

Thorny Path, a — Volume 12 eBook

Thorny Path, a — Volume 12 by Georg Ebers

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CHAPTER XXXIV.

Caracalla's evening meal was ended, and for years past his friends had never seen the gloomy monarch in so mad a mood. The high-priest of Serapis, with Dio Cassius the senator, and a few others of his suite, had not indeed appeared at table; but the priest of Alexander, the prefect Macrinus, his favorites Theocritus, Pandion, Antigonus, and others of their kidney, had crowded round him, had drunk to his health, and wished him joy of his glorious revenge.

Everything which legend or history had recorded of similar deeds was compared with this day's work, and it was agreed that it transcended them all. This delighted the half-drunken monarch. To-day, he declared with flashing eyes, and not till to-day, he had dared to be entirely what Fate had called him to be—at once the judge and the executioner of an accursed and degenerate race. As Titus had been named "the Good," so he would be called "the Terrible." And this day had secured him that grand name, so pleasing to his inmost heart.

"Hail to the benevolent sovereign who would fain be terrible!" cried Theocritus, raising his cup; and the rest of the guests echoed him.

Then the number of the slain was discussed. No one could estimate it exactly. Zminis, the only man who could have seen everything, had not appeared: Fifty, sixty, seventy thousand Alexandrians were supposed to have suffered death; Macrinus, however, asserted that there must have been more than a hundred thousand, and Caracalla rewarded him for his statement by exclaiming loudly "Splendid! grand! Hardly comprehensible by the vulgar mind! But, even so, it is not the end of what I mean to give them. To-day I have racked their limbs; but I have yet to strike them to the heart, as they have stricken me!"

He ceased, and after a short pause repeated unhesitatingly, and as though by a sudden impulse, the lines with which Euripides ends several of his tragedies:

"Jove in high heaven dispenses various fates;
And now the gods shower blessings which our hope
Dared not aspire to, now control the ills
We deemed inevitable. Thus the god
To these hath given an end we never thought."

—Potter's translation.

And this was the end of the revolting scene, for, as he spoke, Caesar pushed away his cup and sat staring into vacancy, so pale that his physician, foreseeing a fresh attack, brought out his medicine vial.

The praetorian prefect gave a signal to the rest that they should not notice the change in their imperial host, and he did his best to keep the conversation going, till Caracalla, after a long pause, wiped his brow and exclaimed hoarsely: "What has become of the Egyptian? He was to bring in the living prisoners—the living, I say! Let him bring me them."

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He struck the table by his couch violently with his fist; and then, as if the clatter of the metal vessels on it had brought him to himself, he added, meditatively: "A hundred thousand! If they burned their dead here, it would take a forest to reduce them to ashes."

"This day will cost him dear enough as it is," the high-priest of Alexander whispered; he, as idiologos, having to deposit the tribute from the temples and their estates in the imperial treasury. He addressed his neighbor, old Julius Paulinus, who replied:

"Charon is doing the best business to-day. A hundred thousand obolus in a few hours. If Tarautas reigns over us much longer, I will farm his ferry!"

During this whispered dialogue Theocritus the favorite was assuring Caesar in a loud voice that the possessions of the victims would suffice for any form of interment, and an ample number of thank-offerings into the bargain.

"An offering!" echoed Caracalla, and he pointed to a short sword which lay beside him on the couch. "That helped in the work. My father wielded it in many a fight, and I have not let it rust. Still, I doubt whether in my hands and his together it ever before yesterday slaughtered a hundred thousand."

He looked round for the high-priest of Serapis, and after seeking him in vain among the guests, he exclaimed:

"The revered Timotheus withdraws his countenance from us to-day. Yet it was to his god that I dedicated the work of vengeance. He laments the loss of worshipers to great Serapis, as you, Vertinus"—and he turned to the idiologos—"regret the slain taxpayers. Well, you are thinking of my loss or gain, and that I can not but praise. Your colleague in the service of Serapis has nothing to care for but the honor of his god; but he does not succeed in rising to the occasion. Poor wretch! I will give him a lesson. Here Epagathos, and you, Claudius—go at once to Timotheus; carry him this sword. I devote it to his god. It is to be preserved in his holy of holies, in memory of the greatest act of vengeance ever known. If Timotheus should refuse the gift—But no, he has sense—he knows me!"

He paused, and turned to look at Macrinus, who had risen to speak to some officials and soldiers who had entered the room. They brought the news that the Parthian envoys had broken off all negotiations, and had left the city in the afternoon. They would enter into no alliance, and were prepared to meet the Roman army.

Macrinus repeated this to Caesar with a shrug of his shoulders, but he withheld the remark added by the venerable elder of the ambassadors, that they did not fear a foe who by so vile a deed had incurred the wrath of the gods.

“Then it is war with the Parthians!” cried Caracalla, and his eyes flashed. “My breast-plated favorites will rejoice.”

But then he looked grave, and inquired: “They are leaving the town, you say? But are they birds? The gates and harbor are closed.”

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"A small Phoenician vessel stole out just before sundown between our guard-ships," was the reply. "Curse it!" broke from Caesar's lips in a loud voice, and, after a brief dialogue in an undertone with the prefect, he desired to have papyrus and writing materials brought to him. He himself must inform the senate of what had occurred, and he did so in a few words.

He did not know the number of the slain, and he did not think it worth while to make a rough estimate. All the Alexandrians, he said, had in fact merited death. A swift trireme was to carry the letter to Ostia at daybreak.

He did not, indeed, ask the opinion of the senate, and yet he felt that it would be better that news of the day's events should reach the curia under his own hand than through the distorting medium of rumor.

Nor did Macrinus impress on him, as usual, that he should give his dispatch a respectful form. This crime, if anything, might help him to the fulfillment of the Magian's prophecy.

As Caesar was rolling up his missive, the long-expected Zminis came into the room. He had attired himself splendidly, and bore the insignia of his new office. He humbly begged to be pardoned for his long delay. He had had to make his outer man fit to appear among Caesar's guests, for— as he boastfully explained—he himself had waded in blood, and in the court-yard of the Museum the red life-juice of the Alexandrians had reached above his horse's knees. The number of the dead, he declared with sickening pride, was above a hundred thousand, as estimated by the prefect.

"Then we will call it eleven myriad," Caracalla broke in. "Now, we have had enough of the dead. Bring in the living."

"Whom?" asked the Egyptian, in surprise. Hereupon Caesar's eyelids began to quiver, and in a threatening tone he reminded his bloody-handed tool of those whom he had ordered him to take alive. Still Zminis was silent, and Caesar furiously shrieked his demand as to whether by his blundering Heron's daughter had escaped; whether he could not produce the gem-cutter and his son. The blood-stained butcher then perceived that Caesar's murderous sword might be turned against him also. Still, he was prepared to defend himself by every means in his power. His brain was inventive, and, seeing that the fault for which he would least easily be forgiven was the failure to capture Melissa, he tried to screen himself by a lie. Relying on an incident which he himself had witnessed, he began: "I felt certain of securing the gem-cutter's pretty daughter, for my men had surrounded his house. But it had come to the ears of these Alexandrian scoundrels that a son of Heron's, a painter, and his sister, had betrayed their fellow-citizens and excited your wrath. It was to them that they ascribed the punishment which I executed upon them in your name. This rabble have no notion of reflection; before we could hinder them they had rushed on the innocent dwelling. They



flung fire-brands into it, burned it, and tore it down. Any one who was within perished, and thus the daughter of Heron died. That is, unfortunately, proved. I can take the old man and his son tomorrow. To-day I have had so much to do that there has not been time to bind the sheaves. It is said that they had escaped before the mob rushed on the house."

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“And the gem-cutter’s daughter?” asked Caracalla, in a trembling voice. “You are sure she was burned in the building?”

“As sure as that I have zealously endeavored to let the Alexandrians feel your avenging hand,” replied the Egyptian resolutely, and with a bold face he confirmed his he. “I have here the jewel she wore on her arm. It was found on the charred body in the cellar. Adventus, your chamberlain, says that Melissa received it yesterday as a gift from you. Here it is.”

And he handed Caracalla the serpent-shaped bracelet which Caesar had sent to his sweetheart before setting out for the Circus. The fire had damaged it, but there was no mistaking it. It had been found beneath the ruins on a human arm, and Zminis had only learned from the chamberlain, to whom he had shown it, that it had belonged to the daughter of Heron.

“Even the features of the corpse,” Zminis added, “were still recognizable.”

“The corpse!” Caesar echoed gloomily. “And it was the Alexandrians, you say, who destroyed the house?”

“Yes, my lord; a raging mob, and mingled with them men of every race—Jews, Greeks, Syrians, what not. Most of them had lost a father, a son, or a brother, sent to Hades by your vengeance. Their wildest curses were for Alexander, the painter, who in fact had played the spy for you. But the Macedonian phalanx arrived at the right moment. They killed most of them and took some prisoners. You can see them yourself in the morning. As regards the wife of Seleukus—”

“Well,” exclaimed Caesar, and his eye brightened again.

“She fell a victim to the clumsiness of the praetorians.”

“Indeed!” interrupted the legate Quintus Flavius Nobilior, who had granted Alexander’s life to the prayer of the twins Aurelius; and Macrinus also forbade any insulting observations as to the blameless troops whom he had the honor to command.

But the Egyptian was not to be checked; he went on eagerly: “Pardon, my lords. It is perfectly certain, nevertheless, that it was a praetorian— his name is Rufus, and he belongs to the second cohort—who pierced the lady Berenike with his spear.”

