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[From an oil painting by the Author in the possession of Edwin Jenkins, Esq.]

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SARONIA

A Romance of Ancient Ephesus

BY

RICHARD SHORT



LONDON

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1900

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SARONIA

CHAPTER I

THE AGORA

The sun had risen in all its splendour, and was flooding the bay and mountains with silvery light. The river Cayster moved on its course, and mixed its waters with the blue of the Ægean Sea, and washed the shores of Samos, appearing like a purple vision on the ocean. Boats and ships of quaint form and gorgeous colouring, propelled by a gentle breeze, moved to and fro, and glided up the shining way which led to the great city of Ephesus, the chief of Ionia, and the home of the goddess. Not far away was shining like a brilliant star the marble pillars of the Temple of Diana. Ephesus was now fully awake, and the people were moving along its streets, some wending their way to the temples to offer their morning devotions, others hastening to the great theatre, and many more directing their course towards their daily toil; for men must work, even within the precincts of a city where all is splendour. The city, with its wealth of art and stores of gold, was envied of conquerors. Situated between the mountains, its inhabitants had a noble chance of making it beautiful, and, being skilled in art and endowed with learning, they built temples of the noblest design, erected statues of the richest order, painted pictures of the grandest conception. Odeum and theatre all sprang forth in magical beauty and power, whilst villas replete with elegance combined to make it one of the loveliest cities, surrounded with hills and groves and the traditions of a line of centuries.

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The great market was being filled with men and women offering the most tempting products of the land. Groups were selling and buying fruits, flowers and perfumes, bread, fish and wine. Ribbon-sellers, chaplet-weavers, money-changers—all were there; and the people purchased for their daily needs, whilst others bought rich offerings for the temples of their goddess and their gods.

Here and there the ground was covered with flowers of richest shades and sweetest fragrance, and great branches with clustering blossoms of crimson oleander and myrtle lay around.

From the house of the Roman Lady Venusta the slave Saronia had come to buy. She was clothed in the simplest manner, tall and beautifully formed, with eyes speaking a tale of sadness and a weariness of life; a dignified slave, but a slave nevertheless, purchased but a year ago, and brought hither by a trading-barque from Sidon, in Phœnicia, where she had served as a slave from childhood.

She gathered together her pomegranates, citrons, almonds, olives, and flowers, placed them in her basket of wickerwork, walked out of the market, and passed up the way which led to the home of her mistress. But the splendour to which she hastened was a prison to her. She so full of young life, she who felt within her the rising for supremacy (an unquenchable spirit), she with a mystic flame burning up her soul, felt it was not a home but a waiting-place until the Fates passed by and led her on.

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True, Venusta treated Saronia fairly well, but Nika, her daughter, hated her—from the first she hated her. And why this hate? Nika herself could scarcely say; but who has not felt this subtle power to love or hate at first sight—an intuitive something which draws or repels without our reason or consent? Perhaps it was the great sadness of Saronia's eyes, the overflowing influence of a mighty spirit, that Nika disliked so much; or perhaps it was that when Chios, the Greek, came to visit the Romans, he spoke kindly to the slave, and thus Nika detested her. It may be so.

Passing by the great theatre and the Odeum, she went up the shaded way over the side of Mount Coressus, and came to the beautiful home of Venusta, passed in laden with fruit and flowers, great clusters of sweet-scented blossoms falling from the basket as she raised it from her head. For a moment she stood as in a dream, with girdled drapery falling to her feet, and her gaze firmly fixed upon the great temple appearing full in view as she looked through the window, which allowed the sunlight to penetrate into her room.

That night, when her work was done, she mounted the marble steps surrounding the house, and

breathed the pleasant, perfumed air which came down the mountain-side and danced through the myrtle groves.

The moon had well-nigh reached her meridian and sent forth her pale, cool light, bathing the city in its glory, making the great hills look so strange and lonely, as star after star struggled to show their quivering rays; but the light of the Queen of Heaven, the great Moon Goddess, absorbed them all.

'Twas then the spirit of the girl was moved, and she said to herself:

'Ah! what am I, most Holy Mother, most chaste Luna, great Orb which symbols forth all Nature's mother, thou great Ashtoreth whom I was taught to adore in childhood when in Sidon? Well do I remember when I raised my tiny hand and kissed it unto thee. And they tell me here, also, thou art the same mother, but under another name; that in Ionia they call thee Diana instead of Ashtoreth, and that yonder mighty temple is thy dwelling-place, around whose sacred pillars spreads a sanctuary where those who flee are safe. Holy Mother! May I flee to thee? They say even a slave may come to thy sanctuary, and once there with a just cause, is ever safe from the fiercest Roman or the rudest Greek.'

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And thus she spoke until a flock of night-birds flew along and like a cloud obscured the moon, and a voice, sounding like a silver lute, seemed to say:

'My face is veiled with earth-born things; those birds are dark to thee, but every wing before my gaze is tipped with light and silver sheened. So shalt thou see thy sorrows when thou fully knowest me.'

CHAPTER II

THE MESSENGER OF EROS

The great theatre at Ephesus was thronged; over fifty thousand people had gathered together to witness a new play. Amongst them were Nika and Chios.

'Dost thou like the play?' she asked. 'They tell me the tragedy was wrought in Phœnicia, and has been played with great success in Sidon, from thence to Cyprus, and now here. It pleases thee, Chios?'

'Yes, fairly so; and would do so more were it not that through it runs a vein of suffering, making one wish he could fit disjointed elements so properly together as to make the poor richer, the weak stronger, and the mighty less tyrannical.'

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'Chios, again thou art a dreamer. Thou shouldst have a planet all thine own, and, after setting up thy kings governing each particular section of thine orb, thou then shouldst sit enthroned above them all and play the mighty demigod.'

'Nay, Nika, stay thy wit; thou makest sport of my poor sympathies.'

'Yes, yes; it is well, perchance, that thou shouldst bridle in my tongue. But, after all, thou art too kind; there are those of meaner dust who would build upon thy kindness until thou be but the hidden foundation for their super-structure of selfishness. Look, for instance, at that slave-girl of mine, Saronia the Sidonian, naturally haughty, arrogant—if I were to free her, she would spit at me. No, no, a place for everything. A serpent crawls the earth; let it crawl. Dost thou know, Chios, methinks that girl, with her deep unfathomable eyes of night-gloom, is not quite so innocent as one might imagine. I suspect her—'

'Of what?'

'Of what? Why, the old story. She has a lover, and meets him secretly—so speaks the rumour of our other household slaves. What thinkest thou?'

'Think? Think it is a base slander on a defenceless maid. She is as pure as the first dawn of day—a mighty spirit is she, as wild as the north wind and as untamable as the winged lightning, but as chaste as the snow on the mountains of Tmolus.'

'Thy words are so sweet for this scornful girl that surely the power of her magical love encircles thy heart and will eat out thy life. What next? Wilt thou offer Lucius, my father, a ransom and wed her?'

'Nay, Nika, what thou sayest is not so, may not be; nevertheless, am I not free to love anything the gods have created and blessed?'

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'Yes, yes, go thy ways; but, for all that, it is more seemly for an eagle to mate with an eagle than with a screech-owl. Thou wilt see her anon; thy pet slave waiteth without for her mistress. Now go to her for me and bid her come; and, love-sick boy, be sure she does not fascinate thee that thou be so transfixed to her side that passers-by think they see two statues by Scopas, dressed by some wanton wit to imitate the life.'

'Ah, Nika, thou wert always merry; would thou wert as tender-hearted as humorous. I obey thee.'

And leaving her, he passed out, and saw Saronia—saw her leaning, tired and thoughtful, against a pillar, and around its base were richly carved in strong relief the stories of the gods. Stepping towards her, he said:

'Sleepest thou, or art thou thinking of thy far-away Sidon, or perchance peering into the future to divine thy fortune? What are the omens? Have fair ones passed thee as thou standest here?'

'Nay, good sire, I was thinking of neither the past nor the future, but of the present. I know I am but a slave, a thing who has no right to speak or move or scarcely think without my mistress's bidding.'

'I pity thee, and have tried to befriend thee.'

'Thou art kind, but it will serve me little; they hate me—they all hate me, and make my life a misery—but it will not ever be thus. Just now a woman of peculiar mien stood before me—a woman skilled, she told me, in the mysteries of fate. Looking at me, she said my star was rising full of splendour, and would lead me by its power into a knowledge deep and high—deep as death, high as the heavens. Think you, master, there be any truth in such woman's talk?'

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'I cannot say, Saronia. Of those hidden things I am not given to understand. I lean towards the new faith, whose founder is one Christ. Of Him I know little, but 'tis said He is both God and man. What thinkest thou of this?'

'I know not what to think. I do not know the faith, neither does it seem to rise for a hearing in my soul. No; born within me is the faith of Ashtoreth, and as it seems akin to much that is worshipped here, I think I should feel more at home were I to understand the mysteries of Hecate and worship at her shrine.'

'Thou dost not know what thou askest, Saronia. The way to those mysteries is dark and to thee impenetrable. Thou art too good to load thy spirit with such things of gloom, too young to sacrifice thee there. Around her darkness hovers—night, everlasting night, abides. I have heard those who know say this. Are there no brighter hopes for thee? If not, slave art thou indeed—slave in body, slave in soul.'

'True,' said the girl. 'Slaves are we either in body or spirit, whomsoever we serve—men or women, goddesses or gods; to such must we submit and lose our will in that of the greater. Serve, then, the one thou likest best. For myself, I think I like Diana as Hecate. She, I am told, rules the underworld. I aspire no higher; my pinions were shorn away, and I now grovel on the earth, and wish to worship in her bosom.'

'Of what mould art thou, Saronia? I understand thee not. I fear thee somewhat; my soul quails before the power thou already wieldest. What wouldst thou be with that great dark spirit of thine if thou only moved out upon the great ocean of the Ephesian faith? Verily thou wouldst be a bird of ill-omen to those thou didst hate. Didst thou ever love, Saronia?'

'What is love?' said she. 'I know it not. Is it a new god?'

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'Yes, girl, call it a god if thou pleasest. Call it Eros, call it Venus, call it what thou mayest, thou wilt fall before it one day and worship—worship madly and perchance too well. Haste thee now to thy mistress, Nika; I have already kept thee too long.'

That night, when all were asleep, Saronia stood looking again towards the great Temple of Artemis. Dimly could she see it by the stars. Two great passions were arranging themselves within her bosom—not two passions joined in common sympathy, but each one striving for itself, and both against the great citadel of her heart. One she recognised, that which drew her on like some great master mind beseeching her to grasp the key and unlock the great secrets of Nature's goddess. The other she knew not; it was a strange passion to her. It was wild, tumultuous, and then calm as a summer's eve—like a storm which bows down the lofty pines on Mount Coressus, and yet as gentle and melodious as the softest Ionian music which ever broke the stillness of the evening air. And as the maid stood there with her long tresses falling over her graceful form, visions rose before her, visions of the future stretching down the great highway leading into eternity, and a voice rang through her soul, crying, 'What is love?'

And she said within herself: 'Can this strange passion be the messenger of Eros?' A form rose before her mind like unto Chios. The great clouds rolled up from the west, the lightnings flashed across the sky, illuminating for a moment the great white marble Temple with its roof of cedar and its plates of gold. The frightened, shivering girl drew her garments tightly around her and hid her face.

How long she remained there she knew not, but when she awoke from a swoon and raised herself from the ground, the scarlet shafts of sunrise were moving up the eastern sky, and the birds were singing from the myrtle groves.

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CHAPTER III

THE CURSE OF HECATE

The day had well-nigh lost its youth. Nika and her mother had retired to the room called 'Golden,' because of the rich chasings of gold on its walls of purest marble, and the threads of gold and vermilion which interlaced in chaste design the polished floor of malachite and aqua marine.

Across the entrance to this room hung a richly embroidered curtain, dyed twice in Tyrian purple, which being drawn back exposed to view a colonnade of varied beauty and richly carved, many of the carvings being the work of Venusta's friends.

Behind the peristyle the walls were hung with beautiful pictures created by artists long since dead, Parrhasius and Apelles, Evenor and Zeuxis; each painting was framed with a panel of exquisite mosaic. Statuary of rarest loveliness by Phidias, Praxiteles and Scopas, Thrason, Myron, Pharax and Phradmon, stood between the pillars. Within the court were fragrant flowers of every shade, and in the centre towered one grand design in fountain form, from which came sprays of perfumed water, hiding the sultry sky and falling back with musical rhythm into the many-coloured marble basin. Slaves with fans of gorgeous plumage wafted the perfumed air into the Golden Room.

In this retiring room, on a couch of citrus-wood inlaid with precious stones and pearls, reclined Venusta. She was clothed in a linen robe of saffron-yellow, with delicate pattern interwoven, and embroidered borders from Phrygia and Babylon. Her face spoke plainly that the Romans ruled the Ionians.

Close by her was Nika, standing like a beautiful dream. She was draped in white silk from the Isle of Cos, and through this diaphanous dress the outlines of her lovely form were seen. Around her waist circled a zone of gems—ruby, sapphire, emerald, hyacinth, garnet, topaz, aqua marine—blended together in magnificent confusion. A splendid opal glinted above her brow, and her hair, like sunlight mixed with gold, came forward shading eyes of loveliest blue, then flowed back like rippling wavelets move towards the shore.

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'Take the cithra and play one of thy sweetest melodies,' said Venusta. 'Play that soft Ionian air I heard from thee but yester eve.'

Nika did not respond, but restlessly plucked the petals of a lovely oleander, and as she flung them to the floor murmured:

'Thus would I pluck her life—her life, and end it in nothingness.'

'What ails thee, girl? Art thou ill?'

'No; but impatient for revenge.'

'On whom?'

'On the slave Saronia, who stands yonder in the court, dressed in golden brown, looking like a dark fiend as she rests her head against the porphyry pillar that Scopas carved.'

'Wherein has she offended, Nika?'

'In this wise. Thou knowest, mother, I never liked her, and ever as I know her I like her less. And now she poisons with her charms the mind of Chios; not that I care for Chios, but why should such a scorpion stand between us, even if the obstruction be as thin as the mountain mist which flees before the first blush of day? Listen, mother. 'Twas but yesterday, at the great theatre, I sent Chios to bid her come to me. His lengthened stay, his silent mood when he returned, her haughty bearing, all told me another drama had been enacted outside the theatre to which I dare not be bidden. But I will hear of it. I will clearly understand it. She shall speak it again before us, and besides her own she shall act the part of Chios.'

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'Do you believe this being is treacherous?'

'I do, mother.'

'Then we will bid her come to us.'

Venusta touched a silver bell. Saronia entered and stood before them—stood without one quiver on her beautiful lips, although she could see by the countenance of her mistress that a storm was at hand. There she stood, pale and self-contained, a smouldering fire burning within her, and the voice of the wise woman ringing in her ears: 'Thy star is rising, full of splendour.'

'Slave, my daughter says thy conduct is uncertain. Knowest thou the penalty of this?'

'Were it true, I know some of the penalties. But wherein have I disobeyed?'

'It is not that thou failest to obey—that would be rebellion, and I myself would probably slay thee, as my husband is away from Ephesus. No! It is this: thou presumest too much—and this, mark you, is the least can be said of it. 'Tis said thou art given to converse freely with our beloved friend Chios, and if this be true 'tis inconsistent with thy position as my slave. But tell us, what hast thou said to him? what did he say to thee during the long interview yesterday outside the great theatre? What passed between you? Tell it quickly; our spirits are of that nature which cannot entertain delay. Now tell it quickly and begone.'

'He told me nothing I may say again; nor will it interest my mistress.'

'How dost thou know?'

'If thou wouldst know, my lady mistress, it comes to this only. I bemoaned my state of slavery, and he, true open-hearted man, did sympathize with me. I deem this matter no offence.'

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'Reptile which thou art! Mistress of lies! Thou liest now. Dost think to make believe that he would stoop to sympathize with carrion? Didst thou not entice him? Speak out, or, by the gods, I promise I will have thee tied to the wheel and whipped with rods until thou shalt not even know thyself. Speak, slave! or I will take that tongue of thine from out thy poisonous mouth, and brand thee on thy forehead as a wretch. Once more I speak to thee: tell me the truth!'

Then answered Saronia:

'Lady of Rome, I spoke the truth—the gods can do no better. Thou mayest torture me, and I may die. I have, perchance, lived long enough, and it would be well to pass where I may serve the gods only.'

'Who art thou, slave, and what art thou, who speakest thus?'

'I know not who I am. What I am thou mayest know hereafter.'

'Understand I have power to torture thee!'

'I know all, and have dared to reply.'

'Hast thou no fear? Beware!'

'I have none, for the gods are with me, and my cause is just.'

'Just? Thou mockest. What justice canst thou demand, perjured one of Hades? Leave me, or I may be tempted to slay thee where thou standest; but that would not do. Sorceress, thy foul blood might haunt the Golden Room!'

Saronia went out, and wept great tears of sorrow.

When she had gone, Nika spoke:

'Now seest thou, mother, what she is: she dares even thee! What canst thou do but punish? A fine episode—a Sidonian slave defies her mistress, a Roman matron. Speak quickly; I am burning to hear what thou thinkest. Speak, great Venusta, wife of Lucius!'

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'Silence, Nika! It is not becoming thou shouldst use thy satire even in playfulness to such an one as I.'

'Thou knowest my tongue from veriest childhood was ever the same. It is my dagger. It is better than thy jewelled blade of steel. I can wound the heart without shedding one drop of blood. Come, mother, forgive me, and say what shall be done to punish Saronia.'

'She must be tortured until she speaks the truth.'

'But if she should die, we should never know.'

'True! That is a condition we cannot alter.'

'Listen. Give me a day or two and let me try what I may do with guile.'

'Let it be so, Nika. But see I lose not dignity. Make her know it is through thy intercession I relent. Give her two short periods of the sun, and charm with thy music from her that which Venusta cannot wrench by threatenings. If thou canst, girl; but, for my own part, I should as surely expect a fisher to take fish by casting net on a barren rock as that thou wilt be successful with thine undertaking.'

The next day the Roman girl made it convenient that the slave should be alone with her, and commenced her plan of deceit, saying:

'Sidonian, why dost thou look so sad? Thou art unhappy. Dost fear the Lady Venusta? Trust in me. A mother's love is great towards her child. Trust thou in me, girl, make me thy confidant. I know it is not seemly for the high-born daughter of thy mistress to converse with thee in this manner, but I have read somewhere that "All flesh is as grass; the wind passeth over it and it is gone." So, after all, it may be but the force of circumstances which makes me mistress and thee slave. Come, now, tell me what Chios said to thee, and relieve thy mind from anxious thought.'

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'My mistress Nika, I cannot tell thee more.'

'Did not Chios speak some sweet words of love into thine ear? Did he not praise thy lovely form, those clustering tresses, those liquid eyes, and did he not taste thy lips? Now, Saronia, tell me,

and one day I may tell thee all of my own love story.'

Then spoke the slave:

'I know not of love. If kind words be love, then spake he kindly to me.'

'Didst thou speak of me to him?'

'Yes.'

'And what didst thou say?'

'It may wound thee sore to know.'

'No, no! It will leave no lasting impression on my mind; it will be as a cloud-shadow passing over a granite rock, leaving no trace behind. What didst thou say?'

'Thou hatest me.'

'I hate thee! How dost thou know?'

'I scarcely know how to frame my words to form reply.'

'Thou shalt.'

'I cannot! But surely as I feel the throbbing of my heart, so certain am I of thine hatred, and expect no mercy from my mistress or her daughter; yet still I feel thou canst not harm me, and I shall not fail beneath thine hand. My destiny is dark, but not broken. I am not like water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. No; my path lies onward through the ages, perchance where thou mayest not follow. I know not why I speak in this manner to thee. A fire seems eating up my very vitals, my brain whirls, and a power which possesses me bids me defy thee, and say: "The slave Saronia is as good as thou, and the time is not distant—yea, well within the span of this brief mortal life—when thou shalt seek me out for help, when thou shalt call for the Sidonian, when thou shalt beg for aid from dark Saronia!"'

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When Venusta returned, she found her daughter lying on the citrous couch with head buried between her beautiful hands; but oh the horror depicted on that lovely face as she raised it and gazed into her mother's eyes!

'Thou art suffering, Nika.'

'Thou sayest truly; my whole being seems to have been lashed into a fury, like unto when the winds of winter sweep over the moaning sea, and break the mast from out the noble ship, scatter her cordage, sever the silver cord of her mariners, and leave her an abandoned wreck, the sport of every yawning wave; and after this the mockery of calm and sunny sky. And I, too, have now the calm, and I may truly call it mockery. 'Tis a calm of awful stillness without a ray of hope—a calm so still, so death-like, leaden, which leaves no room for doubt that I am left alone. The spirits of the gods have left me. I am accursed!'

'By whom art thou accursed? What meanest thou, child?'

'I have received the curse of Hecate. In what form my destiny for ill will work out, I know not; but as surely as the dying one gasping for breath knows his end draws nigh, so feel I the power of this great curse upon me.'

'Nonsense, poor girl: it is some quaint fantasy of the mind.'

'Nay, mother, would it were so; then time would rid me of this frightful living death!'

'But speak plainly, Nika; tell me all.'

'It was thus. I spoke to Saronia; I tried to win from her by honeyed words that which thou requested her to tell me. Then did she disclose to me her knowledge of my hate, and after other words had passed she broke forth like a chained lion, and, snapping her chains as if they were threads of finest silk, she defied me. Standing with hair dishevelled and eyes aflame, I saw her face take form like unto the face of the resplendent statue of the goddess, and I knew she was possessed of Hecate, and I cursed before the words of dreadful meaning had passed her lips. Then spake she words aglow with fire, which burnt into me far deeper than the brand of iron burns into the brows of slaves. Those scars pass with death, mine must go with me through the gateway into Hades, into Tartarus, into my wandering 'midst the darkness, where my unclothed, starving spirit shall move through the sable gloom of a destiny that shall stretch out into the great hereafter. Oh, mother, mother, my agony is great!'

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'And where is this fiend gone?' asked Venusta. 'She was not in her accustomed place when I entered, and at that I wondered. Dost thou know where she is, daughter?'

'No, I know not. For when that fearful being had spoken, as I have told thee, I hid my eyes for very fear. Only once did I raise them and see her like a black death still standing by my couch; but she had grasped thy jewelled dagger which lay upon the table, and held it with outstretched hand towards the ground, and with upturned gaze and frightful calm she seemed to plead an

answer from the goddess. Then fell I into a deep swoon, and in vision seemed to fall from dark abyss to dark abyss, until my soul was torn asunder, and its portions rent again and dissolved into nothingness, and for ever lost.

'It is horrible to think of; and when I awoke, I was alone—yea, alone. It is an awful thing to feel such loneliness. Glad was I when the shadow of the great cypress-tree yonder came through the open window and lay upon the marble floor; even such as that was company to my cursed soul.'

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'Lie still, Nika. I will find her, and ere yon red-globed sun hath sunk behind the purple hills she shall suffer for this power which she pretends to possess. A braying ass within a lion's skin! I will brand her with hot irons, and pour strong ink into the furrows! I will work her like a beast, and, when torn and wrinkled with toil and pain, cast her out upon the hills to die! Such is my right to do, and all my powers shall be enforced.'

'Art thou not afraid?'

'No! I respect the faith of Hecate, and by report well know her power; but this young hag is not elect of such a goddess. That she tortures thee with fearful harrowings shows all this is but a slave's device to make escape from the punishment I threaten!'

'No, no! She is true—I am guilty. Would I were not! I have pained her to the verge of death. I have lied against her, and with cruel words and threatenings made her life a wretched misery! Oh, could I but recall the past! But all is dark. I know a great fate of ill-omen hangs over me. When it will descend, I know not. When it will enwrap me, I know not. But it will come, and at a time I am least ready, that I feel;' and Nika wept like a child.

Venusta kissed her daughter and passed out of the Golden Room.

On arriving at the place where the slaves dwelt, she found Saronia had fled, and no one knew whither. She was seen to take her mantle and leave hurriedly, and that was all.

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CHAPTER IV

SANCTUARY

When Saronia saw that Nika had fallen overpowered, and knew her lot was cast, she felt herself a new creature. Her young blood coursed wildly, and great thoughts trooped through her brain like a force of armed men hastening to war. For a moment reason staggered, but did not fall.

When the tumult of her soul was stayed, she said:

'Has the goddess spoken through me? Am I her beloved? If this be so, why not fly to her sanctuary and trust to her great power? I will away now—even now! I will not question with myself. Farewell, cruel Nika! Farewell, merciless girl! Thou wilt stand in thy lot at the end. I go my way, whither I know not—gloom, night, darkness envelops me. But, chaste Diana, show by thy kindly light the way—I am thine! Behold this tiny crescent graven on my hand when yet a child—true sign my loved ones were the worshippers of Ashtoreth; and now I come to thee, great Goddess Luna, Hecate, Diana, the mother of Nature, adored in Ionia!'

Having passed the threshold of the house, she came down the shaded way, along the side of Mount Coressus.

The tall pines murmured softly their evening hymn; the roadside was covered with great bunches of pink and white flowers; clusters of ripe grapes hung from the trellised vines, and the pomegranate-trees were laden with fruit.

