

A Question eBook

A Question by Georg Ebers

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A QUESTION

By Georg Ebers

Translated from the German by Mary J. Safford

PRELUDE.

In the Art-Palace on green Isar's strand,
Before one picture long I kept my seat,
It held me spellbound by some magic band,
Nor when my home I sought, could I forget.

A year elapsed, came winter's frost and snow,
'Twas rarely now we saw the bright sun shine,
I plucked up courage and cried: "Be it so!"
Then southward wandered with those I call mine.

Like birds of passage built we there a nest
On a palm-shaded shore, all steeped in light,
Life was a holiday, enjoyed with zest
And grateful hearts, the while it winged its flight.



Oft on the sea's wide purplish-blue expanse,
With ever new delight I fixed my eyes,
Alma Tadema's picture, at each glance
Recalled to mind, a thousand times would rise.

Once a day dawned, glad as a bride's fair face,
Perfume, and light, and joy it did enfold,
Then-without search, flitted from out of space
Words for the tale that my friend's picture told.

A QUESTION

CHAPTER I.

The house-keeper and the steward.

"Salt sea-water or oil, it's all the same to you! Haven't I put my lamp out long ago? Doesn't the fire on the hearth give light enough? Are your eyes so drowsy that they don't see the dawn shining in upon us more and more brightly? The olives are not yet pressed, and the old oil is getting toward the dregs. Besides, you know how much fruit those abominable thieves have stolen. But sparrows will carry grain into the barn before you'll try to save your master's property!"

So Semestre, the ancient house-keeper of Lysander of Syracuse, scolded the two maids, Chloris and Dorippe, who, unheeding the smoking wicks of their lamps, were wearily turning the hand-mills.

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Dorippe, the younger of the two, grasped her disordered black tresses, over which thousands of rebellious little hairs seemed to weave a veil of mist, drew from the mass of curls falling on her neck a bronze arrow, with which she extinguished the feeble light of both lamps, and, turning to the house-keeper, said:

"There, then! We can't yet tell a black thread from a white one, and I must put out the lamps, as if this rich house were a beggar's hut. Two hundred jars of shining oil were standing in the storehouses a week ago. Why did the master let them be put on the ship and taken to Messina by his brother and Mopsus?"

"And why isn't the fruit gathered yet?" asked Chloris. "The olives are overripe, and the thieves have an easy task, now the watchmen have gone to Messina as rowers. We must save by drops, while we own more gnarled olive-trees than there are days in the year. How many jars of oil might be had from the fruit that has dropped on the ground alone! The harvest at neighbor Protarch's was over long ago, and if I were like Lysander—"

"There would probably be an end of saving," cried the house-keeper, interrupting the girl. "Well, I confess it wasn't easy for me to part with the golden gift of the gods, but what could I do? Our master's brother, Alciphron, wanted it, and there was a great barter. Alciphron is clever, and has a lucky hand, in which the liquid gold we press from the olives with so much toil, and keep so carefully, becomes coined metal. He's like my own child, for I was his nurse. Here in the country we increase our riches by care, patience and frugality, while the city merchant must have farseeing eyes, and know how to act speedily. Even when a boy, my Alciphron was the wisest of Dionysius's three sons, and, if there was anything sweet to be divided, always knew how to get the largest share. When his mother was alive, she once told the lad to give her the best of some freshly-baked cakes, that she might take it to the temple for an offering, and what was his answer? 'It will be well for me to taste them all, that I may be certain not to make a mistake;' and when Clytemnestra—"

"Is Alciphron younger than our poor master?" interrupted Dorippe.

"They were sesame cakes with honey," replied the house-keeper, whose hearing was impaired by age, and who therefore frequently misunderstood words uttered in a low tone. "Is the linen ready for the wash?"

"I didn't ask about the cakes," replied Dorippe, exchanging a mischievous glance with Chloris; "I only wanted to know—"

"You girls are deaf; I've noticed it a long time," interrupted the house-keeper. "You've grown hard of hearing, and I know why. Hundreds of times I've forbidden you to throw yourselves on the dewy grass in the evening, when you were heated by dancing. How often I get absurd answers, when I ask you anything!"

The girls both laughed merrily.

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The higher voice of one mingled harmoniously with the deeper tones of her companion, and two pairs of dark eyes again met, full of joyous mirth, for they well knew who was deaf, and who had quicker hearing than even the nightingale, which, perched on the green fig-tree outside, was exultingly hailing the sunrise, now with a clear, flute-like warble, now with notes of melancholy longing.

The house-keeper looked with mingled astonishment and anger at the two laughing girls, then clapped her hands loudly, exclaiming:

"To work, wenches! You, Chloris, prepare the morning meal; and you, Dorippe, see if the master wants anything, and bring fresh wood for the fire. Stop your silly giggling, for laughing before sunrise causes tears at evening. I suppose the jests of the vineyard watchmen are still lingering in your heads. Now go, and don't touch food till you've arranged your hair."

The girls, nudging each other, left the women's apartment, into which the dawn was now shining more brightly through the open roof.

It was a stately room, surrounded by marble columns, which bore witness to the owner's wealth, for the floor was beautifully adorned with bright-hued pictures, mosaic work executed in colored stones by an artist from Syracuse. They represented the young god Dionysius, the Hyades surrounding him, and in colored groups all the gifts of the divinities who watch over fields and gardens, as well as those of the Nysian god. Each individual design, as well as the whole picture, was inclosed in a framework of delicate lines. The hearth, over which Semestre now bent, to fan the glimmering embers with a goose-wing, was made of yellow marble.

Dorippe now returned, curtly said that the master wanted to be helped into the open air, when the sun was higher, and brought, as she had been ordered, a fresh supply of gnarled olive-branches, and pinecones, which, kindling rapidly, coaxed the wood to unite its blaze with theirs.

Glittering sparks flew upward from the crackling branches toward the open roof, and with them a column of warm smoke rose straight into the pure, cool morning air; but as the door of the women's apartment now opened, the draught swept the gray, floating pillar sideways, directly toward Semestre, who was fanning the flames with her goose-wing.

Coughing violently, she wiped her eyes with the edge of her blue peplum, and glanced angrily at the unbidden guest who ventured to enter the women's apartment at this hour.

As soon as she recognized the visitor she nodded pleasantly, though with a certain touch of condescension, and rose from her stool, but instantly dropped back on it again, instead of going forward to meet the new-comer. Then she planted herself still more

firmly on her seat, and, instead of uttering a friendly greeting, coughed and muttered a few unintelligible words.

“Give me a little corner by your fire, it’s a cold morning,” cried the old man in a deep voice. “Helios freezes his people before he comes, that they may be doubly grateful for the warmth he bestows.”

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"You are right," replied Semestre, who had only understood a few of the old man's words; "people ought to be grateful for a warm fire; but why, at your age, do you go out so early, dressed only in your chiton, without cloak or sandals, at a season when the buds have scarcely opened on the trees. You people yonder are different from others in many respects, but you ought not to go without a hat, Jason; your hair is as white as mine."

"And wholly gone from the crown," replied the old man, laughing. "It's more faithful to you women; I suppose out of gratitude for the better care you bestow. I need neither hat, cloak, nor sandals! An old countryman doesn't fear the morning chill. When a boy, I was as white as your master's little daughter, the fair-faced Xanthe, but now head, neck, arms, legs, every part of me not covered by the woolen chiton, is brown as a wine-skin before it's hung up in the smoke, and the dark hue is like a protecting garment, nay better, for it helps me bear not only cold, but heat. There's nothing white about me now, except the beard on my chin, the scanty hair on my head, and, thank the gods, these two rows of sound teeth."

Jason, as he spoke, passed his hard, brown finger over the upper and then the under row of his teeth; but the housekeeper, puckering her mouth in the attempt to hide many a blemish behind her own lips, answered:

"Your teeth are as faithful to you as our hair is to us, for men know how to use them more stoutly than women. Now show what you can do. We have a nice curd porridge, seasoned with thyme, and some dried lamb for breakfast. If the girl hurries, you needn't wait long. Every guest, even the least friendly, is welcome to our house."

"I didn't come here to eat," replied the old man; "I've had my breakfast. There's something on my mind I would like to discuss with the clever house-keeper, nay, I ought to say the mistress of this house, and faithful guardian of its only daughter."

Semestre turned her wrinkled face towards the old man, opened her eyes to their widest extent, and then called eagerly to Dorippe, who was busied about the hearth, "We want to be alone!"

The girl walked slowly toward the door, and tried to conceal herself behind the projecting pillars to listen, but Semestre saw her, rose from her seat, and drove her out of doors with her myrtle-staff, exclaiming:

"Let no one come in till I call. Even Xanthe must not interrupt us."

"You won't stay alone, for Aphrodite and all the Loves will soon join such a pair," cried the girl, as she sprang across the threshold, banging the door loudly behind her.

“What did she say?” asked Semestre, looking suspiciously after the maiden. The vexations one has to endure from those girls, Jason, can’t be described, especially since they’ve grown deaf.”

“Deaf?” asked the old man in astonishment.

“Yes, they scarcely understand a word correctly, and even Xanthe, who has just reached her seventeenth year, is beginning to be hard of hearing.”

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A smile flitted over Jason's face, and, raising his voice to a louder tone, he said, flatteringly:

"Every one can't have senses as keen as yours, Semestre; have you time to listen to me?"

The house-keeper nodded assent, leaned against the column nearest the hearth, rested both hands on her staff, and bent forward to intimate that she would listen attentively, and did not wish to lose a single word.

Jason stood directly opposite, and, while thus measuring each other with their eyes, Semestre looked like a cautious cat awaiting the attack of the less nimble but stronger shepherd's dog.

"You know," Jason began, that when, long ago, we two, you as nurse and I as steward, came to this place, our present masters' fine estates belonged undivided to their father. The gods gave the old man three sons. The oldest, Alciphron, whom you nursed and watched through his boyhood, went to a foreign land, became a great merchant in Messina, and, after his father's death, received a large inheritance in gold, silver and the city house at the port. The country estates were divided between Protarch and Lysander. My master, as the elder of the two, obtained the old house; yours built this new and elegant mansion. One son, the handsome Phaon, has grown up under our roof, while yours shelters the lovely Xanthe. My master has gone to Messina, not only to sell our oil and yours, but to speak to the guardian of a wealthy heiress, of whom his brother had written. He wants her for Phaon's wife; but I think Phaon was created for Xanthe and Xanthe for him. There's nothing lacking, except to have Hymen—"

"To have Hymen unite them," interrupted Semestre. "There's no hurry about heiresses; they don't let themselves be plucked like blackberries. If she has scorned her country suitor, it may well seem desirable to Protarch and all of you that Xanthe should prove more yielding, for then our property would be joined with yours."

"It would be just the same as during Dionysius's lifetime."

"And you alone would reap the profit."

"No, Semestre, it would be an advantage to both us and you; for, since your master had that unlucky fall from the high wall of the vineyard, the ruler's eye is lacking here, and many things don't go as they ought."

"People see what they want to see," cried Semestre. "Our estates are no worse managed than yours."

"I only meant to say—"

“That your Phaon seems to you well fitted to supply my master’s place. I think differently, and, if Lysander continues to improve, he’ll learn to use his limbs again.”

“An invalid needs rest, and, since the deaths of your mistress and mine, quarrelling never ceases—”

“We never disturb the peace.”

“And quarrelling is even more unpleasant to us than to you; but how often the shepherds and vine-dressers fight over the spring, which belongs to us both, and whose beautiful wall and marble bench are already damaged, and will soon be completely destroyed, because your master says mine ought to bear the expense of the work—”

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“And I daily strengthen him in this belief. We repaired the inclosing wall of the spring, and it’s only fair to ask Protarch to mend the masonry of the platform. We won’t yield, and if you—”

“If we refuse to do Lysander’s will, it will lead to the quarrelling I would fain prevent by Phaon’s marriage with your Xanthe. Your master is in the habit of following your advice, as if you were his own mother. You nurse the poor invalid like one, and if you would only—”

“Lysander has other plans, and Phaon’s father is seeking an heiress for his son in Messina.”