Flavius here begged to be allowed to speak, and reported how Berenike had sought and found her end. And he did so as though he were narrating the death of a heroine, but he added, in a tone of disapproval: “Unhappily, the misguided woman died with a curse on you, great Caesar, on her treasonable lips.”

“And this female hero finds her Homer in you!” cried Caesar. “We will speak together again, my Quintus.”

He raised a brimming cup to his lips and emptied it at a draught; then, setting it on the table with such violence that it rang, he exclaimed “Then you have brought me none of those whom I commanded you to capture? Even the feeble girl who had not quitted her father’s house you allowed to be murdered by those coarse monsters! And you think I shall look on you with favor? By this time to-morrow the gem-cutter and his son Alexander are here before me, or by the head of my divine father you go to the wild beasts in the Circus.”

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"They will not eat such as he," observed old Julius Paulinus, and Caesar nodded approvingly. The Egyptian shuddered, for this imperial nod showed him by how slender a thread his life hung.

In a flash he reflected whither he might fly if he should fail to find this hated couple. If, after all, he should discover Melissa alive, so much the better. Then, he might have been mistaken in identifying the body; some slave girl might have stolen the bracelet and put it on before the house was burned down. He knew for a fact that the charred corpse of which he had spoken was that of a street wench who had rushed among the foremost into the house of the much-envied imperial favorite—the traitress—and had met her death in the spreading flames.

Zminis had but a moment to rack his inventive and prudent brain, but he already had thought of something which might perhaps influence Caesar in his favor. Of all the Alexandrians, the members of the Museum were those whom Caracalla hated most. He had been particularly enjoined not to spare one of them; and in the course of the ride which Caesar, attended by the armed troopers of Arsinoe, had taken through the streets streaming with blood, he had stayed longest gazing at the heap of corpses in the courtyard of the Museum. In the portico, a colonnade copied from the Stoa at Athens, whither a dozen or so of the philosophers had fled when attacked, he had even stabbed several with his own hand. The blood on the sword which Caracalla had dedicated to Serapis had been shed at the Museum.

The Egyptian had himself led the massacre here, and had seen that it was thoroughly effectual. The mention of those slaughtered hair-splitters must, if anything, be likely to mitigate Caesar's wrath; so no sooner had the applause died away with which the proconsul's jest at his expense had been received, than Zminis began to give his report of the great massacre in the Museum. He could boast of having spared scarcely one of the empty word-pickers with whom the epigrams against Caesar and his mother had originated. Teachers and pupils, even the domestic officials, had been overtaken by the insulted sovereign's vengeance. Nothing was left but the stones of that great institution, which had indeed long outlived its fame. The Numidians who had helped in the work had been drunk with blood, and had forced their way even into the physician's lecture-rooms and the hospital adjoining. There, too, they had given no quarter; and among the sufferers who had been carried thither to be healed they had found Tarautas, the wounded gladiator. A Numidian, the youngest of the legion, a beardless youth, had pinned the terrible conqueror of lions and men to the bed with his spear, and then, with the same weapon, had released at least a dozen of his fellow-sufferers from their pain.

As he told his story the Egyptian stood staring into vacancy, as though he saw it all, and the whites of his eyeballs gleamed more hideously than ever out of his swarthy face. The lean, sallow wretch stood before Caesar like a talking corpse, and did not observe the effect his narrative of the gladiator's death was producing. But he soon found out.

While he was yet speaking, Caracalla, leaning on the table by his couch with both hands, fixed his eyes on his face, without a word.

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Then he suddenly sprang up, and, beside himself with rage, he interrupted the terrified Egyptian and railed at him furiously:

“My Tarautas, who had so narrowly escaped death! The bravest hero of his kind basely murdered on his sick-bed, by a barbarian, a beardless boy! And you, you loathsome jackal, could allow it? This deed—and you know it, villain—will be set down to my score. It will be brought up against me to the end of my days in Rome, in the provinces, everywhere. I shall be cursed for your crime wherever there is a human heart to throb and feel, and a human tongue to speak. And I—when did I ever order you to slake your thirst for blood in that of the sick and suffering? Never! I could never have done such a thing! I even told you to spare the women and helpless slaves. You are all witnesses, But you all hear me— I will punish the murderer of the wretched sick! I will avenge you, foully murdered, brave, noble Tarautas!—Here, lictors! Bind him—away with him to the Circus with the criminals thrown to the wild beasts! He allowed the girl whose life I bade him spare to be burned to death before his eyes, and the hapless sick were slain at his command by a beardless boy!—And Tarautas! I valued him as I do all who are superior to their kind; I cared for him. He was wounded for our entertainment, my friends. Poor fellow—poor, brave Tarautas!”

He here broke into loud sobs, and it was so unheard-of, so incomprehensible a thing that this man should weep who, even at his father's death had not shed a tear, that Julius Paulinus himself held his mocking tongue.

The rest of the spectators also kept anxious and uneasy silence while the lictors bound Zminis's hands, and, in spite of his attempts to raise his voice once more in self-defense, dragged him away and thrust him out across the threshold of the dining-hall. The door closed behind him, and no applause followed, though every one approved of the Egyptian's condemnation, for Caracalla was still weeping.

Was it possible that these tears could be shed for sick people whom he did not know, and for the coarse gladiator, the butcher of men and beasts, who had had nothing to give Caesar but a few hours of excitement at the intoxicating performances in the arena? So it must be; for from time to time Caracalla moaned softly, “Those unhappy sick!” or “Poor Tarautas!”

And, indeed, at this moment Caracalla himself could not have said whom he was lamenting. He had in the Circus staked his life on that of Tarautas, and when he shed tears over his memory it was certainly less for the gladiator's sake than over the approaching end of his own existence, to which he looked forward in consequence of Tarautas's death. But he had often been near the gates of Hades in the battle-field with calm indifference; and now, while he thus bewailed the sick and Tarautas with bitter lamentations, in his mind he saw no sick-bed, nor, indeed, the stunted form of the braggart hero of the arena, but the slender, graceful figure of a sweet girl, and a blackened, charred arm on which glittered a golden armlet.

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That woman! Treacherous, shameless, but how lovely and beloved! That woman, under his eyes, as it were, was swept out of the land of the living; and with her, with Melissa, the only girl for whom his heart had ever throbbed faster, the miracle-worker who had possessed the unique power of exorcising his torments, whose love—for so he still chose to believe, though he had always refused her petitions that he would show mercy—whose love would have given him strength to become a benefactor to all mankind, a second Trajan or Titus. He had quite forgotten that he had intended her to meet a disgraceful end in the arena under fearful torments, if she had been brought to him a prisoner. He felt as though the fate of Roxana, with whom his most cherished dream had perished, had quite broken his heart; and it was Melissa whom he really bewailed, with the gladiator's name on his lips and the jewel before his eyes which had been his gift, and which she had worn on her arm even in death. But he ere long controlled this display of feeling, ashamed to shed tears for her who had cheated him and who had fled from his love. Only once more did he sob aloud. Then he raised himself, and while holding his handkerchief to his eyes he addressed the company with theatrical pathos:

“Yes, my friends, tell whom you will that you have seen Bassianus weep; but add that his tears flowed from grief at the necessity for punishing so many of his subjects with such rigor. Say, too, that Caesar wept with pity and indignation. For what good man would not be moved to sorrow at seeing the sick and wounded thus maltreated? What humane heart could refrain from loud lamentations at the sight of barbarity which is not withheld from laying a murderous hand even on the sacred anguish of the sick and wounded? Defend me, then, against those Romans who may shrug their shoulders over the weakness of a weeping Caesar—the Terrible. My office demands severity; and yet, my friends, I am not ashamed of these tears.”

With this he took leave of his guests and retired to rest, and those who remained were soon agreed that every word of this speech, as well as Caesar's tears, were rank hypocrisy. The mime Theocritus admired his sovereign in all sincerity, for how rarely could even the greatest actors succeed in forcing from their eyes, by sheer determination, a flood of real, warm tears—he had seen them flow. As Caesar quitted the room, his hand on the lion's mane, the praetor Priscillianus whispered to Cilo:

“Your disciple has been taking lessons here of the weeping crocodile.”

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Out on the great square the soldiers were resting after the day's bloody work. They had lighted large fires in front of the most sacred sanctuary of a great city, as though they were in the open field. Round each of these, foot and horse soldiers lay or squatted on the ground, according to their companies;

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and over the wine allowed them by Caesar they told each other the hideous experiences of the day, which even those who had grown rich by it could not think of without disgust. Gold and silver cups, the plunder of the city, circulated round those camp-fires and the juice of the vine was poured into them out of jugs of precious metal. Tongues were wagging fast, for, though there was indeed but one opinion as to what had been done, there were mercenaries enough and ambitious pretenders who could dare to defend it. Every word might reach the sovereign's ears, and the day might bring promotion as well as gold and booty. Even the calmest were still in some excitement over the massacre they had helped in; the plunder was discussed, and barter and exchange were eagerly carried on.

As Caracalla passed the balcony he stepped out for a moment, followed by the lamp-bearers, to thank his faithful warriors for the valor and obedience they had shown this day. The traitorous Alexandrians had now met their deserts. The greater the plunder his dear brethren in arms could win, the better he would be pleased. This speech was hailed with a shout of glee drowning his words; but Caracalla had heard his dearly bought troops cheer him with greater zeal and vigor. There were here whole groups of men who did not join at all, or hardly opened their mouths. And his ear was sharp.