A flock of birds of varied hue flew around her, and an eagle, sporting in the air and clapping its wings, swooped down and sailed from right to left, fairest of omens the gods could give. This she saw, and recognised its import, but the flowers and murmuring pines she heeded not.

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Down the lovely way she trod and came to the valley beneath, and joined the crowd passing along the city streets.

From the Odeum came the richest music, pealing forth upon the sultry air, and, breaking into softest harmony, melted into the light.

On, further, until the great theatre burst upon her sight, and then for a moment she stood and rested against the sculptured shaft of a mighty pillar and thought of Chios. Suddenly she was confronted with the wise woman who spoke with her not long ago.

'Whither goest thou, pretty slave? Art thou on a mission for thy mistress? or does that star of

thine so quickly lead thee to thy fate? Tell me, girl, whither art thou steering?'

'I cannot tell thee; but I pray thee point the nearest way to the pine and cypress grove nigh to the Temple of Diana.'

'Ah, now I know, and will not betray! Sanctuary! Thou seekest sanctuary, and thou shalt have it if I can aid thee; but no time is to be lost. Rush on as if thy life hung on a single thread. Turn to the right, pass the Stadium, wind quickly around the hill Pion, and thou shalt see the Temple bathed in glorious light, and close to it the sacred grove; but I fear the hour has passed to gain access, and the planet Saturn rules. Hide thee among the trees to-night, and when the sun's first rays appear haste thee to thy refuge. That hour is the hour of Jupiter, the next is that of the Sun; thou shalt prevail, and when thou flourisheth, remember me.'

She moved away, and stealing around the hill with its great Acropolis and fortress walls of iron brick, gained the sacred port, at the head of which, standing broadly against the dying day, appeared the mighty Temple—that Temple which she had so often gazed on from Venusta's home.

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It was not far away, but she could not reach it in time to claim security that day. If she ran she would be suspected, and her feet seemed weighted with sandals of lead.

She passed the smaller temples, saw the great ships with gorgeous sails and swinging pendants pass up and down the sacred way, and heard the chant of evening song float forth from many a shrine. Still, on she went, footsore and weary, to find, alas! the door of her asylum closed; then, gazing for a moment at the mighty structure within the parabolus walls, she uttered a faint cry and burst into a flood of tears. Nothing could she do but fly to the grove and pass the night there, and, creeping stealthily away, she moved towards the pines and cypress-trees.

That night there raged a storm. The great clouds in wild masses sailed across the sky like leviathans in the blue-tinted darkness of ocean depths. No moon nor star. The mighty winds swayed the trees, and bent the stoutest of them like reeds. Saronia crouched beneath a giant pine, whose summit seemed to pierce the sky. Faint and shivering, she drew her garments closely around her and fell asleep, only to be awakened by the thunderings which seemed to break the universe in twain with echoes like the voices of the gods in combat. A lightning flash flew down like a haunted fiend and blasted her tree from top to base, but it hurt her not.

And after hours had passed, and the furious winds had sailed out over the deep, the rains descended and drenched her flimsy garment. The stormy winds sank down to a melancholy wail, and played their dirge amongst the branches of the cluster-pine, and the dawn came up from the east and struggled between the dark-green foliage.

Saronia arose and staggered through the long wet grass, heeding not the masses of yellow iris or the flaming poppies. When she arrived at the confines of the grove the light had broken through the gray, and soon she saw the sun, and knew it was her hour.

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On she went, with her thin brown garments clinging to her lovely form. For a moment, like a thief, she hung around the entrance gate, and with a wild convulsive moan passed within—to sanctuary!

When the priests went by they saw the fallen form, and thought her dead. They raised her tenderly and led her away.

'Who art thou?' said the chief of the priests.

The girl looked beseechingly at him, and said:

'I am the slave of the Roman Venusta, whose home is on the Mount Coressus. Faithfully have I served her, and would have continued but for her cruelty. Before I saw this city my home was Sidon, in Phœnicia. There also I was a slave as far back as my memory serves me. Who I am I know not—'

'What is thy name?'

'Saronia; and hither have I fled to throw myself on the mercy of the goddess, with the hope that I may serve her.'

Then answered he of the Megalobyzi:

'Thou speakest plainly, and we will inquire into the matter;' and, turning to a priestess standing near, he requested her to protect the girl and give her food.

The young priestess was of exquisite beauty, and her face beamed with rarest charity. Her voice was full of sweetness as she said:

'Maiden, lean on my arm, and let me lead thee to thy rest;' and Saronia heard the chanting of the morning hymn, and felt she had reached her goal—the dearest to her heart.

At Venusta's house, just after the morning meal, a slave delivered to her mistress a message. The Roman autocrat broke the ominous seal, and, turning deathly pale, read out the following: [Pg 22]

'Great is Diana of the Ephesians, whom all Asia and the inhabited earth worshippeth.

'UNTO THE NOBLE LADY VENUSTA,

'Whereas thy slave-girl Saronia is now within the sacred precincts of the Temple of our Lady Saviour, and claims sanctuary, alleging that by your cruel treatment she has fled your abode;

'And this Notice, in accordance with the Law, demands that you appear at our Tribunal, and if by proof you show her allegations false, she shall forthwith be handed back, you releasing her from all punishment for thus submitting her case to this our High and Sacred Court.

'On the other hand, if she be in the right, then she shall be free to consecrate herself unto the service of the Ephesian goddess, and observe the rites as practised in the Temple of Artemis.'

For a moment Venusta was silent. What was to be done? Her Roman blood ran riot through her veins. Recovering herself, she said to her daughter:

'I will pursue her even to the jaws of death. Shall I thus be taunted by a slave? No; the wife of Lucius will not submit to be taught her duty to a hag such as she! I will reply immediately and use the law to win her back.'

'Leave her,' said Nika. 'See, will it avail thee to have thy name blazoned abroad among the noble ones of Ephesus? She is not worth much—never was, and would be worthless were she back again. Let her go!'

'No, child, my dignity is hurt. Thou knowest the high position held by us in this city, and to remain silent, I fear, in this case is to admit guilt. This would not do.'

'Mother dear, let me speak again, and plainly. I fear her. Should she return, soon must thou prepare the marble urn to receive the ashes of Nika. What could we do with her? She is far too terrible for us. If she spake never a word, her look would kill me. Thou knowest she cannot now be punished, for after having sought sanctuary the law provides a shelter against torture, and think of the scandal were the case tried, and her name in any way coupled with our beloved friend Chios. No, no; let her go. Were it not an insult to offer thee, I would sell my jewels, all, all I possess—everything—and pay her ransom. Say, dearest mother, say to Nika, say for the torn fragment of peace left me, that my request is granted.'

'I will let her go,' said the Roman. 'I think it best as thou hast said. Her destiny seems to lie outside our reach. To bring her back is wrong to thee after what thou hast now said. To let her remain may be humiliation. However, one thing we know: whilst within the Temple she cannot trouble us. To free her and let her wander abroad—well, it would be worse than playing with a deadly serpent. Discussion further may only hamper our best policy. She shall circle in her own orbit.' And Venusta framed reply, stating the slave's assertions quite untrue; but, being desirous of making an offering to the Queen of Heaven, she set her free.

And thus does fate work out our destiny, and prove

'Man's goings are not of his own ways;
How then can he direct his paths?'

CHAPTER V

THE TEMPLE OF DIANA

Bathed in the sunlight of an azure sky, the Temple of Diana raised its lovely head and shone the fairest mistress of the ancient East. Boasting a long list of ancestors, she, the last of a line of temples, the Mighty One that should fight against the coming Christ, a strong fortress wherein her devotees should defend their faith against all detractors—this the last, the eighth, the proudest Temple, the wonder of the world, was now in all its splendour, enthroned at the head of the sacred port, and shone out like a silvery sun. [Pg 24]

Built on sure foundations of the Ionic order, with symmetrical proportions, it towered high in majesty, with double rows of fluted marble pillars carved magnificently, many of which were the gifts of kings.

Its pronaos and pediments were resplendent with marble, whilst the vestibule and peristyle were adorned with the richest friezes and the noblest statues.

The roof of cedar was covered with marble and gold, and the staircases were of vine. Around it on every side great flights of marble steps led up to the sacred shrine.

The entrance doors to this mighty Temple were of cypress wood, with ivory panels of richest sculpture set in gold.

Within, the place was full of rarest beauty, and strength abounded on every hand.

Pillars rose on pillars, and the choicest workmanship adorned them. The friezes and the painted walls were all that art could furnish, and the sky appeared through the open roof like a circle of fairest blue.

In the Temple stood the altar, behind the altar the great statue of the Moon Goddess, Diana of the Ephesians, the Lady Saviour, the Resplendent One, the Mother of Nature. This symbol of deity was hidden from the vulgar gaze by a lovely veil of costly make, coloured with purple of Tyre, adorned with figures and arabesques and embroideries from Babylon, and edged with a fringe of purest gold. Behind the statue was the opisthodomus, or retiring chamber.

The Temple floor was of white marble, the purest kind, and polished, the joining of the slabs faced with golden wire.

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The quiet splendour of this mighty edifice baffles description. Not only was it magnificent in itself, but it was the grand storehouse for all that was beautiful and costly. It abounded in the sculptured works of Praxiteles and Thrason, and there were the statues of the Amazons, and that by Rhœcus, which the Ephesians called 'Night,' and those by Phidias and Scopas, silver wrought by Mentor, vases made of gold.

The cella walls were hung with costly paintings—pictures by Timarete, the daughter of Nicon; others by Callithon of Samos, portraying 'Discord raising the Battle' and the 'Binding on of the Armour of Patroclus.' There was Euphonor's 'Ulysses feigning Madness,' and that great painting by Timanthes which caused a shudder to pass through the mighty Alexander, and the majestic portrait of that mighty conqueror painted by Apelles.

In it were stored the strangest books, and there hung the finest instruments of music.

It was the common treasury for all Asia; all nations deposited their treasures there for safety, and the world wondered at its riches. Deposits were made of all kinds—honorary statues, votive offerings, spoils, and actual treasure—and the people invoked the blessing of the goddess whose presence filled the golden shrine of Ephesus.

An awful stillness reigned within the sacred pile—silence soon to be lightly broken by the entrance of a few priestesses, who led a girl within the folding doors of the great sanctuary.

This was the night prior to initiation, and the novice was taken there that she might recognise solemnly what she was about to do on the morrow.

The moonlight streamed faintly through the open roof, casting shadows on the marble floor.

As Saronia—for it was she who accompanied the priestesses—moved on, she drew her cloak lightly around her, for the night-winds were chill, and her spirit nature was strained to its highest point. They stopped in front of the great altar. The moon threw off her veil of clouds, and the light from her glorious body shone forth, illuminating the veil that hid the statue of the goddess.

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'See thou that glorious orb, Saronia—for thou shalt ever retain thy name, a favour granted to few—seest thou that globe of light? 'Tis the symbol of our goddess—the symbol set in the blue heavens—and behind this purple veil her image stands, shadowing her forth, the mother of nature, protector of cities, and dispenser of all good gifts to men. On earth we worship her as such; above she is Luna, the Queen of Heaven; and when the time comes that thou canst bear it, thou shalt know her as Hecate, the goddess of the under world, she who governs the shades and rules the spirits in Hades with an eternal power. This goddess—the Triformis—thou art about to serve with all thy soul. Is it not so? Canst thou be true to her, forsaking all, follow where her great spirit leads? She will speak to thee, maiden—she will speak to thee; and, having once spoken, that voice will ever reverberate through the deepest recesses of thy being, will live on for ever to bless thee, or wind around thy soul to curse thee down to Tartarus as thou art faithful or false.

'Saronia! Saronia! it is not yet too late to withdraw and throw thyself into the mighty throes of the great world's agony. Which shall it be? It is for thee to decide. No one is pressed into the service of the great goddess Diana, neither may any follow her as a matter of convenience.'

A cloud passed o'er the moon, and they were shrouded in darkness. Then as suddenly passed those cloudlets away, and Saronia, trembling with fear, said:

'Great priestess of the goddess, fear not; my mind is settled. Long, long have I wished for this hour, the hour of joy. My soul thrills with anticipation; my whole being is like one grand instrument tuned to the hand of my lady goddess, Diana Trivia. Let the night hasten; let the darkness be driven with power of the storm-wind; may the night speed on, and make way for the morning. Oh, chaste moon, flee thy way to the west, that the scarlet shafts may appear and I may pour my soul out before thee. My spirit longeth for thee, oh gracious one, that I may dwell in thy Temple evermore.'

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Then deep silence fell on all, and the pillars and roof cast great ghostly shadows on the floor, conjuring up mighty forms of weirdness, and the priestesses murmured reverently:

'The goddess is here! Hecate is here!'

The winds were rising and whistling with strange meaning through the sacred pines; the moon sailed down the west as a barque on the wings of a favouring gale; the stars looked down from their distant thrones; the song of the waves came up from the strand; and the night wore on.

The next day's sun arose, mounted the heavens in beauty, and smiled down its splendour on mountain and sea. Saronia breathed the fresh morning air. All nature was alive; the flowers seemed to cast a richer perfume; the birds, to her, warbled their choicest strains; life and joy were everywhere; night and death were asleep.

The great highway to peace was unclouded, and she could look straight down the golden road, until it melted into the altar-steps of heaven.

This was her bridal morn; why should she not be happy? And that day she was wedded to her faith, initiated into the mysteries of Diana, and became a priestess of the goddess.

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CHAPTER VI

LUCIUS

Ephesus was a scene of gaiety.

Great arches decorated with choice foliage and festooned with lovely flowers spanned the public way; banners of strange beauty waved on the morning breeze; jubilant strains of martial music floated on the perfumed air.

The day was young, yet vast crowds were astir. This was a festive day—the day of the home-coming of Lucius, whose wife was Venusta.

Yes, he was to arrive in port to-day in command of a Roman squadron. Had he not been to far-off Britain and brought a British chieftain captive to Rome?

Already the powerful ships were seen between the Isle of Samos and the main. Soon they drew nearer. Their great square sails set to catch the favouring gale urged them onwards like homesick birds until they drew close to the entrance of the port, and the people flocked to meet them. For Lucius was a valiant commander, and he should have a hearty welcome. Besides, had he not from time to time made costly offerings to their city protectress, and was there not a tablet in the great theatre recounting the noble deeds of Lucius Erastus?

The fleet had entered the channel leading up to the city port. First came, like flying scouts, groups of gaily painted boats and splendid barges, with sails of many hues, vermilion, azure, golden-coloured, and white, some with stripes, and many-formed devices, others with curious mystic signs.

Streamers hung lazily aloft from masts and yards, prows and sterns, whilst flutes and lyres, syrinx and clarionet, kithra and aulos sent forth the soft Ionian music until the shores were wrapt in softest harmony. Some of the welcomers had ventured beyond the margin of the strand, and now returned in haste to lead the way.

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Then came the biremes with their double rows of oars, and clewed-up sails, swinging on the yards. Then the triremes followed with their treble banks of oars, and one among the last of those great ships was greatest. She was commanded by the Roman favourite. Yes, there she comes with beaked prow, projecting ram, castellated cabin, and great oars sweeping the silver sea. Above her gunwale rose a line of polished shields and rows of glittering spears—spears handled by warriors who knew their work.

Flags flew out from end to end, blazoning in wild profusion along the yards and up the mast, gambolling with the cordage and the mighty sail. Following the warships came a host of vessels and boats, and along the banks of the great canal multitudes hastened, shouting as they went great shouts of welcome.

The Roman fleet with its hosts of followers moored within the harbour with the city full in view, and Lucius thought he saw a silvery scarf waving from a house on Mount Coressus.

When he had landed and was near the great theatre, many were the friends who surrounded him, giving greeting; foes also, with envy at heart, time-servers, cried 'Welcome!'

Just then the joyous acclamations for a moment ceased. A cluster of priestesses going from temple to temple passed that way, and the hardy sailor bared his head as the little procession went by. Two eyes met his, and a feeling as if the dead were there crept through his soul; they were dark unfathomable eyes, and the girl was tall and beautiful, with clustering hair. And he said within him: 'Where have I seen that face ere now?'

When she had passed he went his way, but his brow was dark with thought; something had crossed his track leaving a trail of gloom, why, he could not say. Again sweet voices chimed pleasantly, and the softest Ionian cadences floated out from the roofless Odeum. A carpet of

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bruised and dying roses strewed the ground.

He had soon forgotten the girl with the dark eyes and clustering hair, and entered his princely home on the slopes of Coressus. Around it the pine-trees waved a greeting, and the wind sighed through the branches of the cypress.

That evening the residence of Lucius was a scene of gaiety and splendour.

Venusta welcomed her husband with the true feelings of a loyal wife, and Nika was glad at the return of her father; she could now repose on his protective presence.

Many of the nobles of Ephesus had gathered there—artists and sculptors, philosophers and warriors, lovely women, Greeks and Romans, maidens of Caria, Priene, and girls from Samos blended in one great mass of power and beauty.

The sweet day still cast its soft light, and lit up the lovely flowers and beautiful trees of olive, cypress, pine, and myrtle. The sun had lost its power, the atmosphere was deliciously cool, and many came from within to breathe the refreshing air ere the dew bathed the grass and the night-birds sang from the grove, or the twilight heralded the night and the stars encircled the moon.

Nika, leaning on the arm of Lucius, stood by a great white marble fountain—he the bronzed sea-warrior, and she like a dream of spring.

'Tell me, child—for many seasons have rolled away since I left thee and thy mother to visit those lovely isles in the far-off west—is thy young heart sound like thy father's barque after the battling of the stormy seas, or has Cupid laid siege and thou capitulated?'

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'Nay, father, Nika's heart is free, neither could it be otherwise, for it is hard as the marble of this fountain, colder than the water which springs from each chaste design.'

'Ah, girl, thou art, I fear, like others of thy sex, prone to sail under false colours when a lover is in chase. Tell me, where is Chios? I thought he would have been here. Was he not bidden?'

'He was, but there is no written law for him. He moves in his own eccentric orbit. He will come when most unexpected, suddenly, like an eagle from the clear blue depths of the sky, or as a comet from out the midnight gloom.'

'Why, daughter, there he is, conversing with that sweet maid of Smyrna! Let us crowd all sail, and bear down on his weather. Quickly! I like that boy, and, if my reckoning be correct, thou dost not dislike him. Am I right?'

'Well, I like him, and I like him not. He has mixed much with the people of the new faith, and ever as he goes that way his mind becomes o'erclouded with gloom. He is strangely abstracted, scarce a word escapes his lips. Were it not for this strange faith which spells him, I should say he loved, and, if 'twere love, I should not be the idol of his choice.'

'Who, then?'

'I know not;' and a painful sorrow passed across her brow, but Lucius saw it not.

The night came down, and beacon fires glared out on every hill and mountain-top. Coressus and Pion were aflame, great torches whirled and rushed wildly up and down the mountain-side, and moved in fiery lines throughout the city streets.

The lamps were lit within, and windows made of richly-coloured glass, amber, blue, and ruby, shone forth in lovely harmony and glorious hues, until the myrtle-trees, with their great white blossoms and perfumed breath, seemed quivering with delight. Merry songs, with laughter and rippling music, floated on the lazy air. Joy ran riot in the house of Lucius, and the meanest slave had for a time a share of happiness. The hours rolled on in pleasure, like a stately ship on a sunny sea.

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Down deep in the heart of Nika joy was mockery.

The guests departed, and she retired to her chamber. Throwing herself on a couch, she wept great tears of anguish, a tide of tears no joy could stay.

She arose and gazed out into the darkness, and saw the looming of the great Temple rearing its majestic form in sable gloom, darker than the night; and she looked into the great unfathomable depths of the skies, and sighed like the deep moaning of the wind. But the heavens were as brass, and the great sigh died without becoming a prayer.

Moving back silently to her couch, she lay down, but not to sleep, for she heard strange sounds arise from the sacred grove, and she knew the songs of the night came up from the Temple of Hecate.

The morning came, and with it the springs of life revived, and she said: 'Why this sadness? why this harvest of gloom? I will awaken myself, tear this veil of night from around my spirit. I will lay bare my soul to the glorious sunlight, drink in its glory until I am saturated with delight. I will not weep; I will not mourn; I defy this spell; I challenge this curse—this brand of hell! Oh that it were always day, that the sun never set, and my mind were as strong as now!' and she flung the great masses of wavy hair back from her stately forehead, and it fell to the ground, enshrouding her form till she looked like a goddess on earth.

'Why art thou so late, dear, to thy morning meal?' said Venusta. 'Come, sit by my side, and tell me what thinkest thou of last night's innocent revelry? Was it not a right hearty welcome to thy father, most fitting to receive him? and didst thou note that noble Roman who stood next but one to thee when those dancing-girls came forward to dance to us? I know thou sawest him, Nika, for I saw your eyes meet. Well, he has come from Rome to govern. He is the new Proconsul. His influence in the imperial city is great. Besides, he is positively a favourite with the Emperor. I tell thee all this that thou mayest know of him. Moreover, Lucius has bidden him to spend this evening here, and thou wilt have ample time to satisfy thy curious mind respecting him, and, fortunately or unfortunately, as the Fates may determine, Chios also will be here. Nika, take care; this Roman is not a child or a fool! They say he is impetuous, firm, resolute when need be. Now let us join my husband. I see him yonder gathering flowers.'

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Lucius came to them, smiling as he came. He offered a rose to Nika, but Venusta said: 'No, no; let me choose first! I will take the rose. Give her an unthorned flower; the emblem of evil and good, pleasure and pain, shall be mine, for we twain are one, husband, and if this flower presages aught than happiness, then may I, thy loving wife, rest on thy strong arm, as this rose clung to the oak from which thou pluckedst it.'

Nika was walking solitary, alone.

'Give her a bloom which speaks the language of hope;' and he approached and gave her the pink-white almond flower.

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CHAPTER VII

CAUGHT

'Venusta,' said Lucius, 'I have been thinking of that slave girl, the dark Phœnician maid, Saronia; I see her not in her accustomed place. I feel a keen interest in that weird beauty. What of her? Is she dead, or what?'

'She is as good as dead to us, dear. She is at the Temple, and has been initiated as a priestess for the presiding goddess.'

'Priestess! priestess! What does it all mean? Light dawns! I saw her—yes, I saw her—as I passed through the city yesterday. Now I understand. Hear me. As I passed near the great theatre some maidens of the Temple came that way. I stood still, with bared head; the sounds of greeting were stayed until they went with solemn tread; and, as they passed, one with eyes deep-looking like the ocean's depths, turned them full on me, and gazed into my inner soul, and, like a barque which strikes a sunken rock and staggers, so did my spirit. I did my best to divine who she was, but all was dark, and I moved on with clouded mind. Now I know. Why is she there? Some great mystery hangs over it. I am not usually given to fear, but somehow I feel a sorrow of this event.'

Then did Venusta tell him of what had occurred—told him that only which she thought would screen herself and Nika.

The old commander saw too plainly that one side only of the story had been told, and felt confirmed in his suspicions when he saw his daughter's eyes suffused with tears. He, with that true manliness which permeated him, said but little, for fear he might know too much, and deeper wound the pent-up feelings of his child.

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That evening the Roman nobleman arrived, and was warmly welcomed by Lucius, and introduced to Venusta and Nika; and Varro was soon at home, for at first sight he loved the sailor's daughter, and at once made up his mind to lay siege; but, Roman-like, he would mature his plans before declaring war. Besides, he knew not if a rival were in the field and would join the girl as firm ally.

It is well known how difficult it is to entertain a stranger the first quarter of an hour. One would know his pet theories and touch on them, so that the newcomer might lead off and rejoice; but even the astute mind of the wife of Lucius was puzzled to divine the inclinations of the Roman—he was impenetrable, a perfect blank; but the truth was this: the Roman tactician had but one thought just then, and that was of Nika, and it developed so rapidly that it was undiscovered. Had it been, it were not food for conversation; so Venusta opened fire with the beauties of the city, for the weather at that season of the year was nearly always fine.

'Well, how dost thou like our noble city, the envied of the world? Hast seen the great Gymnasium, the Serapion, the theatre?'

'Yea, my lady, I have, as much as one can in so short a time as I have lived within the great heart of this beautiful place. Rome is great, but Ephesus is lovely—the very air seems laden with rejoicings. Surely this must be the Elysian city on earth!'

'Thou art too complimentary; but, as thou sayest, it is lovely. Didst thou notice the double colonnade around the Agora, and the many mighty statues there? And what thinkest thou of the lovely little Odeum nestling at the feet of Mount Pion, and the great Stadium around the hillside

to the west? Is it not noble?'

'Yes, it is fine, a magnificent racecourse; and I am told seventy thousand people will not fill it to overflowing. Is this so?' [Pg 36]

'Yes; and you should see the charioteers in full swing.'

'But thou hast not spoken of the gem of the city, the great Temple of Diana?'

'No, I have not.'

'I passed the Temple on my way hither, and I shall not soon forget when I stood without the Parabolus walls, and, looking through the entrance gate, gazed on the flight of marble steps leading up to the mighty building. I have seen nothing like it in my splendid Rome. Not only is the Temple great, but the very place on which it stands, surrounded with its sacred groves, seems a fit place for the birth of a goddess. I saw the shrine of Hecate lifting its head behind the mightier home of Diana, and heard songs of worship coming forth from both, sometimes low, as the murmur of a sinless child, then rising in great waves—billowy waves of jubilant harmony—until I seemed bound to the place by an invisible chain.'