“But surely not for the youth’s happiness, nor do I come to speak to you in Protarch’s name.”

“So you invented the little plan yourself—I am afraid without success, for I’ve already told you that my master has other views.”

“Then try to win him to our side—no, not only to us, but to do what is best for the prosperity of this house.”

“Not for this house; only for yourselves. Your plan doesn’t please me.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t wish what you desire.”

“‘I don’t wish,’ that’s a woman’s most convincing reason.

“It is, for at least I desire nothing I haven’t carefully considered. And you know Alciphron, in Syracuse, our master’s oldest brother, did not ask for the heiress, who probably seemed to him too insignificant for his own family, but wanted our girl for his son Leonax. We joyfully gave our consent, and, within a few days, perhaps to-morrow, the suitor will come from Messina with your master to see his bride.”

“Still, I stick to it: your Xanthe belongs to our Phaon, and, if you would act according to Dionysius’s wishes, like fair-minded people—”

“Isn’t Alciphron—the best and wisest of men—also Dionysius’s child? I would give his first-born, rather than any one else, this fruitful soil, and, when the rich father’s favorite, when Leonax once rules here by Xanthe’s side, there’ll be no lack of means to rebuild the platform and renew a few marble benches.”

Angered by these words, the old man indignantly exclaimed:

“You add mockery to wrong. We know the truth. To please Alciphron, your foster-child, you would make us all beggars. If Lysander gives his daughter to Leonax it will be your work, yours alone, and we will—”

Semestre did not allow herself to be intimidated, but, angrily raising her myrtle-staff, interrupted Jason by exclaiming in a loud, tremulous voice:

You are right. This old heart clings to Alciphron, and throbs more quickly at the mere mention of its darling’s name; but verily you have done little to win our affection. Last autumn the harvest of new wine was more abundant than we expected. We lacked skins, and when we asked you to help us with yours—”

“We said no, because we ourselves did not know what to do with the harvest.”

“And who shamefully killed my gray cat?”

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"It entered Phaon's dove-cote and killed the young of his best pair of cropper pigeons."

"It was a marten, not the good, kind creature. You are unfriendly in all your acts, for when our brown hen flew over to you yesterday she was driven away with stones. Did Phaon mistake her for a vulture with sharp beak and powerful talons?"

"A maid-servant drove her away, because, since your master has been ill and no longer able to attend to business, your poultry daily feeds upon our barley."

"I'm surprised you don't brand us as robbers!" cried Semestre. "Yes, if you had beaten me yourself with a stick, you would say a dry branch of a fig or olive tree had accidentally fallen on my back. I know you well enough, and Leonax, Alciphron's son, not your sleepy Phaon, whom people say is roaming about when he ought to be resting quietly in the house, shall have our girl for his wife. It's not I who say so, but Lysander, my lord and master."

"Your will is his," replied Jason. "Far be it from me to wound the sick man with words, but ever since he has been ill you've played the master, and he ought to be called the house-keeper. Ay, you have more influence under his roof than any one else, but Aphrodite and Eros are a thousand times more powerful, for you rule by pans, spits, and soft pillows—they govern hearts with divine, irresistible omnipotence."

Semestre laughed scornfully, and, striking the hard stone floor with her myrtle-staff, exclaimed:

"My spit is enough, and perhaps Eros is helping it with his arrows, for Xanthe no longer asks for your Phaon, any more than I fretted for a person now standing before me when he was young. Eros loves harder work. People who grow up together and meet every day, morning, noon, and night, get used to each other as the foot does to the sandal, and the sandal to the foot, but the heart remains untouched. But when a handsome stranger, with perfumed locks and costly garments, suddenly meets the maiden, Aphrodite's little son fits an arrow to his golden bow."

"But he doesn't shoot," cried Jason, "when he knows that another shaft has already pierced the maiden's heart. Any man can win any girl, except one whose soul is filled with love for another."

"The gray-headed old bachelor speaks from experience," retorted Semestre, quickly. "And your Phaon! If he really loved our girl, how could he woo another or have her wooed for him? It comes to the same thing. But I don't like to waste so many words. I know our Xanthe better than you, and she no more cares for her playfellow than the column on the right side of the hearth yearns toward the one on the left, though they have stood together under the same roof so long."

“Do you know what the marble feels?”

“Nothing, Jason, nothing at all; that is, just as much as Xanthe feels for Phaon. But what’s that noise outside the door?”

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The house-keeper was still talking, when one of the folding doors opened a little, and Dorippe called through the crack:

"May we come in? Here's a messenger from Protarch."

"Admit him," cried Semestre, eagerly. The door flew wide open, and the two girls entered the women's apartment with Mopsus, the brother of the lively Chloris. The latter was clinging to his arm, and as he came into the hall removed the broad-brimmed travelling-hat from his brown locks, while dark-skinned Dorippe went behind him and pushed the hesitating youth across the threshold, as a boat is launched into the sea.

In reply to the house-keeper's excited questions, he related that Protarch had sold his master's oil at Messina for as high a price as his own, bought two new horses for his neighbor Cleon, and sent Mopsus himself forward with them. If the wind didn't change, he would arrive that day.

While speaking, he drew from the girdle which confined his blue chiton, bordered with white, around his waist, a strip of papyrus, and handed it to Semestre with a greeting from his master.

The house-keeper looked at both sides of the yellow sheet, turned it over and over, held it close to her eyes, and then glanced hesitatingly at Jason. He would know that she could not read; but Xanthe could decipher written sentences, and the young girl must soon appear at breakfast.

"Shall I read it?" asked the old man.

"I could do so myself, if I chose," replied the house-keeper, drawing her staff over the floor in sharp and blunt angles, as if she were writing. "I could, but I don't like to hear news on an empty stomach, and what is said in this letter concerns myself, I should suppose, and nobody else. Go and call Xanthe to breakfast, Dorippe."

"I know what is in it," cried the girl, reluctant to part from her companion's brother, whom she loved, and who still had a great deal to tell her about his journey to Messina.

"Mopsus has told us. Our master's nephew, Leonax, Alciphron's son, will accompany his uncle and stay for a week or longer as a guest, not over yonder with Protarch, but here in our house. He is a, handsome youth, even taller than Phaon, and Mopsus says Alciphron's wife, by our master's request, dipped deep into his purse at Messina, and bought from her husband's merchant friends gold bracelets and women's garments, such as matrons wear."

At these words a smile of joy and hope flitted over Semestre's wrinkled face, like a spring breeze sweeping across a leafless garden. She no longer thought of the harm a piece of news might do her empty stomach, and, while mentally seeing the flutter of a

matron's beautiful blue garment and the flash of Xanthe's rich dowry, eagerly asked the welcome messenger:

"Does she speak the truth? And what is this about the robes?"

"I brought the clothes myself," replied Mopsus, "and packed them in a beautiful chest inlaid with ivory, like those newlywedded youths receive with the bridal dowry. Praxilla, the handsome sister of Alciphron's wife, also gave—"

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“Go and call Xanthe!” cried Semestre, interrupting the messenger. She had laughed softly several times while listening to his tale, and, when the girls hastily withdrew with Mopsus, cast a triumphant glance at Jason.

Then, remembering how much was to be done to make fitting preparation for the young suitor Leonax, she called loudly:

“Dorippe—Chloris! Chloris—Dorippe !” Neither of the maidens seemed to hear, and, when obliged to resign all hope of an answer, she shrugged her shoulders, and turning to Jason said:

“So young and so deaf; it is sad. Poor girls!”

“They like Mopsus better than you, and don’t wish to hear,” replied Jason, laughing.

“They can’t,” said Semestre, angrily. “Mopsus is a bold, good-for-nothing fellow, whom I’ve often wanted to drive out of the house, but I should like to see the person who refused me obedience. As for your proposal, you have now heard distinctly enough that our girl is intended for Leonax.”

“But suppose Xanthe doesn’t want Leonax, and prefers Phaon to the stranger?”

“Alciphron’s son a ‘stranger’ on the estates of his ancestors!” exclaimed Semestre.

“What don’t we hear? But I must go to work to prepare the best possible reception for Leonax, that he may feel from the first he is no stranger here, but perfectly at home. Now go, if you choose, and offer sacrifices to Aphrodite, that she may join the hearts of Xanthe and Phaon. I’ll stick to my spit.”

“Then you’ll be in the right place,” cried Jason, “but you’re not yet turning it for Leonax’s wedding-feast.”

“And I promise you I’ll prepare the roast for Phaon’s,” retorted Semestre, “but not until the sacrifice of an animal I’m fattening myself induces the foam-born goddess to kindle in Xanthe’s heart sweet love for Leonax.”

CHAPTER II.

Xanthe.

“Xanthe, Xanthe!” called Semestre, a short time after. “Xanthe! Where is the girl?”

The old woman had gone into the garden. Knowing how to use time to advantage, and liking to do two things at once, while looking for her nursling and repeatedly shouting the girl’s name, she was gathering vegetables and herbs, on which the dew of early morning still glittered brightly.

While thus occupied, she was thinking far more of her favorite's son and the roast meats, cakes, and sauces to be prepared for him, than of Xanthe.

She wanted to provide for Leonax all the dishes his father had specially liked when a child, for what a father relishes, she considered, will please his children.

Twenty times she had stooped to pluck fresh lavender, green lettuce, and young, red turnips, and each time, while straightening herself again by her myrtle-staff, as well as a back bent by age would allow, called "Xanthe, Xanthe!"

Though she at last threw her head back so far that the sun shone into her open mouth, and the power of her lungs was not small, no answer came. This did not make her uneasy, for the girl could not be far away, and Semestre was used to calling her name more than once before she obeyed.

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True, to-day the answer was delayed longer than usual. The maiden heard the old woman's shrill, resounding voice very clearly, but heeded it no more than the cackling of the hens, the screams of the peacocks, and the cooing of the doves in the court-yard.

The house-keeper, she knew, was calling her to breakfast, and the bit of dry bread she had taken with her was amply sufficient to satisfy her hunger. Nay, if Semestre had tempted her with the sweetest cakes, she would not have left her favorite nook by the spring now.

This spring gushed from the highest rock on her father's estate. She often went there, especially when her heart was stirred, and it was a lovely spot.

The sparkling water rushed from a cleft in the rocks, and, on the left of the little bench, where Xanthe sat, formed a clear, transparent pool, whose edges were inclosed by exquisitely-polished, white-marble blocks. Every reddish pebble, every smooth bit of snowy quartz, every point and furrow and stripe on the pretty shells on its sandy bottom, was as distinctly visible as if held before the eyes on the palm of the hand, and yet the water was so deep that the gold circlet sparkling above the elbow on Xanthe's round arm, nay, even the gems confining her peplum on the shoulder, would have been wet had she tried to touch the bottom of the basin with the tips of her fingers.

The water was green and clear as crystal, into which, while molten, bits of emeralds had been cast to change them into liquid drops.

Farther on it flowed through a channel choked with all kinds of plants. Close by the edges of the rivulet, which rushed swiftly down to the valley, drooped delicate vines, that threw their tendrils over the stones and flourished luxuriantly in the rocks amid thick, moist clumps of moss. Dainty green plants, swayed to and fro by the plashing water, grew everywhere on the bottom of the brook, and, wherever on its course it could flow more smoothly, ferns, nodding gracefully, surrounded it like ostrich-feathers waving about the cradle of a royal babe.

Xanthe liked to watch the stream disappear in the myrtle-grove.

When, sitting in her favorite nook, she turned her eyes downward, she overlooked the broad gardens and fields of her father and uncle, stretching on the right and left of the stream along the gentle slope of the mountain, and the narrow plain by the sea.

The whole scene resembled a thick woolen carpet, whose green surface was embroidered with white and yellow spots, or one of the baskets young maidens bear on their heads at the feast of Demeter, and in which, piled high above the edge, light and dark-hued fruit gleams forth from leaves of every tint.