What cause could they have for dissatisfaction after such splendid booty, although they did not yet know that a war with the Parthians was in prospect?

He must know; but not to-day. They were to be depended on, he felt sure, for they were those to whom he was most liberal, and he had taken care that there should be no one in the empire whose means equaled his own. But that they should be so lukewarm annoyed him. To-day, of all days, an enthusiastic roar of acclamations would have been peculiarly gratifying. They ought to have known it; and he went to his bedroom in silent anger. There his freedman Epagathos was waiting for him, with Adventus and his learned Indian body slave Arjuna. The Indian never spoke unless he was spoken to, and the two others took good care not to address their lord. So silence reigned in the spacious room while the Indian undressed Caracalla. Caesar was wont to say that this man's hands were matchless for lightness and delicacy of touch, but to-day they trembled as he lifted the laurel wreath from Caesar's head and unbuckled the padded breast plate. The events of the day had shaken this man's soul to the foundations. In his Eastern home he had been taught from his infancy to respect life even in beasts, living exclusively on vegetables, and holding all blood in abhorrence. He now felt the deepest loathing of all about him; and a passionate longing for the peaceful and pure home among sages, from which he had been snatched as a boy, came over him with increasing vehemence. There was nothing here but what it defiled him to handle, and his fingers shrank involuntarily from their task, as duty compelled him to touch the limbs of a man who, to his fancy, was dripping with human blood, and who was as much accursed by gods and men as though he were a leper.

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Arjuna made haste that he might escape from the presence of the horrible man, and Caesar took no heed either of the pallor of his handsome brown face or the trembling of his slender fingers, for a crowd of thoughts made him blind and deaf to all that was going on around him. They reverted first to the events of the day; but as the Indian removed the warm surcoat, the night breeze blew coldly into the room, and he shivered. Was it the spirit of the slain Tarautas which had floated in at the open window? The cold breath which fanned his cheek was certainly no mere draught. It was exactly like a human sigh, only it was cold instead of warm. If it proceeded from the ghost of the dead gladiator he must be quite close to him. And the fancy gained reality in his mind; he saw a floating human form which beckoned him and softly laid a cold hand on his shoulder.

He, Caesar, had linked his fate to that of the gladiator, and now Tarautas had come to warn him. But Caracalla had no mind to follow him; he forbade the apparition with a loud cry of "Away!" At this the Indian started, and though he could scarcely utter the words, he besought Caesar to be seated that he might take off his laced shoes; and then Caracalla perceived that it was an illusion that had terrified him, and he shrugged his shoulders, somewhat ashamed. While the slave was busy he wiped his damp brow, saying to himself with a proud smile that of course spirits never appeared in broad light and when others were present.

At last he dismissed the Indian and lay down. His head was burning, and his heart beat too violently for sleep. At his bidding Epagathos and Adventus followed the Indian into the adjoining room after extinguishing the lamp. . . Caracalla was alone in the dark. Awaiting sleep, he stretched himself at full length, but he remained as wide awake as by day. And still he could not help thinking of the immediate past. Even his enemies could not deny that it was his duty as a man and an emperor to inflict the severest punishment on this town, and to make it feel his avenging hand; and yet he was beginning to be aware of the ruthlessness of his commands. He would have been glad to talk it all over with some one else. But Philostratus, the only man who understood him, was out of reach; he had sent him to his mother. And for what purpose? To tell her that he, Caesar, had found a wife after his own heart, and to win her favor and consent. At this thought the blood surged up in him with rage and shame. Even before they were wed his chosen bride had been false to him; she had fled from his embraces, as he now knew, to death, never to return.

He would gladly have sent a galley in pursuit to bring Philostratus back again; but the vessel in which the philosopher had embarked was one of the swiftest in the imperial fleet, and it had already so long a start that to overtake it would be almost impossible. So within a few days Philostratus would meet his mother; he, if any one, could describe Melissa's beauty in the most glowing colors, and that he would do so to the empress, his great friend, was beyond a doubt. But the haughty Julia would scarcely be inclined to accept the gem-cutter's child for a daughter; indeed, she did not wish that he should ever marry again.

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But what was he to her? Her heart was given to the infant son of her niece Mammaea; —[The third Caesar after Caracalla, Alexander Severus]— in him she discovered every gift and virtue. What joy there would be among the women of Julia's train when it was known that Caesar's chosen bride had disdained him, and, in him, the very purple. But that joy would not be of long duration, for the news of the punishment by death of a hundred thousand Alexandrians would, he knew, fall like a lash on the women. He fancied he could hear their howls and wailing, and see the horror of Philostratus, and how he would join the women in bemoaning the horrible deed! He, the philosopher, would perhaps be really grieved; aye, and if he had been at his side this morning everything might perhaps have been different. But the deed was done, and now he must take the consequences.

That the better sort would avoid him after such an act was self-evident— they had already refused to eat with him. On the other hand, it had brought nearer to him the favorites whom he had attracted to his person. Theocritus and Pandion, Antigonus and Epagathos, the priest of Alexander, who at Rome was overwhelmed with debt, and who in Egypt had become a rich man again, would cling to him more closely.

"Base wretches!" he muttered to himself.

If only Philostratus would come back to him! But he scarcely dared hope it. The evil took so much more care for their own well-being and multiplication than the good. If one of the righteous fell away, all the others forthwith turned their backs on him; and when the penitent desired to return to the fold, the immaculate repelled or avoided him. But the wicked could always find the fallen man at once, and would cling to him and hinder him from returning. Their ranks were always open to him, however closely he might formerly have been attached to the virtuous. To live in exclusive intercourse with these reprobates was an odious thought. He could compel whom he chose to live with him; but of what use were silent and reluctant companions? And whose fault was it that he had sent away Philostratus, the best of them all? Hers—the faithless traitress, from whom he had looked for peace and joy, who had declared that she felt herself bound to him, the trickster in whom he had believed he saw Roxana—But she was no more. On the table by his bed, among his own jewels, lay the golden serpent he had given her—he fancied he could see it in the dark—and she had worn it even in death. He shuddered; he felt as though a woman's arm, all black and charred, was stretched out to him in the night, and the golden snake uncurled from it and reached forth as though to bite him.

He shivered, and hid his head under the coverlet; but, ashamed and vexed at his own foolish weakness, he soon emerged from the stifling darkness, and an inward voice scornfully asked him whether he still believed that the soul of the great Macedonian inhabited his body. There was an end of this proud conviction. He had no more connection with Alexander than Melissa had with Roxana, whom she resembled.

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The blood seethed hotly in his veins; to live on these terms seemed to him impossible.

As soon as it was day it must surely be seen that he was very seriously ill. The spirit of Tarautas would again appear to him—and not merely as a vaporous illusion—and put an end to his utter misery.

But he felt his own pulse; it beat no more quickly than usual. He had no fever, and yet he must be ill, very ill. And again he flushed so hotly that he felt as if he should choke. Breathing hard, he sat up to call his physician. Then he observed a light through the half-closed door of the adjoining room. He heard voices—those of Adventus and the Indian.

Arjuna was generally so silent that Philostratus had vainly endeavored to discover from him any particulars as to the doctrine of the Brahmans, among whom Apollonius of Tyana declared that he had found the highest wisdom, or concerning the manners of his people. And yet the Indian was a man of learning, and could even read the manuscripts of his country. The Parthian ambassador had expressly dwelt on this when he delivered Arjuna to Caesar as a gift from his king. But Arjuna had never favored any of these strangers with his confidence. Only with old Adventus did he ever hold conversation, for the chamberlain took care that he should be supplied with the vegetables and fruit on which he was accustomed to live—for meat never passed his lips; and now he was talking with the old man, and Caracalla sat up and laid his hand to his ear.

The Indian was absorbed in the study of a bookroll in his own tongue, which he carried about him. “What are you reading?” asked Adventus.

“A book,” replied Arjuna, “from which a man may learn what will become of you and me, and all these slaughtered victims, after death.”

“Who can know that?” said the old man with a sigh; and Arjuna replied very positively:

“It is written here, and there is no doubt about it. Will you hear it?”

“Certainly,” said Adventus eagerly, and the Indian began translating out of his book:

“When a man dies his various parts go whither they belong. His voice goes to the fire, his breath to the winds, his eyes to the sun, his spirit to the moon, his hearing becomes one with space, his body goes to the earth, his soul is absorbed into ether, his hairs become plants, the hair of his head goes to crown the trees, his blood returns to water. Thus, every portion of a man is restored to that portion of the universe to which it belongs; and of himself, his own essence, nothing remains but one part what that is called is a great secret.”

Caracalla was listening intently. This discourse attracted him.

He, like the other Caesars, must after his death be deified by the senate; but he felt convinced, for his part, that the Olympians would never count him as one of themselves. At the same time he was philosopher enough to understand that no existing thing could ever cease to exist. The restoration of each part of his body to that portion of the universe to which it was akin, pleased his fancy. There was no place in the Indian's creed for the responsibility of the soul at the judgment of the dead. Caesar was already on the point of asking the slave to reveal his secret, when Adventus prevented him by exclaiming:

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"You may confide to me what will be left of me—unless, indeed, you mean the worms which shall eat me and so proceed from me. It can not be good for much, at any rate, and I will tell no one."

To this Arjuna solemnly replied: "There is one thing which persists to all eternity and can never be lost in all the ages of the universe, and that is—the deed."