Just then Chios was announced, and Varro saw by Nika's eyes that she had something more than respect for the Greek. Venusta was glad Chios had come, for she feared the Roman might continue to speak of the Temple, and that the conversation might drift towards the priestesses, and the name of Saronia be mentioned.

Chios appeared happy, save for the far-away look in his eyes. Nika was the only one who could read him and solve his abstraction. She spoke kindly to him, and gradually allowed her manner to change to freezing-point. This was strategic: she showed the Roman she valued little the friendship of the Greek, and Varro was deceived, and thought it true. There was no need for battle against this Ephesian artist. He could even use him to further his own ends to win the girl. No, Nika had slighted Chios—treated him coldly. He could now treat him courteously and fraternize; but, could he have looked into the girl's heart, he would have seen the image of Chios engraved there. [Pg 37]

'How long,' said Varro, 'hast thou been in Ephesus?'

'From childhood,' replied Chios.

'And hast thou followed thy profession from youth?'

'Yes, and I love it—am wedded to it for life.'

'What meanest thou? Wilt thou never wed some sweet Ionian girl?'

'Never! As I tell thee, I am wedded to my art. I shall never wed again. Why should I, seeing I love it dearly, as strongly as yonder priesthood love their faith and are content? So am I.'

At this saying of Chios the beautiful mouth of the Roman girl was slightly agitated, and her hand closed tightly on an almond flower, and its petals fell to the ground.

Then came Lucius and his wife, and all joined in pleasant gossip. Varro spoke proudly of Rome, and Lucius of Britain, and the time sped on. The young noble left, but Chios remained.

Nika was ill at ease, her mind was a storm, and, throwing a mantle over her shoulders, she said playfully:

'Come, Chios; take me to the balcony, that we may breathe the fresh night air.'

She was impatient to get at the mind of the Greek. Quick-sighted, she had already read the mind of the Roman. What did she care? She would be bold.

'Chios, why didst thou say thou wilt never wed? Is it really so?'

'Yes, Nika, it is true.'

'Chios, we have known each other long, and have been more than friends. We have been like children of one mother! Thou hast ever spoken freely and kindly to me, and I would ask thee one question—one little question—that is all.' [Pg 38]

'Say on, Nika.'

'Didst thou ever love?'

'I may have.'

'I thought so much,' replied she; 'and where is that love? Does it live on, or is it—dead?'

'It lives, but I am trying to kill it.'

'Wouldst thou be a murderer, Chios?'

'No, I mean well.'

'Tell me thy secret, and I will bury it in the grave of my heart. Whom—dost—thou—love?'

'I cannot tell thee, but she is not a Roman.'

'Then I *know*—it is Saronia. Let me lean upon thy arm, Chios. Lead me within—the night is chill.'

CHAPTER VIII

PAYING THEIR VOWS

From morn to eve great songs of praise and adoration went up before the shrine of Diana, and soft music echoed through the great Temple, sometimes swelling like the martial notes of the Persian hosts when they marched through the vales of Ionia to Abydos, and then sweet melodies sank back into the faintest strains, like a weeping lute or the sighs of a broken heart.

Those plaintive sounds suited one spirit, and that one was the storm-clad soul of Saronia. She had seen her old master on his arrival at Ephesus; he had done her no harm, and her heart went out towards him that she might speak and thank him for his kindness. After all, she had the true instinct of a woman, and must love something: she loved the goddess, but she had a spiritual and a human existence, and both must love. True, her nature was somewhat seared, battling as she had done for existence. There was a time when a kiss, a simple kiss, would have thrilled her very soul; but that was long ago. Since those happy times she had hardened herself against the world—the cold, selfish world made her so. But a nature with true instinctive love cannot long remain in such a state when conditions change; and now Saronia was coming to her former self, removed from the world and surrounded by those who really loved her. Her heart softened, and she felt a keen affection for Lucius.

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There were but two men in the teeming millions of the world she cared for; of those two, one had been passively kind, the other an active friend. The latter was Chios, of whom she dared not think. No, she could not even breathe a sigh o'er the remembrances of him, for fear a smouldering dead past might break into a living flame. All this she knew—knew it now when she had passed from death to life, when the night had fled and the day dawned; so she conjured up a mighty gulf between her and the Greek, a gulf over which she would not pass, neither could he come unto her. But of Lucius she felt no fear, and this is the distinction between friendship and love.

Lucius was to visit the Temple of Diana to render thanks for her protecting grace to him whilst he had been battling with many storms; and his mariners had promised a votive offering to the goddess when the winds whistled through the cordage and the waves tossed their ship until it reeled and staggered like a drunken man. And now they came to fulfil their vows. This was not a vain show. Those sons of the ocean had warm hearts, and would lay them there before the shrine. Neither did Lucius desire pomp or show; he would come with his men and worship simply, manly. So, when the sun was low and the winds were hushed, they drew nigh and bowed before the altar, and, offering their libations, whispered forth their prayers. Around the flower-strewn altar stood the priests and priestesses. The chanting songs went upward in deep sonorous rhythm, and as the sacred hymn died out in echoes through the columned sanctuary, the toilers of the sea bent low and sang:

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Thanks to Thee, O Lady Saviour.
Thanks to Thee, O great Dispenser.
Mercy have, and keep us lowly
In the hollow of Thine hand.
Hail! O hail! Thou mighty Mother.
Hail! Thou Giver of all good.
Mercy have and keep us lowly,
Ever bring us safe to Thee.

Then in deep unison priests and mariners joined in one grand anthem of thanksgiving, and cheeks were wet with the tears of men whose sinews were like iron, and whose hearts were proof against fear.

When they moved away, Lucius looked lovingly towards the shrine, and beheld Saronia, with her robe of purest white, standing in bold relief against the rich colour of the great veil which hid the statue of the goddess from their view; and their eyes met, and from her came a look of sweetest thanks, filling his soul with unfathomable calm, and he knew their hearts were tuned in strange resemblance, and that the priestess of Diana would offer prayer for him whether he dwelt in his lovely home or paced the poop of his lofty ship when the gale grew loud and the storm-birds flew.

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For a while stillness reigned, and the priests and priestesses were alone, singing their evening hymns; the great censor swung, and the burning incense filled the Temple with odour. Then they passed through the portals to their rest, and the Temple watchers stood at the gates and kept guard within the Parabolus walls.

The dark eyes of Saronia were filled with tears of joy, for she had seen Lucius; she was at peace, though the sun had set and the shadows fell.

And thus peace cometh to the mind of the tempest-tossed, but such a being as Saronia could not long sustain it. Her soul was a spirit in chase, pursuing something undefinable which she longed

to obtain, that she might be for ever satisfied and her measure of happiness complete. A calm to her was like a summer day in winter-time, the harbinger of coming storm.

CHAPTER IX

THE STUDIO OF CHIOS

The studio of Chios was very beautiful, and an artist is pretty well known by the place in which he paints, provided he has means to gratify his tastes. It was not a great room filled with materials, leaving him just a dozen square feet to walk about, but a studio of ample proportions, and kept as it should be with space to move around. Nothing of it could be seen from the road, for great clusters of myrtle-trees, gigantic rose-bushes, and crimson oleanders hid it most effectually; but those of his friends who went that way knew when they had passed through the quiet gateway and between the flower-trees that not far away was one of the sweetest little studios in Ephesus. Yes, there it was close to the pond of water-lilies, with the bees humming from blossom to blossom, and the birds singing cheerfully from the foliage which surrounded it; the birds were quite tame, for Chios was kind to them, and some would light upon his shoulders, and others on his arm.

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A few steps led up to the marble portico, with its ceiling of blue decked with little silver stars and a crescent moon. At the entrance stood two small statues by Euphranor and Phidias.

Within all was beauty: the studio, circular in form, with alcoves lit with light which filtered in through the thinnest sheets of coloured marble; the furniture, simple, but choice; a kline or two of cedar-wood, enriched with gold, to recline on when weary; a few chairs of ebony, cypress, and rosewood were placed in the alcoves; a marble thronos for his sitters; a few small tables, three-legged and four-legged, beautifully carved, stood about to hold his brushes and palettes and the choicest flowers, which a good old servant brought him every morning.

These things, with his easels, made up the contents of his studio. It was not so famous for its furniture as for the beauty of its construction, with domed roof and circular opening to the sky, and its floor of marble enriched with precious stones. For Chios was wealthy, and could lavish money as he pleased in decorating his studio.

Behind this working-room were retiring-rooms, and a small but valuable library of choice manuscripts by Callinus, the Elegiac poet; Batalus, the musician; Dion, Andron, Delias, and Daphnus, the philosophers; with works by Phavorinus, Zenodotus, Menander, and many others.

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It was a quiet afternoon; the winds were too lazy to stir and had fallen asleep.

Varro passed that way, and said: 'I will drop in and see Chios.'

The artist was outside, painting into his picture some apple-blossoms hanging gracefully from a tree which grew against a piece of old Greek wall. Looking up from his work with a smile, he welcomed the noble Roman.

'I am glad thou art come, for my hand is weary and my brain tired. It is so sultry within that I felt quite unfitted to work there, and sought refuge beneath those shading trees, whilst, as thou seest, a gleam of light comes down between the foliage and strikes upon those blossoms of the apple-tree.'

'I really hope I am not intruding too much, Chios?'

'Oh dear no; I am glad to see thee. Wilt thou sit? Make thyself at home.'

The two men talked of Ephesus and its people until the conversation was of the ladies, and soon the name of Nika was heard, for the Roman could not but speak of her.

'What thinkest thou of her?' said Chios. 'Thou hast seen her?'

'Well, truthfully, I may say, during the interview referred to, my mind was more concerned to think of Chios until I clearly perceived that he had the blank face given him by that beautiful girl. Then my heart grew hopeful, for, to tell thee all, I think I love that maid.'

'Think thou lovest—is that all? A man who loves is sure. A man has no such sure knowledge of anything else on this earth or in the beyond. I am afraid thy love is of the morning cloud thinness, and will soon pass away.'

'No, no. Believe me, it is not so. I spake not so freely, truthfully, as I should. I love her, and am certain of it; but tell me, Chios, that thou lovest her not.'

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'Why asketh thou such a question? Did she not give me the cut direct in thy presence?'

'Because I am skilled in the ways of women, and know they frequently act directly opposite to

that they mean. I saw her coldness to thee, and saw no reason for it, and at once, in my mind, questioned the proceeding. Say, dost thou love her—hast tried to win her? Is she sporting with thy manly heart? Speak, on the honour of a Greek, and, if such be the case, I leave the field.'

'I love her not.'

'Hast thou failed, and stifled the dawn of love?'

'No.'

'Is it, then, Nika loves Chios, and Chios is adamant?'

'I am not skilled in the mysteries to be able to read her thoughts.'

'Perhaps not; but, as a man, like myself, thou canst read actions, and they are the outcome of thoughts.'

'Thou forgettest, noble friend, but a moment or so ago thou saidst that frequently actions were contrary to what was really meant. How, then, can I divine her meaning more than thyself?'

'True, thou hast me rather firmly; and such skill in fencing demands my admiration and consideration. I will not press further on thee, Chios, and I have now naught to do but to make love, and make her love me more than ever she loved another.'

'That will be an easy matter, for I saw how satisfied she was with Varro when last we passed the evening together at the house of Lucius. An Ephesian painter would stand no chance against the Proconsul of Ephesus.'

'Come, come, Chios; thou art already jealous of thy rival!'

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'No; thou art free to conquer and annex. I am a friend of Nika, and trust may remain so, but I am nothing more, or ever may be.'

'Then I may take thee to be a man callous to the beauty of women, if thou art not charmed with her loveliness, for there is no girl in Ephesus as beautiful as she.'

'That may be so, but thou must not take me to be indifferent to the charms of the fair sex because I do not admire Nika's loveliness and think it beyond compare. I may find loveliness in another form; it may be in the virtues of the soul, or spirit, whichever you may choose to name that awful thing. Behind a less lovely face than hers may be enshrined a splendid harmony of thinking, active life, which is building up its destiny, and will continue so to do through the great æons, down the grand vista of the future, when the face once so fair to look upon has passed into base mould, and been blown hither and thither, the sport of every breeze. To love beauty only is like plucking an apple of Sodom, which has a fair rind to look at, but when pressed sends out little clouds of dust and leaves you nothing but the broken shell.'

'Chios, my friend, I thought thou wert an artist, but lo, thou art a philosopher also! And, if thou art not in love, well, I have never been in Rome! I shall wait; it will develop. I shall know. Well, good-bye, Chios. I have too long kept thee from thy work. The world waits for thy beautiful picture—I must not hinder. Good-bye. We meet at the house of Lucius, where I know thou at least art ever welcome.'

When he had gone, Chios went within, and threw himself upon a seat, clasping his head with both hands. It seemed as if some great agony would rend his being.

'What am I,' he cried, 'to be made the sport of fate? Why this great conflict within me? Why this uprising of my nature to war? He was true—I love hopelessly, and would to the gods I could quench it! If it would lie peacefully in my heart like a loving child upon its mother's bosom I would not care; but it is not so. A year or so ago that love was like a summer wind, but now it rushes through me with the terrible roar of a mighty storm, and tosses me to and fro like a ship whirled in a hurricane. What raises this great tempest? It is not I, Saronia! It is not Chios! I could have loved thee deeply when thou wert a slave, and would have at all hazard plucked thee from thy low estate, and lived for thee; but now I know thou never canst be mine, and fain would let thee rest, and never trouble, but for this mighty power which forces me onwards to declare to thee a love as pure as angels ever knew, but which would be a sacrilege both damned and deep were I to whisper such into thy soul. No, no; it must not be so! I will rise above it: bring into the arena all the might of my manhood, and in this holy war will fight against my star, against my fate, and may the greatest God, whoever He be, look down on this unequal combat and assist the right.'

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Chios sank back upon the couch of cedar-wood. The shadows fell upon the marble floor. The night crept on, and he slept.

CHAPTER X

THE RIBBON OF GOLD

Saronia had been sent on an errand of mercy, and was returning, disguised, towards the Temple, when, as she was passing close to the garden of Chios, a crowd of brawlers, inflated with wine, came towards her. Wishing to avoid them, she turned within the gate left open by Varro; but the fellows were too quick-sighted for her, saw her movements, guessed her mind, and followed her to have some sport, not knowing who she was. She ran quickly down the pathway to hide behind the foliage, and, not daring to follow, they let her go. She heard the shouting of the ribald crew as they passed down the road.

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The moon shone out its full, and the silver light lit up the marble building. In passing the steps, she beheld the statue by Phidias, and her love for the beautiful prompted her to steal forward and take a hasty look. Standing near the doorway, she turned her eyes upwards towards the moonlit sky, and, in so doing, caught sight of the word 'Chios' carved over the splendid entrance. For a moment her heart failed her, and she nearly fell to the ground, but, leaning against the statue of Dawn, she recovered herself, and determined to hurry away. But the door of the studio was partly open, and she gazed within. She stepped noiselessly forward another step, and saw the light of the moon falling through the open roof. The light fell full on the face of a man, who seemed as dead. And she knew it was Chios.

Then came back the true nature of the woman who was destined to become great as a priestess of Diana. Old love sprang up anew. The smouldering embers of the almost dead past burst into life. Here was the man she would have loved—perhaps silently—had her course turned otherwise. Here was the man who had befriended her in deepest misery. Here was Chios lying stretched death-like before her. Should she at all hazard go within and see if he lived? Yes, by the goddess whom she worshipped she would venture! She passed noiselessly over the polished floor, step by step, like a night-thief treads; one step more, and she was beside him! She threw back her black mantle, displaying a garment of purest white clasped round the waist with a girdle of gold. Her massive tresses of rich dark hair floating over her brow shadowed her face until she looked like some great spirit queen, the Spirit Queen of Night.

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She stooped; she placed her lips close to those of Chios, but they did not touch. She felt his warm breath on her cheeks. He lived! He sighed like the sougning of the wind amongst the reeds. He murmured, 'Saronia.'

She started up; stood near him. He still slept. She stood erect, with arms crossed over her bosom and head bowed, looking sweetly on his manly face. Then, taking from her neck a little silver shrine, in form like unto the Temple, she laid it on his bosom, fled noiselessly as she came, and passed up the road which led towards the great Temple.

Chios awoke, and for a moment was bewildered. He had slept when the golden sunlight smiled, and now the silver moon lit up the sky, lit up the garments of the night, and he said:

'Sleep is a blessed thing. Its mysteries, who can know? Dreams, they say, are fables of the mind. Would to Heaven I could have dreamt on, and have slipped through the thin gauze of mortality, and never more entered this vile clay supposed to be the temple of the soul!

'I wandered on and on into infinite space—without light, without the faintest dawn; no beloved hand led me. Weary and sad I flew from star to star, looking for my rest, but finding none. No chain of sympathy bound me until I drew nigh unto a world as one suspended glory. Then my whole soul stretched out to reach it, and I knew I had found sanctuary. I stood before the gates of a great city whose walls shone forth like a thousand suns, and I essayed to enter; but a being of transcendent loveliness stood before me, and I knew it was Saronia! She said: "Not yet, Chios. Thy humanity still lives, and the silver cord still binds thee to it. Thou must return and work out thy destiny. This city shalt thou dimly see, and then go back to earth."

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'And we twain floated upwards, and stood on the diamond floor on the summit of the massive walls.

'And I looked on the great city until its loveliness bewildered, dazzled my comprehension, and I shuddered at my own deformity, and said: "Let us go!"

'Then, with a love radiant with eternal life, she pressed her lips to mine, saying: "My soul shall strengthen thine. Thou hast seen the city wherein is built a home for Saronia and Chios. Go, now, to earth whilst thou hast power. Make use of thy life that thou mayest be found meet to inherit the plane where our palace stands."

'I awoke to find myself lying on this couch, and to hear the whisperings of the evening breeze.

'Ah, me! I will go out and gaze up into the deep blue of the heavens. Perchance I may see the star on which is the City of Light.' And, as he arose, there slipped from the folds of his dress the little silver temple placed there by Saronia. It fell to the ground like a silver bell. Stooping, he took it in his hand. A cloudlet passed from the face of the moon. He grew deathly pale, and said: 'What meaneth this? Whence this charm? Great gods! Its ribbon is marked with the sign of a priestess, and another which tells me 'tis blessed by the goddess! Whose can it be? Has she been here? Is this the kiss of my dream? Is this emblem of faith the symbol of strength to me?

'My brain whirls with a strange delight. But, no, it cannot be! I neither can foster a love for Saronia nor may I embrace her faith.

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'Why shall I not do both? No, no, Chios will kill the thought. I am seeking the truth to walk to the great life beyond. It shall be so. Saronia is too pure to miss her way, by whatever coloured light she may be led. She may worship Diana, I the Christ. We shall join hands on the diamond floorway which circles the city of God.

'Little silver shrine, little ribbon of gold, what shall I do with thee? Shall I cast thee from me, and bid farewell with longing eyes, as the mariner bids adieu to the last low streak of misty land ere he launches out on the trackless deep? or shall I wear thee on my breast, hid from the vulgar gaze, in memory of whom—of whom? Saronia? Perchance 'twas her! It shall remain. It cannot harm, and shall be near me until I know the giver.'

So he placed the golden ribbon around his neck, and hid the symbol on his heart, and stood like one drunken with new wine, until the shriek of the night-bird awoke him from his reverie.

CHAPTER XI

THE PRIESTESS OF DIANA

Saronia was now a priestess of Diana Triformis, and initiated into the mysteries of Hecate. She had grown rapidly in favour with her companions, and was looked on as one of the most devoted women of Ephesus.

Her great strength of character eminently fitted her for the position in which she had been placed, and those around looked on the beautiful girl as one destined in due time to fill the mightiest position of honour in the great Temple, and prophesied that she would soon reach the proud eminence of High Priestess.

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Saronia was not an ordinary being; one look at the rounded forehead which shone over dark eyebrows and the unfathomable eyes would convince the most sceptical. The mysteries had a charm for her, and now that she had been taught the hidden secrets of Nature, she craved to understand the powers which worked the will, to dive deeply into the sympathies governing the soul, and to become skilled in the magical rites observed in the worship of the goddess of the underworld.

Hers was an exceptional case, and her companions, knowing a great spirit was in their midst, hastened her career until, moving rapidly forwards, she stood inferior in knowledge and power to none save the Arch-Priestess of Diana. Thus the slave became a spiritual princess, and won the confidence of the people; they loved her for her goodness. Ever ready with words of kindness, she won the deepest regard from the suffering and the outcast.

Those duties were but one part of her priestly call—that part which reflected the purest nature of her goddess.

She worshipped one goddess, yet three: Luna in heaven, Diana on earth, Hecate in hell—a terrible gathering together of good and evil, a trinity in unity, but not a trinity in purity, a broken circle representing Morn, Noon, Night, Birth, Life, Death.

It was when Saronia moved into the great darkness of Hecate that the gloom and passion of the priestess were aroused, and the constant warring of evil against goodness within awakened new aspirations for another experience when she might revolve in a circle of truth and unsullied purity.

And thus it is that when we would do good, evil will present itself; so men set up the symbol of fire as the symbol of deity. Its active elements represent the bad; the light from the flame, the flower of the fire, designates the good.

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The mystery of evil worked mightily on the sensitive mind of the girl, and she stretched forth through the darkness for a solution of this great problem which has harassed the minds of men through the ever-changing past. But no answer came, not a voice was heard, and she settled herself as well as she could to penetrate deeper into the hidden things, that perchance she might emerge into the glories of a nobler life.

She, by virtue of her occupation, believed in the great underworld of Hades—in Tartarus, in the Elysian—and knew that Hecate, her mistress, her goddess, presided over the depths where the unclothed spirits wailed and wandered, and over the starving ones who waited at the sacrifice to drink in the rich aroma arising from the altar fire. She knew of the pleadings of the lost for mercy from those they wronged on earth, and the pitiless refusals they met with from the unforgiving shades. In the dark, mysterious nature of Saronia were deep yearnings to set the unforgiven entombed ones free, that they might move upward on the arc of their ascending life, and go forward until they glistened with a glory of purity.

Frequently there arose within her mind the question, 'Is there a God of perfect goodness? Do I know all? Is there in the great and mighty universe a Central Throne, on which the All Perfect rules? Is there far away in the depths of yon gray-blue a King above all other gods and goddesses? And will He ever reveal Himself to man and teach a rule of life by which we may

ascend to hold communion with Him?'

And as she meditated a joy unspeakable overwhelmed her soul, and tears, joyful tears, trickled down her beautiful face. But no voice or light came to say if other than Diana heard, and the great Temple shone before her in the sunlight. She said:

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'This joy is from my goddess, Queen of Heaven; there is no goddess or god greater than she who speaks to me, and Hecate will control the evil which exists. I must bow before her and worship at her shrine, be co-worker with her, and afterwards she may explain to me those deep mysteries, things which sadden my soul. I shall know later that which to me is now impenetrable, dark, and lonely. O sweet goddess, hear me! O saviour, Queen, Protectress, hear me! O mighty Luminant, I adore thee! Queen of the Lower World, Queen of the Earth, Queen of the Skies, I adore, I worship thee! My being comes from thee, my life is held and led by thee, my future spreads out before thee. The great unfathomable eternity of the hereafter is known to thee. O mighty Lover, guard me! Generous Dispenser, protect me! Great, far-reaching goddess, lead me through the æons, purify my mind from those thoughts which would reach out after some other love! Wrest from my spirit those dark forebodings, those wild clamourings for light, when thou art the light of the ages, the glory of the visible, the multitudinous glory of the invisible, the great centre on which the universe revolves.'

CHAPTER XII

THE FESTIVAL OF ARTEMIS

The day was glorious, and the hearts of the Ephesian people were brimming over with joy, for was not this the first day of the month Artemision? Eager crowds of people read the great inscription, which ran as follows:

'TO THE EPHESIAN DIANA.

'Inasmuch as it is notorious that not only among the people of Ionia, but everywhere among the Greek nations, temples are dedicated to her, on account of her plain manifestations of herself; and that, moreover, in token of the great veneration paid to her, a month is called after her name, by us Artemisiona, by the Macedonians and other Greek nations, Artemision, in which general assemblies and hieromenia are celebrated.

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'Now, inasmuch as these sacred honours are not observed in the holy city, the nurse of its own, the Ephesian goddess; the people of Ephesus deem it proper that the whole month called by her name be sacred and set apart for the goddess; and have determined by this decree that the observation of it by them be improved.

'THEREFORE, IT IS ENACTED that in the whole month Artemision the days be holy, and nothing be attended to in them but the yearly feastings, the Artemisial panegyrics and the hieromenia, the entire month being sacred to the goddess; for, from this improvement in her worship, her cities shall receive additional lustre and be permanent in their prosperity for ever.'

Little crowds coming up from Smyrna and Thyatira, Sardis and Laodicea, from Militus on the coast and Samos on the sea, gathered around and read this proclamation. The people of Ephesus felt themselves honoured by their city being the Temple-home of the great goddess, and all gave themselves up to rejoicing. And the day wore on.