Groves of young pomegranate and myrtle trees, with vigorous shoots, stood forth in strong relief against the silvery gray-green foliage of the gnarled olive-trees.

Fragrant roses, glowing with a scarlet hue, as if the sun's fiery kiss had called them to life, adorned bushes and hedges, while, blushing faintly, as if a child's lips had waked them from slumber, the blossoms of the peach and almond glimmered on the branches of the trees.

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Tiny young green leaves were growing from the oddly-interwoven branches of the fig-trees, to which clung the swelling pouches of the fruit. Golden lemons glittered amid their strong, brilliant foliage, which had survived the winter season; and long rows of blackish-green cypresses rose straight and tall, like the grave voices of the chorus amid the joyous revel. To Xanthe, gazing downward, her father's pine-wood seemed like a camp full of arched, round tents, and, if she allowed her eyes to wander farther, she beheld the motionless sea, whose broad surface, on this pleasant morning, sparkled like polished sapphire, and everywhere seemed striving to surpass with its own blue the color of the clear sky. Ever and anon, like a tiny silver cloud floating across the firmament, white sails glided by.

Pleasant green hills framed this lovely view. On their well-cultivated slopes appeared here the white, glimmering walls of a temple; yonder villages, houses, and cottages, like the herds and single sheep that he half concealed by dense foliage.

Garlands of flowers surround the heads of happy mortals, and here the house of every wealthy land-owner was inclosed by a hedge or garden.

Behind the hills rose the sharply-cut outlines of the naked cliffs of the lofty, distant mountains, and the snowy head of sleeping Mount Etna gleamed brightly through the mist.

Now, in the early morning, sea and garden, hills and distant mountains were covered with a delicate veil of indescribable hue. It seemed as if the sea had furnished the warp of this fabric, and the golden sun the woof.

The scene was wondrously beautiful, but Xanthe had not gone to the spring to gaze at the landscape; nay, she scarcely knew that it was lovely.

When the sea shone with the hue of the sky and lay motionless, as it did to-day, she thought Glaucus, the god of the blue sea, was sunning himself in pleasant slumber.

On other bright days when the waves and surges swelled, white foam crowned their crests, and a never-ending succession of breakers dashed upon the shore, she believed the fifty daughters of Nereus were pursuing their sports under the clear water.

They were all lovely women, and full of exuberant gayety.

Some rocked quietly on the gleaming waves, others boldly swung themselves on the backs of the bearded Tritons, and merrily urged them through the flood.

When the surf beat roaring on the strand, Xanthe thought she could hear these creatures guiding their course with their scaly tails and blowing into shells, and many a glimmering foam-crest on a deep-blue wave was no transparent bubble-no, the girl distinctly saw that it was the white neck, the gleaming arm, or the snowy foot of one of

Nereus's daughters. She believed that she clearly distinguished them sporting joyously up and down through the azure water, now plunging into the depths with their feet, and now with their heads foremost, anon floating gently on the surface of the waves. One held out her hand to another, and in so doing their beautiful, rounded arms often gleamed beneath the crest of a surge.

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Every day they practised new games, as the sea never looks precisely the same; each hour it changed its hue, here, there, and everywhere, Light streaks, like transparent bluish-green gauze, often ran through the darker surface, which resembled a purplish-blue mantle of some costly Phoenician stuff; the waves could flash black as the eye of night, and white as Leucothea's neck.

Then Amphitrite appeared, with floating hair and resonant voice, and beside her Poseidon with his four steeds.

Frowning sullenly, he struck them sharply with his lash, which whistled through the air, and angrily thrust his trident deep into the sea. Instantly the waves took hues of lighter brown, deeper yellow, and cloudy gray, and the sea wore the aspect of a shallow pond with muddy bottom, into which workmen hurl blocks of stone. The purity of the water was sadly dimmed, and the billows dashed foaming toward the sky, threatening in their violent assault to shatter the marble dike erected along the shore. The Nereids, trembling, took refuge in the ever-calm depths, the Tritons no longer used their hollow shells to blow gentle harmonies; nay, they sent forth crashing war-songs, as if some hostile citadel were to be assailed; while Amphitrite thrust both hands into her long, fluttering hair, and with out-stretched head uttered her furious roar.

But to-day the sea was calm, and when Xanthe had reached the spring the edges of the milk-white, light, fleecy clouds, towering one above another on the summits of the loftier mountains, were still glowing with a rosy light. It was the edge of the garment of the vanishing Eos, the leaves of the blossoms scattered by the Hours in the pathway of the four steeds of Helios, as they rose from the waves.

To day and at this hour the morning sunlight fell serenely on the tall cypresses upon the hill, the trees in the garden swayed in the soft breath of the morning breeze, and Xanthe nodded to them, for she thought the beautiful Dryads living in the trees were greeting each other.

Often, with a brief prayer, she laid flowers or a round cake on the altar that stood beside her seat, and which her ancestor had erected to the nymph of the spring—but today she had not come for this.

Then what brought her to the hill so early? Did she visit the spring to admire her own image in its mirror-like surface?

At home she was rarely permitted such an indulgence, for, whenever she looked in the polished metal-disk, Semestre used to say:

“If a girl often peers into such useless things, she'll certainly see a fool's image in them.”

Forbidden things are charming, yet Xanthe rarely looked into this liquid mirror, though she might have enjoyed gazing at it frequently, for her figure was tall and slender as the trunk of a cypress, her thick fair hair glittered like gold, the oval of her face was exquisitely rounded, long lashes shaded the large blue eyes that could conceal no emotion which stirred her soul, and when she was alone seemed to ask: "What have the gods allotted for my future?" Yet in their gaze might often be read the answer "Something delightful, surely."

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And yet Xanthe did not come to the spring to paint pictures of her future; on the contrary, she came to be sad, and shed tears unrebuked. She did not weep passionately, but the big salt drops welled slowly from her eyes and ran down her young cheeks, as drop after drop of shining sap flows down the trunk of a wounded birch-tree.

Yes, Xanthe felt very sorrowful, yet everything that surrounded her was so bright, and at her home laughter was rarely silent, while her own often rang out no less merrily than that of lively Chloris and dark-skinned Dorippe.

Her sick father, now slowly recovering, could refuse her nothing, and, if Semestre tried to do so, Xanthe usually succeeded in having her own way. There was no lack of festivals and joyous dances, and to none of her companions did the youths present more beautiful ribbons, to no one in the circle did they prefer to offer their hands. She was the fairest of all the maidens far and near, and Ismene, Phryxus's wife, had said that her laughter was gay enough to make a cripple dance. Ismene had a daughter herself just Xanthe's age, so it must probably have been true.

Then why, in the name of all the gods, was Xanthe sad?

Is any cause required to explain it?

Must a maiden have met with misfortune, to make her feel a longing to weep? Certainly not.

Nay, the gayest rattle-brain is the least likely to escape such a desire.

When the sky has long shone with unclouded splendor, and the air is so wonderfully clear that even the most distant mountain-peaks are distinctly visible, rain is not long delayed; and who can laugh heartily a long time without finally shedding tears like a mourner?

Whoever endures a severe though not the deepest affliction, whoever is permitted to reach the topmost summit of joy, and a girl who feels love-these three Heaven favors with the blessing of tears.

Had Eros's arrow struck Xanthe's young heart too?

It was possible, though she would not confess it even to herself, and only yesterday had denied it, without the quiver of an eyelash.

Yet, if she did love a youth, and for his sake had climbed to the spring, he must doubtless dwell in the reddish house, standing on a beautiful level patch of ground on the right of the brook, between the sea and the pool; for she glanced toward it again and again, and, except the servants, no one lived under its roof save the aged steward

Jason, and Phaon, her uncle's son. Protarch himself had gone to Messina, with his own and her father's oil.

To age is allotted the alms of reverence, to youth the gift of love, and, of the three men who lived in the house on Xanthe's right-hand, only one could lay claim to such a gift, and he had an unusually good right to do so.

Xanthe was thinking of Phaon as she sat beside the spring, but her brow wore such a defiant frown that she did not bear the most distant resemblance to a maiden giving herself up to tender emotions.

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Now the door of the reddish house opened, and, rising hastily, she looked toward it. A slave came cautiously out, bearing a large jar with handles, made of brown clay, adorned with black figures.

What had the high-shouldered graybeard done, that she stamped her foot so angrily on the ground, and buried the upper row of her snow-white teeth deep in her under-lip, as if stifling some pang?

No one is less welcome than the unbidden intruder, who meets us in the place of some one for whom we ardently long, and Xanthe did not wish to see the slave, but Phaon, his master's son.

She had nothing to say to the youth; she would have rushed away if he had ventured to seek her by the spring, but she wanted to see him, wanted to learn whether Semestre had told the truth, when she said Phaon intended to marry a wealthy heiress, whose hand his father was seeking in Messina. The house-keeper had declared the night before that he only wooed the ugly creature for the sake of her money, and now took advantage of his father's absence to steal out of the house evening after evening, as soon as the fire was lighted on the hearth. And the fine night-bird did not return till long past sunrise, no doubt from mad revels with that crazy Hermias and other wild fellows from Syracuse. They probably understood how to loosen his slow tongue.

Then the old woman described what occurred at such banquets, and when she mentioned the painted flute-players, with whom the dissipated city youths squandered their fathers' money, and the old house-keeper called attention to the fact that Phaon already wandered about as stupidly and sleepily as if he were a docile pupil of the notorious Hermias, Xanthe fairly hated her, and almost forgot the respect she owed to her gray hair, and told her to her face she was a liar and slanderer.

But the girl had been unable to speak, for Phaon's secret courtship of the Messina heiress had deeply wounded her pride, and he really did look more weary and dreamy than usual.

Semestre's praises of her cousin, the young Leonax, Xanthe had heard as little as the chirping of the crickets on the hearth, and before the house-keeper had finished speaking she rose, and, without bidding her good-night, turned her back and left the women's apartment.

Ere lying down to rest in her own room, she paced up and down before her couch, then began to loosen her thick hair so carelessly that the violent pulling actually hurt her, and tied so tightly under her chin the pretty scarlet kerchief worn over her golden tresses at night to prevent them from tangling, that she was obliged to unfasten it again to keep from stifling.

The sandals, from which she had released her slender feet, and which, obedient to her dead mother's teaching, she usually placed beside the chair where her clothes lay smoothly folded, she flung into a corner of the room, still thinking of Phaon, the Messina heiress, and her playfellow's shameful conduct. She had intended to discover whether Semestre spoke the truth, and in the stillness of the night consider what she must do to ascertain how much Phaon was concerned in his father's suit.

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But the god Morpheus willed otherwise, for scarcely had Xanthe laid down to rest, extinguished her little lamp, and wrapped herself closely in the woolen coverlet, when sleep overpowered her.

The young girl waked just before sunrise, instantly thought of Phaon, of the heiress, and of Semestre's wicked words, and hastily went out to the spring.

From there she could see whether her uncle's son returned home from the city with staggering steps, or would, as usual, come out of the house early in the morning to curry and water his brown steeds, which no slave was ever permitted to touch.

But he did not appear, and, in his place, the high-shouldered servant entered the courtyard.

If the young girl was usually sad here, because she liked to be melancholy, to-day grief pierced her heart like a knife, and the bit of white bread she raised to her lips because, with all her sorrow, she was hungry, tasted bitter, as if dipped in wormwood.

She had no need to salt it; the tears that fell on it did that.

Xanthe heard the house-keeper's calls, but did not obey immediately, and perhaps would not have heeded them at all if she had not noticed—yes, she was not mistaken—that, in the full meaning of the words, she had begun to weep like a chidden child.

She was weeping for anger; and soon it vexed her so much to think that she should cry, that fresh tears streamed down her cheeks.

But not many, for, ere her beautiful eyes grew red, they were dry again, as is the custom of eyes when they are young and see anything new.

Two children, a vineyard-watchman's son and a herdsman's little daughter, approached the spring, talking loudly together.