"I know that," replied the old man with an indifferent shrug; but the word struck Caesar like a thunder-bolt. He listened breathlessly to hear what more the Indian might say; but Arjuna, who regarded it as sacrilege to waste the highest lore on one unworthy of it, went on reading to himself, and Adventus stretched himself out to sleep.

All was silent in and about the sleeping-room, and the fearful words, "the deed," still rang in the ears of the man who had just committed the most monstrous of all atrocities. He could not get rid of the haunting words; all the ill he had done from his childhood returned to him in fancy, and seemed heaped up to form a mountain which weighed on him like an incubus.

The deed!

His, too, must live on, and with it his name, cursed and hated to the latest generations of men. The souls of the slain would have carried the news of the deeds he had done even to Hades; and if Tarautas were to come and fetch him away, he would be met below by legions of indignant shades—a hundred thousand! And at their head his stern father, and the other worthy men who had ruled Rome with wisdom and honor, would shout in his face: "A hundred thousand times a murderer! robber of the state! destroyer of the army!" and drag him before the judgment-seat; and before judgment could be pronounced the hundred thousand, led by the noblest of all his victims, the good Papinian, would rush upon him and tear him limb from limb.

Dozing as he lay, he felt cold, ghostly hands on his shoulder, on his head, wherever the cold breath of the waning night could fan him through the open window; and with a loud cry he sprang out of bed as he fancied he felt a touch of the shadowy hand of Vindex. On hearing his voice, Adventus and the Indian hurried in, with Epagathos, who had even heard his shriek in the farther room. They found him bathed in a sweat of horror, and struggling for breath, his eyes fixed on vacancy; and the freedman flew off to fetch the physician. When he came Caesar angrily dismissed him, for he felt no physical disorder. Without dressing, he went to the window. It was about three hours before sunrise.

However, he gave orders that his bath should be prepared, and desired to be dressed; then Macrinus and others were to be sent for. Sooner would he step into boiling water than return to that bed of terror. Day, life, business must banish his terrors. But then, after the evening would come another night; and if the sufferings he had just gone

through should repeat themselves then, and in those to follow, he should lose his wits, and he would bless the spirit of Tarautas if it would but come to lead him away to death.

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But “the deed”! The Indian was right—that would survive him on earth, and mankind would unite in cursing him.

Was there yet time—was he yet capable of atoning for what was done by some great and splendid deed? But the hundred thousand—

The number rose before him like a mountain, blotting out every scheme he tried to form as he went to his bath—taking his lion with him; he reveled in the warm water, and finally lay down to rest in clean linen wrappers. No one had dared to speak to him. His aspect was too threatening.

In a room adjoining the bath-room he had breakfast served him. It was, as usual, a simple meal, and yet he could only swallow a few mouthfuls, for everything had a bitter taste. The praetorian prefect was roused, and Caesar was glad to see him, for it was in attending to affairs that he most easily forgot what weighed upon him. The more serious they were, the better, and Macrinus looked as if there was something of grave importance to be settled.

Caracalla’s first question was with reference to the Parthian ambassadors. They had, in fact, departed; now he must prepare for war. Caesar was eager to decide at once on the destination of each legion, and to call the legates together to a council of war; but Macrinus was not so prompt and ready as usual on such occasions. He had that to communicate which, as he knew, would to Caesar take the head of all else. If it should prove true, it must withdraw him altogether from the affairs of government; and this was what Macrinus aimed at when, before summoning the legates, he observed with a show of reluctance that Caesar would be wroth with him if, for the sake of a council of war, he were to defer a report which had just reached his ears.

“Business first!” cried Caracalla, with decisive prohibition.

“As you will. I thought only of what I was told by an official of this temple, that the gem-cutter’s daughter—you know the girl—is still alive—”

But he got no further, for Caesar sprang to his feet, and desired to hear more of this.

Macrinus proceeded to relate that a slaughterer in the court of sacrifice had told him that Melissa had been seen last evening, and was somewhere in the Serapeum. More than this the prefect knew not, and Caesar forthwith dismissed him to make further inquiry before he himself should take steps to prove the truth of the report.

Then he paced the room with revived energy. His eye sparkled, and, breathing fast, he strove to reduce the storm of schemes, plans, and hopes which surged up within him to some sort of order. He must punish the fugitive—but yet more surely he would never again let her out of his sight. But if only he could first have her cast to the wild beasts,

and then bring her to life again, crown her with the imperial diadem, and load her with every gift that power and wealth could procure! He would read every wish in her eyes, if only she would

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once more lay her hand on his forehead, charm away his pain, and bring sleep to his horror-stricken bed. He had done nothing to vex her; nay, every petition she had urged — But suddenly the image rose before him of old Vindex and his nephew, whom he had sent to execution in spite of her intercession; and again the awful word, “the deed,” rang in his inward ear. Were these hideous thoughts to haunt him even by day?

No, no! In his waking hours there was much to be done which might give him the strength to dissipate them.

The kitchen-steward was by this time in attendance; but what did Caracalla care for dainties to tickle his palate now that he had a hope of seeing Melissa once more? With perfect indifference he left the catering to the skillful and inventive cook; and hardly had he retired when Macrinus returned.

The slaughterer had acquired his information through a comrade, who said that he had twice caught sight of Melissa at the window of the chambers of mystery in the upper story of the Serapeum, yesterday afternoon. He had hoped to win the reward which was offered for the recovery of the fugitive, and had promised his colleague half the money if he would help him to capture the maiden. But just at sunset, hearing that the massacre was ended, the man had incautiously gone out into the town, where he had been slain by a drunken soldier of the Scythian legion. The hapless man’s body had been found, but Macrinus’s informant had assured him that he could entirely rely on the report of his unfortunate colleague, who was a sober and truthful man, as the chief augur would testify.

This was enough for Caracalla. Macrinus was at once to go for the high-priest, and to take care that he took no further steps to conceal Melissa. The slaughterer had ever since daybreak kept secret watch on all the doors of the Serapeum, aided by his comrades, who were to share in the reward, and especially on the stairway leading from the ground floor up to the mystic’s galleries.

The prefect at once obeyed the despot’s command. On the threshold he met the kitchen-steward returning to submit his list of dishes for Caesar’s approval.

He found Caracalla in an altered mood, rejuvenescent and in the highest spirits. After hastily agreeing to the day’s bill of fare, he asked the steward in what part of the building the chambers of mystery were; and when he learned that the stairs leading up to them began close to the kitchens, which had been arranged for Caesar’s convenience under the temple laboratory, Caracalla declared in a condescending tone that he would go to look round the scene of the cook’s labors. And the lion should come too, to return thanks for the good meat which was brought to him so regularly.



The head cook, rejoiced at the unwonted graciousness of a master whose wrath had often fallen on him, led the way to his kitchen hearth. This had been constructed in a large hall, originally the largest of the laboratories, where incense was prepared for the sanctuary and medicines concocted for the sick in the temple hospital. There were smaller halls and rooms adjoining, where at this moment some priests were busy preparing kyphi and mixing drugs.

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The steward, proud of Caesar's promised visit, announced to his subordinates the honor they might expect, and he then went to the door of the small laboratory to tell the old pastophoros who was employed there, and who had done him many a good turn, that if he wished to see the emperor he had only to open the door leading to the staircase. He was about to visit the mystic chambers with his much-talked-of lion. No one need be afraid of the beast; it was quite tame, and Caesar loved it as a son.

At this the old drug-pounder muttered some reply, which sounded more like a curse than the expected thanks, and the steward regretted having compared the lion to a son in this man's presence, for the pastophoros wore a mourning garment, and two promising sons had been snatched from him, slain yesterday with the other youths in the stadium.

But the cook soon forgot the old man's ill-humor; he had to clear his subordinates out of the way as quickly as possible and prepare for his illustrious visitor. As he bustled around, here, there, and everywhere, the pastophoros entered the kitchen and begged for a piece of mutton. This was granted him by a hasty sign toward a freshly slaughtered sheep, and the old man busied himself for some time behind the steward's back. At last he had cut off what he wanted, and gazed with singular tenderness at the piece of red, veinless meat. On returning to his laboratory, he hastily bolted himself in, and when he came out again a few minutes later his calm, wrinkled old face had a malignant and evil look. He stood at the bottom of the stairs, looking about him cautiously; then he flew up the steps with the agility of youth, and at a turn in the stairs he stuck the piece of meat close to the foot of the balustrade.

He returned as nimbly as he had gone, cast a sorrowful glance through the open laboratory window at the arena where all that had graced his life lay dead, and passed his hand over his tearful face. At last he returned to his task, but he was less able to do it than before. It was with a trembling hand that he weighed out the juniper berries and cedar resin, and he listened all the time with bated breath.

Presently there was a stir on the stairs, and the kitchen slaves shouted that Caesar was coming. So he went out of the laboratory, which was behind the stairs, to see what was going forward, and a turnspit at once made way for the old man so as not to hinder his view.

Was that little young man, mounting the steps so gayly, with the high-priest at his side and his suite at his heels, the dreadful monster who had murdered his noble sons? He had pictured the dreadful tyrant quite differently. Now Caesar was laughing, and the tall man next him made some light and ready reply—the head cook said it was the Roman priest of Alexander, who was not on good terms with Timotheus. Could they be laughing at the high-priest? Never, in all the years he had known him, had he seen Timotheus so pale and dejected.