From the great theatre, all the way through the city gate to the finest, largest, and richest Temple ever reared, thousands of people in holiday attire awaited with ardent desire for the great procession which was heralded as it left the Temple.

And now it moves in all its magnificence and music, and symbols of the ceremonies. First came choirs of the most beautiful youths and lovely maidens clothed in white robes, singing responsively the praises of their protecting deity. The procession moved along regularly. Some carried the holy utensils, others torches, others, again, baskets of flowers which were strewn in the way. Perfumes were scattered amongst the people until the air was redolent with sweet odours. Next followed the horses, hounds, and hunting accoutrements, as well for attack as defence; after this came a train of virgins led by a lovely girl dressed in a purple robe. The skin of a fawn girded it round, on which hung a quiver and arrows. She symbolized Diana the Huntress, and was followed by her faithful hounds.

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Then came choirs of youths and maidens singing the sacred chants, one choir answering the other, and then unitedly sending forth a peal in unison.

After them a multitude of Ephesian children. Then, with flying feet and swinging, voluptuous forms, the dancing-girls of Ionia.

Now rose on the perfumed air the sound of instruments, from the sweet, low tones of the flute and golden notes of the magadis, to the resounding clang of the cymbals and the beat of the timbrels, playing the 'March of Hell.' Whoever has heard such notes may never forget them—

music set to the shrieks of the lost in Tartarus—the wild imploring of the forsaken pleading for forgiveness, as the songs from the dwellers in the Elysian fields break on their sinking souls like a ray of golden hope, too soon to be drowned by the cries of the Furies.

And thus did the Ephesians play the 'March of the Goddess Hecate,' and the sound of the queenly tread of the Infernal Goddess seemed to follow the ranks of her devotees, ranks of priests and priestesses dressed in black raiment bestud with stars of gold, a crescent moon on every brow. They held their hands towards the earth. Now came banners waving in the air, and standards of silver and gold bestud with precious stones. The Temple way blazed out with gorgeous colouring and glittering sheen.

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Then rose to view the golden statue of the goddess, with many symbols of earth and sky and sea, supported by bars of gold and borne on the shoulders of stalwart men, all priests of the Temple, followed by a train of virgin priestesses with heads erect, wearing fillets of gold and myrtle-blossoms, each carrying the insignia of her office. These were followed by priests and choirs of singers, and others carrying smaller images of the goddess and silver shrines set with diamonds and emeralds. A company of lovely girls played music like the Dawn of Love.

Men of culture, men of noble rank, followed: all were greeted with loud acclaim. Then came again the tones of tibia, cithara, and many-sounding instruments playing the music of Diana, no fierce trumpetings, but sweetest melody, soft, peaceful, and joyful. In the rhythm were the fall of dew, the swing of the sickle, the song of the reapers, the lowing of cattle and laughter of children at play, and the mother's murmur of love as she hushed her babe to rest.

The vast procession moved onward with songs and hymns innumerable, and music and melody mingled in harmony to the Queen of Nature, Queen of Hades, Queen of Heaven, telling the story of her many attributes.

The vast pageant had gone—gone by the way of the great theatre, around Mount Pion and the Stadium to the Sacred Grove and the Temple.

Two men remained behind; they were strangers to each other.

One was Chios, the other a man short in stature, roughly clad, with eyes full of fire and possessed of great intelligence. He neither knelt nor applauded whilst the procession passed, but stood a stern spectator. One could see at a glance he was not a worshipper of the mighty Diana. Possessed of a firm, steadfast, thoughtful look, it stamped him as a character of no mean order. Who could he be? And why there at such a time, neither accepting nor opposing the worship of the city goddess?

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He was one of the chief of the sect who followed the Christ of Nazareth, and had come to Ephesus to war against the Old with a New Creed.

Seeing him alone, and apparently poor, Chios, with that kindness ever characteristic of him, drew nigh, saying:

'Hail, fellow voyager! How didst thou like the mighty gathering of all that is power, truth, and loveliness in Ephesus?'

Then replied he:

'The kingly power and loveliness passed by in yonder show, but the truth was not there.'

'How sayest thou this, friend? Art thou not a worshipper of our great goddess Diana?'

'No.'

'What, then, dost thou worship?'

'I worship God.'

'And canst thou not worship God and adore her?'

'No.'

'Why?'

'Because God is a spirit and demands spiritual worship. He is a jealous God, and will have no other gods before Him.'

'Now, pray tell me,' said Chios, 'why of necessity should we worship your Deity? In what particular does He differ from Diana? She also is a great spirit. Why multiply gods and worship another?'

'Listen, young man. There is but one eternal past and future, and one Eternal God only can reign. There is no division of eternal power; so infinite is He, the universe is but a point compared to Him. He dwells above, below, beyond it. No man can follow His presence into the unfathomable abyss, no princely spirit could wing its way to find Him out. Ye worship ye know not what. You have set up the symbols of nature and named it deity. There is no God behind those symbols to answer when you call. You answer yourselves—believe a lie; custom gilds it as a truth.'

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'Thou speakest strongly, good man. Dost thou bring proof of thy teachings?'

'My proof is within me: communion with the Spirit of my God. He speaks to me, believe it who may; it is sufficient for me.'

'But what if thou hast lulled thyself into a sweet calm, a calm born of content, worshipping a spiritual ideal? May it not be thus?'

'No.'

'How shall I know that what thou sayest is true?'

'By worshipping my God.'

'And what will follow?'

'The same conscious calm and communion, and thou shalt be the judge.'

'Tell me more of Him. Does He work by love or command?'

'Both. Those who serve Him find His commands encircled with love. He commands as a father for the good of his children. He is our Father, created our being; as when He said, "Let there be light," and the light flashed through the darkness.'

'What is the name of thy sect?'

'Christian.'

'Ah well, I have heard much of them, and desire to hear of their creed. Now I remember—yes, I remember the Father. Is there not wrapped up in the mysteries some teaching respecting a Son?'

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'Yes, that is true—the Christ. He was slain by Pilate of Judea. Hast thou not heard of it?'

'Yes, I have heard as thou sayest; but I must confess I know little or nothing of the mysteries which surround thy faith.'

'Wouldst thou know?'

'I would.'

'Then thou shalt; but not now. This is not a place to expound the hidden things of God; moreover, if seen with me, evil may befall thee. Go now thy way. Let my prayers go with thee. We shall meet again. I will send for thee.'

'Thou mayest not find me.'

'I shall, fear not. I am not a magician, but my spirit is in sympathy with thine; we cannot travel far asunder without thou break the bond of union.'

'Dost understand Ephesian magic?'

'Yea, I understand, but practise not. Ere long it shall be shaken to its very roots.'

'Thou speakest as one with authority.'

'I do. Go in peace, and forget not the aged man who promises to reveal the truth to thee. Farewell!'

And as the stranger moved slowly away with downcast head and thoughtful mien, Chios felt as if a thick darkness surrounded him. Even Saronia faded from his mind before the burning words of that man. Chios perceived that the new teacher possessed immense spiritual and intellectual power, and felt his own weakness. He knew the sayings he had heard were but the outriders of a mighty army; that, in fact, this man had treated him as if he were a child. Who could he be? And whence came the great storehouse of wisdom which lay behind that impressive brow? From whence came the influence with which he spoke? His voice was low, but every word struck home and flashed forth strong conviction. Was he a god in disguise? Was he one of the gods come down to witness the festivities of the great goddess Diana?

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'No, no; I believe not those vain imaginings. I will wait and wish for the time to meet again this great spirit. I will sit at his feet and learn, and perchance receive light and perhaps rest. Certainly I require it. Creed of my own I have not, or believe not what I have. Saronia's love can never be mine. Truth and love I must obtain. Truth this man offers me, and a promise of love from the God of Love. If thus it comes to pass, I will live well and move onward to the great Dream City, and stand upon the diamond floorway which leads to the altar steps of the Father God.'

By this time the great procession had moved around the south of Mount Pion, and was returning towards the Temple by way of the Serapion.

Slowly it went with majestic tread, passing by the harbour, and sailors on the ships bowed down in lowly adoration.

CHAPTER XIII

CHIOS THE GREEK

Day after day passed in festive manner until half the Month of Joy had sped, still Chios had not heard from the wise man. Where was he? Had he forgotten his promise? Was it all a dream? or was it, as he thought, a visitation from heaven, one of the gods on earth? Neither. He was confident he had met a human being, a man more powerful than any he had ever met before. There was but one other spirit like him, and that one dwelt in the form of a woman, and her name was Saronia. [Pg 61]

To Chios both spirits appeared of the highest order, showing different phases, both giants in their faiths; one he loved, the other he somewhat feared, for he knew not what that strange man would tell to him, and Chios was like a ship on the stormy seas, tossed to and fro without sail or rudder to guide him. So he said, 'I will go to the Temple; there is worship at this hour.' As he moved slowly onwards Saronia passed him. Their eyes met, but she dared not speak.

The Greek felt all the old love revive the moment he beheld the beautiful girl. Moreover, he thought he read on her face the blush of a hidden love. What should he do? To go now to the Temple where she had entered would be useless, for his thoughts, his mind, his whole soul had gone out again to her, and he could worship no other deity, even were damnation the penalty. He would return to his studio, to his work on his great picture—the picture of his love, of the one being who haunted his life, of Saronia as High Priestess of Diana.

Oh, if he could speak to her; could draw near and drink deeply of those mysterious eyes! Even that might pacify him. How could it be done? He had influence in the city; he would use it. Could he not obtain entrance to the Sacred Grove?—for there he knew she nightly went to pay her vows on the altar of the Infernal Goddess. Yes, his mind was fully made up. He would find the hour she frequented the place, would hazard his life to speak with her, and if but one sentence came from those lips he would be satisfied, even if those words were the curse of Hecate.

On the way to the studio, and just as he was about to enter the gateway, he saw a woman leaning against a pillar. She addressed him, asking for alms. He replied: [Pg 62]

'What dost thou here, woman? Why not take part in this day of joy?'

She said:

'My heart cannot feel joy. It is dead; it is incapable of throbbing to the pleasure of the world or the joy of religion.'

'Why?'

'Because I am an outcast; my sins are so great that I dare not pray. I am past feeling, and would die.'

'Art thou in such a state?'

'Yea, and worse: I am let alone by the gods and man.'

'Thou art, then, a wandering star?'

'Yes, thou sayest truly, for I shall soon shoot into the darkness of the unknown and be for ever lost.'

'Hast thou no occupation?'

'None.'

'Canst thou do anything to earn an honest livelihood?'

'I am skilled in magic, having learnt it in my youth; but the art is so common in Ephesus that my gains are very small.'

'Come, now, canst thou read my fate for a piece of gold?'

'I know thee.'

'Who am I?'

'He whom they call Chios the Greek, the Ephesian artist, and——'

'Go on, woman, do not fear!'

'The lover of Saronia.'

'Thou art mad.'

'No. Would that I had been born such!'

'How dost thou know my name?'

'Know thy name! I inquired for it after thou didst take away the slave girl Saronia, when she leant against the pillar outside the great theatre, waiting the bidding of her haughty mistress Nika. My [Pg 63]

curse rest on Nika!

'Silence! Curse her not.'

'Say on, Chios: what dost thou want of me?'

'Nothing.'

'Then pass thy way and leave me as thou didst find me, unless thou, too, would whip me like a cur for resting against thy piece of marble.'

'Nay, woman; I will not go until I help thee. Here is a golden piece—another and another. Take them all; I have more. Go thou and get food, and hope on. Thou art earth's side of the great threshold, and may yet do well with the remnant of thy life.'

'No, no; I know the faith. Thou art wrong. The cursed of Hecate are doomed!'

'Listen, woman! Thou knowest Saronia?'

'Ah! ah! Thou canst not leave that name. I knew I was right. Thou lovest her?'

'Silence, I tell thee again! Thou art more profane than I imagined. Think you I am perilous enough to venture the curse of hell by daring to love a priestess of Hecate?'

'Yes. Thou art of the mould to dare anything for love. Not only to risk the curse of hell, but to wear it as thou wearest that ribbon around thy neck, the ribbon which suspends the silver shrine Saronia placed upon thy breast when thou didst slumber as the dead.'

'Witch as thou art, how dost thou know of this?'

'Magic does not aid me in this case. I saw her do it.'

'Saw Saronia—do—it?'

'Yes, I saw her.'

'Thou liest; it is thy dreadful sorcery!'

'Nay, nay, not so. I saw her enter thy gateway to escape a band of drunken ruffians. I stood by this very pillar where I often stand. I knew Saronia, and followed to protect, if needs be, and hid behind the myrtle-trees until she entered. Then I gazed within, saw her bend over thy sleeping form and put her sweet face close to thine, saw her take the trinket from her bosom, kiss it, and place it on thy breast. Then again did she stoop over, and drank in one long draught of thy breath—thy life, as if to mingle soul with soul.'

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'Hast thou spoken of this to any other?'

'No.'

'Darest thou?'

'I will not.'

'And why so true?'

'Because if ever the fire is lit again within this wreck it will be she who will kindle the first spark.'

'How thinkest thou so?'

'It was I who befriended her, pointing the way when she fled from the house of Venusta. Besides, I met her before that, near the great theatre; there I read her fate, and told her her star was rising full of splendour. Besides, I love her as much as I can, and have begged of her to think of this poor hag when she cometh into great power—and she shall! Yes, she shall rise higher and higher, for the great spirit of the goddess leads her. Hear what Endora says: "Saronia's star is still in the ascendant. She has been priestess of spirits before this earth-life, and she shall rise to be queen of the priestesses here—first amongst women who serve the great goddess at the shrine of Artemis."'

'Art thou sure?'

'I know it.'

'By what?'

'By my power, which never fails. Would Chios know further?'

'No; but, stay, dost thou think Saronia is past loving other than the goddess?'

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'I tell thee she loves Chios, and thou knowest it as well as I. She cannot rend the chain which binds ye twain together. The position is perilous in the extreme. Thou knowest she is bound to chastity, and wouldst thou try to break her sacred vows?'

'No; Heaven stay the thought! This I swear; but—can I trust thee?'

'Yes, Chios, thou art safe. Thy spirit comes towards me, but it cannot blend with mine, and for want of this thou mayest mistrust the need of perfect sympathy. But thou art good; I am dark and

foul as Tartarus! Evil and good cannot make one unbroken circle of harmony. Nevertheless, trust me, Chios—trust me.'

'Very well, I will. At what hour does Saronia visit the Sacred Grove of Hecate to offer sacrifice?'

'This very night at midnight.'

'Are there means of access to that grove?'

'Yes, for those who dare, but few would.'

'Which is the way?'

'Go thou to the wood outside the Temple, pass a furlong to the north; there is a low wall which thou canst easily vault. Once within the sacred enclosure, push on westward another furlong, and thou wilt see the Hecatesium, the little temple shaded with gigantic pines and cypress-trees. Yellow iris stud the ground, and crimson and white oleander grow between. Heed not the mighty thunderings proceeding from the temple, or the livid, glare-like lightning's flash springing forth between the pillars of the portico—on swiftly by it, lest thy heart faileth and thou diest. Having passed this temple, take the winding road at its rear. This will bring thee to where three roads meet, and there thou wilt see, by the light of the waning moon and the flickering stars, an altar, and, rising above it, the three-figured statue of the Triple Goddess. She, as Hecate, holding in her hands the keys of hell and of death, facing the pit in which the altar is reared for to-night's incantations and sacrifice. Secrete thyself before midnight behind the base of one of the tall trees. Thou wilt not have long to wait ere the light of a torch will stream upon the dark green foliage and a woman's form will appear, and, later, as she approaches, dark tresses waving in the breeze, and, if light enough, two eyes like stars of night, o'ershadowed by eyebrows like cloudlets of gloom. Those are the eyes of Saronia, the priestess of Hecate. Darest thou to be there and speak to her? I think not. Weigh well thy intentions, Chios, before setting out on such an awful journey. Let me entreat thee, good man; let me beg of thee—forswear this enterprise!'

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'Farewell, Endora—that is thy name, is it not?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Farewell, Endora—farewell. Keep the secret, as thou hast said.'

'I will, and perchance some power may save thee from the vengeance of earth and hell.'

CHAPTER XIV

THE GROVE OF HECATE

The evening sun had set behind great frowning clouds of crimson and gray; dark masses like funeral steeds moved slowly through the sky. The night came, dark and dreary; a sable mantle of clouds hung from east to west like a wall of gloom, and when from noon ten hours had sped Chios went forth, following the highway to the Temple. He was clad in a mantle of azure blue, shrouded from head to foot; his most intimate friends would have passed without knowing him. The Temple was at his right hand, and he had gained the outskirts of the great forest of pine-trees. He saw the river Cayster winding towards the sea like a river of death.

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He entered the grove; the tall trees shook their mighty foliage, warning him in accents deep as the voice of judgment. What did he care? Forward he went. If all the trees of that wood had voices loud as the thunderings of the gods and spoke to him, he would not stay one step towards the goal.

No, as he penetrated further his courage grew stronger and his mind firmer. At last, through the darkness, he saw the wall which surrounded the Sacred Grove. For a moment he stood still, but to think of the commands of Endora. Then, with a bound, he was over, and stood on ground unlawful for him to tread; but what cared he? On he moved carefully, for fear the rustling shrubs might betray him, until he saw the looming of the Temple of Hecate. He heard weird sounds issuing forth, and fierce fires seemed to burn within the sacred shrine of the Infernal Goddess. Ever and anon from between the pillars of the portico, guarding it like a flaming sword, there flashed forth bars of light, and mighty thunderings came bellowing from that most dreadful fane, followed by shrieks like the cries of drowning men when they founder with their barque. All was as Endora had said. But Chios heeded nothing. Such he expected, and was prepared to meet them as a man who had determined to hazard all; and, passing stealthily by the marble pile, he gained the footpath at the rear, and followed on; gained the site where stood the trench and its awful altar of the goddess. Then, for the first time, he freely drew breath, and sat down at the foot of the statue of Diana Triformis. Presently he hid behind a wide-spreading tree, and waited for Saronia.

Several forms like men or women or demons passed by towards the Temple; he heard their mutterings, but saw not their faces. The time hung heavily on his hands. 'Twas still half an hour to midnight, and the waning moon was hid—not a star shone forth to comfort him. The wild beasts of the grove howled from their distant lair.

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Then came a convulsion in the heavens—the gathering storm-clouds spoke to each other and exchanged lightning glances until the sky was a sea of fire. Great clouds whirled up from the west, and others bore down from the east, and they mingled around the moon in one great aerial war until the heavens were rent asunder, and the east wind gained the mastery, sweeping the surging war-clouds away to the western sky in the dark-blue depths. The waning moon shone out with sickly hue, and the diamond stars sprung forth, and soft clouds moving onwards like dark-stoled virgin priestesses bowed to the Queen of Heaven.

Chios starts; he shrinks; he sees the glare of torches coming down the Sacred Way; he counts them as they wildly dance upon the midnight air—one, two—five—eight. He is undone! She cometh not alone! Towards him sweeps the fiery line until within a hundred paces it stops, and forms a circle, seven around, with one uplifted torch within the sacred zone. The circle breaks and forms two lines and the centre figure passes between, moving onward to the altar. The others in serpent form move sinuously back to the Temple of Hecate.

The solitary figure, the haughty torch-bearer, draws nearer, until Chios sees by the lurid glare the dark masses of hair floating on the wind, and fancies he sees the mysterious eyes beneath the marble brow. He could not mistake her—he knew her too well. It was Saronia, the priestess, arrayed in her priestly robes.

She was standing by the statue of the great goddess with head thrown back. The flame of the torch like a serpent of fire coiled and uncoiled like a living thing, and lit up the band of gold which circled her head, and shone on her mantle of sable hue. [Pg 69]

Then, stretching out her hands towards the earth, she addressed the goddess:

'Hail, Hecate!
Hail, Diana!
Luna, Hail!
Goddess of Heaven, the Earth, and the Underworld.
Thou rollest the heavens around the steady pole.
Thou illuminest the sun.
Thou governest the world.
Thou treadest on the dark realms of Tartarus.
The stars move responsive to thy command.
The gods rejoice in thy divinity.
The hours and the seasons return by thy appointment,
And the elements reverence thy decree.
Hear me, O Moon!
Hear me, great Saviour!
Listen, dread Hecate!
A black lamb I bring thee.'

Then, seizing the lamb, she raised it to the altar and slew it, and the red blood danced o'er the marble shrine. And taking a golden vase filled with baneful oblation, she poured it over the victim, at the same time swinging the torch to and fro above her head, chanting:

'Come forth, thou moon, with propitious light.
Cold, silent goddess! at this witching hour
To thee I'll chant.

Hail, Hecate! prodigious demon, hail!
Come at the last, and make the work prevail,
That the strong brewage may perform its part,
No worse than that was made by Circe's art,
By bold Medea, terrible as fair,
Or Perimedeia of the golden hair.'

Then the earth shook, and spiral columns of vapour rose around the altar, and from each column came a spectre of fire and stood with outstretched hands. [Pg 70]

The priestess placed the resinous wood around the sacrifice, and applying her torch, the altar was crowned with flame, and the spirits drew nigh and drank up the odour, dancing in wild fury around the pyre.

Then spoke Saronia:

'Ye wandering spirits, ye starving, lonely shades destined to require the sustenance ye seldom receive, take this oblation, drink ye in the nurture as it arises, take it from the great queen goddess through the hands of her priestess;' and the spirits chanted:

'Hail, Saronia!
Hail, Saronia!
Princess born
And mighty priestess!
Hail, thou minister of Tartarus!
Feeder of the gods-forsaken ones!

Blessings ever be upon thee,
Blessings such as we can give,
Thin and faint as misty vapour,
Tinged with hell and cold damnation;
Yet we bless thee as we may,
For love a spark remains within us,
And we wait for our redemption,
Working out our fearful destiny,
Till those we injured grant release,
And the Mighty All Creative
Pass us to the fields Elysian.'

They disappeared, and Saronia, the fearful priestess, was alone. Shielding her eyes that she might not look again upon the sacrifice, she turned to move away.

She had passed but a few steps from the altar when Chios came forth from his hiding-place and followed her. She heard his steps, and fearing to look around lest her sacrifice should be incomplete, kept on her way to the Temple of Hecate.

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Chios was soon by her side. She gazed for a moment on his face, and fell to the ground as dead.

He raised her carefully, bore her to the foot of a great laurel-tree, and taking his cloak, placed her on it, and bent over her in agony.

'O fool, what hast thou done? Thou hast slain her! O cursed hour! Shades of night, seize me, take me to your Hades, torture me, but, holy heavens, restore Saronia! O cruel fate! Most cruel destiny! What cause is there for this?'

The talisman! the shrine he wore! the gift! He had heard of its wondrous power. He tore it from his neck, and placed it on her chilly brow.

Her eyes opened, and she essayed to rise.

Chios moved to help her; but, no, she sprang to her feet, and stepping back from him, looked like a tigress at bay. For a moment words would not flow at her command, but her eyes burnt into his very soul, and still she spoke not.

He wished a thousandfold he had never dared to confront her in such a dreadful place and against such fearful odds. He knew he was observed by troops of invisible beings thirsting for vengeance, and that one word of hers would loose them, those hounds of hell, in all their fury. He feared them not. 'Twas the scathing, burning eyes of the priestess which withered him—so changed from love to hate.

All those thoughts passed through his mind with the force of a whirlwind. He felt he had penetrated like a robber within the magic circle of her power, taking mean advantage of her secret life, betraying all confidence. What was to be done? He would not pass like a dream—a horrid dream—to her; that would end all. No, he must finish his work, whatever might follow. He would speak to her.

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'Saronia, forgive me; I am mad. I know not what unknown power compels me to this wicked act. I could not stay from thee. As the stars vibrate to each other, so my soul to thine. Speak, Saronia! I have dared death to see thee, to speak to thee. Answer me, Saronia! Let me hear thy dear, sweet voice, even if it be a curse thou utterest.'

She stood forth again in all her majesty; her great spirit had gained supremacy; her eyes shone forth like diamonds wet with dew, and she said:

'What evil fate brings thee here? Death awaits both if mortal eye beholds us. For thy many acts of kindness I overlook thy madness. Thou knowest the way, return quickly, and never intrude thyself again. One word: thou hast been spectator of the rites and mysteries, hast seen my power. Understand, I could raise armies, if needs be, to destroy thee—could blast thee like a tree whose life has passed, by one fell stroke of lightning. Now away, no more!'

'Saronia! Saronia! Bear with me but for one brief moment! Hear my story, then I go.'

'Why should I? Thou knowest full well I am dedicated to my faith, to my goddess. Why tempt me to evil?'

'Saronia, I have striven hard to avoid this, and before to-night have succeeded. I could no longer bear this worse than death, and have sought thee here to tell thee I love thee, have ever loved thee, even when thou wert a slave. I have thrown aside the glamour of the world for one sweet word from thee.'

'How can I help thy love?'

'Thou canst return it by one sweet smile of pity—pity is the twin sister of love.'

'I will give thee no encouragement. I swear by the hosts above, around, and beneath that I repel

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Chios the lover, and make it known clearly to thee I stand pure and unsullied before the goddess I have just evoked. Shame on thee! Thou wouldst shake the strong foundation on which my spirit rests. Away, I say again, for fear she whom I serve may compel me to curse thee! Go!