They had decked themselves with fresh, green vines twined about their necks and bosoms, and were now going to sail a little boat made of bark in the tiny, walled pool into which the spring flowed.

The boy had been the owner of the boat, but had given it to the little girl the day before, and now refused to deliver it, unless she would give him in exchange the shining shells her big brother had found, cleaned, and fastened around her little brown arm with a string. The boy persisted in his demand, stretching out his hand for the shells, while the little girl, with sobs and tears, defended herself.

Xanthe, unobserved by the children, became a witness of this contest between might and right, hastily stepped between the combatants, gave the boy a blow on the

shoulder, took the boat away, handed it to the little maiden, and, turning to the latter, said:

“Now, play quietly together, and, if Syrus doesn’t let you keep the boat and the shells, come to me, poor Stephanion.”

So saying, she wiped the little girl’s eyes with her own skirt, seized her by the shoulder, grasped the boy’s black curls, pressed the two little ones toward each other with gentle violence, and commanded:

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"Now, kiss each other!"

The little girl dutifully obeyed the bidding, but the kiss the boy gave his playmate strongly resembled a blow with the mouth.

Xanthe laughed merrily, turned her back on the children, and went slowly down into the valley.

During her walk all sorts of little incidents flashed through her mind with the speed of lightning; memories of the days when she herself was a little girl and Phaon had played with her daily, as the curly-headed Syrus now did with the herdsman's daughter.

But all the scenes swiftly conjured up before her mental vision were very different from that just witnessed.

Once, when she had said that the brook couldn't bear to the sea all the leaves and flowers she tossed in, Phaon only smiled quietly, but the next day she found, fastened to an axis, a wooden cross he had carved himself and fixed between some stones. The stream swept against the broad surfaces of the spokes and forced it to turn constantly.

For weeks both enjoyed the successful toy, but he did not ask a word of thanks, nor did she utter any, only eagerly showed her pleasure, and that was enough for Phaon.

If she began to build a house of sand and stones with him, and it was not finished at once, when they went to play next day she found it roofed and supplied with a little garden, where twigs were stuck in the sand for trees, and red and blue buds for flowers. He had made the seat by the spring for her, and also the little steps on the seashore, by whose aid it was possible to enter dryshod the boat her playfellow had painted with brilliant hues of red and blue, because a neighbor's gay skiff had pleased her fancy.

She now thought of these and many similar acts, and that he had never promised her anything, only placed the finished article before her as a matter of course.

It had never entered his mind to ask compensation for his gifts or thanks for his acts, like curly-headed Syrus. Silently he rendered her service after service; but, unfortunately, at this hour Xanthe was not disposed to acknowledge it.

People grow angry with no one more readily than the person from whom they have received many favors which they are unable to repay; women, no matter whether young or old, resemble goddesses in the fact that they cheerfully accept every gift from a man as an offering that is their due, so long as they are graciously disposed toward the giver, but to-day Xanthe was inclined, to be vexed with her playmate.

A thousand joys and sorrows, shared in common, bound them to each other, and in the farthest horizons of her recollections lay an event which had given her affection for him a new direction. His mother and hers had died on the same day, and since then Xanthe had thought it her duty to watch over and care for him, at first, probably, only as a big live doll, afterward in a more serious way. And now he was deceiving her and going to ruin. Yet Phaon was so entirely different from the wild fellows in Syracuse.

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From a child he had been one of those who act without many words. He liked to wander dreamily in lonely paths, with his large, dark eyes fixed on the ground.

He rarely spoke, unless questioned. Never did he boast of being able to accomplish, or having successfully performed, this or that feat.

He was silent at his work, and, even while engaged in merry games, set about a task slowly, but completed whatever he undertook.

He was welcome in the wrestling-ring and at the dance, for the youths respected his strength, grace, dexterity, and the quiet way in which he silenced wranglers and boasters; while the maidens liked to gaze into the handsome dreamer's eyes, and admired him, though even in the maddest whirl of the dance he remained passionless, moving lightly in perfect time to the measures of the tambourine and double flute.

True, many whom he forgot to notice railed at his silent ways, and even Xanthe had often been sorely vexed when his tongue failed to utter a single word of the significant stories told by his eyes. Ay, they understood how to talk! When his deep, ardent gaze rested upon her, unwavering, but glowing and powerful as the lava-stream that sweeps every obstacle from its still, noiseless course, she believed he was not silent from poverty of mind and heart, but because the feelings that moved him were so mighty that no mortal lips could clothe them in words.

Nevertheless, to-day Xanthe was angry with her playfellow, and a maiden's wrath has two eyes—one blind, the other keener than a falcon's.

What she usually prized and valued in Phaon she now did not see at all, but distinguished every one of his defects.

True, he had shown her much affection without words, but he was certainly as mute as a fish, and would, doubtless, have boasted and asked for thanks like anybody else, if indolence had not fettered his stiff tongue.

Only a short time ago she was obliged to give her hand to lanky Iphis, because Phaon came forward too slowly. He was sleepy, a foolish dreamer, and she would tell him it would be better for him to stretch himself comfortably on his couch and continue to practise silence, rather than woo foreign maidens and riot all night with dissipated companions.

CHAPTER III.

Lysander.



As Xanthe approached her father's house, Semestre's call and the gay notes of a monaulus—[A musical instrument, played like our flageolet or clarinet]—greeted her.

A conjurer had obtained admittance, and was showing his laughing audience the tricks of his trained cocks and hens.

He was a dwarfish, bow-legged little man, with a short neck, on which rested a big head with a very prominent forehead, that shaded his small piercing eyes like a balcony.

The feathered actors lived in a two-wheeled cart, drawn from village to village, and city to city, by a tiny, gayly-decked donkey.

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Three cocks and four hens were now standing on the roof of the cart, looking very comical, for their clever owner, who doubtless knew what pleases the eyes of children and peasants, had colored their white feathers, here and there, with brilliant red and glaring yellow.

Beside the cart stood a pale, sorrowful-looking boy, playing a merry tune on the monaulus. Lysander, Xanthe's father, had been helped out of the house into the sunlight, and, seated in his arm-chair of polished olive-wood, was gazing at the show.

As soon as he saw his daughter, he beckoned to her, and stroking her hair, while she pressed her lips to his forehead, said:

"An amusing sight! The two hens obey the little man as if they were dutiful children. I'm glad he came, for a person like me, forbidden by fate to enjoy the comical things to be seen out of doors, must be grateful when they come in his way. Your feet are twitching, Dorippe. Whenever a flute raises its voice, it moves young girls' limbs, as the wind stirs the leaves of the poplars. You would doubtless like to begin to dance at once."

At these words, Mopsus, keeping time to the music, advanced toward his sweetheart, but Semestre stepped before him, exclaiming half to the lad and half to her master:

"There must be no jumping about now. Whoever dances in the morning will break a leg at night."

Lysander nodded assent.

"Then go into the house, Chloris, and fetch this king of hens a jug of wine, some bread, and two cheeses."

"How many cheeses?" asked the housekeeper."

"Two," replied Lysander.

"One will be more than enough," cried Semestre.—"Bring only one, Chloris." The invalid smilingly shrugged his shoulders, clasped Xanthe's hand as she stood beside him, and said in so low a tone that the old woman could not hear:

"Haven't I grown like little thick-skull's hens? Semestre commands and I must obey. There she goes after Chloris, to save the second cheese."

Xanthe smiled assent. Her father raised his voice and called to the juggler:

"Well, my little friend, show what your actors can do.—You young people, Mopsus and Dorippe, for aught I care, can dance as long as the monaulus sounds, and Semestre stays in the house."

“We want first to see what the hens can do,” cried the dark-haired girl, clinging to her lover’s arm, and turning with Mopsus toward the exhibition, which now began again.

There was many an exclamation of astonishment, many a laugh, for, when the little man ordered his largest cock to show its skill in riding, it jumped nimbly on the donkey’s back; when he ordered it to clean its horse, it pulled a red feather out of the ornaments on the ass’s head; and finally proved itself a trumpeter, by stretching its neck and beginning to crow.

The hens performed still more difficult feats, for they drew from a wooden box for each spectator a leaf of a tree, on which certain characters were visible.

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The scrawl was intelligible only to the conjurer, but was said to contain infallible information about the future, and the little man offered to interpret the writing to each individual.

This trainer of hens was a clever dwarf, with very quick ears. He had distinctly understood that, through Semestre, he was to lose a nice cheese, and, when the housekeeper returned, ordered a hen to tell each person present how many years he or she had lived in the world.

The snow-white bird, with the yellow head, scratched seventeen times before Xanthe, and, on reaching Mopsus, twenty-three times, which was perfectly correct.

“Now tell us this honorable lady’s age too,” said the conjurer to the hen.

Semestre told Chloris to repeat what the little man had said, and was already reflecting whether she should not let him have the second cheese, in consideration of the “honorable lady,” when the hen began to scratch again.

Up to sixty she nodded assent, as she watched the bird’s claw; at sixty-five she compressed her lips tightly, at seventy the lines on her brow announced a coming storm, at eighty she struck the ground violently with her myrtle-staff, and, as the hen, scratching faster and faster, approached ninety, and a hundred, and she saw that all the spectators were laughing, and her master was fairly holding his sides, rushed angrily into the house.

As soon as she had vanished behind the doors, Lysander threw the man half a drachm, and, clapping his hands, exclaimed:

“Now, children, kick up your heels; we sha’n’t see Semestre again immediately. You did your business well, friend: but now come here and interpret your hen’s oracles.”

The conjurer bowed, by bending his big head and quickly raising it again, for his short back seemed to be immovable, approached the master of the house, and with his little round fingers grasped at the leaf in Lysander’s hand; but the latter hastily drew it back, saying:

“First this girl, then I, for her future is long, while mine—”

“Yours,” interrupted the dwarf, standing before Lysander—“yours will be a pleasant one, for the hen has drawn for you a leaf that means peaceful happiness.”

“A violet-leaf!” exclaimed Xanthe. “Yes, a violet-leaf,” repeated the conjurer. “Put it in my hand. There are—just look here—there are seven lines, and seven—everybody knows that—seven is the number of health. Peaceful happiness in good health, that is what your oracle says.” “The gods owe me that, after suffering so long,” sighed



Lysander. "At any rate, come back here in a year, and if your cackling Pythia and this little leaf tell the truth, and I am permitted to bring it to you without support or crutch, I'll give you a stout piece of cloth for a new cloak; yet nay, better try your luck in six months, for your chiton looks sicker than I, and will hardly last a whole year."

"Not half a one," replied the conjurer, with a sly smile. "Give me the piece of stuff to-day, that, when I come back in a month, I may have suitable garments when I amuse the guests at the feast given for your recovery. I'm no giant, and shall not greatly impair your store."

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"We'll see what can be done," replied Lysander, laughing, "and if, when you return in a month, I don't turn you from the door as a bad prophet, in spite of your fine clothes, your flute-player shall have a piece of linen for his thin limbs. But now foretell my daughter's future, too."

The dwarf took Xanthe's leaf from her hand, and said:

"This comes from an olive-tree, is particularly long, and has a light and dark side. You will live to a great age, and your life will be more or less happy as you shape it."

"As you shape it," repeated the girl. "That's a real hen's oracle. 'As people do, so things will be,' my nurse used to say every third word." Disappointed and angry, she threw the leaf on the ground, and turned her back on the little man.

The conjurer watched her keenly and searchingly, as not without difficulty he picked up the leaf. Then glancing pleasantly at her father, he called her back, pointed with his finger to the inner surface, and said:

"Just look at these lines, with the little strokes here at the end. That's a snail with horns. A slow creature! It warns people not to be over-hasty. If you feel inclined to run, check your steps and ask where the path will lead."

"And move through life like a cart creeping down into the valley with drags on the wheels," interrupted Xanthe. "I expected something unlike school-masters' lessons from the clever hen that loaded Semestre with so many years."