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The high-priest had indeed good cause for anxiety, for he suspected who it was that Caesar hoped to find in the mystic rooms, and feared that his wife might, in fact, have Melissa in hiding in that part of the building to which he was now leading the way. After Macrinus had come to fetch him he had had no opportunity of inquiring, for the prefect had not quitted him for a moment, and Euryale was in the town busy with other women in seeking out and nursing such of the wounded as had been found alive among the dead.

Caesar triumphed in the changed, gloomy, and depressed demeanor of a man usually so self-possessed; for he fancied that it betrayed some knowledge on the part of Timotheus of Melissa's hiding-place; and he could jest with the priest of Alexander and his favorite Theokritus and the other friends who attended him, while he ignored the high-priest's presence and never even alluded to Melissa.

Hardly had they gone past the old man when, just as the kitchen slaves were shouting "Hail, Caesar!" the lady Euryale, as pale as death, hurried in, and with a trembling voice inquired whither her husband was conducting the emperor.

She had turned back when half way on her road, in obedience to the impulse of her heart, which prompted her, before she went on her Samaritan's errand, to visit Melissa in her hiding-place, and let her see the face of a friend at the beginning of a new, lonely, and anxious day. On hearing the reply which was readily given, her knees trembled beneath her, and the steward, who saw her totter, supported her and led her into the laboratory, where essences and strong waters soon restored her to consciousness. Euryale had known the old pastophoros a long time, and, noticing his mourning garb, she asked sympathetically: "And you, too, are bereft?"

"Of both," was the answer. "You were always so good to them— Slaughtered like beasts for sacrifice—down there in the stadium," and tears flowed fast down the old man's furrowed cheeks. The lady uplifted her hands as though calling on Heaven to avenge this outrageous crime; at the same instant a loud howl of pain was heard from above, and a great confusion of men's voices.

Euryale was beside herself with fear. If they had found Melissa in her room her husband's fate was sealed, and she was guilty of his doom. But they could scarcely yet have opened the chambers, and the girl was clever and nimble, and might perhaps escape in time if she heard the men approaching. She eagerly flew to the window. She could see below her the stone which Melissa must move to get out; but between the wall and the stadium the street was crowded, and at every door of the Serapeum lictors were posted, even at that stone door known only to the initiated, with the temple slaughterers and other servants who seemed all to be on guard. If Melissa were to come out now she would be seized, and it must become known who had shown her the way into the hiding-place that had sheltered her.

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At this moment Theokritus came leaping down the stairs, crying out to her: "The lion—a physician—where shall I find a leech?"

The matron pointed to the old man, who was one of the medical students of the sanctuary, and the favorite shouted out to him, "Come up!" and then rushed on, paying no heed to Euryale's inquiry for Melissa; but the old man laughed scornfully and shouted after him, "I am no beast-healer."

Then, turning to the lady, he added:

"I am sorry for the lion. You know me, lady. I could never till yesterday bear to see a fly hurt. But this brute! It was as a son to that bloodhound, and he shall feel for once something to grieve him. The lion has had his portion. No physician in the world can bring him to life again."

He bent his head and returned to his laboratory; but the matron understood that this kind, peaceable man, in spite of his white hair, had become a poisoner, and that the splendid, guiltless beast owed its death to him. She shuddered. Wherever this unblest man went, good turned to evil; terror, suffering, and death took the place of peace, happiness, and life. He had forced her even into the sin of disobedience to her husband and master. But now her secret hiding of Melissa against his will would be avenged. He and she alike would probably pay for the deed with their life; for the murder of his lion would inevitably rouse Caesar's wildest passions.

Still, she knew that Caracalla respected her; for her sake, perhaps, he would spare her husband. But Melissa? What would her fate be if she were dragged out of her hiding-place?—and she must be discovered! He had threatened to cast her to the beasts; and ought she not to prefer even that fearful fate to forgiveness and a fresh outburst of Caesar's passion?

Pale and tearless, but shaken with alarms, she bent over the balustrade of the stairs and murmured a prayer commending herself, her husband, and Melissa to God. Then she hastened up the steps. The great doors leading to the chambers of mystery stood wide open, and the first person she met was her husband.

"You here?" said he in an undertone. "You may thank the gods that your kind heart did not betray you into hiding the girl here. I trembled for her and for ourselves. But there is not a sign of her; neither here nor on the secret stair. What a morning—and what a day must follow! There lies Caesar's lion. If his suspicion that it has been poisoned should be proved true, woe to this luckless city, woe to us all!"

And Caesar's aspect justified the worst anticipations. He had thrown himself on the floor by the side of his dead favorite, hiding his face in the lion's noble mane, with strange, quavering wailing. Then he raised the brute's heavy head and kissed his dead

eyes, and as it slipped from his hand and fell on the floor, he started to his feet, shaking his fist, and exclaiming:

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“Yes, you have poisoned him! Bring the miscreant here, or you shall follow him!”

Macrinus assured him that if indeed some basest of base wretches had dared to destroy the life of this splendid and faithful king of beasts, the murderer should infallibly be found. But Caracalla screamed in his face:

“Found? Dare you speak of finding? Have you even brought me the girl who was hidden here? Have you found her? Where is she? She was seen here and she must be here!”

And he hurried from room to room in undignified haste, like a slave hunting for some lost treasure of his master’s, tearing open closets, peeping behind curtains and up chimneys, and snatching the clothes, behind which she might have hidden, from the pegs on which they hung. He insisted on seeing every secret door, and ran first down and then up the hidden stairs by which Melissa had in fact escaped.

In the great hall, where by this time physicians and courtiers had gathered round the carcass of the lion, Caesar sank on to a seat, his brow damp with heat, and stared at the floor; while the leeches, who, as Alexandrians for the most part, were anxious not to rouse the despot’s rage, assured him that to all appearance the lion, who had been highly fed and getting little exercise, had died of a fit. The poison had indeed worked more rapidly than any the imperial body physician was acquainted with; and he, not less anxious to mollify the sovereign, bore them out in this opinion. But their diagnosis, though well meant, had the contrary effect to that they had intended. The prosecution and punishment of a murderer would have given occupation to his revengeful spirit and have diverted his thoughts, and the capture of the criminal would have pacified him; as it was, he could only regard the death of the lion as a fresh stroke of fate directed against himself. He sat absorbed in sullen gloom, muttering frantic curses, and haughtily desired the high-priest to restore the offering he had wasted on a god who was so malignant, and as hostile to him as all else in this city of abomination.

He then rose, desired every one to stand back from where the lion lay, and gazed down at the beast for many minutes. And as he looked, his excited imagination showed him Melissa stroking the noble brute, and the lion lashing the ground with his tail when he heard the light step of her little feet. He could hear the music of her voice when she spoke coaxingly to the lion; and then again he started off to search the rooms once more, shouting her name, heedless of the bystanders, till Macrinus made so bold as to assure him that the slaughterer’s report must have been false. He must have mistaken some one else for Melissa, for it was proved beyond a doubt that Melissa had been burned in her father’s house.

At this Caesar looked the prefect in the face with glazed and wandering eyes, and Macrinus started in horror as he suddenly shrieked, “The deed, the deed!” and struck his brow with his fist.

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From that hour Caracalla had lost forever the power of distinguishing the illusions which pursued him from reality.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A week later Caracalla quitted Alexandria to make war on the Parthians. What finally drove the unhappy man to hurry from the hated place was the torturing fear of sharing his lion's fate, and of being sent after the murdered Tarautas by the friends who had heard his appeal to fate.

Quite mad he was not, for the illusions which haunted him were often absent for several hours, when he spoke with perfect lucidity, received reports, and gave orders. It was with peculiar terror that his soul avoided every recollection of his mother, of Theokritus, and all those whose opinion he had formerly valued and whose judgment was not indifferent to him.

In constant terror of the dagger of an avenger—a dread which, with many other peculiarities, the leech could hardly ascribe to the diseased phenomena of his mental state—he only showed himself to his soldiers, and he might often be seen making a meal off a pottage he himself had cooked to escape the poison which had been fatal to his lion. He was never for an instant free from the horrible sense of being hated, shunned, and persecuted by the whole world.

Sometimes he would remember that once a fair girl had prayed for him; but when he tried to recall her features he could only see the charred arm with the golden snake held up before him as he had pictured it that night after the most hideous of his massacres; and every time, at the sight of it, that word came back to him which still tortured his soul above all else—"The deed." But his attendants, who heard him repeating it day and night, never knew what he meant by it.

When Zminis met his end by the wild beasts in the arena, it was before half-empty seats, though several legions had been ordered into the amphitheatre to fill them. The larger number of the citizens were slain, and the remainder were in mourning for relatives more or less near; and they also kept away from the scene to avoid the hated despot.

Macrinus now governed the empire almost as a sovereign, for Caesar, formerly a laborious and autocratic ruler, shrank from all business. Even before they left Alexandria the plebeian prefect could see that Serapion's prophecy was fulfilling itself. He remained in close intimacy with the soothsayer; but only once more, and just before Caesar's departure, could the magian be induced to raise the spirits of the dead, for his clever accomplice, Castor, had fallen a victim in the massacre because, prompted by

the high price set on Alexander's head, and his own fierce hatred of the young painter, he would go out to discover where he and his sister had concealed themselves.