'Before I say farewell, perchance for ever, is this thy shrine, this trinket thine?'

'Yes. I sought shelter, not knowing whither. Two statues standing near the doorway caught my gaze, and through the open door I beheld thy prostrate form. Thinking death or sickness visited Chios, I entered, remembering thy goodness. Thou wert asleep and sighing forth my name. I foolishly placed that little token on thy breast, and the Fates have worked it well so far as it is concerned, for by its power thou hast brought back my life—not that my death would have been of great moment, but thy crime would have been magnified and thy suffering intense. Little did I think such small pretext as a simple act of gratitude from me would have brought thee here. Now I have told thee all. Go, for thy life!'

'No, I will stay. My determination is strengthening, my mission is pure; no harm can come to thee. I think not of myself. Listen! There will come a time when thou wilt be free from this thralldom of priestcraft, when that spirit of thine will live on in the Elysian. I will live well and ever love thee, and this is my story to-night. I will love thee as lasting as the sun, wait on for thy emancipation, and meet thee in the spirit-world. When each shall have performed its earth-life, then thy spirit shall be united to mine through the depths of an everlasting life. Wilt thou betroth thyself to me in this wise? No harm can come of this spirit love, and it cannot fail to bless. Saronia of the great unfathomable soul, looking out of those eyes so full of mystic meaning, can this be so? Bind thyself to me! Be mine when death shall sever the silver chain! This is all I ask. I know thou lovest me; those silent tears betray thee, and thy eyes speak love—love filtering through the mystic faith, love that is stronger than death. Speak, Saronia! Dost thou hear me?'

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'I do. I hear all.'

'Wilt thou wed me for the next life?'

'What shall I do, Chios? Thou hast discovered my hidden love. I cannot lie. I will meet thee in the great hereafter. I am thine, when my mission here be accomplished—thine through all eternity!'

'Shall I plant a kiss upon thy brow, Saronia, sealing our vows?'

'Dost thou not fear this awful thing?'

'No. I care not for death now. If I go, I will wait for thee and for love; thou wilt not long survive. Methinks our spirits have already been one. If I fall, thou wilt not remain long away. Death will hasten our union.'

Then, taking her head between his hands, he kissed her, and kissed the silver shrine, and moved out into the gloom.

The night passed, the day came forth in rosy splendour, such a day as is only experienced in the beautiful Ionian land.

The air was balmy and perfume laden, the winds scarcely stirred the trembling leaves, the birds sang with joyous notes—all Nature smiled.

Chios passed through the myrtle garden to his studio, but the brush was powerless in his hand. Last night's adventure was uppermost in his thoughts, as well it might be. It was in his sober moments when judgment reigned, and love lay calmly on his soul, that he became fully aware of what he had done. He leant against a pillar, and reflected upon his position. He had entered into the fight, he had broken the ranks. He was a mariner who must weather the gale on the deck of his craft. There was no escape for him, neither did he desire one.

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He, like a master mind, surveyed his position. He had pledged his love to one who could never return it on earth. He would walk alone until his release. Joy in anticipation of their reunion was sufficient for him. True, he felt there was a great disparity in their relative positions—she a mighty priestess, he a sceptic of her faith. But what of that? He believed in Saronia, and she believed in him. Let the faiths go to the winds! If he found not a new god that he might worship—well, then he would make Saronia the goddess of his soul, and worship her with a love that would raise the jealousy of the gods. But if he found the great Spirit who demanded his love and service, then such should have his supreme adoration. But no god or goddess spoke to him. Therefore he knew no being superior to Saronia. She was his life; fearful as she was in her mighty incantations, he feared her not. Her mysteries he heeded not, the magic of her being satisfied his craving for union with that which completed the circle of his existence. He had found it in this lovely girl, and he measured this subtle, endless affinity against that which the world calls love, where men take wives for a fragment of time and think not, care not, whether that love continues in the great hereafter, and content themselves with the thought that they may be free when born anew from the womb of death. His love was a sacred love, a pure and perfect one, and he was happy amidst all the mazes of the circumstances by which he had made it known to Saronia.

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CHAPTER XV

AT VENUSTA'S HOUSE

Day after day passed, and the friends of Chios were wont to note his thoughtfulness. It did not amount to moroseness; he was preoccupied, and his mind abstracted.

It was while he was in one of his deepest moods that Varro called, accosting the Greek in a pleasant way:

'How fares the world with thee, noble artist? Thou art in one of thy best humours—or art thou sad?'

'Neither,' replied he.

'Ah! I know: thou art grieving after Nika.'

'Nika?'

'Yes, Nika. Thou surely must have heard I wooed and won her?'

'Indeed, I have not; but I congratulate thee, my lucky fellow.'

'That is from thy heart and true, Chios?'

'It is.'

'Then we may be the fastest friends.'

'And what say Lucius and Venusta?'

'Delighted.'

'Good, very good!'

'And—yet another bit of news for you, Chios, for it seems thou art not a fruitful newsmonger.'

'What is it?'

'The sudden death of the High Priestess of Artemis.'

'Is it so?' and a deathly pallor spread over the face of Chios.

'Art thou ill?'

'No.'

'But I have not finished.'

'What more—not of gloom, I hope?'

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'No; a sudden freak of fortune, if rumour speaks correctly.'

'Speak out.'

'Well, just this: it is commonly reported that the dark-eyed slave of Venusta will be elected to fill the place of the Arch-Priestess.'

'What! Saronia?'

'Yes, Saronia. Thou art her friend. True, her time as priestess has been very brief, but for that strange being it seems mortals suspend their laws just like the gods did theirs for the Hebrew, when the sun stood still that he might slay. Look at her! Just awhile since a slave. One fine day she took it into her head to run for sanctuary to the Temple, and got there—was received—commenced her studies. From this, in a most unprecedented way, bounded into the priesthood, and already, I am told, she stands out with fearful power and wonderful knowledge, inasmuch as the priestesses longest in the service stand back in awe and say: "She is the fittest to serve in chief the goddess, and command her servants." A High Priestess she will be, mark my words. There is a great destiny before that girl. I hear of her power from Nika. Somehow, she closely follows the course of Saronia, and speaks of her with dread. Why, I know not. Now, Chios, what thinkest thou of all this?'

'I think it passing strange. 'Tis like a dream. This is her destiny. She is no ordinary being. Her spirit towers above its fellows, and must command—I will call at Venusta's at sundown. Perhaps we may hear more on this subject.'

'Do so, Chios, and I will meet thee. What art thou painting?'

'But little.'

'Ah, cunning dog! I saw thee turn thy picture quickly away as I entered, and, swiftly as thou didst it, I had time to catch a glimpse of a girl as High Priestess offering sacrifice to Hecate. Am I right?'

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'Thou speakest knowingly, good Varro.'

'Chios, I am not wide of the mark, and shall I say the face was that of Saronia? Art thou a seer, Chios? After all, then, my news was not news to thee? Thou art a sly fellow!'

'No, I am not a seer.'

'Well, then, we will call thee painter; but one thing is certain, thou hast studied her closely, to remember her features so well. Thou hast a keen appreciation of the beautiful, and an excellent knowledge of the future, to paint Saronia as High Priestess. Farewell, Chios; I am off. We meet to-night, and may the gods be propitious!'

That evening Chios visited Venusta's home, the house of his friend. The Roman was there. Lucius had sailed o'er sunny seas to Britain. Nika seemed happy, and laughed with joyous glee as if she had never one day of sorrow.

Venusta was delighted to behold Chios, and said:

'Why hast thou kept so long from us? We thought thou wouldst never return, and long since looked up our stray sayings to find if perchance we might have unwittingly offended thee. But naught could we find whereby we could pronounce ourselves guilty, so concluded thou hadst found some pretty maid during the Artemision month, and wert busy preparing for thy nuptials. Is it so, Chios?'

'No.'

'Now, do not vex! Art grown thin-skinned, and cannot take this saying of mine as a joke?'

'Nay,' replied he, 'I am emphatic because I mean it. So many falsehoods are told by lovers that if I were not in earnest thou wouldst perhaps doubt my answer.'

'Ah! Thou hast not yet seen the ideal set up within thee. Never mind; persevere, Chios, and she may come to thee sooner than expected. Then we will take the laughing side, and thou must bear with all our points of wit. We will deal leniently; will not let an arrow fly when thy counterpart is near. No, we will be demure, as if we never spoke to thee of such a childish thing as love. Let us change the subject, Chios. Thou hast heard my dearest has left his home once more to visit foreign lands?'

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'Yes, I heard. Lucius could not leave Ephesus without the poorest Ionian youth knowing it. He belongs to the people; they watch his coming home and leaving. I should have come to say farewell, but at the time I was prostrated by a touch of Ephesian fever. Not serious, but just enough, as Lucius would say, to make me haul on shore.'

'Yes, those beautiful savages have again rebelled against the Roman State, and the Emperor summoned Lucius with his fleet to the mouth of the Tiber to ship reinforcements for those distant parts. By this time he is well on his journey.'

'How long will he remain?'

'That is quite uncertain. I understand, after disembarking the soldiers, he will sail round the northern shores of the great island, and if the winds fail him the rowers will have a dreadful time, for by accounts the waters there are sluggish and leaden, inasmuch that strong winds driving on the shore make faint impressions on the lifeless seas. The gods speed him, and may he soon return. I have instructed him to bring a British girl for slave for Nika; and I truly hope, if he bring such, she may not be like that dark, mysterious one we owned, by name Saronia. She nearly frightened Nika out of her senses—did she not, girl?'

Nika was silent, and a gloom spread over her face like a funeral pall, and the joy of her life grew faint and low.

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'I have been speaking of Saronia to Chios,' said Varro.

'And what thinkest thou of her, Chios?'

'Why should I say?' replied he.

'Speak on; we know thou wilt favour her.'

'What, then, do you wish me to say? I cannot speak as if I were delivering an oration on Saronia.'

'To be plain, then,' said Venusta, 'dost thou think it meet that this slave-girl should fill the throne of the High Priestess of Diana?'

'Yes, I do.'

'By what right or reason? Say on.'

'By being the fittest, if those who know her best speak the truth.'

'Oh, Chios, why are you so fascinated by this snake-like creature?'

'I am not fascinated, most noble Venusta. I speak as reason prompts me. If my reason is awry, then call me mad.'

'No, no; thou art not mad. If any man in Ionia has a well-balanced and healthy mind, it is thou; but, nevertheless, although I alter the picture on my mind of an innocent bird drawn on to

destruction by the piercing eye of a snake, yet the conditions are the same within me, and I must say I cannot for my life understand why such a sensible man can be led by the charming of such a wicked girl.'

'She is not wicked; she is pure, and worthy of great consideration. All Ephesus speaks of her goodness.'

'But dost thou not know her spirit is so deeply imbued with the mysteries of her worship that it is said she with impunity treads the dark realms of Tartarus? Wherein, then, lies all her boasted goodness?'

'It may be so; but I warrant this, madam, if Saronia moves into those mysteries, and mixes with the spirits imprisoned, it is to minister to their wants, and not to add a pang to their unutterable woe.'

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'Thou art incorrigible; and it is useless, I perceive, to talk to thee on this matter. Thou wilt awaken one day from this cloudy dream and see her in all her horror. Dost thou not fear her?'

'No; none need fear the good; it is the evil which haunts us.'

'Oh, mother,' cried Nika, 'do change this most uninteresting subject! Saronia is no longer under our control, and we may not speak of her in this manner without fear. She serves the goddess; let her be. Should fate call her to wear the diamond crown, what is that to thee? What is that to me?'

'So, so, pretty girl! Art thou taking to thyself the right to lecture me? Thou, above all, hast had more than enough of this foul serpent's venom thrust on thee; and I tell you all, if I have influence it shall be directed to drag her from the proud position to which her ambitious spirit soars, and I am certain Varro will aid me when I say Nika nearly paid with her life for the fright Saronia gave her. A wicked, designing enemy is she.'

'Gracious lady,' replied the Roman, 'I fear I cannot move in matters of religion. I should bring down a swarm of bees about my ears and odium on the power of Rome;' and he looked sideways with a smile towards Chios, but the face of the Greek was like marble—not a muscle moved. Then Varro continued: 'No, no; let her be. None may break her faith, neither Greek nor Roman; if she be not called by the goddess, then this rumour will float away into nothingness.'

'I suppose thou sayest truly; but one thing I know, were she priestess presiding, Venusta would not enter the Temple—no, not if it were the only pathway to the Elysian.'

'But,' said Chios, 'the Lady Venusta would witness the installation, should such take place, and favour me with her company?'

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'Thanks; but that shall not be. I might cause thee perturbation;' and she smiled rather cynically, or Chios thought so.

Chios was thoughtful, and his gaze was through the open window away over the city towards the grove of Hecate, where the great trees peeped from behind the mountain of Pion.

A dead silence fell on all, which was broken by Nika saying:

'I should so much like thee to paint a picture of myself. Say, wilt thou? And when may I give thee first sitting?'

'When thou comest,' replied Chios, 'I will do my best.'

'Good!' said Venusta; 'thou shalt do it. I am sure it will do thee no harm to look intently on a face like hers. It might perhaps soften thy too sage-like brow; and then—who knows?—thou mightst captivate some lovely girl—eh?—as lovely as Nika. What sayest thou, noble lord of Rome?'

'True,' said he, 'it may be so; but I fear it is a hopeless case. He is a confirmed bachelor.'

'Perhaps not,' said Nika's mother. 'Who can tell? He may now be madly in love. Chios does such strange things. During his absence from us he may have taken a wife, and at any moment herald her forth as the fairest of Ionia. May it be so, noble Greek?'

'No; Samos may be levelled to the ocean bed, but thou wilt never—never see me wed.'

'Thou art dark again, Chios. Move aside, girl,' said Venusta; 'let the sun shine upon him;' but the face of Nika became clouded. She knew her mother's wit was wounding the heart of the only man she really loved.

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CHAPTER XVI

A GARDEN ON CORESSUS

The evening grew old, but the light still lingered in the sky, and Venusta suggested a walk in the garden, seeing her daughter was agitated and careworn.

The soft winds moved the leaves of the silver poplar, the violet-scented air fanned their cheeks,

the convolvuli were closing, and the narcissi nodded good-night; it seemed sacrilege to break in on the perfumed silence. Varro walked with Venusta, and Nika with the Greek. Chios was the first to speak:

'Thou art unhappy to-night, Nika. What ails thee?'

'Nothing. I am happy. The evening air is sweet and pleasant to my soul, and before thou didst speak I saw the first star glisten on the diadem of night—shining out like a Pharos to the mariner; and as he knows by it that land is nigh, so see I that star a beacon on the hills of a far-away haven which perchance I may never enter, but be shipwrecked at the last.'

'Poor girl, thou art indeed sad!'

'Yea, sad I am, yet happy in my sadness. Oftentimes I am sad and wretched withal; but to-night, I know not why, I am resigned—feeling as if some great, sad joy spread its wings around me for protection. Oh that I might ever continue so! I fear this is but a prelude to a storm-wind which shall rush over and break me as a hurricane would kill those lovely flowers.'

As she spoke a night-hawk passed with a shriek, and the evening star was hid with a cloud.

'Sawest thou that dreadful bird? Heard'st thou its wail, Chios?'

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'Yea. What of it? It goes to its home on the cliffs of Coressus.'

'No, no! That is not all! It spoke as it flew—shrieked sounds of gloom, which the augurs understand; it means evil!'

'Dost thou believe the augurs, Nika?'

'I do, and the words of the priestess also.'

'Which priestess?'

'Saronia.'

'What of her?'

'Dost thou not know?'

'Thy mother told me something respecting an uttered curse.'

'What if she become High Priestess of Diana?'

'She would deal justly.'

'Thou dost not know how I fear that girl—how I fear her spell. I have tried to drown it, but it will not die. It mounts above the crested ocean of my pleasure, and, like the evil bird just passed, it wheels and shrieks around, and mars the joys that youth and the world give me.'

Just then the notes of a bird singing out its soul came forth from the myrtle-trees.

'Hearest that jubilant song? It compensates the evil omen. Light up, sweet face, with radiant smiles! Answer it back with joyous greeting!'

'No, I cannot. This omen is for Chios. Thou wilt joy. Thy life is tinged with richest colour—mine is shadowed with darkness. Thou art good! I see it all when too late.'

Venusta and Varro were returning, and met Nika and her companion. The Roman playfully remarked:

'Ionian, dost thou mean to steal my love?'

'No! If thou wert jealous, why quicken thy pace and leave us, like wounded birds or disabled ships, to follow in thy wake? Here she is safely brought, and as I have acted sea-pilot; thou shalt be the harbour guide, and take her into port. Do not miss your way, as lovers often do! Come, noble Venusta, let me be thy guide.'

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CHAPTER XVII

THE PICTURE

The day arrived for the election of High Priestess of Diana, and, as was generally expected within the Temple, Saronia was chosen to occupy that exalted position. When the people heard of this they were amazed, for amongst them she was scarcely known, excepting for her kindly manner and beautiful presence. Few, if any, outside the Temple recognised in her any of those superior intellectual attainments which were expected in the person who undertook the highest and most sacred duties of the Temple. Consequent on the election of a comparatively unknown girl, inquiries were numerous, asking who she was and whence she came, springing like a comet out of the gray depths of the sky; and when reply was made that she had been a slave to the wife of Lucius, many marvelled, and said it was the hand of the goddess who raised one of low degree to

sit upon the golden throne; whilst among the noble families of Rome great curiosity was manifested to glean from her former mistress what she was like—what was thought of her; in fact, they wished to know all about the former slave. And thus, in a brief period, Saronia became the most notable person in all Ephesus and throughout Ionia, into Lydia, Caria, Pamphylia and Phrygia, and over the sea to Greece.

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It was during this excitement Nika came to the studio of Chios. It was her first visit. Never did the girl look more beautiful. She greeted the artist with a smile, and sat down upon one of the lovely couches. Casting aside her richly-embroidered cloak, she revealed her snow-white garments clinging in folds around her graceful form. Her hair fell forward on either side, leaving an arched temple smooth as marble, and waved away over her ears till it was caught by an azure ribbon flecked with gold. Then she laughed a merry peal of laughter, and said:

'Art thou glad to see me?'

'I am, Nika. Thou bringest sunshine into the place. It lights up thy face and twinkles like stars in thy beautiful hair. One requires a cheerful sitter to make a good likeness, for, after all, the poor artist has only a few pigments to portray the loveliest of creatures.'

'Now, now, silence, flatterer! To business. How intendest thou to treat the subject which may represent me? Say, wilt thou paint me as Ariadne in Naxos?'

'No; the subject ill befits these joyous times. Ariadne lost her lover; thou hast gained one, and retainest him with chains of brass. I will paint thee as thou reclinest. Keep thou the cheerful mood, and Nika shall see how she looks when she is happy.'

'Must I not rearrange those wandering locks?'

'No; the light dances between the shadows like children at play. Let them remain.'

'Very well, Chios. Thou art an obliging man. I will do my best to remain as steady as Olympus. May I converse?'

'Freely, if thou pleasest.'

After the sitting was completed, she felt that she had never spent a happier day, and said:

'When may I come again?'

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'To-morrow, at the same hour. I will paint thee whilst in such merry mood. Good-bye, Nika; greetings to thy mother.'

The next day, and from time to time, she came to Chios, until the painting was well-nigh finished.

One evil day she came and reclined upon her accustomed couch. Chios was absent. After a while she arose, and moved around the room. Behind a curtain of splendid tapestry, half hid, she saw a picture o'er which was thrown a screen of yellow silk. She would see the painting on the hidden panel; she would lift the veil—see the goddess. What fun she would have with Chios! Perchance 'twas some Ionian beauty or Carian girl who had smitten him suddenly. Should she risk it? Yes—no—perhaps he might come swiftly and be annoyed. So she moved away—stood still for a moment.

'See it I must. If caught, I will laugh away his censure—shine out on him in all my splendour and burn up his reproof.'

So she stepped forward and raised the yellow silk concealing the picture of Saronia as High Priestess of Diana, and as that dark, mysterious face met her gaze, she uttered a piercing shriek, and fell to the ground. Chios heard it, and rushed within. Seeing the curtain disturbed, he took in the whole position, and, darting forward, found Nika lying unconscious. He raised her and laid her on the couch. Her flowing hair had burst its bands and fallen over her shoulders. He tried to rouse her, called her name, and said: 'Chios is here, Nika, awake!' But she lay as one who was dead.

What could be done? Her bosom heaved—she was not dead—she would come to again. He could not leave her for assistance, for if she awoke and found herself alone, she might die. He knelt by her side, and chafed her hands; but it was of no avail. Just then a thought came into his mind. He would paint her as she slumbered in that death-like swoon. He seized his brushes, and quickly wrought a picture—sketchy, but true—and when it was drawn he called it 'Death.' Then came signs of awakening. Tears flowed from the half-opened eyes, and rushes of colour, like the morning sunrise, stole over her cheeks. Then the mists cleared away, and she saw Chios kneeling before her, and, with a wild, convulsive start, she fell upon his neck, crying, 'Save me! save me!'

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And Chios answered:

'Thou art safe. What fearest thou?'

'I fear the face of Saronia. I shall never forget it. It is like when I fell before her as she cursed me.'

'Calm thyself! I tell thee again there is nothing to fear. I am with thee—no harm shall befall.'

'Dost thou not fear her thyself?'

'No.'

'Then—thou lovest her?'

'What madness seizes thee? How can I love a sacred priestess of the holy Temple?'

'A woman is quick to read a man. Whether thou knowest it fully or not, I tell thee thou lovest Saronia, the chief of the priestesses of the mighty goddess. Chios, thou hast power over this fearful being! Oh that she were not a priestess!'

'Why so? What difference would it make to thee?'

'All.'

'Tell me what thou meanest.'

'This. If it were possible for thee to approach her, thou couldst intercede for me. The curse might be removed from off this soul; bit by bit, as the sun darkens by eclipse, so my spirit grows more night-like, and soon my lamp shall go out in darkness. I know it is impossible for thee to speak to her, or I would ask thee, but canst thou not send to her privately? Love thee I am certain she does. This curse somehow sharpens my intellect, and my inner sight is clearer. I perceive things which wound me sorely. If she loves thee, she cannot deny thee. Wilt thou help me? Thou hatest me not, neither dost thou love me. All this I have seen long since; but I love thee dearly. What need have I to say this? Thou art already aware of it. It is not meet I should thus speak, seeing I am betrothed to Varro. It is not chaste to unburden my feelings in this manner, but my so doing will not injure the Roman or conjure up the fire of love in Chios for Nika. No, it will not harm.'

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'Nika!'

'Listen, Chios. I would die for thee. Is not this love worthy of thy regard, worthy of an effort on thy part? Wilt thou not take pity on a poor outcast soul? And, Chios, if thou art vexed with me for divining thy love for Saronia—vexed with my love for thee—then, if I cannot banish such love—the curse of a love for thee without a love in return—then, forgive me, and I will bury it, that it may never rise again from the grave of my heart. Oh, help me—help me!'

'Nika, hear me calmly. There was a time when I could speak to Saronia; but she now soars to an altitude unapproachable, and I can follow her only afar off. I dare not send a message to her. She, who stands first of Ionian women, Queen of the World next the goddess, how is it possible?'

'Chios, all things are possible whilst life lasts. If death cut us down in the endeavour, then there is an end of it; but to dare unto death requires love stronger than life. Command me to see her on thy behalf, and I will speak to her or die in the attempt.'

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'Good girl, I do not require thine assistance. I have no message for her. How can I help thee? Would that I could! Let me think for a moment. I have a plan—the Roman! Thou hast influence with him, say?'

'He adores me.'

'Then propose to him that I paint Saronia. Thou hast seen the picture. It is like her, is it not?'

'It is, truly so.'

'Well, no one knows I am engaged on this work but Varro, and he caught a glimpse of it; we can make it necessary that I should see her at the Temple. If the Roman offer to present the picture, this will be granted. He is wealthy and can pay a large sum for the painting, but I will return every coin. If my greatest work can aid you, freely, freely will I give it; but, hear me, this will be a fruitless endeavour.'

'How so?'

'Because, if such a curse is on thee, it is not the curse of Saronia. She would not blast thee. If such a thing exists, it is the curse of Hecate. The priestess had never the power to conceive it, neither the strength to kill it; but hear me further. I do not believe thou art cursed. My view of a presiding demon or divinity runs not in such direction. Gods and goddesses roam not to and fro blasting spirits of mortals in such manner. It is an idea born of older times, and doubtless will survive down the ages until men grow wiser; then such nonsense will be looked upon with ridicule, and become a thing of the past.'

Nika shuddered, and said:

'Would I could think so! I know what I say is true—I am as certain of it as that I exist. Were I bereft of reason and madness clothed me as with a garment, yet this curse, burnt into my soul with letters of fire, would be understood in all its power to me.'

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'It is useless talking to thee, foolish girl. I will do as thou wishest with the picture of Saronia.'

'And I will away and do my part, and hope, ere many days are ended, thy project may bear fruit.'

Pale and agitated, she arose to go. Chios said:

'I will accompany thee and pay my respects to thy mother;' and gathering a bunch of orange-blossom and roses, he gave them to Nika.