"Only question her about what is in your heart," replied the little man, "and she won't fail to answer."

The young girl glanced irresolutely at the conjurer, but repressed the desire to learn more of the future, fearing her father's laughter. She knew that, when Lysander was well and free from pain, nothing pleased him so much as to tease her till she wept.

The invalid guessed what was passing in his little daughter's mind, and said, encouragingly:

"Ask the hen. I'll stop both ears while you question the oracle. Yes, yes, one can scarcely hear his own voice for the monaulus and the shouts of the crazy people yonder.

"Such sounds lure those who are fond of dancing, as surely as a honey-comb brings flies. By the dog! there are four merry couples already! Only I miss Phaon. You say the couch in my brother's house has grown too hard for him, and he has found softer pillows in Syracuse. With us the day began long ago, but in the city perhaps they haven't quite finished with yesterday. I'm sorry for the fine fellow."

"Is it true," asked Xanthe, blushing, "that my uncle is seeking a rich bride for him in Messina?"

"Probably, but in courtship one does not always reach the desired goal. Has Phaon told you nothing about his father's wishes? Question the conjurer, or he'll get his new clothes with far too little trouble. Save me the reproach of being a spendthrift."

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"I don't wish to do so; what is the use of such folly?" replied Xanthe, with flushed cheeks, preparing to go into the house.

Her father shrugged his shoulders, and, turning his head, called after her:

"Do as you please, but cut a piece from the brown woolen cloth, and bring it to the conjurer."

The young girl disappeared in the house. The tune which the boy drew from the monaulus again and again sounded monotonous, but the young people constantly grew more mirthful; higher and higher sprang the bounding feet.

The ribbons fluttered as if a storm had seized them; many a gay garment waved; and there was no end to the shouts and clapping of hands in time with the music.

When Mopsus, or any other lad, raised his voice unusually loud, or a young girl laughed in the overflowing joy of her heart, Lysander's eyes sparkled like sunshine, and he often raised his hands and swayed merrily to and fro to the measure of the music.

Your heart really dances with the young people," said the conjurer.

"But it lacks feet," replied Lysander, and then he told him about his fall, and the particulars of his sufferings, the danger in which he had been, the remedies used, and the final convalescence. He did this with great pleasure, for it always relieved his mind when he was permitted to tell the story of his life to a sympathizing auditor, and few had listened more attentively than did the conjurer, partly from real interest, partly in anticipation of the cloth.

The little man frequently interrupted Lysander with intelligent questions, and did not lose patience when the speaker paused to wave his hand to the merry group.

"How they laugh and enjoy themselves!" the invalid again exclaimed. "They are all young, and before I had this fall—"

The sentence was not finished, for the notes of the monaulus suddenly ceased, the dancers stopped, and, instead of the music and laughter, Semestre's voice was heard; but at the same time Xanthe, carrying a small piece of brown cloth over her arm, approached the sick man. The latter at first looked at his daughter's flushed face with some surprise, then again glanced toward the scene of the interrupted dance, for something was happening there which he could not fully approve, though it forced him to laugh aloud.

The young people, whose sport had been interrupted, had recovered from their fright and joined in a long chain.

Mopsus led the saucy band.

A maiden followed each youth, and the whole party were united, for each individual grasped the person in front with both hands.

Singing a rhythmical dancing-tune, with the upper portion of the body bent forward, and executing dainty steps with their feet, they circled faster and faster around the furious house-keeper.

The latter strove to catch first Chloris, then Dorippe, then some other maiden, but ere she succeeded the chain separated, joining again behind her ere she could turn. Mopsus and his dark-haired sweetheart were again the leaders. When the ring broke the youths and maidens quickly grasped each other again, and the chain of singing, laughing lads and lasses once more whirled around the old woman.

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For some time the amused master of the house could not succeed in shaking his head disapprovingly; but when the old housekeeper, who had never ceased scolding and shaking her myrtle-staff, began to totter from anger and excitement, Lysander thought the jest was being carried too far, and, turning to his daughter, exclaimed:

“Go, rescue Semestre and drive those crazy people away. Fun must not go beyond proper bounds.”

Xanthe instantly obeyed the command the chain parted, the youths hurrying one way, the maidens another; the lads escaped, and so did all the girls except dark-haired Dorippe, who was caught by Semestre and driven into the house with angry words and blows.

“There will be tears after the morning dance,” said Lysander, “and I advise you, friend, if you want to avoid a scolding yourself, to leave the place at once with your feathered artists. Give the man the cloth, Xanthe.”

Xanthe handed the brown woolen stuff to the conjurer.

She blushed faintly as she did so, for, while attempting to cut from the piece a sufficient quantity, Semestre had snatched the knife from her hand, exclaiming rudely:

“Half that is twice too much for the insolent rascal.”

The little man took the scanty gift, spread it out to its full extent, and, turning to Lysander, said:

“At our age people rarely experience new emotions, but to-day, for the first time since I stopped growing, I wish I was still smaller than I am now.”

The invalid had shaken his head discontentedly at sight of the tiny piece, and, as the conjurer was refolding it over his knee, loosed from his shoulders the chlamys he himself wore, saying gravely:

“Take this cloak, for what Lysander promises he does not perform by halves.”

The last words were addressed to Semestre as well as the dwarf, for the old housekeeper, with panting breath and trembling hands, now approached her master.

Kind words were not to be expected from her mouth now, but even more bitter and vehement reproaches sprang to her lips as she saw her master give his scarcely-worn chlamys to a strolling vagrant, and also presume to reward her economy with taunts.

She had carefully woven the cloak with her own hands, and that, she cried, was the way her labor was valued! There was plenty of cloth in the chests, which Lysander could

divide among the buffoons at the next fair in Syracuse. In other countries, even among wild barbarians, white hairs were honored, but here the elders taught the young people to insult them with jeers and mockery.

At these words the invalid's face turned pale, a dark shadow appeared under his eyes, and an expression of pain hovered around his mouth. He looked utterly exhausted.

Every feature betrayed how the old woman's shrill voice and passionate words disturbed him, but he could not silence her by loud rebukes, for his voice failed, and he therefore sought to make peace by the soothing gestures of his thin hands and his beseeching eyes.

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Xanthe felt and saw that her father was suffering, and exclaimed in a fearless, resolute tone:

“Silence, Semestre! your scolding is hurting my father.”

These words increased the house-keeper’s wrath instead of lessening it. In a half-furious, half-whining tone, she exclaimed:

“So it comes to this! The child orders the old woman. But you shall know, Lysander, that I won’t allow myself to be mocked like a fool. That impudent Mopsus is your freed-woman’s child, and served this house for high wages, but he shall leave it this very day, so surely as I hope to live until the vintage. He or I! If you wish to keep him, I’ll go to Agrigentum and live with my daughter and grandchildren, who send to me by every messenger. If this insolent fellow is more to you than I am, I’ll leave this place of ingratitude. In Agrigentum—”

“It is beautiful in Agrigentum !” interrupted the conjurer, pointing with his finger impressively in the direction of this famous city.

“It is delightful there,” cried the old woman, “so long as one doesn’t meet pygmies like you in the streets.”

The house-keeper was struggling for breath, and her master took advantage of the pause to murmur beseechingly, like a child who is to be deprived of something it loves:

“Mopsus must go—merry Mopsus? Nobody knows how to lift and support me so well.”

These words softened Semestre’s wrath, and, lowering her voice, she replied:

“You will no longer need the lad for that purpose; Leonax, Alciphron’s son, is coming to-day. He’ll lift and support you as if you were his own father. The people in Messina are friendly and honor age, for, while you jeer at me, they remember the old woman, and will send me a beautiful matron’s-robe for the future wedding.”

The invalid looked inquiringly at his daughter, and the latter answered, blushing:

“Semestre has told me. She informed me, while I was cutting the cloth, that Leonax would come as a suitor.”

“May he fare better than Alkamenes and the others, whom you sent home! You know I will not force your inclinations, but, if I am to lose Mopsus, I should like a pleasant son. Why has Phaon fallen into such foolish, evil ways? The young Leonax—”

“Is of a different stamp,” interrupted Semestre—” Now come, my dove, I have a thousand things to do.”



“Go,” replied Xanthe. “I’ll come directly.—You will feel better, father, if you rest now. Let me help you into the house, and lie down on the cushion for a time.”

The young girl tried to lift her father, but her strength was too feeble to raise the wearied man. At last, with the conjurer’s help, he succeeded in rising, and the latter whispered earnestly in his ear:

“My hens tell me many things, but another oracle behind my forehead says, you are on the high-road to recovery, but you won’t reach the goal, unless you treat the old woman, who is limping into the house yonder, as I do the birds I train.”

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“And what do you do?”

“Teach them to obey me, and if I see that they assert their own wills, sell them and seek others.”

“You are not indebted to the stupid creatures for anything?”

“But I owe so much the more to the others, who do their duty.”

“Quite true, and therefore you feed and keep them.”

“Until they begin to grow old and refuse obedience.”

“And then?”

“Then I give them to a peasant, on whose land they lay eggs, eat and die. The right farmer for your hens lives in Agrigentum.”

Lysander shrugged his shoulders; and, as, leaning on his daughter, he tottered slowly forward, almost falling on the threshold, Xanthe took a silent vow to give him a son on whom he could firmly depend—a stalwart, reliable man.

CHAPTER IV.

The two sucking-pigs.

Fifteen minutes had passed, and the old house-keeper's face still glowed —no longer from anger, but because, full of zeal, she now moulded cakes before the bright flames on the hearth, now basted the roast on the spit with its own juices.

Beside her stood old Jason, who could not give up his young master's cause for lost, and exposed himself once more to the arrows of Semestre's angry words, because he bitterly repented having irritated instead of winning her.

Unfortunately, his soothing speeches fell on hard ground, for Semestre scarcely vouchsafed a reply, and at last distinctly intimated that he interrupted her.

“Attention,” she said, “is the mother of every true success. It is even more needful in cooking than in weaving; and if Leonax, for whom my hands are busy, resembles his father, he knows how to distinguish bad from good.”

“Alciphron,” replied Jason, “liked the figs on our arbor by the house better than yours.”

“And while he was enjoying them,” cried the old woman, “you beat him with a hazel rod. I can hear him cry now, poor little dear.”

“Too many figs are bad for the stomach,” replied the old man, very slowly and distinctly, but not too loud, that he might not remind her of her deafness. Then seeing Semestre smile, he drew nearer, and with winning cheerfulness continued: “Be sensible, and don’t try to part the children, who belong to each other. Xanthe, too, is fond of figs, and, if Leonax shares his father’s taste, how will the sweet fruit of your favorite trees fare, if Hymen unites them in marriage? Phaon doesn’t care for sweet things. But seriously: though his father may seek twenty brides for him, he himself wants no one but Xanthe. And can you deny that he is a handsome, powerful fellow?”

“So is the other,” cried Semestre, wholly unmoved by these words. “Have you seen your favorite this morning? No! Do you know where he slept last night and the night before?”

“On his couch, I suppose.”

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"In your house?"

"I don't run after the youth, now he is grown up."

"Neither shall we! You are giving yourself useless trouble, Jason, and I earnestly beg you not to disturb me any longer now, for a dark spot is already appearing on the roast. Quick, Chloris—lift the spit from the fire!"

"I should like to bid Lysander good-morning."

"He is tired, and wants to see no one. The servants have vexed him."

"Then I'll stay awhile in the garden."

"To try your luck with Xanthe? I tell you, it's trouble wasted, for she's dressing her hair to receive our guest from Messina; and, if she were standing where those cabbage-leaves be, she wouldn't contradict me if I were to repeat what you heard from my lips this morning at sunrise. Our girl will never become Phaon's wife until I myself offer a sacrifice to Aphrodite, that she may fill Xanthe's heart with love for him."

Jason shrugged his shoulders, and was preparing to turn his back on the old woman, when Dorippe entered and approached the hearth. Her eyes were red with weeping, and in her arms she carried a round, yellowish-white creature that, struggling and stretching it's little legs in the air, squealed in a clear, shrill voice, even more loudly and piteously than a hungry babe.