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When at last the unhappy monarch quitted Alexandria one rainy morning, followed by the curses of innumerable mourners—fathers, mothers, widows, and orphans—as well as of ruined artisans and craftsmen, the ill-used city, once so proudly gay, felt itself relieved of a crushing nightmare. This time it was not to Caesar that the cloudy sky promised welfare—his life was wrapped in gloom—but to the people he had so bitterly hated. Thousands looked forward hopefully to life once more, in spite of their mourning robes and widows' veils, and notwithstanding the serious hindrances which the malice of their “afflicted” sovereign had placed in the way of the resuscitation of their town, for Caracalla had commanded that a wall should be built to divide the great merchant city into two parts.

Nay, he had intended to strike a death-blow even at the learning to which Alexandria owed a part of her greatness, by decreeing that the Museum and schools should be removed and the theatres closed.

Maddening alike to heart and brain was the memory that he left behind him, and the citizens would shake their fists if only his name were spoken. But their biting tongues had ceased to mock or jest. Most of the epigramatists were silenced forever, and the nimble wit of the survivors was quelled for many a month by bitter curses or tears of sorrow.

But now—it was a fortnight since the dreadful man had left—the shops and stores, which had been closed against the plunderers, were being reopened. Life was astir again in the deserted and silent baths and taverns, for there was no further fear of rapine from insolent soldiers, or the treacherous ears of spies and delators. Women and girls could once more venture into the highways, the market was filled with dealers, and many an one who was conscious of a heedless speech or suspected of whistling in the circus, or of some other crime, now came out of his well-watched hiding-place.

Glaukias, the sculptor, among others, reopened his work-rooms in Heron's garden-plot. In the cellar beneath the floor the gem-cutter had remained hidden with Polybius and his sister Praxilla, for the easy-going old man could not be induced to embark in the vessel which Argutis had hired for them. Sooner would he die than leave Alexandria. He was too much petted and too infirm to face the discomforts of a sea voyage. And his obstinacy had served him well, for the ship in which they were to have sailed, though it got out before the harbor was closed, was overtaken and brought back by an imperial galley.

Polybius was, however, quite willing to accept Heron's invitation to share his hiding-place.

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Now they could both come out again; but these few weeks had affected them very differently. The gem-cutter looked like the shadow of himself, and had lost his upright carriage. He knew, indeed, that Melissa was alive, and that Alexander, after being wounded, had been carried by Andreas to the house of Zeno, and was on the way to recovery; but the death of his favorite son preyed on his mind, and it was a great grievance that his house should have been wrecked and burned. His hidden gold, which was safe with him, would have allowed of his building a far finer one in its stead, but the fact that it should be his fellow-citizens who had destroyed it was worst of all. It weighed on his spirits, and made him morose and silent.

Old Dido, who had risked her life more than once, looked at him with mournful eyes, and besought all the gods she worshiped to restore her good master's former vigor, that she might once more hear him curse and storm; for his subdued mood seemed to her unnatural and alarming—a portent of his approaching end.

Praxilla, too, the comfortable widow, had grown pale and thin, but old Dido had learned a great deal from her teaching. Polybius only was more cheerful than ever. He knew that his son and Melissa had escaped the most imminent dangers. This made him glad; and then his sister had done wonders that he might not too greatly miss his cook. His meals had nevertheless been often scanty enough, and this compulsory temperance had relieved him of his gout and done him so much good that, when Andreas led him out into daylight once more, the burly old man exclaimed: "I feel as light as a bird. If I had but wings I could fly across the lake to see the boy. It is you, my brother, who have helped to make me so much lighter." He laid his arm on the freedman's shoulder and kissed him on the cheeks. It was for the first time; and never before had he called him brother. But that his lips had obeyed the impulse of his heart might be seen in the tearful glitter of his eyes, which met those of Andreas, and they, too, were moist.

Polybius knew all that the Christian had done for his son and for Melissa, for him and his, and his jest in saying that Andreas had helped to make him lighter referred to his latest achievement. Julianus, the new governor of the city, who now occupied the residence of the prefect Titianus, had taken advantage of the oppressed people to extract money, and Andreas, by the payment of a large sum, had succeeded in persuading him to sign a document which exonerated Polybius and his son from all criminality, and protected their person and property against soldiers and town guards alike. This safe-conduct secured a peaceful future to the genial old man, and filled the measure of what he owed to the freedman, even to overflowing. Andreas, on his part, felt that his former owner's kiss and brotherly greeting had sealed his acceptance as a free man. He asked no greater reward than

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this he had just received; and there was another thing which made his heart leap with gladness. He knew now that the fullness of time had come in the best sense for the daughter of the only woman he had ever loved, and that the Good Shepherd had called her to be one of His flock. He could rejoice over this without a pang, for he had learned that Diodoros, too, had entered on the path which hitherto he had pointed out to him in vain.

A calm cheerfulness, which surprised all who knew him, brightened the grave man; for him the essence of Christian love lay in the Resurrection, and he saw with astonishment that a wonderful new vitality was rising out of death. For Alexandria, too, the time was fulfilled. Men and women crowded to the rite of baptism. Mothers brought their daughters, and fathers their sons. These days of horror had multiplied the little Christian congregation to a church of ten thousand members. Caracalla turned hundreds from heathenism by his bloody sacrifices, his love of fighting, his passion for revenge, and the blindness which made him cast away all care for his eternal soul to secure the enjoyment of a brief existence. That the sword which had slain thousands of their sons should have been dedicated to Serapis, and accepted by the god, alienated many of the citizens from the patron divinity of the town. Then the news that Timotheus the high-priest had abdicated his office soon after Caesar's departure, and, with his revered wife Euryale, had been baptized by their friend the learned Clemens, confirmed many in their desire to be admitted into the Christian community.

After these horrors of bloodshed, these orgies of hatred and vengeance, every heart longed for love and peace and brotherly communion. Who of all those that had looked death in the face in these days was not anxious to know more of the creed which taught that the life beyond the grave was of greater importance than that on earth?—while those who already held it went forth to meet, as it were, a bridegroom. They had seen men trodden down and all their rights trampled on, and now every ear was open when a doctrine was preached which recognized the supreme value of humanity, by ascribing, even to the humblest, the dignity of a child of God. They were accustomed to pray to immortal beings who lived in privileged supremacy and wild revelry at the golden tables of the Olympian banquet; and now they were told that the church of the Christians meant the communion of the faithful with their fatherly God, and with His Son who had mingled with other mortals in the form of man and who had done more for them than a brother, inasmuch as He had taken upon Himself to die on the cross for love of them.

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To a highly cultured race like the Alexandrians it had long seemed an absurdity to try to purchase the favor of the god; by blood-offerings. Many philosophical sects, and especially the Pythagoreans, had forbidden such sacrifices, and had enjoined the bringing of offerings not to purchase good fortune, but only to honor the gods; and now they saw the Christians not making any offerings at all, but sharing a love-feast. This, as they declared, was to keep them in remembrance of their brotherhood and of their crucified Lord, whose blood, once shed, His heavenly Father had accepted instead of every other sacrifice. The voluntary and agonizing death of the Redeemer had saved the soul of every Christian from sin and damnation; and many who in the late scenes of horror had been inconsolable in anticipation of the grave, felt moved to share in this divine gift of grace.

Beautiful, wise, and convincing sentences from the Bible went from lip to lip; and a saying of Clemens, whose immense learning was well known, was especially effective and popular. He had said that "faith was knowledge of divine things through revelation, but that learning must give the proof thereof"; and this speech led many men of high attainments to study the new doctrines.

The lower classes were no doubt those most strongly attracted, the poor and the slaves; and with them the sorrowing and oppressed. There were many of these now in the town; ten thousand had seen those dearest to them perish, and others, being wounded, had within a few days been ruined both in health and estate.

As to Melissa in her peril, so to all these the Saviour's call to the heavy-laden that He would give them rest had come as a promise of new hope to ear and heart. At the sound of these words they saw the buds of a new spring-time for the soul before their eyes; any one who knew a Christian improved his intimacy that he might hear more about the tender-hearted Comforter, the Friend of children, the kind and helpful Patron of the poor, the sorrowful, and the oppressed.

Assemblies of any kind were prohibited by the new governor; but the law of Aelius Marcianus allowed gatherings for religious purposes, and the learned lawyer, Johannes, directed his fellow-Christians to rely on that. All Alexandria was bidden to these meetings, and the text with which Andreas opened the first, "Now the fullness of time is come," passed from mouth to mouth.

Apart from that period which had preceded the birth of Christ, these words applied to none better than to the days of death and terror which they had just gone through. Had a plainer boundary-stone ever been erected between a past and a future time? Out of the old vain and careless life, which had ended with such fearful horrors, a new life would now proceed of peace and love and pious cares.

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The greater number of the citizens, and at their head the wealthy and proud, still crowded the heathen temples to serve the old gods and purchase their favor with offerings; still, the Christian churches were too small and few to hold the faithful, and these had risen to higher consideration, for the community no longer consisted exclusively of the lower rank of people and slaves. No, men and women of the best families came streaming in, and this creed—as was proclaimed by Demetrius, the eloquent bishop; by Origen, who in power and learning—was the superior of any heathen philosopher; by the zealous Andreas, and many another chosen spirit—this creed was the religion of the future.