CHAPTER XVIII

WARNING

As they passed the gateway, Endora, the witch, stood by and gazed at the girl and Chios. The maiden pitied her, and gave her a coin of gold. The old woman looked up, first at Chios; then, turning to Nika, said:

'May the choicest flowers of life ever strew thy pathway, fair lady, and may the goddess— But stay, I cannot bless thee. I have no power to do so. Would that I could!'

As they passed away, she muttered:

'I cannot even try to bless her; she is accursed of Hecate—I read it too well. Ah, ah, ah! She is like unto me: both are outcasts; she in the heyday of youth and flowing over with wealth, I an old hag and poor as a barren rock, save for this bit of gold. The goddess is no respecter of persons. What can be the sin of this golden-haired beauty? Mine I know. I will unravel hers. Where does she go, I wonder? And with Chios? And he gave her the richest flowers. I will follow far behind. My sight is keen. I will know where she perches.'

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So Endora followed, and saw them enter the house of Venusta. The witch accosted a little child.

'Knowest thou the lady of this dwelling, innocent one? I am seeking alms, and would know her name.'

'The lady of the house?' replied the girl.

'Yes, of this one,' pointing with her finger. 'This house,' and she pierced through the eye of the child, who started back with dread. 'Tell me, quickly, who resides within.'

'Venusta, wife of Lucius, the Roman sailor.'

'And who was that fair maid who passed in with the noble Greek?'

'That was Nika, her daughter.'

Endora moved off, murmuring, 'Nika! Nika!' A sudden frenzy seized her; her eyes glared out like spots of fire.

'Nika, is it? Ah, I know her pride! She hunted the chosen of Hecate, and now she loves without being beloved, and the curse is strong upon her. She has her reward. Starving am I, and this coin would buy food; but I will never use it. No, back it shall go to the giver! The flying slave, starting eyes, haunted look, speak to me. I helped to save, encourage Saronia. I will never fatten on the alms of her enemy! No, no; outcast as thou art, poor soul of mine, I will not taint thee further by accepting such as this.'

So she went back to the girl to whom she had spoken, and said:

'Take thou this golden coin to the slave who stands in yonder vestibule and say it belongs to Mistress Nika, that she gave it to a woman at the gate of Chios, and that the woman has no use for it. Now go, quickly, and perhaps she may reward thee. I would, but have none to give.'

For very fear the child took the money within, and the witch Endora passed on her way.

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As the woman went by the Temple, a company of priestesses passed the outer walls and made for the grand entrance. She hurried forward and overtook them, singling out a striking form, one whom she could not mistake, and, rushing to the front, fell prostrate at her feet, crying:

'Mercy, lady, mercy; hear me! Do not turn aside. Rather would I ye should use me to clean the dust from off thy sandals ere ye enter the sacred courts.'

'What hast thou to say?'

'Mighty priestess, thou art Saronia.'

'I am.'

'Did I not tell thee, noble lady, thy star rode upwards in the Eastern sky? and now its light so strong, so splendid, beats upon thee, that thou art like a silver moon among the stars. Hear me, great priestess, I implore thee. Think of Endora, vile and steeped in iniquity. Pray for me that I may be forgiven—pray for me!'

And with a cry she fell to the ground.

'Take her within,' said Saronia, 'and see that she be cared for. I will follow.'

Then they raised her, and the poor thing staggered through the great court.

The priestess was soon at the side of the wretched woman, and two attendants ministered to her wants. When she revived, Saronia dismissed the girls, saying:

'Alone I will listen to this tale of grief.'

When they had departed, she took Endora's hand in hers.

'Art thou better? Say on thy story.'

'I am base, worse than thou dreamest. True, I was weak, faint for want of food; but I am not penitent. I have no desire to be forgiven. Deeper sunk is my soul by this pretending, this false asking pardon through thy intercession with the goddess. No, no, no; my spirit is too dark, too damned for cleansing! I have another motive.'

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'Vile woman, what dost thou mean?'

'I come to tell thee of *Nika*.'

'Nika? Nika of Lucius?'

'Yes.'

'Stay thy speech, then; she is dead to me. I have no desire to hear more of her.'

'But, dreadful Saronia, thou *shalt* hear *that I have to say!* Thou hast a woman's heart, and will listen as I go on. She has been thine enemy—still is—she lurks in thy pathway. Venusta is as bad, if not worse. Both would singe thy wings, sacred as thou art, and draw thee down to be the sport of Ephesus, nor stay their tongues at any lie.'

'What meanest thou? How knowest thou this?'

'How do I know? Do not slaves leave their homes by stealth and come to the wise woman Endora that she may read their fate? Such is the case. One night, under cover of darkness, a slave slid from the jewelled home of the Romans, and sought my wretched den. 'Twas then I plucked from out the bosom of the frightened one the secrets of Venusta's house. She overheard her mistress say that all in her power should be done to drag thee down, appealing at the same time for aid from the Roman Proconsul, who has just arrived from Rome to rule Ionia. But—I have more to tell thee. Thou knowest Chios, the Greek?'

'Thou art growing too familiar, Endora.'

'I am aware of it, august lady, but this familiarity is but the outcome of my strong desire to aid thee. I will say my say if cast to death for it. Remember we serve one goddess. Thou art blessed; I a rebel and cursed. But Hecate is our goddess. I say thou knowest Chios; I know it to be so, I noted his kindness when thou wert a slave. Rememberest thou the time when, standing without the great theatre, waiting the bidding of the Roman reptile, he came and spoke words of comfort to thee—to thee? And below, in the depths of thy heart, are many cherished windings of the past wherein he lit thee through the briars.'

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'Cease, woman: no more of this! I may arise and destroy thee. Darest thou insult the servant of Diana?'

'I insult thee not; I tell the truth, and truth is a rare commodity with me. Thou canst slay me! If I lie, then would I fear, but, speaking the truth, I make thine hands weak and thy wings weary. Once more I say at that time thou lovedst him, and could not help doing so; and this also I assert: Chios loves Saronia—Chios is content to feed on those memories of the past, and so art thou. Thou art forbidden by thy office to love other than the goddess, but I tell thee woman must love, and in secret I know thou must keep this love aglow—*eternally* so—like a vestal flame; and woe, I say, to the woman that crosses thy path to kill this light, to put out this flame! Now, such a being is Nika—Nika, the Roman girl; she attempts it. I have told thee; I have warned thee.'

'Thou talkest madly. What have I to do with Nika or Chios?' And, pointing towards the great Temple, Saronia exclaimed: 'There is the gateway to my only love!'

'No, no, lovely priestess! I am right, and thou must hear me to the end, and then, if thou desirest, may'st destroy me. 'Twas but to-day I stood at the gate of Chios asking charity, when he and Nika came forth. One could see by her face beaming with radiance that words of tenderest meaning clung like flowers of jasmine around her heart, and she bore in her hands richest blossoms of varied hue culled from the garden of Chios. Now, mark well what I am about to say. He loves her not—of this I am certain, but she has drawn him with her subtle wiles and may bind him as a slave—bind him with her web as a spider chains a fly. He is a good man being netted by an artful fowler; a part of their hate for thee would be gratified could they but take Chios in their snare, make him their tool in bringing forth their darkest designs on thee. I warn thee of this treacherous girl and her wolf-like dame. Take heed. Beware, lest Chios and Nika join them for thy destruction.'

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'How didst thou know Chios?'

'Have I not told thee I saw him near the great theatre talking to thee when thou worest the robe of golden brown, the badge of slavery?'

'True.'

'Yes, Chios I knew well, but the girl I knew not. And, when they passed, she with the golden hair gave me a coin—a coin of gold. I would have blessed her, and commenced—but failed. Even if I had blessed her, my blessings would have been empty words; but even such I could not bestow, for, as I spoke, I looked into her eyes and read her accursed of Hecate.'

'Hush! 'tis fearful!'

'I hurried after to know her name, and saw her enter a sumptuous home on the slope of Coressus, and was told it was Venusta's place, and she who entered Nika, the daughter. I sent the golden disc within, saying I needed it not. I could not take alms from the accursed girl, the young tigress who would have maimed thee—killed thee! This is my story. I go.'

'Hast thou more to say?'

'No, noble priestess. Let me go. The truth is said. Now I am weak again, and thou couldst crush me as a moth between the fingers, or I might presumptuously fly too near the flaming lamp and be my own destroyer.'

'I cannot let thee go as thou earnest, in poverty. Thou wilt, I am sure, take from my hands these bits of gold in place of that thou sacrificedst for me. They will buy thee food and wine and raiment, and help to give some little joy. Go thy unhappy way. I pity thee, Endora—I pity thee, and I tell thee I will care for myself; but no harm can come to me whilst I follow that which is good.'

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Saronia left her, retired to her private chamber, and threw herself down to rest awhile. She believed all the woman had said. She had faith in Chios, but would he be firm amidst the temptations which beset him? Then she arose, and walked to and fro the room like a caged lion. She could not move out and wage warfare; it was an unequal fight. What could she do? For a moment jealousy sat upon the throne of reason, and she became fearful to look upon. Should she, in the might of her fury, blast this girl before her time? Should she pour forth her mystic spells until they consumed her very vitals? No! She would, at any rate, if war must come, battle with her, spirit against spirit, woman against woman. For the present she would wait events.

She wished now she had kept Endora, and bade her bring news from the hum of the busy world. Never mind; she could summon her at will. One thought could fetch her. She was mightier in will than the wise woman, and, as Hecate could summon her priestesses, so Saronia could call the witch.

CHAPTER XIX

THE DAWN OF FAITH

The day had arrived, and Varro and Chios were to meet the priests and priestesses concerning the picture of Saronia. Many eyes were turned upon them until they entered the Temple and were hidden from view.

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When the time came for the Roman to approach the High Priest, he addressed him thus:

'Most noble of the Megalobyzi, most exalted among men, king of priests, High Priest of the great Diana, whose fame extends from Central Rome to Britain in the West, where stands a temple to her name—fame which extends not only from the centre to the West, but back again through the great world until it grasps the lands and islands of the far-off East, we, in all humility, and for the great veneration in which we hold the goddess, would help to honour the name of her great High Priestess, Saronia, before whom we bow lowly, and salute her first among women, by presenting to this holy shrine a picture truly painted of this noble virgin, that her goodness and beauty may ever appear before the eyes of the worshippers of her august mistress, Diana Triformis.'

Then replied the chief Megabyzus:

'Have we an artist in Ephesus who could do justice to our noble queen?'

'We have,' said Varro; 'Chios the Greek. This is he.'

'Good, most esteemed Proconsul, but remember it is enacted that the High Priestess cannot leave the precincts of the Temple to sit for this picture.'

'That we know, and to this end have secured the help of Chios, who knows well the face of great Saronia, and he has almost finished the work. Wouldst thou, in the name of the goddess, accept it from my hands?'

'We will, and mayest thou, good artist, prosper in thy work, and consider thyself fortunate that this honour is conferred on thee, the honour of immortalizing the loveliest woman since the time of Helen.'

'Most noble priest, I am thine humble servant, and reverence thy creed.'

But as Chios raised his eyes to those of Megabyzus, he saw them filled with a strange fire—eyes like those of an evil spirit, gleaming behind the living windows of darkling hue. It was but for a moment, and the priest turned to Saronia, saying:

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'Thy consent to us already has been given. Wouldst thou speak to these noble friends?'

Then the girl, in her beauty and power, addressed the Roman in accents sweet and queenly, thanking him for the gift; and, looking on Chios as if she had never before seen him, said:

'Noble artist of the Ephesian city, when wilt thou scan my features—say when—and in what part of this Temple may I linger that thy efforts may be complete?'

'I purpose to trouble thee but little, mighty priestess. I will come when thou art offering sacrifice at the altar, and gaze on thy splendour afar off. As it has been said, the painting is well-nigh finished. I have beheld thee often when I worshipped here. Thy lineaments are graven on my memory. When word is sent me I will come.'

'Well, it shall be quickly,' said she, adding, with a smile: 'Before my beauty fades, if any there be. Come to-morrow at the hour of sacrifice, and thou wilt see Saronia.'

When they had retired, she meditated within: 'What meaneth this strange proceeding? The affianced of Nika presenting the picture of Saronia to the Temple, and Chios to paint it. There is evil afloat. The stormy petrel skims the waves. I will find from Chios the meaning of this secret work. No good for me can come from the house of Venusta. Be patient, Saronia, and thou shalt learn all. I will contrive to speak with Chios. Out of his heart of love he will tell me all. His eyes looked into mine: his mind was pure and shaped towards me. Good Chios, I trust thee, but I will try thee.'

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The next day when he arrived the Temple was full of song—white-robed priests and virgins stood around the altar offering their devotions, whilst the incense-cloud rose upward through the open roof like a morning mist hanging around the mountain.

He was seated in a nook of the Temple where great pillars hid him from view. He heard not the morning song nor saw the incense-cloud ascend; he saw but one object, and that was Saronia, with uplifted eyes filled with radiant mystery, beseeching Heaven, the loose drapery hanging in snowy folds around her form and falling to her feet.

One half-hour, with such intent as Chios had, was worth a lifetime to a meaner man. Every touch of the brush told, and ere the service ended he rested, and gazed passionately on her he loved so well.

The song sank down to a whisper and died, burying its harmonies among the mighty marble pillars. Priestesses and priests moved away, leaving Saronia alone at the great altar, looking like the goddess of the shrine. For a moment she was silent, standing like a statue of Scopas; then she beckoned Chios to come forward, and moved away from the flower-strewn altar to meet him. The eyes of the girl spoke love—softest, tenderest love—but the face of Chios was like the granite rock of Bolerium. He knew he faced the opening through which the priests had passed, and feared to smile. Her lips parted, and she said:

'Chios, what brings thee here? There is mystery in it all.'

'Thou hast truly said. I have a mission to speak for Nika. My words must necessarily be few and to the point. She pines with the weight of the curse of Hecate, and asks thy intercession.'

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'Ah! I see through it all. Nika, the torturer, the serpent, would rob Saronia, and thou, half-hearted, art tottering on thy throne.'

'No, Saronia. Hear me!'

'I will *not*. Listen thou to me. If this curse were removed, thou wouldst marry her. She knows thou never wilt whilst it remains. I have not power to undo what my goddess binds. Had I, Saronia would *never* be the one to feather an arrow for Nika. No, no; go thy way! Choose ye whom ye will love. I will never force thee to love me, neither will I help thee to love another. Farewell!' and, turning sharply, she went, and as she passed away turned again, and gave one look of love, so tenderly that the great tears swept down the cheeks of Chios. She saw them, and read his answering love.

He was alone. The Temple, with all its grandeur, was a tomb. He staggered to a seat, and for a while seemed as if his soul had gone away. Then, arousing himself, he gazed long and lovingly at the spot where she had stood near the altar steps, and then went out into the fierce glare of the sun.

Passing from the Temple, he espied a stranger coming towards him. As he approached, he discovered him to be the man he met very nearly at the same place when the great procession passed.

'We have met again,' said Judah. 'How hast thou fared? Thou dost not seem happy.'

'Thou hast rightly said. I suffer.'

'Perhaps I may comfort thee. It will not be the first time I have ministered to such complaint.'

'No, thou canst not. My sorrow is too deep to be fathomed, and too sacred to expose.'

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'I like thy thoughts, young man. Wert thou taught them yonder?' pointing towards the Temple.

'No; they are the fruit of a mind that receives no impetus from such fraud as so-called worship is.'

'Thou speakest strongly. What knowest thou of worship? A mind perturbed like thine is like a troubled sea, with never a place for calm. The worshipping soul is not thine.'

'True, friend; I may not be a worshipper, neither wish to be one. This life is a mystery; the next a deeper one. If we cannot understand this earth-life, and are unable to trust mortals whom we see and know, how, then, can we trust those whom we have not seen?'

'Shall we bestow our affections on the gods, who may not exist save in our imagination, or, if they be, for all we know, they may ridicule our adoration, make sport of us, tools of us to suit some purpose in pursuit of their own glory.'

'Art thou a philosopher?'

'I am an artist.'

'Why followest thou this profession?'

'Because I love it.'

'Hast thou fame, riches?'

'Yea, sufficient.'

'Why dost thou work?'

'That I may portray Nature in her beauteous forms, and give them forth to the people, that they may ever have the truth in trees and flowers and the ever-changing sea.'

'Thou hast a benevolent spirit, and thy works betray such. Is it not so?'

'Man should not herald every atom of good he possesses.'

'That is true; but, nevertheless, a man's works reflect his inner being. What is thy name?'

'Chios.'

'A Greek?'

'It is so.'

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'Then listen, Chios the Ionian. If thou canst be judged by thy works, judge ye the Creator of Nature by the same law. The God who made the pine-tree shoot forth from the darkling earth and grow upwards towards the vaulted heaven, clothing its foliage with the morning mist as with a garment; winged the great eagle which gazes on the sun, and made him a home amongst the rocks on yonder mountain-side; painted the petals of the rose which scatters perfume on the languid air—He who rolls the waves towards the shore, breaking eternally by His decree; the God who made the loveliest form in which a soul ere robed itself; fills the fruitful earth with food for men—judge Him, I say, by His works, as I have judged thee by thine. Are not His acts benevolent—are they not proofs of love? Thy acts are feeble attempts, and so are mine—little imitations, the outcome of His breath within us. His are boundless, eternal, and show forth His guardian care for all His creatures.'

'I never looked at the matter in this way,' replied Chios. 'Thou seemest right. There must be a great First Cause behind all this, and it does appear His motive is unselfish.'

'In that thou sayest truly, for God is love.'

'What! So have the gods and goddesses of Greece that passion; and, if our traditions be correct, they loved too well, and made fools of themselves.'

'Again, Chios, thou art wise. I say thou art also true; but the loves of the Grecian gods is not the love of my God. The traditions of your Ionian faith are lies. There are no gods but One. The passions imputed to them are but reflections of that which is impure in man. That which dwells in the bosom of the Infinite is purer than the river at its source, rising into light through the fissures of the rock. The best of man's love is selfish, and we exchange love for love. Men do not bestow their affections on those who hate them, but the Eternal One loves all with an amplitude beyond comprehension. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that we might have life eternal."'

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'What dost thou mean by life eternal?'

'This: that thy life may spread out into the great future, and the spirit be young when the stars grow dim and the sun be dead, and knowledge accumulate higher and deeper, joy broaden out as the æons on æons pass slowly behind thee, gathering in number like sands on the sea-shore; but never a shadow of death will lay on thee—never thy years will cease to be numberless. Thou wilt begin it, never wilt end it—end there is none.'

'Thou art mighty in thy thoughts. I would know more of thee.'

'Nay, it matters not to thee what of myself. My purpose will be served if I can lead thy mind into the channel of truth. I deem it fair to say, thy face being once set towards the goal, thou wilt pursue thy course till all is well.'

'Thou thinkest too highly of me.'

'No.'

'Well, this I promise, good man: I will give fairest of hearing to thy teachings, and hope thou mayest implant the seed of a good faith, which may spring up and bear a bountiful harvest; but tell me ere we part, in the great life thou speakest of where is my future home? who are my companions?'

'They shall kindred spirits be. What thou makest thyself here determines whom thou shalt dwell with yonder. Thine abode shall suit thy soul. Here men of evil build palaces and dwell therein, whilst others, as pure as the mountain breeze, crawl in and out a hovel or a rocky cave; but in the new life this shall not be. In what part of the mighty universe thou wilt begin thy course I cannot tell—perchance one of those bright orbs of light which shine forth so sweetly may be thy home. Then on and on, through space illimitable, but always nearer the infinite. Here mother and father greeted thee, but yonder, where there is no marrying or giving in marriage, God Himself shall be all in all, and meet thy coming. Take this parchment; I have written it for thee. Read it well; bend thine heart in prayer, seek communion with the Great Spirit that He may give thee light, for without such the words of man are useless. I wish thee well, Chios, and will see thee again.'

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As he passed away, Chios felt such a sense of loneliness as he had never before experienced. A faint dawn was breaking, and he murmured: 'Where there is no marrying or giving in marriage;' and the dark eyes of Saronia seemed to gaze steadily into his soul, until he cried: 'We must follow hand in hand through the life that is to be. Light without her would be darkness; life, however long, would be eternal death!'

CHAPTER XX

PLEADING

When Chios next saw Nika there was a look of great anxiety on her beautiful face. She said:

'Well, hast thou seen Saronia?'

He knew not what to answer, and for a moment was silent; but the silence was soon broken by the girl muttering:

'She has refused. Tell me, is it not so?'

'Yes, she has, and I can do no more.'

'What did she say?'

'Her words were few, but to the point, to this effect: she had not cursed thee—if the goddess had, Saronia had not power to revoke it.'

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'As I thought. She would not stir as much as the quiver of a leaf to aid me; she hates me. Nevertheless, I am no worse by thy asking, rather better, for a fresh knowledge springs into my mind, whispering I was mistaken. Now I know she loves thee not, or would have granted thy request, Chios. No, there is no love in that great dark spirit. She has no counterpart, no affinity, and must move for ever feeding on herself; and thou, Chios, must see all this as well as I, and own if there were a love in thee for her it is a hopeless one, never to be returned.'

A deep gloom clouded that lovely face, plunging her into deepest thought. Suddenly recollecting herself, she said:

'What answer makest thou?'

Chios looked into Nika's eyes.

'The feud between thee and the priestess I may not judge, but Saronia is not a being who may revolve in an orbit moving in her eternal circle through the ages without passing the path of a kindred soul whom she may love. She will find her counterpart, and love as intensely as her mind is great and her faith strong. Thou knowest, girl, I would not for unnumbered worlds willingly cause thee a sting of heart—I never have; but I am compelled to speak as I have in vindication of Saronia.'

'Thou ever didst it; it is no new phase.'

'No; and it must remain so until this clay of mine is strewn to the winds, and after that, when my spirit is free to breathe the softer air of the summer land, even then would I vindicate her, if a myriad demons, dark and hellish, stood forth in fierce array to damn her!'

'Oh, Chios, where hast thou learned to speak like this? It is so much like her that, if I knew thee less, I should count thee her affinity. Thy look is terrible. Calm thee, my noble brother, for more thou art to me—calm thee, Chios; I fear thee for the first time. Thou wilt not also curse me. Look at me! pity me! I have bared my very soul to thee. Spurn me not. Thy look tells me thou art on the verge of doing so. Let me cling a little to thee, Chios dear. Help Nika. Cheer her, if with only one

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tender look. I have somewhat learned to bear the curse of Hecate, the curse of loving thee without return of love, but can barely carry it, and often fall. If thou shouldst put out thy spark of coldest charity and leave me in darkness, Nika will fade and die.'

'Cease, foolish maid! why speakest thou thus to me? It is not fair to the Roman to whom thou art betrothed.'

'I know it all. What can I do? Can a maiden love two men? No, I love thee, Chios, and cannot help it. My love for thee grew from childhood. I cannot kill it. The Roman I respect, and may become his wife. Should he chide, I would meet him word for word, and the quarrel would not wound my soul, because I love him not; but with thee all—all is different. Say what thou wilt, raise thy jewelled dagger to slay me, my tongue would be as silent as the breaking dawn—ah, as silent!'

And she bowed her head, for her eyes were wet with tears.

'Come, Nika, no more of this. I am sorry for thee, but thou must not reproach Saronia, who is not here to defend herself.'

'Let it be so, Chios. Thou art kind again. Thy voice bespeaks it, and my heart leaps up like a ship which scuds with the favouring gale on the crests of the foaming sea.'

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CHAPTER XXI

THE WITCH

It was night in the city of the Ephesian goddess. Gathered around the glare of a rude lamp sat Endora and a few who had come to consult her. Said one:

'Thou hast heard of the new faith springing up around us?'

'I have.'

'Shall it prosper?'

'I know not,' replied the witch.

'I thought thou knewest everything, nothing being hid from thy scrutinizing gaze.'

'Ah, my sons, there are mysteries which I cannot penetrate! Ask me to call spirits from the gloomiest hell, I might do so, but this new faith relates to a spirit-plane above this earth, where men, they say, are gods. Of this place I know nothing; over it I have no control.'

'What is the emblem of this faith?'

'A cross.'

'Tis easily made. Let us form one and adjure.'

'Nay, nay,' said the woman; 'let such things be.'

'No, no; we will make it, and thou bring out thy potent spells. Let the faiths fight now! To-morrow we shall war with the new one before the sun. The people of Asia are gone mad over the new doctrines, and those infatuated by them will on the next day to this gather within the Agora, burn their charms and amulets, and fires will blaze with fuel formed from choicest books on Asian magic. Up quickly, we say, and to thy work! We fear not. Do thy best, and let the gods of this vile sect do theirs!'

With a raven-clouded brow, the witch brought out her potions.

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'What hast thou, woman?'

'Various kinds.'

'Hast thou those which cast out demons?'

'I have.'

'Then stand forth Samo—Samo has a legion in him. Art thou ready, Endora? Proceed.'

Then she chanted:

'Demon legion, listen, listen!
Hear the voice of Hecate,
Hear the thundering of her feet!
I, her minion, bid you tremble
Ere ye hasten back to Tartarus.

Seek ye bodies more befitting,
With your spirits more in union.

Come ye out, ye reeking fiends,
Never more return to hinder
This old man from groping forwards
To the radiant fields Elysian.'