It was a pretty, well-fattened sucking pig.

Jason looked at it significantly, but Semestre snatched it out of the girl's arms, pressed it to her own bosom, turned her back upon the old man with resolute meaning, and said, just loud enough for him alone to hear:

"A roast for the banquet."

As soon as Jason had left the room, she put the nicely-washed pig on a little wooden bench, ordered Chloris to see that it did not soil itself; drew from a small box, standing beside the loom, one blue ribbon and two red ones; tied the former carefully around the little creature's curly tail, and the latter about its ears; lifted the pig again, looked at it as a mother gazes at her prettily-dressed darling, patted its fattest parts with her right-hand, and ordered Dorippe to carry it to Aphrodite's temple immediately.

It's a beautiful creature, absolutely faultless, and the priest must slay it at once in Honor of the gracious goddess. I will come myself, as soon as everything is ready here; and, after such a gift, foam-born Cypris will surely grant my petition. Hide the little treasure carefully under your robe, that no one may see it."

“It struggles and squeals when I carry it,” replied the girl.

“Yes, it does squeal,” said the old woman. “Wait, I’ll look for a suitable basket.”

The house-keeper went out, and, when she returned, cried:

“Mopsus is standing outside with our donkey, to carry bag and baggage to his mother’s house, but he’s still in Lysander’s service to-day. Let him put the creature in a basket on the donkey’s back, and then he can quickly carry it to the temple—at once and without delay, for, if I don’t find it on the goddess’s altar in an hour, you shall answer for it! Tell him this, and then get some rosemary and myrtle to garland our hearth.”

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Mopsus did not hasten to perform the errand. He had first to help Dorippe cut the green branches, and, while thus engaged, sought pleasant gifts not only on the ground, but from his sweetheart's red lips, then moved up the mountain with his donkey, very slowly, without urging the animal. The latter carried one basket on the right and one on the left of its saddle, wore bright cock's feathers on its head, and had a fiery-red bridle. It looked gay enough in its finery, yet hung its head, though far less sorrowfully than its young driver, whom Semestre had exiled from his master's house and the girl he loved.

He spent half an hour in reaching the sanctuary.

Old Jason, at the same time, was standing before the little grove beside the steps leading to the cella.

The worthy man cradled in his arms, as Dorippe had just done in Lysander's house, a little squealing creature, and this, too, was a pig; but it wore no ribbon around its little tail and ears, was not particularly fat, and had numerous black spots under its scanty bristles and on its sharp snout.

The old man was gazing at the innocent creature by no means tenderly, but with the utmost indignation. He had good reason to be angry, for the priest had not thought it fit for a sacrifice to the goddess, it was so poor in fat and full of bad marks.

Alas, and Jason had no second pig, and was so eager to win the goddess to Phaon's cause.

As soon as he saw Semestre's offering, he had hurried home to anticipate her with his own, and first win the goddess's heart for his young master.

Now he stood considering whether he should strangle the unlucky creature, or carry it back to its mother.

Like a frugal steward, he decided upon the latter course, and, just as he was comparing the image of the lean, spotted animal with its future well-rounded condition, he heard the hoofs of the donkey driven by Mopsus, the heavy thud of a stick on the elastic flesh, and after every blow, the shout, "Semestre!"

Directly after Mopsus and his donkey reached the old man, and as the youth, without looking to the right or left, dealt the animal another thwack, again uttering the house-keeper's name, and in connection with it a succession of harsh, abusive words, Jason looked at the young man with approval, nay, almost tenderly.

The latter usually shouted a loud "Joy be with you!" whenever he met the old man, but to-day answered his greeting only with a sorrowful nod and low murmur.

The steward had stepped in front of him, laid his hard hand on the donkey's head, and asked:

"Do you call your ass Semestre?" Mopsus blushed, and answered:

"In future I shall call all she-asses that, but the old Megaera named this one Jason."

"Why, see," cried the steward, "how kindly the worthy woman remembers me! But she, too, was not forgotten, for, whenever you lifted your stick, you thought, I should suppose, of her."

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"Indeed I did!" cried Mopsus; then, while stroking the stripes on the donkey's flanks, added kindly:

"Poor Jason, you too have nothing for which to thank the old woman. If you only knew how abominable this woman is—"

"I do know," the steward interrupted, "but she is an old woman, and it does not beseem you to abuse her; she represents the house under its invalid ruler."

"I'd willingly lay both these hands under his feet," cried the youth, "but Semestre has driven me out of his service for nothing, away from here and Dorippe, and where can I find a place in the neighborhood?"

The almost whining tone of the complaint contrasted oddly with the appearance of the tall, broad-shouldered Mopsus, yet tears filled his eyes, as he now told the steward about the juggler, the dance, Semestre's anger, his banishment from Lysander's house, and the house-keeper's commission to carry a sucking-pig to Aphrodite's temple for her.

Jason listened with only partial attention, for the low grunting of a pig, that reached his ears from one of the baskets on the donkey, seemed to him far more interesting than the poor fellow's story. He knew the ways of every domestic animal, and such sounds were only uttered by a little pig that felt comfortably fat, and lived under favorable circumstances.

A great thought awoke in his mind, and must have pleased him hugely, for his eyes began to sparkle, his mouth puckered in a smile, and he looked exactly like a satyr thrusting his thick lips toward the largest and ripest bunches of grapes in the vineyard.

When Mopsus paused, he angrily noticed what an enlivening influence his sorrowful story had had upon the old man, but soon laughed too; for, ere he could give expression to his dissatisfaction, Jason had opened the basket on the left of the donkey, taken out Semestre's gayly-decked pig, put his own lanky animal in its place, and said, giggling with pleasure:

"After what Semestre has done to a poor fellow like you, she doesn't deserve the favor of our goddess. Let me offer Aphrodite this most charming of pigs, and you offer my little beast in the house-keeper's name; then her petition will certainly find no hearing."

At these words Mopsus's broad face brightened, and, after laughing loudly, he struck his fist in the palm of his left hand, turned on the heel of his right foot, and exclaimed:

"Yes, that will be just right."

True, directly after, he looked as doubtful as if an invisible myrtle-staff had been swung over his back, and asked:

“But if she notices it?”

“I know how we’ll manage it,” replied the old man, and, putting Semestre’s pig in Mopsus’s arms, took the ribbons from its ears and curly tail.

Meantime, the little animal grunted as piteously as if it noticed that its finery was being stolen and its beauty impaired.

And when Jason, with Mopsus’s assistance, put the same ribbons on his own lank pig, it looked neither better nor prouder than before, for it was no lucky animal and did not appreciate beautiful gifts.

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CHAPTER V.

The walk to the sea.

While the priest of Aphrodite received Jason's gift, praised the pig's beauty, and promised to slay it immediately, but said he would only accept the lean animal Mopsus offered in Semestre's name for the sake of its ornaments and the giver, Xanthe came out of her father's house. She wore her handsomest garments, and had carefully arranged her beautiful fair hair reflecting as she did so on many different things, for maidens are fond of thinking when seated at the loom or spinning-wheel, or quietly occupied in adorning their tresses.

Semestre followed close behind, and gave her a small knife, saying:

"It is seemly to decorate the door of a welcome guest with flowers. The bushes are full of roses now, so go and cut as many as will be needed for a handsome garland, but gather only red or yellow flowers, no white ones, for they bring no good fortune. You will find the largest below near the bench by the sea."

"I know."

"Wait and hear me out."

"Well?"

"The weather is delightful, there was a light breeze from the north during the night, so it may happen that the ship from Messina will arrive before noon."

"Then let me go down."

"Go and watch for the sails. If you see ours, hurry back and tell Chloris to call me, for I must go to the temple of Cypris."

"You?" asked Xanthe, laughing.

"I, and you are the last person who should sneer at the errand; nay, you can accompany me."

"No! I will cut the roses."

These words were uttered in a tone the house-keeper knew well. Whenever Xanthe used it, she insisted upon having her own way, and did what she pleased, while Semestre, who usually never admitted that her hearing was no longer so keen as in former days, in such cases willingly pleaded her deafness, in order to avoid a retreat.

To-day she particularly shrank from irritating the easily-excited girl, and therefore replied:

“What did you say? Wouldn’t it be better for you to go and cut the roses immediately, my dove? Make haste, for the vessel for which you are to watch bears your happiness. How beautiful the ornaments Leonax is bringing will look! We have never yet seen the like, I imagine. The people in Messina haven’t forgotten poor me either, for I heard whispers about a robe such as matrons wear. It is—it might be—well, we shall see.”

Tittering, and almost embarrassed, she fixed her eyes upon the ground, reminded Xanthe once more to have her called as soon as the ship from Messina appeared, and then, leaning on her myrtle-staff, tottered up the path leading to the temple of the goddess.

Xanthe did not go directly down to the sea, but approached her uncle’s house to seek Phaon with her eyes.

As she could not see him, either in the stables, or the walk lined with fig-trees trained upon espaliers beside the house, she turned quickly away, repressing out of pride her desire to call him.

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On her way to the sea she met her uncle's high-shouldered slave. Xanthe stopped and questioned him.

Semestre had told no lie. Phaon had not yet returned from a nocturnal excursion, and for several days had not reached home until just before sunrise.

No, he was not the man to offer support to her sick father. He was looking for a wealthy heiress, and forgot his relatives for the sake of dissolute young men and worthless wenches.

This thought hurt her sorely, so sorely that she wanted to weep as she had done by the spring.

But she forced back her tears; not one wet her cheeks, yet it seemed as if her poor heart had obtained eyes to shed them.

The little knife in her hand reminded her of her task of cutting roses, and watching for the ship which was to bring her uncle's son from Messina.

If Leonax was what Semestre described him, she would not repel him like the other suitors, whom she had rejected with laughing lips.

Yes, she would become his wife, not only for her father's sake, but to punish Phaon.

Sorrow and pain never felt before filled her heart after making this resolution. Wholly engrossed by these conflicting emotions, instead of going down to the sea, she walked straight on till she reached the great gate that led to her own home. There she remembered the object of her errand, and was just turning back, when the conjurer, who was resting outside the gate with his cart in the shadow of the fence, called:

"You are obeying my advice, beautiful Xanthe, and move as thoughtfully as a sophist."

"Then you must not disturb me," cried the girl, raising her head defiantly. "Pardon me if I do so," replied the other, "but I wanted to tell you that I might perhaps know of aid for your father. In my home—"

"Where is your home?"

"In Messina."

"Messina!" exclaimed Xanthe, eagerly.

"A very experienced physician lives there," interrupted the conjurer.

"No one has helped my father."

"Yet!"

"Then come in and speak to him."

"I'm afraid of the cross old woman."

"She has gone out, and you will find father alone."

"Then I'll go to him."

"Did you say you were from Messina?"

"That is my home."

"Do you know my uncle Alciphron, the merchant?"

"Certainly. He owns the most ships in the place."

"And his son Leonax, too?"

"I often saw him, for my hut stands opposite to the landing-place of your uncle's vessels, and the youth always superintends the loading and unloading. He, if any one, belongs to those spoiled children of fortune who disgust poor dwarfs like me with life, and make us laugh when people say there are just gods above."

"You are blaspheming."

"I only say what others think."

"Yet you too were young once."

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"But I was a dwarf, and he resembles Achilles in stature; I was poor and he does not know what to do with his wealth; maidens fled from me as they seek him; I was found in the streets; and a father still guides, a loving mother kisses him. I don't envy him, for whoever enters life an orphan is spared the pain of becoming one afterward."

"You speak bitter words."

"He who is beaten does not laugh."

"So you envy Leonax his prosperity?"

"No, for, though I might have such excellent cause to complain, I envy no king, for there is but one person whose inmost heart I know thoroughly, and that one stands before you."

"You revile Fate, and yet believe it possible that we may all have more sorrow to bear than you."

"You have understood me rightly."