The freedman had never yet lived in such a happy and elevated frame of mind; as he looked back on his past existence he often remembered with thankful joy the promise that the last should be first, and that the lowly should be exalted. If the dead had risen from their graves before his eyes it would scarcely have surprised him, for in these latter days he had seen wonder follow on wonder. The utmost his soul had so fervently desired, for which he had prayed and longed, had found fulfillment in a way which far surpassed his hopes; and through what blood and fear had the Lord led His own, to let them reach the highest goal! He knew from the lady Euryale that his desire to win Melissa's soul to the true faith had been granted, and that she craved to be baptized. This had not been confirmed by the girl herself, for, attacked by a violent fever, she had during nine days hovered between life and death; and since then Andreas had for more than a week been detained in the town arranging affairs for Polybius.

The task was now ended which he had set himself to carry through. He could leave the city and see once more the young people he loved. He parted from Polybius and his sister at the garden gate, and led Heron and old Dido to a small cottage which his former master had given him to live in.

The gem-cutter was not to be allowed to see his children till the leech should give leave, and the unfortunate man could not get over his surprise and emotion at finding in his new home not only a work-table, with tools, wax, and stones, but several cages full of birds, and among these feathered friends a starling. His faithful and now freed slave, Argutis, had, by Polybius's orders, supplied everything needful; but the birds were a thought of the Christian girl Agatha. All this was a consolation in his grief, and when the gem-cutter was alone with old Dido he burst into sobs. The slave woman followed his example, but he stopped her with loud, harsh scolding. At first she was frightened; but then she exclaimed with delight from the very bottom of her faithful heart, "The gods be praised!" and from the moment when he could storm, she always declared, Heron's recovery began.

.....

The sun was setting when Andreas made his way to Zeno's house—a long, white-washed building.

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The road led through a palm-grove on the Christian's estate. His anxiety to see the beloved sufferers urged him forward so quickly that he presently overtook another man who was walking in the same direction in the cool of the evening. This was Ptolemaeus, the physician.

He greeted Andreas with cheerful kindness, and the freedman knew what he meant when, without waiting to be asked, he said:

"We are out of the wood now; the fever has passed away. The delirious fancies have left her, and since noon she has slept. When I quitted her an hour ago she was sleeping soundly and quietly. Till now the shaken soul has been living in a dream; but now that the fever has passed away, she will soon be herself again. As yet she has recognized no one; neither Agatha nor the lady Euryale; not even Diodoros, whom I allowed to look at her yesterday for a moment. We have taken her away from the large house in the garden, on account of the children, to the little villa opposite the place of worship. It is quiet there, and the air blows in on her through the open veranda. The Empress herself could not wish for a better sick-room. And the care Agatha takes of her! You are right to hasten. The last glimmer of sunshine is extinct, and divine service will soon begin. I am satisfied with Diodoros too; youth is a soil on which the physician reaps easy laurels. What will it not heal and strengthen! Only when the soul is so deeply shaken, as with Melissa and her brother, matters go more slowly, even with the young. However, as I said, we are past the crisis."

"God be praised!" said Andreas. "Such news makes me young again. I could run like a boy." They now entered the well-kept gardens which lay behind Zeno's house. Noble clumps of tall old trees rose above the green grass plots and splendid shrubs. Round a dancing fountain were carefully kept beds of beautiful flowers. The garden ended at a palm-grove, which cast its shade on Zeno's little private place of worship—an open plot inclosed by tamarisk hedges like walls. The little villa in which Melissa lay was in a bower of verdure, and the veranda with the wide door through which the bed of the sufferer had been carried in, stood open in the cool evening to the garden, the palm-grove, and the place of worship with its garland, as it were, of fragile tamarisk boughs.

Agatha was keeping watch by Melissa; but as the last of the figures, great and small, who could be seen moving across the garden, all in the same direction, disappeared behind the tamarisk screen, the young Christian looked lovingly down at her friend's pale and all too delicate face, touched her forehead lightly with her lips, and whispered to the sleeper, as though she could hear her voice:

"I am only going to pray for you and your brother."

And she went out.

A few moments later the brazen gong was heard—muffled out of regard for the sick—which announced the hour of prayer to the little congregation. It had sounded every evening without disturbing the sufferer, but to-night it roused her from her slumbers.

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She looked about her in bewilderment and tried to rise, but she was too weak to lift herself. Terror, blood, Diodoros wounded, Andreas, the ass on which she had ridden that night, were the images which first crowded on her awakening spirit in bewildering confusion. She had heard that piercing ring of smitten brass in the Serapeum. Was she still there? Had she only dreamed of that night-ride with her wounded lover? Perhaps she had lost consciousness in the mystic chambers, and the clang of the gong had roused her.

And she shuddered. In her terror she dared not open her eyes for fear of seeing on all hands the hideous images on the walls and ceiling. Merciful gods! If her flight from the Serapeum and the rescue of Diodoros by Andreas had really been but a dream, then the door might open at any moment, and the Egyptian Zminis or his men might come in to drag her before that dreadful Caesar.

She had half recovered consciousness several times, and as these thoughts had come over her, her returning lucidity had vanished and a fresh attack of fever had shaken her. But this time her head seemed clearer; the cloud and humming had left her which had impeded the use of her ears and eyes.

Her brain too had recovered its faculties. As soon as she tried to think, her restored intelligence told her that if she were indeed still in the Serapeum and the door should open, the lady Euryale might come in to speak courage to her and take her in her motherly arms, and—And she suddenly recollected the promise which had come to her from the Scriptures of the Christians. It stood before her soul in perfect clearness that she had found a loving comforter in the Saviour; she remembered how gladly she had declared to the lady Euryale that the fullness of time had now indeed come to her, and that she had no more fervent wish than to become a fellow-believer with her kind friend—a baptized Christian. And all the while she felt as though light were spreading in her and around her, and the vision she had last seen when she lost consciousness rose again before her inward eye. Again she saw the Redeemer as He had stood before her at the end of her ride, stretching out His arms to her in the darkness, inviting her, who was weary and heavy laden, to be refreshed by him. A glow of thankfulness warmed her heart, and she closed her eyes once more.

But she did not sleep; and while she lay fully conscious, with her hands on her bosom as it rose and fell regularly with her deep breathing, thinking of the loving Teacher, of the Christians, and of all the glorious promises she had read in the Sermon on the Mount, and which were addressed to her too, she could fancy that her head rested on Euryale's shoulder, while she saw the form of the Saviour robed in light and beckoning to her.

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Her whole frame was wrapped in pleasant languor. Just so had she felt once before—she remembered it well—and she remembered when it was. She had felt just as she did now after her lover had for the first time clasped her to his heart, when, as night came on, she had sat by his side on the marble bench, while the Christian procession passed. She had taken the chanting train for the wandering souls of the dead and—how strange! No—she was not mistaken. She heard at this moment the selfsame strain which they had then sung so joyfully, in spite of its solemn mode. She did know when it had begun, but again it filled her with a bitter-sweet sense of pity. Only it struck deeper now than before, for she knew now that it applied to all human beings, since they were all the children of the same kind Father, and her own brethren and sisters.

But whence did the wonderful music proceed—Was she—and a shock of alarm thrilled her at the thought—was she numbered with the dead? Had her heart ceased to beat when the Saviour had taken her in His arms after her ride through blood and darkness, when all had grown dim to her senses? Was she now in the abode of the blest?

Andreas had painted it as a glorious place; and yet she shuddered at the thought. But was not that foolish? If she were really dead, all terror and pain were at an end. She would see her mother once more; and whatever might happen to those she loved, she might perhaps be suffered to linger near them, as she had done on earth, and hope with assurance to meet them again here, sooner or later.

But no! Her heart was beating still; she could feel how strongly it throbbed. Then where was she?

There certainly had not been any such coverlet as this on her bed in the Serapeum, and the room there was much lower. She looked about her and succeeded in turning on her side toward the evening breeze which blew in on her, so pure and soft and sweet. She raised her delicate emaciated hand to her head and found that her thick hair was gone. Then she must have cut it off to disguise herself.

But where was she? Whither had she fled?

It mattered not. The Serapeum was far away, and she need no longer fear Zminis and his spies. Now for the first time she raised her eyes thankfully to Heaven, and next she looked about her; and while she gazed and let her eyes feed themselves full, a faint cry of delight escaped her lips. Before her, in the silvery light of the bright disk of the young moon lay a splendid blooming garden, and over the palms which towered above all else, in shadowy masses, in the distance the evening star was rising just in front, the moonlight twinkled and flashed in the rising and falling drops of the fountain; and as she lay, stirred to the depths of her soul by this silent splendor, thinking of kindly Selene moving on her peaceful path above, of Artemis hunting in the moonlight, of the nymphs of the waters, and the dryads just now perhaps stealing out of the great trees to dance

with sportive fauns, the chant suddenly broke out again in solemn measure, and she heard, to deep manly voices, the beginning of the Psalm:

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"Give thanks unto the Lord and declare his name; proclaim his wonders among the nations.

"Sing of him and praise him; tell of all his wonders; glorify his holy name; their hearts rejoice that seek the Lord."

Here the men ceased and the women began as though to confirm their praise of the most High, singing the ninetieth Psalm with enthusiastic joy:

"O Lord, thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations.

"Before the mountains were brought forth, or, ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.

"For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is passed, and as a watch in the night."

Then the men's voices broke in again

"The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork.

"Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge."

And the women in their turn took up the chant, and from their grateful breasts rose clear and strong the Psalm of David:

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

"Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases.

"Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with loving-kindness and tender mercies."

Melissa listened breathlessly to the singing, of which she could hear every word; and how gladly would she have mingled her voice with theirs in thanksgiving to the kind Father in heaven who was hers as well as theirs! There lay His wondrous works before her, and her heart echoed the verse:

"Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with loving-kindness and tender mercies," as though it were addressed especially to her and sung for her by the choir of women.