Putting her hands forward towards the man and lowering them towards the ground, she paused with greedy expectation, whilst the possessed stood still with vacant stare, and naught was heard but the barking of the night-hounds.

'Thou hast failed, mother,' said Sceva—'thou hast failed!'

'Yes, I know—I know! Look ye—look at the cross yonder! See how it streams with living light! 'Tis guarded by spirits of flame more powerful than Hecate—ah, more powerful than Hecate is here!'

'Nonsense, woman! cease thy prattling! Thou hast drunk the Samian wine—thou art weak to-night. We will abjure. Eh? By Solomon! who left us incantations stronger than thine.'

Sceva said: 'Set a basin full of water on the floor. It shall be upturned by unseen hands, that we may be assured of the departure of the demons.'

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Then, drawing from the folds of his dress a blood stone ring, he placed it near the nostrils of the demoniac, commanding the legion to come out of him, chanting:

'By the Jewish altar throne,
By the temple at fair Salem,
By the rites of Solomon,
By the sovereign power of Judah,
Children loved by God of gods,
Come ye forth, ye fiends rebellious,
Hasten with the waning hour
Back to hell, your endless house!'

Still the look of Samo was one of blank despair. No voice came from him, no paroxysms, no falling to the ground, and the water was unspilt.

Then the men gazed at each other, and Endora said with her sardonic smile:

'What ails the gods to-night? They are powerless, and ye also have drunk the Samian wine.'

'No, we will not yield,' said Sceva. 'Now for the test! Let us adjure by this Jesus whom the wandering Paul preaches, and, by Heaven, we will use the cross.'

Rushing forward, he seized it and held the emblem before the man.

Endora cried out: 'Stay! stay! Do it not! I see one by it who looks like a God!'

But Sceva said, 'Nay!' and cried out:

'We, the holders of this symbol,
Bid you by the name of Jesus
Come ye forth, and ever be so
While eternal ages roll!'

Then a voice came forth from Samo, 'Jesus I know, but who are ye?' and with the wild frenzy of madness he rushed upon them, tearing their garments to pieces until they fled the cave and down the steep sides of Mount Pion towards the city.

The poor demoniac had clutched the radiant cross, and fell with it to the ground. As he pressed it to his lips, a joyous smile swept over his face. He was changed. The tempest-tossed soul was riding at anchor in a haven of calm, and the weary spirit shone with glorious sheen.

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Endora had fled with the rest. She hid herself behind some black poplars until the freed man departed. Then she crept back to her cave, and found utter confusion reigning. Things were soon put straight, for she had few luxuries.

She sat down meditating on those passing strange events. Suddenly she started, crying, 'The Cross! the Cross!' and springing forward, she grasped it, broke it to pieces, and flung it from the cave.

'No good can come to me whilst it remains within. It represents not Hecate—of that I am sure.'

Then she sat down again, like a spider in its den, trusting some visitors might come to consult and bring her gain, for the night was clear and the stars shone out like children of the sun.

CHAPTER XXII

THE LOVE-PHILTRE

'Foiled am I on every hand.

'First, cursed by a slave once my slave, and she now the Queen Priestess of the Asian people, with myriads at her feet!

'That is not all. She has refused to aid me, even when Chios pleads for me, and he—what of him? The only man I ever loved, or ever shall, turns from my love and pities me. Curse the pity! Is it come to this, that I, a high-born Roman of the Romans, seek shelter from an unknown slave, and beg for love from a Greek, and be refused? No, no, Nika! Thou must arouse thyself, and thou shalt.

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'What I cannot gain by pleadings shall be sought for otherwise. I will not be foiled. I will not die, and mix with every common dust borne hither and thither by the wanton breeze. Again I say no, it shall not be!

'Well then, Nika, bold girl, what wilt thou do? Let me think.

'Of one thing I am certain. Chios loves Saronia. Who knows but that she loves Chios? Of this I am not quite sure. No mortal knows the mind of that strange being. Ah! shall I say that she loves clandestinely and meets her lover?—whirl an arrow barbed perchance with lies and bring her down? That will be revenge, but I may in some way implicate Chios, and, besides, if I cannot prove my saying, I encounter death.

'No, this is too wild. Cease thy flutterings, vain spirit mine! Oh that I had proof of such a thing! Then would I rush to the world, proclaim her fallen, and gloat over her wretchedness. It may come—who can say? But, for the present, I have another course that will strike home—I will do my utmost to bring Chios to my love, and wound to death Saronia.

'I will seek the witch of Ephesus, Endora, and consult her. She will help me, for—gold. I will buy from her the costliest charms. She shall brew, doubly brew a philtre of love, strong enough to warm the icy Chios were he ten times colder than the snows on Tmolus. Neither will I lose time. I will meet her to-night. She lives in a darksome cave on the Temple side of Pion, and nothing shall daunt me, for, as soon as the veil of night is drawn, I will robe myself with courage, and go forth, fearing neither the howling beasts nor the shadowy gloom of the lofty pines. No, though a phalanx of fiends from the depths bar my passage, yet will I press forward like he who fights for life.'

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When darkness enveloped the city and mountains, she stole forth from her home on the lofty Coressus, down the mountain way.

The sweet odours of the night-flowers blew gently against her cheeks. She drew her purple mantle around her, and hastened on unobserved.

As she passed the studio gate of Chios, the nightingale sang to its mate, but a chill of horror shook her soul, for well she knew her way was evil.

Moving away, her spirits rose. She left the great road to ascend the side of Mount Pion. Her step was light, and without weariness she drew near the cave of Endora. For the first time fear possessed her. She saw the witch at the entrance. She had, however, gone too far to retract, neither did she want to do so.

Well knowing a girl's appearance in such a place at such an hour could point only to one intent, the woman addressed Nika:

'Tell me, lady, dost thou seek the witch?'

'Yes,' replied the girl, 'and thou art she.'

'Come within, pretty maiden, for the winds are chill and the night-hawks violent. Nay, stay a moment, do not enter now. I will light the lamp.'

As Endora entered she thought within her: 'This is Nika accursed of Hecate, the tyrant of Saronia, the lover of Chios. What darkness is abroad? What comes she for to-night? Shall I slay or play with her? Revenge is toothsome to me. I have her in my power, and could square accounts for Saronia, but what, I wonder, would the priestess say? Perhaps I should get blame or death for my work. So I will let her be, and will draw from her that which I know the dark girl of the Temple will not disdain to hear.'

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'Now then, Endora, do thy work well. Fear not the Roman lady, and a mine of wealth is thine. But what do I care for gold?'

Nika entered the cave, hewn directly out of the rock. An iron ring was driven into the roof, and a quaint old Phallic lamp hung down just clear of their heads; a winding fissure in the rock let out the smoke. A recess was in its inner part, and a time-worn curtain hid a pallet of corn-leaves. Two old chests, a few stools, a rude altar, cooking-pans, and some quaint trifles spread around made up the contents of the place.

'Sit thee down, lady. Compose thyself. Thou art safe, although the place looks stormy. What seekest thou?'

'To know my fate. I have heard thou art deeply skilled in magic, and I would know more than the present reveals.'

'Wouldst thou know all?'

'How far would it go?'

'To thy life's end—and beyond.'

'Tell me first. You know the old story. Shall I love? whom? when? and so on?'

'Ah, girl, thou hast deeply loved, and he whom thou wilt wed thou lovest not.'

'Go on. Gold I have in abundance, and thou shalt be well paid.'

'No, I will not take thy gold.'

'Why not?'

'I wish it so.'

'Thou shalt have it. I have it by me.'

'I tell thee again, great lady, I will have none of it.'

'Why callest thou me great lady? Dost thou know me?'

'No, I know thee not, but see thy fate. Money from thee I will not take. Thou camest here safely; thou canst leave at once without hindrance.' [Pg 115]

'No, no, woman! I have braved the dangers of the night to meet thee, and ere I leave fresh light must shine upon my pathway.'

'Ah, thou art a sharp maid! Now, then, what really is thy business?'

'I require a love philtre. 'Tis true as thou hast said, I marry the man I love not. I would make the one I love love me. Now to thy work! Thou art mightily skilled. I take thee into my confidence. Make the brewage sure, quick, decisive; there must be no mistake about it. First, then, know who I am—Nika, the daughter of Lucius and Venusta, the Romans. You know them?'

'Yes, lady.'

'Hearken again. I love Chios the Greek; I wed the Roman Proconsul because Chios loves me not, but if thou wilt compel him, I sink the Roman and wed Chios. Now I have bared my soul. Thou hast my secret. Keep it and help me, and I will care for thee. Reveal it, and, as I am young and powerful, and by Diana, I swear I will slay thee! Seest thou this dagger with its glinting jewelled hilt? I draw it. See its quivering blade, and beware! Be careful; I am indifferent to all—desperate! We are alone. No wavering will I have. Fulfil quickly my behest, and once more remember: betray Nika, and like a sleuth-hound I will track thee, and like a fury slay thee!'

'Thine eyes are full of fire, young woman, and thy tongue is free. Thou art impelled like a ship before the maddening gale. The witch Endora knows not coercion, and will not be commanded even by Nika the tyrant—tyrant as thou art!'

The girl sprang from her seat, and, with a bound, rushed at Endora, and, raising her jewelled hand, struck with her dagger at the woman's heart; but the strong arm of the witch was swiftly uplifted, and she clutched the wrist of Nika until the dagger fell. [Pg 116]

'Fool that thou art to come here in thy madness to take my life! Hast thou not sense enough left to understand thou art but a sapling in my hands? What shall I do by thee? Shall I crush thee like a worm beneath my feet, or shall I let thee live and suffer?'

'Kill me,' said the Roman, 'and end it all! I am tired.'

'No, I will not—I cannot—I have no power to kill thee! Put up again thy tinselled weapon. A halo of darkness like a thousand nights envelops thy soul. Other hands than mine must slay accursed Nika!'

With a shriek the girl fell to the ground, and the dark, fiendish eyes looked down upon her, and the rugged brow of Endora was furrowed like the waves of the sea.

Nika had the glare of the lamp shining on her pale, frightened face, and the witch stood over her in shadow like a spirit of Hecate—a spirit of evil, of lies.

'Thou knowest that dread secret also. Who told thee?'

'No one told me; I read it in thee. My soul saw thine. When thou hast lived long enough, thou mayest see in others what I beheld in thee. Now sit thee on the seat, and let us converse together. My time is very precious; others come. I begin by saying defiance is not for me. Those I aid must be subjective. I am mistress when I deal out love-philtres. Let me clearly understand. Thou requirest one for Chios?'

'Yes. Say, dost thou know him?'

'Just a little; but methinks he is not the man to be trifled with. I advise thee cast adrift this

hopeless love, and sow the seed of a new one for the Roman. Besides, Chios may love another.'

'Dost thou think so?'

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'I think nothing—I know nothing; I simply suggest the very ordinary remark.'

'Endora, thou art not far away from the truth. I dare not say what I think.'

'Say on; nothing would surprise me after thy mad freak just now.'

'Well, I have a suspicion. He loves a very high personage—a princess.'

'Is it really so, lady?'

'Of course, I am not sure, but Chios always was wide in his actions. I knew a time when I believed he loved a slave.'

'To what slave referrest thou?'

'My slave,' replied Nika—'rather, my slave that was, now the great Saronia, High Priestess to the Ephesian Diana.'

'Nonsense, girl! thou art dreaming!'

'No, I am not, though in dreams oftentimes the truth appears.'

'But there is no truth in this,' replied Endora; 'and if there were, the mighty Saronia is incapable of love.'

'Dost thou know her so intimately as to be able to speak so minutely?'

'Who does not know her? Is she not the most prominent woman in Asia, and as good and lovely as she is famous? Thou canst scout the idea from thy mind of Saronia loving Chios or he loving her. Who is this princess thou hast referred to?'

'A Roman of royal blood.'

'Nika, circle of lies, canst thou think to deceive me, the magic centre of Ephesus? I divine thy thoughts, read thy soul to its very core. Again, let me advise thee, turn from this love business.'

'No! The philtre, brew it, make it quickly, give it me, I beg of thee! I cannot live without Chios. Have some compassion on me. Thou art a woman and wise, and canst see in this I lie not—my soul consumes me! He rejects me; all this inflames me to grasp quickly at this heart I love. In my passion I tried to slay thee. Forgive me, Endora—forgive me; I was mad! If thou dost not help me to win him—mark my meaning—I will not fail to make him so that he shall never love another!'

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'Rash girl, thou art truly beside thyself! Philtre thou shalt have, but remember it often turns to madness those you seek to win. What then?'

'What then? I slay myself as an atonement!'

'Again, let me warn thee those philtres do not always take effect. It may be like so much water to Chios.'

'Never mind. Let me try.'

'Then have it thou shalt, but what of the Roman? With such intoxication for Chios, and if the Greek half equals thee, then it would be so apparent to the Proconsul.'

'Never you care! Give me a philtre to cool his love.'

So, without more words, Endora stepped into the gloom of the cave, and, opening one of the chests, took therefrom ingredients for the spell. On the altar the woman laid some embers of fire, and, pouring oil over them, they sent forth a little blaze, shining out and lighting up the faces with a lurid glare, casting dark shadows behind them. For a moment no voice broke the stillness of the place. After the woman had placed her crucible upon the fire, she turned to Nika, saying:

'Listen while I brew.' Stretching forth her bony hands, she said, 'Take this, thou haughty Greek:

'Fish remora,
Brains of calf,
Hair of wolf and bones of toad,
Blood of doves and hippomanes,
Scarlet oak and bruised snake,
Screech-owl's feathers and marrow of men—
Men who have drowned at sea.

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Crackle the laurels under the pot;
Thrice I stir, thrice I chant the mystic number three.
Who shall withstand the philtre Endora of Hecate brews?
Simmer, ye potion!
Brew, ye philtre!
Spirits of Hades, draw out the essence
Of fish and beasts, birds and men!

Make the broth strong so the sediment worthless may be.
Help ye the drawing of love by the lover
From Chios who drinks of this mixture of Hell!

Turning, she saw the girl pallid with fright and shading her eyes with her hands.

'Ah, Mistress Nika, thou art terror-stricken! What if I should clear thy vision and let thee see the spirits surrounding the charmed vessel?'

Endora blew out the light, and the twain were in darkness, except for the glare of the dying embers. The girl uttered a death-like wail, and fell to the ground like a corpse. When consciousness returned, she saw the witch sitting in a cleft of the rock, with a sardonic smile on her face and a small phial in her hand. But it was not filled with the brewage; its contents were harmless. Endora knew her rôle too well to join Nika and Chios.

As the love-stricken maid grew fully awake, she cried:

'Oh, woman, thou art terrible! Is it thus thou makest the philtre? Had I known so much, my heart would have failed me. Thou art truly of Hecate, and so is Saronia. Is your creed the same?'

'No, proud daughter of Venusta. It is the same, yet not so. Saronia is blessed of Diana; I am the accursed of Hecate. Saronia commands those spirits by her goodness; I draw them by the evil within me. But those shades are the slaves of the priestess, slaves like she was a slave to thee, with this difference: she treats the most abject with compassion; thou treatedst her with——'

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'Hush, woman; no more of this! Let her be.'

'Ah, let her be, indeed; thou dost not intend to. As soon as thou art hence, thou wilt do thy best to devour her, as the night-hawk a sleeping bird. But beware, girl! Thou art treading a great abyss, an unfathomable chasm. Be careful, or thou wilt regret thy undertaking! Shall I say more?'

'No, no; the philtre! Give it me, and let me go.'

'Here, take it! But wilt thou not also take this, a counter-one for the Roman, to make him, cool as Chios, burn with love? I have such ready.'

'Let it be so,' said Nika.

Then the witch said:

'Be wise: the rose-coloured phial for Chios; the azure for the Roman.'

But the azure one was the brewage of hell.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CHARMED WINE

There was great excitement in the city of Ephesus, so strong had the power of the Christians become.

The story of the demoniac also filled the minds of the people, and a great crowd had gathered in the Agora, it being rumoured that converts to the new faith would at noon openly burn their mystic books and publicly renounce their magical rites.

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When the multitude of onlookers saw a vast concourse advancing, bearing symbols of the cross, all looked forward to unpleasant proceedings.

As the Christians drew nigh in regular procession, many leading men and women were observed amongst them. They came on, singing hymns to their God and His Messiah, with heads uncovered in the presence of the sacred emblems.

Judah was amongst them, leading a number of men carrying aged manuscripts—manuscripts on Asian magic, written by some of the cleverest men of ancient times.

The books were piled together, each man laying down his load. A torch was applied, and the smoke went up against the cloudless sky. Volumes were thrown upon burning volumes, the flames leaped high, rising into a pyramid of fire, till the whole were consumed.

Judah stood forward, and, bending over the blackened ashes, cried:

'Thus may error die everywhere down the line of centuries, until good shall reign supreme! One God, one Lord, and His Christ, for ever and ever!'

Amongst the spectators were Venusta, Nika, and the Proconsul; but they were not on the side of the Christians. Their policy was one of silence—silence mixed with scorn.

There was, however, amongst that hated sect one whom they well knew—Chios the Greek; he saw them and passed greeting.

All would have passed off peacefully but for a traitor Ephesian who had mixed himself amongst the Christians, and, to raise the ire of the populace, cried out:

'Down with Diana of the Ephesians!'

The mob rushed frantically upon the crowd of book-destroyers, and would have torn them to pieces but for the intervention of the law, represented by an Asiarch who was present. He calmed the tumult, and laughed to scorn the idea of a few misguided men and women trying to eclipse the goddess whom all the known world worshipped.

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From that hour Chios was a marked man amongst his fellows. They were somewhat indifferent as to how the rabble moved, backward or forward, but with the Greek it was different—he, the greatest artist of Ephesus, whose inspirations had gone to build up the faith! Had he not painted Saronia, the High Priestess? and did not the picture hang prominently within the sacred precincts of the mighty Temple?

No, he must be watched, secured. If a true charge could not be made against him, then a false one must be born. Better for him to go to the lions and die than live to embody with his great genius the principles of a false faith. Thus did he stand on a volcano of hate.

As the crowd dispersed Chios joined Nika and her friends, and was greeted with a covert sneer.

'Did we not see thee amongst the unclean? Shame, good man, to be in such doubtful company! Soon thou wilt be at their midnight orgies, and come forth an advocate for this pernicious fraud. And who may say but that thou mayest be baptized and paint the Christian martyr in the throes of death by fire or sword, or caged beasts, eh?—and sign thy name "Chios the Christian" also?'

'Come, Chios, put away this melancholy. Come with us; we will cheer thee—make thee Chios again. Thou shalt drown thy sorrows in good Ionian wine.'

'Yes,' said Nika, 'thou shalt have a draught of rare old Chian wine.' And to herself she murmured: 'It shall be rose-coloured, and this day shall be the last he shall think of faith or Saronia. Ah! he shall love madly, and I shall win him.'

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Chios made no retaliation, but smilingly said:

'I will accompany you to your lovely home. Come, sweet Nika, let me sail by you. And you, Roman, escort the Lady Venusta. Do not be jealous if I make your Nika happy.'

And they walked the shaded way, passing the stately marble edifices, until they ascended the side of Mount Coressus, the tall pines nodding gracefully as their foliage danced on the breeze.

'Dost thou believe much in this magic?' said the girl. 'I would like thy honest opinion.'

'Well, yes, I cannot say I do not believe in it. Undoubtedly, during the ages man has accumulated knowledge which enables him to consort with the unseen; but at the beginning it was not so, and even now it is unholy to do so.'

'That is quite different to what I expected from thee. I expected thy hand raised emphatically, and "Nonsense! Childish fancies!" to have been thy reply.'

'No, Nika; I search after truth and goodness. Mark ye, all that is true is not good; and truth oftentimes is wrapped in error—wrapped in lies. I take the wheat and throw aside the chaff! I believe it is true. Man by certain peculiar laws may familiarize himself with spirits deeper sunk in misery than himself, and may work with them. Believing this, I do not practise it. It is not good to do so. 'Tis fraught with direst evil, for the spirit here who mixes with such wandering ones sinks to their level and joins them when he passes over the boundary. Men—yea, women!—are like unto their familiar companions; if not so at the outset, will gradually and surely become so. Understand, Nika?'

'Yes, and should feel very timid to move within the magic circle. Thy teaching, thou knowest, is law to me. Therefore I promise I never shall. But was it not a pity to burn all those beautiful books?'

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'No; burn the old creed and start with the new, if the new be better. Burn a world if it be vile, and start with a new earth, peopled with a few who know what it is to live well.'

'But tell me quickly, Chios, how wouldst thou screen Saronia? She is the mightiest sorceress in the land! Wilt thou condemn her also?'

'I condemn no one—I condemn creeds which pilot men to evil, and I press forward to gain the purer light. Let each one do the same.'

They passed into the house of Venusta, and, once within the open court, all was changed. On the cool, perfumed air floated the softest strains, flowing like rippling water from cithara, lute and lyre.

'Nika, dear girl, wilt thou arrange that fruit and wine may be set? Give order to thy slave; bid them be brought.'

'Nay, mother, I will see to it all myself. The rich juice of choicest grape stands yonder. Let me fetch it—let me be serving-maid to such noble guests.'

'Wayward child! A whim of thine, I suppose. Go thy way;' and the girl danced off on the lightest foot to the Golden Room.

She grasped the goblets of gold, poured into them the rarest essence of the vine, and looked down into their rosy depths, and saw mirrored there the consummation of her hopes.

'One thing is needful,' said she, 'to complete the chain. Link after link have I forged it, and now for the last to form a chain of love so strong, so powerful as to bind the Greek to me for *ever!*'

She placed her hand within her girdle of rubies, and drew forth two phials—one azure, the other rose. She held them aloft, one in each jewelled hand. The sunlight came through the windows of coloured marble, and the phials sparkled like the jewels round her waist.

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She gazed on them, a smile lighting up her face. On them hung her life's joy—if such a thing as joy could ever warm the heart of Nika, the Roman girl.

Yes, if she were doomed, she would be damned beneath the shelter of Chios.

The goblets lay on the ivory table. One had a serpent around its base, emblem of eternity; into that she poured the contents of the rose-coloured phial.

'This for Chios,' said she.

The other vessel had a chaste design of lilies, into which she poured the liquid from the azure phial.

'This for the Roman. Eternity for Chios—the fading flowers for Varro!'

On a golden plate begemmed with emeralds she placed them, and went forth from the Golden Room bearing the charmed wine.

'Drink!' said Nika. 'Drink joy to the house of Venusta and Lucius!'

And they pledged themselves in Ionian wine.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MINSTREL

Chios sat lazily in his studio. Work he could not; something had come over him—an influence unseen hovered near. He was not sad, nor was he joyous. There was a deep quiet reigning such as he had never before experienced. He seemed to be moving into a new faith; a serenity of softest light lingered around his spirit—a mild delight into which one would sink until it blossomed into ecstatic joy.

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The light streamed through the open doorway, and fell into the shadows which dwelt behind the marble pillars.

He heard soft strains from a distant lyre, and they sweetly moved his soul. The melody of song floated on the evening breeze. He arose from his seat, and followed the strains down between the sweet-scented myrtles to the entrance-gate.

There was a poor emaciated minstrel, singing for bread. The heart of Chios was touched; he beckoned to the man, and brought him within and set food before him.

'I like thy voice, sweet singer. Now thou art refreshed, tell me of thy life.'

'Thou art passing good, kind sir. I was born in Delos, of Greek parents, who died whilst I was yet a child. I was thrown upon the cold world. A sailor crew took me up, and on board a Phœnician ship I sailed the seas to Argos, Spain, and Gaul, and settled in the islands of the West named Britain. There I eked out an existence, a stranger on a foreign shore. I learned the customs of those strange people, accepted their faith, sang their songs, married, lived the life of a Briton until my wife died—I loved her—then my star waned. I fell sick, and pined for my Eastern home, came back to Sidon, roamed through Syria, Galatia, Phrygia, and here; and now, faint, weary, and tired of living, I fain would lay me down and die. But for this cherished lyre and the pleasure of song, I have no other joy save the memories of the past, and would like to rest and join my only love, the British girl of far Bolerium.'

'Ah! a sad story. The same old tale. Love the leveller, affinity, fate—one gone, the other panting to follow. Man, thou hast a good score of summers before thee. Cheer up! Let us be joyous!'

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And Chios poured forth some refreshing wine, and bade the minstrel partake of it.

'Now sing me one of thy love-songs, and thou shalt not want for a good meal for many a day.'

'What wouldst thou like, good sir? Shall I sing to thee a British song, a legend of the Saronides?'

'Sing on.'

Then the wanderer rose and flung his worn mantle over his shoulders; his wealth of dark hair flowing from under his cap, and the shadows falling around like a veil of mystery, lowering the tone of his pale but beautiful face.

Raising his lyre, he swept his fingers over the strings, and a burst of harmony arose and filled the marble room; and, as it died away in softest echoes, his sweet, clear, pathetic voice sang forth these words:

'Far away across the seas,
Borne by ever-favouring breeze,
Skim and plough the ocean's breast
To the islands of the West.

Where the blue waves kiss the land,
Where the pearls gleam on the strand,
Where the vales of Britain lie
Neath the ever-changing sky,

Lived a British maiden free—
Princess, priestess, both was she,
When a Roman with his art
Wooed and stole this maiden's heart.