"Then admit that you may be happier than many."

"If only most of the contented people were not stupid. However, this morning I am pleased, because your father gave me this new garment, and I rarely need despair; I earn enough bread, cheese, and wine with the aid of my hens, and am not obliged to ask any man's favor. I go with my cart wherever I choose."

"Then you ought to thank the gods, instead of accusing them."

"No, for absence of suffering is not happiness."

"And do you believe Leonax happy?"

"Hitherto he seems to be, and the fickle goddess will perhaps remain faithful to him longer than to many others, for he is busy from early till late, and is his father's right-hand. At least he won't fall into one of the pits Fate digs for mortals."

"And that is—?"

"Weariness. Thousands are worse, and few better, than your cousin; yes, the maiden he chooses for his wife may rejoice." Xanthe blushed, and the dwarf, as he entered the gate, asked:

"Is Leonax wooing his little cousin?"

“Perhaps.”

“But the little cousin has some one else in her mind.”

“Who told you so?”

“My hens.”

“Then remember me to them!” cried Xanthe, who left the juggler and ran straight toward the path leading to the sea.

Just at the point where the latter branched off from the broader road used by carts as well as foot-passengers, stood a singular monument, before which the young girl checked her steps.

The praise the conjurer had lavished on Leonax afforded her little pleasure; nay, she would rather have heard censure of the Messina suitor, for, if he corresponded with the dwarf’s portrait, he would be the right man to supply a son’s place to her father, and rule as master over the estate, where many things did not go on as they ought. Then she must forget the faithless night-reveller, Phaon—if she could.

Every possession seems most charming at the time we are obliged to resign it, and never in all her life had Xanthe thought so tenderly and longingly of Phaon as now and on this spot.

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The monument, overgrown with blossoming vines, before which she paused, was a singular structure, that had been built of brick between her own and her uncle's garden.

It was in the form of a strong wall, bounded by two tall pillars. In the wall were three rows of deep niches with arched ceilings, while on the pillars, exquisitely painted upon a brownish-red ground, were the Genius of Death lowering his torch before an offering-altar, and Orpheus, who had released his wife from the realm of shadows and was now bearing her to the upper world.

Many of the niches were still empty, but in some stood vases of semi-transparent alabaster.

The newest, which had found a place in the lowest row, contained the ashes of the young girl's grandfather, Dionysius, and his wife, and another pair of urns the two mothers, her own and Phaon's.

Both had fallen victims on the same day to the plague, the only pestilence that had visited this bright coast within the memory of man. This had happened eight years ago.

At that time Xanthe was still a child, but Phaon a tall lad.

The girl passed this place ten times a day, often thought of the beloved dead, and, when she chanced to remember them still more vividly, waved a greeting to the dear ashes, because some impulse urged her to give her faithful memory some outward expression.

Very rarely did she recall the day when the funeral-pile had cooled, and the ashes of the two mothers, both so early summoned to the realm of shadows, were collected, placed in the vases, and added to the other urns. But now she could not help remembering it, and how she had sat before one of the pillars of the monument weeping bitterly, and asking herself again and again, if it were possible that her mother would never, never come to kiss her, speak caressing words, arrange her hair and pet her; nay, for the first time, she longed to hear even a sharp reproof from the lips now closed forever.

Phaon was standing by the other pillar, his eyes covered with his right hand.

Never before or since had she seen him look so sad, and it cut her to the heart when she noticed that he trembled as if a chill had seized him, and, drawing a long breath, pushed back the hair, which like a coalblack curtain, covered half his forehead. She had wept bitterly, but he shed no tears. Only a few poor words were exchanged between them in that hour, but each one still echoed in her ears to-day, as if hours instead of years intervened between that time and now.

"Mine was so good," Xanthe had sobbed; but he only nodded, and, after fifteen minutes had passed, said nothing but, "And mine too."

In spite of the long pause that separated the girl's words from the boy's, they were tenderly united, bound together by the thought, dwelling uninterruptedly in both childish hearts, "My mother was so good."

It was again Xanthe who, after some time, had broken the silence by asking "Whom have I now?"

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Again it was long ere Phaon, for his only answer, could repeat softly:

“Yes, whom?”

They were trivial words, but they expressed the deep wretchedness which only a child's heart can feel.

Scarcely had they found their way over the boy's lips when he pressed his left hand also over his eyes, his breast heaved convulsively, and a torrent of burning tears coursed down his cheeks.

Both children still had their fathers, but they forgot them in this hour.

Who, if the warm sun were extinguished, would instantly remember that the moon and stars remain?

As Phaon wept so violently, Xanthe's tears began to flow more slowly, and she gazed at him a long time with ardent sympathy, unperceived by the lad, for he still covered his eyes with his hands.

The child had met a greater grief than her own, and, as soon as she felt that she was less sorrow-stricken than her playfellow, a desire to soothe his sorrow arose.

As the whole plant, with its flowers and fruit, is contained in the sprouting seed, so, too, in the youngest girl lives the future mother, who dries all tears, cheers and consoles.

As Phaon remained in the same attitude, Xanthe rose, approached him, timidly pulled his cloak, and said:

“Come down to our house; I will show you something pretty: four young doves have come out of the shell; they have big, wide bills, and are very ugly.”

Her playmate removed his hands from his eyes and answered kindly:

“No, let me alone, please.”

Xanthe now took his hand and drew him away, saying:

“Yes, you must come; the pole of my cart is broken.”

Phaon had been so accustomed to be always called upon whenever there were any of the little girl's playthings to mend that he obeyed, and the next day allowed her to persuade him to do many things for which he felt no inclination.



He yielded in order not to grieve her, and, as he became more cheerful and even joined in her merry laugh, Xanthe rejoiced as if she had released him from his sorrow. From that time she claimed his services as eagerly as before, but in her own heart felt as if she were his little mother, and watched all his actions as though specially commissioned to do so.

When she had grown up she did not hesitate to encourage or blame him, nay, was often vexed or grieved about him, especially if in the games or dances he paid more attention than she deemed reasonable to other girls, against whom there was much or little objection, nay, often none at all. Not on her own account, she said to herself, it could make no difference to her, but she knew these girls, and it was her duty to warn him.

She willingly forgave many things, but on this point was extremely rigid, and even allowed anger to carry her to the verge of rudeness.

Now, as she stood beside the sepulchre, she thought of the hour when she had comforted him, of her care for him and how it had all been vain, for he spent his nights in rioting with flute-playing women. Yes, Semestre had said so. He seemed to Xanthe lost, utterly lost.

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When she wept in the morning beside the spring, it was not, she now thought, because of the heiress from Messina; no, the tears that had sprung to her eyes were like those a mother sheds for her erring son.

She seemed to herself extremely venerable, and would have thought it only natural if gray hair instead of golden had adorned the head over which scarcely seventeen years had passed.

She even assumed the gait of a dignified matron, but it was hardly like a mother, when, on her way to the rose-bushes by the sea, she studiously strove to misunderstand and pervert everything good in Phaon, and call his quiet nature indolence, his zeal to be useful to her weakness, his taciturn manner mere narrow-mindedness, and even his beautiful, dreamy eyes sleepy.

With all this, the young girl found little time to think of the new suitor; she must first shatter the old divine image, but every blow of the hammer hurt her as if it fell upon herself.

CHAPTER VI.

The rose-bush to which Xanthe went grew on the dike that belonged in common to her father and uncle, beside a bench of beautifully-polished white marble.

Many a winter had loosened the different blocks, and bordered them with yellow edges.

Even at a distance the girl saw that the seat was not vacant. The brook that flowed from the spring to the sea ran beneath it, and the maid-servants were in the habit of washing the household linen in its swift current.

Were they now using the bench to spread out the garments they had rinsed?

No! A man lay on the hard marble, a man who had drawn his light cloak over his face to protect himself from the rays of the sun, now rising higher and higher.

His sandaled feet and ankles, bandaged as if for journeying, appeared beneath the covering.

By these feet Xanthe quickly recognized the sleeping youth.

It was Phaon. She would have known him, even if she had seen only two of his fingers.

The sun would soon reach its meridian height, and there he lay asleep.

At first it had startled her to find him here, but she soon felt nothing but indignation, and again the image of the flute-playing women, with whom he must have revelled until thus exhausted, rose before her mind.

“Let him sleep,” she murmured proudly and contemptuously; she passed him, cut a handful of roses from the bushes covered with crimson and yellow blossoms, sat down on the vacant space beside his head, watched for the ship from Messina, and, as it did not come, began to weave the garland.

She could do the work here as well as anywhere else, and told herself that it was all the same to her whether Phaon or her father’s linen lay there. But her heart belied these reflections, for it throbbed so violently that it ached.

And why would not her fingers move; why could her eyes scarcely distinguish the red roses from the yellow ones?

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The garden was perfectly still, the sea seemed to slumber, and, if a wave lapped the shore, it was with a low, almost inaudible murmur.

A butterfly hovered like a dream over her roses, and a lizard glided noiselessly, like a sudden thought, into a chink between the stones at her feet. Not a breath of air stirred, not a leaf or a twig fell from the trees.

Yonder, as if slumbering under a blue veil, lay the Calabrian coast, while nearer and more distant, but always noiselessly, ships and boats, with gently swelling sails, glided over the water. Even the cicadas seemed to sleep, and everything around was as still, as horribly still, as if the breath of the world, blooming and sparkling about her, was ready to fail.

Xanthe sat spellbound beside the sleeper, while her heart beat so rapidly and strongly that she fancied it was the only sound audible in this terrible silence.

The sunbeams poured fiercely on her head, her cheeks glowed, a painful anxiety overpowered her, and certainly not to rouse Phaon, but merely to hear some noise, she coughed twice, not without effort. When she did so the third time, the sleeper stirred, removed from his face the end of the cloak that had covered his head, slowly raised himself a little, and, without changing his recumbent posture, said simply and quietly, in an extremely musical voice:

“Is that you; Xanthe?”

The words were low, but sounded very joyous.

The girl merely cast a swift glance at the speaker, and then seemed as busily occupied with her roses as if she were sitting entirely alone.

“Well?” he asked again, fixing his large dark eyes upon her with an expression of surprise, and waiting for some greeting.

As she remained persistently silent, he exclaimed, still in the same attitude:

“I wish you a joyful morning, Xanthe.” The young girl, without answering this greeting, gazed upward to the sky and sun as long as she could endure the light, but her lips quivered, and she flung the rose she held in her hand among its fellows in her lap.

Phaon had followed the direction of her look, and again broke the silence, saying with a smile, no less quietly than before:

“Yes, indeed, the sun tells me I’ve been sleeping here a long time; it is almost noon.”

The youth's composure aroused a storm of indignation in Xanthe's breast. Her excitable blood fairly seethed, and she was obliged to put the utmost constraint upon herself not to throw her roses in his face.

But she succeeded in curbing her wrath, and displaying intense eagerness, as she shaded her eyes with her hand and gazed toward some ships that appeared in view.

"I don't know what is the matter with you," said Phaon, smoothing with his right hand the black hair that covered half his forehead. "Do you expect the ship from Messina and my father already?"

"And my cousin Leonax" replied the girl, quickly, putting a strong emphasis upon the last name.

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Then she again gazed into the distance. Phaon shook his head, and both remained silent for several minutes. At last he raised himself higher, turned his full face toward the young girl, gazed at her as tenderly and earnestly as if he wished to stamp her image upon his soul for life, gently pulled the long, floating sleeve of her peplum, and said:

"I didn't think it would be necessary—but I must ask you something."

While he spoke, Xanthe rested her right elbow on her knee, drummed on her scarlet lips with her fingers, and clasped the back of the marble bench with her out-stretched left arm.

Her eyes told him that she was ready to listen, though she still uttered no word of reply.

"I have a question to ask you, Xanthe!" continued Phaon.

"You?" interrupted the girl, with visible astonishment.