The gods of whom she had but just been thinking with pious remembrance appeared to her now as beautiful, merry, sportive children, as graceful creatures of her own kind, in comparison with the Almighty Creator and Ruler of the universe, whose works among the nations, whose holy name, whose wonders, greatness, and loving-kindness these songs of praise celebrated. The breath of His mouth dispersed the whole world of gods to whom she had been wont to pray, as the autumn wind scatters the many-tinted leaves of faded trees. She felt as though He embraced the garden before her with mighty and yet loving arms, and with it the whole world. She had loved the Olympian gods; but in this hour, for the first time, she felt true reverence for one God, and it made her proud to think that she might love this mighty Lord, this tender Father, and know that she was beloved by Him. Her heart beat faster and faster, and she felt as though, under the protection of this God, she need never more fear any danger.

As she looked out again at the palm-trees beyond the tamarisks, above whose plummy heads the evening star now rode in the azure blue of the night sky, the singing was taken up again after a pause; she heard once more the angelic greeting which had before struck her soul as so comforting and full of promise when she read it in the Gospel:

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“Glory to God on high, on earth peace, good-will toward men.”

That which she had then so fervently longed for had, she thought, come to pass. The peace, the rest for which she had yearned so miserably in the midst of terror and bloodshed, now filled her heart—all that surrounded her was so still and peaceful! A wonderful sense of home came over her, and with it the conviction that here she would certainly find those for whom she was longing.

Again she looked up to survey the scene, and she was now aware of a white figure coming toward her from the tamarisk hedge. This was Euryale. She had seen Agatha among the worshipers, and had quitted the congregation, fearing that the sick girl might wake and find no one near her who cared for her or loved her. She crossed the grass plot with a swift step. She had passed the fountain; her head came into the moonlight, and Melissa could see the dear, kind face. With glad excitement she called her by name, and as the matron entered the veranda she heard the convalescent's weak voice and hastened to her side. Lightly, as if joy had made her young again, she sank on her knees by the bed of the resuscitated girl to kiss her with motherly tenderness and press her head gently to her bosom. While Melissa asked a hundred questions the lady had to warn her to remain quiet, and at last to bid her to keep silence.

First of all Melissa wanted to know where she was. Then her lips overflowed with thankfulness and joy, and declarations that she felt as she was sure the souls in bliss must feel, when Euryale had told her in subdued tones that her father was living, that Diodoros and her brother had found a refuge in the house of Zeno, and that Andreas, Polybius, and all dear to them were quite recovered after those evil days. The town had long been rid of Caesar, and Zeno had consented to allow his daughter Agatha to marry Alexander.

In obedience to her motherly adviser, the convalescent remained quiet for a while; but joy seemed to have doubled her strength, for she desired to see Agatha, Alexander, and Andreas, and—she colored, and a beseeching glance met Euryale's eyes—and Diodoros.

But meanwhile the physician Ptolemaeus had come into the room, and he would allow no one to come near her this evening but Zeno's daughter. His grave eyes were dim with tears as, when taking leave, he whispered to the Lady Euryale:

“All is well. Even her mind is saved.”

He was right. From day to day and from hour to hour her recovery progressed and her strength improved. And there was much for her to see and hear, which did her more good than medicine, even though she had been moved to fresh grief by the death of her brother and many friends.

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Like Melissa, her lover and Alexander had been led by thorny paths to the stars which shine on happy souls and shed their light in the hearts of those to whom the higher truth is revealed. It was as Christians that Diodoros and Alexander both came to visit the convalescent. That which had won so many Alexandrians to the blessings of the new faith had attracted them too, and the certainty of finding their beloved among the Christians had been an added inducement to crave instruction from Zeno. And it had been given them in so zealous and captivating a manner that, in their impressionable hearts, the desire for learning had soon been turned to firm conviction and inspired ardor.

Agatha was betrothed to Alexander.

The scorn of his fellow-citizens, which had fallen on the innocent youth and which he had supposed would prevent his ever winning her love, had in fact secured it to him, for Agatha's father was very ready to trust his child to the man who had rescued her, whom she loved, and in whom he saw one of the lowly who should be exalted.

Alexander was not told of Philip's death till his own wounds were healed; but he had meanwhile confided to Andreas that he had made up his mind to fly to a distant land that he might never again see Agatha, and thus not rob the brother on whom he had brought such disaster of the woman he loved. The freedman had heard him with deep emotion, and within a few hours after Andreas had reported to Zeno the self-sacrificing youth's purpose, Zeno had gone to Alexander and greeted him as his son.

Melissa found in Agatha the sister she had so long pined for; and how happy it made her to see her brother's eyes once more sparkle with gladness! Alexander, even as a Christian and as Agatha's husband, remained an artist.

The fortune accumulated by Andreas—the solidi with which he had formerly paid the scapegrace painter's debts included—was applied to the erection of a new and beautiful house of God on the spot where Heron's house had stood. Alexander decorated it with noble pictures, and as this church was soon too small to accommodate the rapidly increasing congregation, he painted the walls of yet another, with figures whose extreme beauty was famous throughout Christendom, and which were preserved and admired till gloomy zealots prohibited the arts in churches and destroyed their works.

Melissa could not be safe in Alexandria. After being quietly married in the house of Polybius, she, with her young husband and Andreas, moved to Carthage, where an uncle of Diodoros dwelt. Love went them, and, with love, happiness. They were not long compelled to remain in exile; a few months after their marriage news was brought to Carthage that Caesar had been murdered by the centurion Martialis, prompted by the tribunes Apollinaris and Nemesianus Aurelius. Immediately on this, Macrinus, the praetorian prefect, was proclaimed emperor by the troops.

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The ambitious man's sovereignty lasted less than a year; still, the prophecy of Serapion was fulfilled. It cost the Magian his life indeed; for a letter written by him to the prefect, in which he reminded him of what he had foretold, fell into the hands of Caracalla's mother, who opened the letters addressed to her ill-fated son at Antioch, where she was then residing. The warning it contained did not arrive, however, till after Caesar's death, and before the new sovereign could effectually protect the soothsayer. As soon as Macrinus had mounted the throne the persecution of those who had roused the ire of the unhappy Caracalla was at an end. Diodoros and Melissa, Heron and Polybius, could mingle once more with their fellow-citizens secure from all pursuit.

Diodoros and other friends took care that the suspicion of treachery which had been cast on Heron's household should be abundantly disproved. Nay, the death of Philip, and Melissa's and Alexander's evil fortunes, placed them in the ranks of the foremost foes of tyranny.

Within ten months of his accession Macrinus was overthrown, after his defeat at Immae, where, though the praetorians still fought for him bravely, he took ignominious flight; Julia Domna's grandnephew was then proclaimed Caesar by the troops, under the name of Heliogabalus, and the young emperor of fourteen had a statue and a cenotaph erected at Alexandria to Caracalla, whose son he was falsely reputed to be. These two works of art suffered severely at the hands of those on whom the hated and luckless emperor had inflicted such fearful evils. Still, on certain memorial days they were decked with beautiful flowers; and when the new prefect, by order of Caracalla's mother, made inquiry as to who it was that laid them there, he was informed that they came from the finest garden in Alexandria, and that it was Melissa, the wife of the owner, who offered them. This comforted the heart of Julia Domna, and she would have blessed the donor still more warmly if she could have known that Melissa included the name of her crazed son in her prayers to her dying day.

Old Heron, who had settled on the estate of Diodoros and lived there among his birds, less surly than of old, still produced his miniature works of art; he would shake his head over those strange offerings, and once when he found himself alone with old Dido, now a freed-woman, he said, irritably: "If that little fool had done as I told her she would be empress now, and as good as Julia Domna. But all has turned out well— only that Argutis, whom every one treats as if our old Macedonian blood ran in his veins, was sent yesterday by Melissa with finer flowers for Caracalla's cenotaph than for her own mother's tomb—May her new-fangled god forgive her! There is some Christian nonsense at the bottom of it, no doubt. I stick to the old gods whom my Olympias served, and she always did the best in everything."

Old Polybius, too, remained a heathen; but he allowed the children to please themselves. He and Heron saw their grandchildren brought up as Christians without a remonstrance, for they both understood that Christianity was the faith of the future.

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Andreas to his latest day was ever the faithful adviser of old and young alike. In the sunshine of love which smiled upon him his austere zeal turned to considerate tenderness. When at last he lay on his death-bed, and shortly before the end, Melissa asked him what was his favorite verse of the Scriptures, he replied firmly and decidedly:

“Now the fullness of time is come.”

“So be it,” replied Melissa with tears in her eyes. He smiled and nodded, signed to Diodoros to draw off his signet ring—the only thing his father had saved from the days of his wealth and freedom—and desired Melissa to keep it for his sake. Deeply moved, she put it on her finger; but Andreas pointed to the motto, and said with failing utterance:

“That is your road—and mine—my father’s motto: *Per aspera ad astra*. It has guided me to my goal, and you—all of you. But the words are in Latin; you understand them? By rough ways to the stars—Nay what they say to me is: Upward, under the burden of the cross, to bliss here and hereafter—And you too,” he added, looking in his darling’s face. “You too, both of you; I know it.”

He sighed deeply, and, laying his hand on Melissa’s head as she knelt by his bed, he closed his faithful eyes in the supporting arms of Diodoros.

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