"I, who else? Jason told me yesterday evening that our uncle Alciphron had wooed you for his son Leonax, and was sure of finding a favorable reception from old Semestre and your poor father. I went at once to ask you if it were true, but turned back again, for there were other things to be done, and I thought we belonged to each other, and you could not love any one so well as you loved me. I don't like useless words, and cannot tell you what is in my heart, but you knew it long ago. Now you are watching for your cousin Leonax. We have never seen him, and I should think—"

"But I know," interrupted the girl, rising so hastily that her roses fell unheeded on the ground—"but I know he is a sensible man, his father's right-hand, a man who would disdain to riot all night with flute-playing women, and to woo girls only because they are rich."

"I don't do that either," replied Phaon. "Your flowers have dropped on the ground—"

With these words the youth rose, bent over the roses, gathered them together, and offered them to Xanthe with his left hand, while trying to clasp her fingers in his right; but she drew back, saying:

"Put them on the bench, and go up to wash the sleep from your eyes."

"Do I look weary?"

"Of course, though you've lain here till noon."

"But I have scarcely slept for several days."



“And dare you boast of it?” asked Xanthe, with glowing cheeks. “I am not your mother, and you must do as you choose, but if you think I belonged to you because we played with each other as children, and I was not unwilling to give you my hand in the dance, you are mistaken. I care for, no man who turns day into night and night into day.”

At the last words Xanthe’s eyes filled with tears, and Phaon noticed it with astonishment.

He gazed at her sadly and beseechingly, and then fixed his eyes on the ground. At last he began to suspect the cause of her anger, and asked, smiling:

“You probably mean that I riot all night?”

“Yes!” cried Xanthe; she withdrew her hand for the second time, and half turned away.

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"Oh!" he replied, in a tone of mingled surprise and sorrow, "you ought not to have believed that."

"Xanthe turned, raised her eyes in astonishment, and asked

"Then where have you been these last nights?"

"Up in your olive-grove with the three Hermes."

"You?"

"How amazed you look!"

"I was only thinking of the wicked fellows who have robbed many trees of their fruit. That savage Korax, with his thievish sons, lives just beside the wall."

For your sake, Xanthe, and because your poor father is ill and unable to look after his property, while Mopsus and your fishermen and slaves were obliged to go in the ship to Messina, to handle the oars and manage the sails, I always went up as soon as it grew dark."

"And have you kept watch there?"

"Yes."

"So many nights?"

"One can sleep after sunrise."

"How tired you must be!"

"I'll make up my sleep when my father returns."

"They say he is seeking the rich Mentor's only daughter for your wife."

"Not with my will, certainly."

"Phaon!"

"I am glad you will give me your hand again."

"You dear, good, kind fellow, how shall I thank you?"

"Anything but that! If you hadn't thought such foolish things about me, I should never have spoken of my watch up yonder. Who could have done it except myself, before Mopsus came back?"



"No one, no one but you! But now—now ask your question at once."

"May I? O Xanthe, dear, dear Xanthe, will you have me or our cousin Leonax for your husband?"

"You, you, only you, and nobody else on earth!" cried the girl, throwing both arms around him. Phaon clasped her closely, and joyously kissed her brow and lips.

The sky, the sea, the sun, everything near or distant that was bright and beautiful, was mirrored in their hearts, and it seemed to both as if they heard all creatures that sing, laugh, and rejoice. Each thought that, in the other, he or she possessed the whole world with all its joy and happiness. They were united, wholly united, there was nothing except themselves, and thus they became to each other an especially blissful world, beside which every other created thing sank into nothingness.

Minute after minute passed, nearly an hour had elapsed, and, instead of making garlands, Xanthe clasped her arms around Phaon's neck; instead of gazing into the distant horizon, she looked into his eyes; instead of watching for approaching steps, both listened to the same sweet words which lovers always repeat, and yet never grow weary of speaking and hearing.

The roses lay on the ground, the ship from Messina ran into the bay beside the estate, and Semestre hobbled down to the sea to look for Xanthe, and in the place of the master of the house receive her favorite's son, who came as a suitor, like a god.

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She repeatedly called the girl's name before reaching the marble bench, but always in vain.

When she had at last reached the myrtle grove, which had concealed the lovers from her eyes, she could not help beholding the unwelcome sight.

Xanthe was resting her head on Phaon's breast, while he bent down and kissed her eyes, her mouth, and at last—who ever did such things in her young days?—even her delicate little nose.

For several minutes Semestre's tongue seemed paralyzed, but at last she raised both arms, and a cry of mingled indignation and anguish escaped her lips.

Xanthe started up in terror, but Phaon remained sitting on the marble bench, held the young girl's hand in his own, and looked no more surprised than if some fruit had dropped from the tree beside him.

The youth's composure increased the old woman's fury, and her lips were just parting to utter a torrent of angry words, when Jason stepped as lightly as a boy between her and the betrothed lovers, cast a delighted glance at his favorites, and bowing with comic dignity to Semestre cried, laughing:

"The two will be husband and wife, my old friend, and ought to ask your blessing, unless you wickedly intend to violate a solemn vow."

"I will—I will! When did I—" shrieked the house-keeper.

"Didn't you," interrupted Jason, raising his voice—"didn't you vow this morning that you would prepare Phaon's wedding-feast with your own hands as soon as you yourself offered a sacrifice to the Cyprian goddess to induce her to unite their hearts?"

"And I'll stick to it, so surely as the gracious goddess—"

"I hold you to your promise!" exclaimed Jason. "Your sucking-pig has just been offered to Aphrodite. The priest gladly accepted it and slaughtered it before my eyes, imploring the goddess with me, to fill Xanthe's heart with love for Phaon."

The house-keeper clenched her hands, approached Jason, and so plainly showed her intention of attacking him that the steward, who had assailed many a wild-boar, retreated—by no means fearlessly.

She forced him back to the marble bench, screaming:

"So that's why the priest found no word of praise for my beautiful pig! You're a thief, a cheat! You took my dear little pig, which all the other gods might envy the mother of

Eros, put in its place a wretched animal just like yourself, and falsely said it came from me. Oh, I see through the whole game! That fine Mopsus was your accomplice; but so true as I—”

“Mopsus has entered our service,” replied Jason, laughing; “and, if our Phaon’s bride will permit, he wants to wed the dark-haired Dorippe. Henceforth our property is yours.”

“And ours yours,” replied Xanthe—“Be good-natured, Semestre; I will marry no man but Phaon, and shall soon win my father over to our side, rely upon that.”

The house-keeper was probably forced to believe these very resolute words, for, like a vanquished but skilful general, she began to think of covering her retreat, saying:

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"I was outwitted; but, what I vowed in a moment of weakness. I have now sworn again. I am only sorry for your poor father, who needed a trustworthy son, and the good Leonax—"

At this moment, as if he had heard his name and obediently appeared at her call, the son of Alciphron, of Messina, appeared with Phaon's father, Protarch, from the shadow of the myrtle-grove.

He was a gay, handsome youth, richly and carefully dressed. After many a pressure of the hand and cordial words of welcome, Phaon took the young girl's hand and led her to the new-comers, saying:

"Give me Xanthe for a wife, my father. We have grown up together like the ivy and wild vine on the wall, and cannot part."

"No certainly not," added Xanthe, blushing and nestling closely to her lover's side, as she gazed beseechingly first at her uncle, and then at the young visitor from Messina.

"Children, children!" cried Protarch, "you spoil my best plans. I had destined Agariste, the rich Mentor's only child, for you, foolish boy, and already had come to terms with the old miser. But who can say I will, or this and that shall happen to-morrow? You are very sweet and charming my girl, and I don't say that I shouldn't be glad, but—mighty Zeus! what will my brother Alciphron say—and you, Leonax?"

"I?" asked the young man, smiling. "I came here like a dutiful son, but I confess I rejoice over what has happened, for now my parents will hardly say 'No' a second time, when I beg them to give me Codrus's daughter, Ismene, for my wife."

"And there stands a maiden who seems to like to hear such uncivil words better than Helen loved Paris's flattering speeches!" exclaimed Phaon's father, first kissing his future daughter's cheek and then his son's forehead.

"But now let us go to father," pleaded Xanthe.

"Only one moment," replied Protarch, "to look after the boxes the people are bringing. —Take care of the large chest with the Phoenician dishes and matron's robes, my lads."

During the first moments of the welcome, Semestre had approached her darling's son, told him who she was, received his father's messages of remembrance, kissed his hand, and stroked his arm.

His declaration that he wished another maiden than Xanthe for his wife soothed her not a little, and when she now heard of matrons' dresses, and not merely one robe, her eyes sparkled joyously, and, fixing them on the ground, she asked:

“Is there a blue one among them? I’m particularly fond of blue.”

“I’ve selected a blue one, too,” replied Protarch. “I’ll explain for what purpose up yonder. Now we’ll go and greet my brother.”

Xanthe, hand in hand with her lover, hurried on in advance of the procession, lovingly prepared her father for what had happened, told him how much injustice he, old Semestre, and she herself had done poor Phaon, led the youth to him, and, deeply agitated, sank on her knees before him as he laid her hand in her playfellow’s, exclaiming in a trembling voice:

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"I have always loved you, curly-head, and Xanthe wants you for her husband. Then I, too, should have a son!—Hear, lofty Olympians, a good, strong, noble son! Help me up, my boy. How well I feel! Haven't I gained in you two stout legs and arms? Only let the old woman come to me to-day! The conjurer taught me how to meet her."

Leaning on Phaon's strong shoulder he joyously went out of the house, greeted his handsome young nephew as well as his brother, and said:

"Let Phaon live with Xanthe in my house, which will soon be his own, for I am feeble and need help."

"With all my heart," cried Protarch, "and it will be well on every account, for, for—well, it must come out, for I, foolish graybeard—"

"Well?" asked Lysander, and Semestre curved her hand into a shell and held it to her ear to hear better.

"I—just look at me—I, Protarch, Dionysius's son, can no longer bear to stay in the house all alone with that silent youth and old Jason, and so I have—perhaps it is a folly, but certainly no crime—so I have chosen a new wife in Messina."

"Protarch!" cried Lysander, raising his hands in astonishment; but Phaon nodded to his father approvingly, exchanging a joyous glance with Xanthe.

"He has chosen my mother's younger sister," said Leonax.

"The younger, yes, but not the youngest," interrupted Protarch. "You must have your wedding in three days, children. Phaon will live here in your house, Lysander, with his Xanthe, and I in the old one yonder with my Praxilla. Directly after your marriage I shall go back to Messina with Leonax and bring home my wife."

"We have long needed a mistress in the house, and I bless your bold resolution!" exclaimed Jason.

"Yes, you were always brave," said the invalid.

"But not so very courageous this time as it might seem," answered Protarch, smiling. "Praxilla is an estimable widow, and it was for her I purchased in Messina the matron's robes for which you asked, Semestre."

"For her?" murmured the old woman. "There is a blue one among them too, which will be becoming, for she has light brown hair very slightly mixed with gray. But she is cheerful, active, and clever, and will aid Phaon and Xanthe in their young house-keeping with many a piece of good advice."

"I shall go to my daughter in Agrigentum," said Semestre, positively.

"Go," replied Lysander, kindly, "and enjoy yourself in your old age on the money you have saved."

"Which my father," added Leonax, "will increase by the sum of a thousand drachmae.

"My Alciphron has a heart!" cried the house-keeper.

"You shall receive from me, on the day of your departure, the same sum and a matron's blue robe," said Lysander.

Shortly after the marriage of Xanthe and Phaon, Semestre went to live with her daughter.

The dike by the sea was splendidly repaired without any dispute, for the estate once more belonged to the two brothers in common, and Xanthe found in Praxilla a new, kind mother.

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The marble seat, on which the young people's fate was decided, was called by the grandchildren of the wedded pair, who lived to old age in love and harmony, "the bench of the question."

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Absence of suffering is not happiness
Laughing before sunrise causes tears at evening
People see what they want to see
Seems most charming at the time we are obliged to resign it
Wrath has two eyes—one blind, the other keener than a falcon's

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