Fled she with him o'er the seas,
Past the sea-girt Cyclades,
On to Sidon's murmuring shore,
But she smiled not evermore.

For the Roman went his way,
And was often heard to say
How he left beyond the seas
The bride of the Saronides.

Grew she sadder day by day,
Till the Reaper came that way;
Then she raised her eyes and smiled,
Died, and left behind a child.'

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As the last notes died away, the singer saw a great change come over the face of the Greek.

His head rested on his right hand, and with the other he convulsively clutched a little silver shrine which hung from his neck. He was as pale as death; he moved not, spoke not, until the minstrel said:

'What ails thee, noble lord?'

Chios braced himself together, and replied:

'I was deeply touched with thy tender tale. My soul flew out to Sidon. Tell me, is this story true?'

'Yes, 'tis true. I knew the priestess princess, but the Roman I never saw.'

'What was she like?'

'Beautiful—rarely beautiful! She moved among the Druid bards the queen, like a queen of night—tall, commanding, with great dark eyes like dusky diamonds; deep, piercing were those eyes, set beneath eyebrows fit for Juno. Every lineament of her face spoke forth a soul of souls. When she walked, her robe of white fell like a summer cloud, and her dark, waving hair in masses of beauty moved over her shoulders down to her feet. Everyone knew her, feared her—everyone loved her. In an evil hour she fell, was punished, and died far, far away from her island home.'

'What was her name?'

'Saronia.'

'Great God! Saronia?'

'Yea, my lord. Thou art agitated?'

'No, no, no! Go on!'

'Nothing much remains to be told. This only: They mourned her fall, her loss, her death. The prophets in that land have cast a destiny of her child, and say she shall shine forth as the moon, terrible as the sun; that she shall tread with dignity the floorway of a great temple, and shall minister at its altar; that she shall rise to the greatest eminence, and——'

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'Stay! Say no more, man—say no more! Leave her there!'

And a great pain passed over the face of Chios, and he pressed his head between his hands as if to hide from his gaze some hideous vision. Then, suddenly recovering, he said:

'Hast thou that song written in words? If so, sell it to me.'

'I have it,' replied the minstrel; and, taking from his bosom some time-worn parchments, selected one. 'This is it; thou art welcome—thou shalt not purchase. The parchment is naught to me; the words are written on my heart. This copy shall be thine.'

Chios took it, and saw the song was written on the back of an old Celtic manuscript. He cared not for these unknown characters. What he wanted was the song only, and for that he would not take a thousand drachmas.

Pressing some golden pieces into the hands of the minstrel, he said:

'Come to-morrow and sing to me. We are friends. Go now to thine home, for the chill evening air is wedding the night, and thou mayest take hurt.'

When Chios was alone the torrent of his mind was unloosed.

He lit the silver lamp, threw himself on his couch, drew out the parchment, gazed long and intently on it, read it again and again—

'Princess, priestess, both was she,'

until his eyes were suffused with tears, and, overcome with his feelings, he fell asleep.

The next day he awaited the coming of the singer, but he came not. The day following did not bring him. Then he determined to seek him, and, after finding the place of his abode, found the spirit of the minstrel had moved to a far-away shore. The singer had sung his last song on earth.

This was told to Chios by an old woman with whom the minstrel lodged.

'What is thy name, good man?' said she.

'Chios.'

'Art thou Chios, the great artist of Ionia?'

'They say so.'

'Then take those parchments. The poor fellow wished it so. And, in dying, he uttered thy name and another. Poor man! he was only a strolling minstrel, but I verily believe he has gone to the Great. He was no ordinary man. Peace rest his soul!'

Chios went his way, muttering to himself:

'Ah! peace rest his soul. What of my own? Would I could reach Saronia! It is a long time since I met her. I dare not go again. Now my soul is greatly troubled. I am wavering in faith and in doubt as to what is truth. In danger for my doubt; in love with the being I may never meet. For aught I know, death may seal me in oblivion, and there shall be no more of me. All this confronts me, and more. I firmly believe I could place before Saronia strong evidence from the song and the words of the minstrel. See her I must. If I die, one is free—free if I live again! I *must* survive! Though no light breaks over this great problem, no voice or echoes from the distant land, yet my soul, finer element of myself, whispers, "Thou shalt never die."

'Well, Chios, another attempt. Without a pretext, I never could, but I have a strong case this time. Go I will, this very night. I know the way, and will venture all. The parchments I will not take—I will leave them at my studio.'

He folded them carefully, sealed them with his signet, and addressed them to the High Priestess of the Temple of Diana at Ephesus.

'That is right,' said he. 'If I fail, she will receive them.'

CHAPTER XXV

THE SACRED HOUNDS

When the night advanced, Chios went his way to the Sacred Grove of Hecate. Once near the walls surrounding it, he sprang over and was soon among the trees.

The night was still; no sound was heard save the shriek of the hawk and the cry of the hounds of the goddess.

Which way should he take? Would she come to sacrifice? What should he do—should he give up this foolhardy expedition and retrace his steps? No; a strange fascination drew him onwards. Step by step he moved forward until he drew nigh to the marble Temple of the night goddess—a lonely man amidst the great solitude, and shadowed by the lofty pines. No thunderings or voices or lightnings came from the sombre pile; a great bird wheeled by, nearly touching him, shrieking as it flew like the spirit of a wandering soul.

Whilst wondering what to do, he heard the sound of barking dogs; it came nearer, nearer still; they would soon be upon him. Escape there was none. He looked for refuge: the trees were tall

and mighty, and no foothold to ascend. He hid behind the great trunk of the nearest, and was no sooner there than a pack of the fiercest hell-hounds came rushing down the gloomy way. Swiftly they came. The leaders went past him; troop after troop swept by in great masses, until they seemed to be without end.

Verily they had an object, for the foremost ones turned and were coming back towards him. Some had left the beaten track and were scouring between the trees. Evidently they had scented him, and in a second or two the foremost brute stood near him with foaming mouth and eyes of fire.

For a moment only it stood; the next it was upon Chios and received the dagger of the Greek firmly embedded in its heart. Rolling over, it uttered a dismal howl and died. Two others were upon him. He grasped his cloak, wound it around his arm over his hand and thrust it into one animal's mouth, and with one wrench dislocated its jaw. With the right hand free, he met the third and plunged his dagger into its side until it fell back goaded with pain, and in the throes of death sent forth terrific wails, at which the doors of the Temple were thrown open. A light streamed down the pathway, lighting up the fierce combat between man and beasts. The priests uttered a peculiar call, and every hound was immediately obedient; not one left its post, but drew up in a circle around Chios, preventing any chance of escape. Torches flamed, and many men came towards the place of conflict.

One of the priests stepped forward, and beheld the Greek covered with blood, and still clutching his jewelled dagger.

The priest cried:

'What dost thou here on holy ground, surrounded by the hounds of the goddess and the slain around thee? Knowest thou the penalty is death? Surrender! or we let loose the hounds that they tear thee limb from limb. Surrender! we say. Thou shalt have trial, that justice may be done, and we may know whether or not thou camest hither by mischance.'

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'I surrender. Not that I fear your hounds or death—I surrender because I have no right here.'

'Art thou a stranger?'

'No.'

'Who art thou, then, besmeared with the blood of the consecrated beasts?'

'I am Chios.'

'Chios!' shouted the priests. 'What doest thou here?'

'That is my business,' replied he.

'Arrest Chios the Greek!' cried the chief.

Chios put up his dagger into its sheath, and, surrounded by the torch-bearing priests and the hounds following, he walked towards the Temple of Hecate. They led him to the rear of the building, and opening the door of a cell cut into the solid rock, they thrust him in, and the hounds wailed and kept guard the long night through.

How long he slept he knew not. When he awoke, a ray of light pierced through between the joints of the doorway, and he knew the day had come, and probably his fate.

It was about the ninth hour, and by this time the priests and priestesses of Diana's fane knew of the arrest of the Greek for penetrating the mysterious grove of Hecate, and slaying the sacred hounds.

What could this strange proceeding mean? All were horror-stricken. None could solve the reason of his being there.

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Chios, above all others—Chios, one of the best beloved in Ephesus, guilty of such a thing!

The news of this strange adventure flew from tongue to tongue until it penetrated the conversation of all the people, from the place where the philosophers gathered to the Acropolis on the summit of Mount Pion, where the Roman soldiers guarded the heights.

From the Temple of Apollo at Claros to the shrines at Phygela nothing was so much spoken about as the sin of Chios the Greek.

As the day grew this event gained in intensity, and many were the interpretations of his presence there.

The people were divided. Those who were devout worshippers of the great goddess, jealous of his leanings toward the Christians, said it was a conspiracy on behalf of the hated sect to burn the Temple, and he ought to die. Others were more lenient, and looked suspiciously on his being within the Sacred Grove, and thought when on his trial all might be explained. But should it not,

then he should stand to the death against the wild beasts within the common arena.

The priests of the Temple would show no undue haste with the trial of such a citizen; but feeling ran high, and the ultra-devotees demanded immediate action.

He was brought before the august tribunal. Many eminent men offered to speak for him. Chios was obdurate, and, when faced by his accusers, and asked to explain his position, he politely, but positively, refused. Nothing was left for him but death, and he was condemned to the lions.

When the sentence became fully known, and, moreover, that he refused explanation, the populace were more than ever confounded, and desired to solve the problem. They well knew that, the decree having gone forth, he must die; and rightly, said many, or the Sacred Grove would never be safe from robbers or midnight prowlers, and the glory of the Lady Saviour be impaired.

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Chios was handed over to the authorities and lodged in a cell within the walls of the great theatre, to be brought forth on a day near at hand, when many who were condemned should fight to the end.

CHAPTER XXVI

ON THE VERGE

The judgment pronounced on Chios reached the house of Venusta, and daughter and mother were sore distressed, for the Greek was as one of themselves.

Nika was broken-hearted, and resolved to save him. What should she do? To betray intense emotion might convince Varro of her love for the ill-fated man. The Roman was aflame with love, and wrapped in a mantle of jealousy, since he had received the philtre from her hands which was destined for Chios.

She would approach him gently, and artful as a snake.

When he came that day, she said:

'Hast thou heard of the arrest of our friend?'

'Heard of it? Why, nothing else occupies the Ephesians, and by this time all in Lydia, Phrygia, and Caria, as well as Ionia, have heard of the sad event. Whatever does it mean, Nika? Canst thou solve it, noble Venusta?'

'We cannot,' they both exclaimed. "'Tis a most mysterious affair. We are as much at sea to understand as thou. Surely he must have had a motive for being in the Sacred Grove.'

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'I am dying to know,' added Nika. 'Our sex is full of curiosity. Could he not yet explain and stand a chance for his life?' said she. 'In one way he deserves his fate: he was always queer and headstrong; but it is a frightful thought to imagine him torn limb from limb and expiring before our eyes. Can anything be done? Perhaps if I saw him,' continued the girl, 'I might extract from him that which he refuses others. There was a time when I had some little influence with him, but that was long, very long ago. Nevertheless, if thou considerest it feasible, and get me audience—private audience, mark you, for he is not the man to unburden his mind to the public gaze—I will see him, weak creature as I am. I will do my best; and see what thou canst do, if thou dost value his life.'

'Good! Well said, Nika! The Proconsul will do what he can. Hold thyself in readiness for the morrow. I will advise thee further on this matter.'

The Roman was sad at heart, and soon took his departure, brooding deeply over that which Nika had advanced. True, he was the first in the land, but could he interfere? He would try. Chios was a noble fellow, and would lay down his life rather than be guilty of a mean act. There must be some great mystery behind it all. What could it be? Chios the generous, truthful, straightforward, faithful friend guilty of death—guilty of death for being within a grove called 'sacred,' and for killing a couple of infuriated dogs! Nonsense! He was not a robber or incendiary. Nothing of the kind; and he would never see the life-blood of such a man flow out to the earth, and his dying spasms make sport for the people of Ionia. No! To work! He knew by virtue of his rank he could see him, and see him he would, and extract from him sufficient to save him.

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When the morning came, the Roman Proconsul saw the Greek in his cell. He was not depressed, nor did he display any fear. He rose to meet Varro with his usual courtesy, and, reaching out his hand, grasped firmly that of his visitor.

'What doest thou here, Chios?'

'Varro, thou art not a stranger in Ephesus, and hast heard all. Nay, more, thou knowest the seal stamped on the decree which bears my fate.'

'Chios, noble friend, I have come to do my best to save thee. Thou dost not wish to die? art not tired of life—of the green fields, the summer sea, the fleeting clouds of the setting sun? Nature has still a charm for thee, I trust? Thou hast not darkened thy spirit with heinous sin, hast thou?'

'No.'

'Then thou hast a friend in Varro.'

'How canst thou help me?'

'This way: give reason of thy being within that fatal Grove. I know thy reason will be good, and thou shalt appeal to Nero. I will see to it that it shall be so, and, further, that thou shalt live—free! Now, my dear fellow, speak out, and give me hope. Speak, Chios; the house of Venusta languisheth to aid thee. Nika would have come, but I thought it better to be here myself.'

'Varro, friend in adversity, I have nothing to say. My life is forfeited. Let it go. Man dies, and it is well to die with conscience clear. Mine is so. No more have I to say but this: My studio—see it safely closed. Let no profane eye dwell upon my leavings. When I have passed, enter thou, take charge, sell all thou findest there; the proceeds give to the poor of this great city. My parchments are there, and, as directed by their superscription, deal with them.'

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'Chios, do not throw thy life away! This very direction now dropped from thy lips tells me thou couldst not be guilty of crime. There is some deep-hidden secret resting within thy bosom dearer than life. I respect thy courage, and will say no more. As a Roman soldier, I dare not.'

'Thanks, Varro, thanks. Thou art right in being silent.'

'Farewell, noble man; I leave thee to thy fate. It will do thee justice. Farewell, farewell, Chios!'

When the Roman had gone, and Chios was alone, the pent-up feelings of the Greek broke loose.

'No,' cried he, 'I will never betray Saronia! A thousand deaths, but not that! She knows; she understands! When I die for her I can do nothing greater. She will feel lonely, but love me more intensely.'

Varro went directly to Nika, and told her of his visit.

'Fool!' said she. 'Let him die! If he count not his life worth having, why then should we trouble?'

'Nay, child, do not be so rash,' said Venusta. 'Do not speak so lightly of his fate. We do not know all. Chios is never the man to act without great reason. He will weigh all consequences.'

'Well, well; I will see him myself as a last effort,' said the girl. 'May I, Varro?'

'Do as thou wilt, but ere thou goest make oath on the honour of a Roman lady thou wilt give him nothing to frustrate the decree. The dishonour would be on me.'

'Agreed! When may I go?'

'At once. Every moment is precious.'

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She was soon ready, and without any apparent perturbation accompanied her lover to the place where Chios was confined.

As she drew near her face became blanched with terror, and she leaned on the arm of Varro for support. Her courage gave way, and for the first time she betrayed a great agitation.

They traversed the line of underground cells until they came to the one in which Chios lay. The Proconsul communicated his wishes to the guard, and Nika was conducted within, and left with Chios.

When he saw her he started back as if stung with a poisoned arrow. His nature told him there was cause to fear. Did she suspect his secret? For a moment both were silent, then he exclaimed:

'Nika, why comest thou to such a horrible place? Hearest thou the roar of the angry beasts calling for their prey? Art thou not afraid?'

'No, Chios, I fear not, only for thee. That has brought me here. I mean to rescue thee. Have I not told thee aforetime that that love which would not dare to die for another is not worthy of the name of love? Thou hast ever known I love thee. Again, without I dissemble. Here I am once more unrestrained. I will speak freely to thee. No one will hear. My Roman has given me liberty to hold free and secret communion with thee. Now, Chios, we must not bandy words. My visit must necessarily be brief, and I have come to aid thee. What wert thou doing in the Sacred Grove? Tell

me, dearest Chios. Tell me lies or truth, anything that I may have argument to plead for thee.'

Then answered he:

'Lies I cannot speak; the truth I will not.'

'Then I know, and will answer for thee. I will say Saronia sent for thee, and thou wert there with thy full heart to do her bidding. That she deceived thee, or failed to come in time—hence thy position.'

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'Woman, thou liest basely! Thou wouldst tear down the honour of an innocent person, and build on the ruins the gratification of thy selfish passions. Leave me! leave me at once! Why hast thou come here like a sinuous serpent, gaudy and beautiful, but carrying a venom dipped in hell? Wert thou to attempt this base calumny, I would nevertheless die, and dying, shower my curses on thy head, on the head of a perjurer, murderess of the deepest blackness! Now go; thou hast had the mind of Chios. Chios can meet his fate. Let Saronia rest; she is innocent of my act.'

'Dear Chios, do pacify thyself. I was probing only to know the truth. Forgive Nika!' And she threw herself upon his neck and wept as if her heart would break.

Chios put her from him, saying:

'A dying man cannot afford to carry with him a stormy spirit. When I was born, the day, the wise men say, was sunny, the leaves were green, and blossoms were on the citron-trees, the birds sang, the winds were hushed, and all nature smiled. On suchlike day my spirit came within the infant form. I came peacefully, and would leave the same, only with a purer soul. Our life here should be an evolution of goodness. Hast thine been so, Nika?'

She started back in tears. It seemed but a few short years when she was a child, and with swiftness her mind flew back across the summers. She saw herself darkened and deformed, and she held down her head in silence.

'Ah, girl! my words have touched thee. Let them be my legacy. Remember them when Chios is gone. Try and be a nobler girl.'

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'Oh, Chios, cease, or I shall die! What shall I do for thee?'

'Nothing! Take my forgiveness, and go. Go to thy betrothed.'

'Is this all? Am I also to be sent empty away? For the sake of all who love thee, for the sake of Ephesus, I beseech thee, speak out! Thou art not guilty, canst do no wrong. Thou art a sacrifice; thou shalt not die!'

She fell upon her knees, grasped his hands in hers, bathed them in the tears which fell from her eyes, saying:

'If thou dost die, I will die also. If I cannot lean upon thee here, I will pass with thee, follow thee like a faithful dog through the land they call spirit. I have no one but Chios—thou art a mighty soul. In the great beyond I can look to none but thee. Oh, Chios! oh, love!'

The heart of the man was melting, but his spirit remained firm.

'Poor Nika! would I could help thee! Were it in my power, I would place thee in a holier sphere when thy new life comes, but such is not for me to do. I cannot assert my own destiny, much less make thine. Thou wouldst not help thyself by dying. I fear our ways lie apart. Thou wouldst not care to follow me. My affinities are not thine, and beyond they would mingle less. Now let me dry thy tears;' and taking her richly-embroidered handkerchief, he brushed the pearly drops from her cheeks, raised her hand to his lips, and kissed it.

'I will not leave thee, Nika, when I have passed through the vale, but will do my best to lead thee through the gloom.'

He took her to the door of the cell and left her.

She staggered forward, lost her consciousness, and fell. They took her to the fresh air, and after a while she looked upwards towards the skies, murmuring:

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'He is gone away. I saw him leave in the midst of a company of gods. There—there is the rift in the blue where he entered. Chios! Chios! Thou wilt come again—again,' and she fell back as one dead.

Quickly they bore her home. Agonizing fever set in with fury on her until all hope of recovery was despaired of. They watched beside her. Still there came no turn for the better.

One ever-recurring delirium was hers, and ever and anon she looked up with vacant stare, saying:

'The pillar has fallen, the tree is stricken, but thou hast promised to return to me!'

After the Roman had taken her to the house of Venusta, he went again to Chios, and told him of her unhappy condition, imploring him, for the sake of Nika, to free himself, as that seemed the only chance of saving her life, for his name was always on her lips.

With profound sorrow Chios bent his head and groaned within, saying:

'Merciless Fates! What have I done to cause such suffering?... My heart sorrows nigh to breaking yet my mind is fixed as a rock dashed upon by many waves. I cannot alter my decision. I die, even if my own eternal destiny were shattered by my refusing to live! All will be well with Nika. She will live, but I shall be led to death. Farewell! My farewell to Venusta, Nika, and glorious Ephesus with all its beauty! Remember my last testament, and, should thou see an aged man with deep intelligence stamped upon his brow—a foreigner, and chief of the Nazarenes (thou wilt recognise him; he is without counterpart)—tell him I die in peace. His God is mine. Again farewell!'

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The two men gazed at each other for a moment. The Roman spoke first:

'Chios, thou art mad! Why, this alone would damn thee tenfold! Thou art lost! The die is cast, thy doom sealed. Unhappy friend, I pity thee, pity thee from my very heart. Farewell! Farewell—for ever!'

And Chios was left to his fate.

The great day had come. Thousands were pouring into the city. It was the day when the Ephesian theatre would be filled with spectators to witness the slaughter of the condemned—slaves, felons, Christians, and Chios—to make sport for the people.

The beasts had been kept without food the preceding day, and were ravenous. The multitude had been gathering since sunrise, and already the theatre was filled. Never in that generation had such a noble citizen as Chios been offered to the lions; and many hard-hearted and stoical ones said, 'He ought to die,' but when the testing time came, many, many of the people would have saved him.

A rumour had floated, propagated by the witch Endora, that she had watched Chios going towards the grove, followed him, and saw him meet a Greek girl, a lady of Ephesus. Finding they were discovered, both hid within. She saw the girl leave, but Chios remained.

The people, ready to believe almost anything for the sake of Chios, accepted this trumped-up story, saying: 'After all, it was a love affair, and Chios was not the man to reveal the lady's name.'

Thus the feeling grew, and if the populace by vote could have saved him, they would have done so; but this was not possible.

So the time wore on, and the multitude became more excited. The hour arrived. Soon the High Priest and Priestess would arrive and the slaughter commence.

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Chios was being brought forth to the arena just as the High Priestess Saronia passed him. Her garments nearly brushed the doomed man, and their eyes met. She halted and spoke to her escort, saying:

'Who is that man?'

They answered: 'Chios the Greek, the great Ionian artist.'

With an unbending look she beckoned him towards her. With voice clear as a silver bell, she said:

'Of what art thou accused?'

'I am accused of being within the Sacred Grove of Hecate, and slaying the hounds.'

'What brought thee there?'

'Madam, that is a part of my crime, that I answer not such questions.'

'Thou art a bold man, but courageous. Hear me, Chios the Greek! By virtue of my office, High Priestess of the Lady Saviour, I pardon thee. Thy crime is not of the State, but of the Temple. Release him! Let him go!'

Those close at hand heard the words of Saronia, and the news passed round the great building like a flash of light, and a mighty shout of consent rang out like the sound of stranded waves, for they loved Chios at heart.

Even the dignity of the Proconsul forsook him for once. He arose, rushed out, sprang into his chariot, and drove quickly to the house of Venusta.

Nika lay motionless in sleep, one hand hanging listlessly over the side of an ebony couch; her hair, glinted with sunlight, partly hid her face.

The Roman whispered softly:

'Nika, Nika dearest, art thou better?'

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Her eyes opened, and she looked up with a stolid gaze.

'Yes. What didst thou say?'

'Art thou better, Nika?'

'Perhaps so. I dreamt a lovely dream.'

'And what was it?'

'I saw Chios walking unfettered amongst the sons of Jove. He said, "I am free; I will come to thee."'

'But he is not dead, my sweet girl.'

'Not dead? not dead?'

'No; he is pardoned.'

'Pardoned?' cried the maid, springing to her feet and looking around as if still in a dream.

'Pardoned? Pardoned? Why? By whom?'

And her soul awoke to consciousness.

'By Saronia, the Arch-Priestess of the Temple,' said he.

'Saronia! Saronia again? Again?' Then the eyes of Nika fell, and a blush like the first crimson streak of morning swept over her cheeks, and she said: 'It must be so. Chios—Saronia.'

CHAPTER XXVII

ONE FOR ANOTHER

'Now thou art well again, Nika. After thou hast rested, come with me, and see the sports. There will be rare tactics with the retiarii armed with nets. One of the swiftest, most agile, will to-day compete with a burly warrior. Beside, there will be a fight with beasts—a lion will be loosed on a Christian. Come with me into the chariot. Let me escort thee thither.'

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'No; I am weary. Free from the long dreary sleep, I would now remain here, thinking over the strange past. I wonder if Chios will call.'

'I cannot say, dear. I left him near the arena pretty well exhausted.'

'Well, go thou; enjoy the day. Thou lovest manly sports. As for me, I will remain here and drink in the sunlight.'

'No; a little excitement may do thee good. The drive will invigorate thee.'

'If I must, then let it be so,' replied the girl, and she ordered her slaves to prepare her.

The sun was declining, more than half its course had run, when Varro and Nika left the house. Once fairly under way, they soon arrived at the scene of carnage.

The Proconsul entered, and moved to his seat of honour; by his side sat his betrothed. Venusta was also there, and was surprised to see her daughter. A few words of explanation soon put matters right, and they settled down to enjoy the competitions.

The day was sultry, but streams of water rippled along by the gorgeously-decked daïs of the Proconsul, and statue fountains on either hand at intervals poured out delicious perfumes, cooling the air, and making it fragrant as an orange grove when the trees are laden with blossoms.

In a place of honour set aside for her sat the High Priestess of the Temple of Diana. Over her head was a canopy of gold, and great masses of fragrant flowers were piled up in tiers behind her.

She wore a dress of silk dazzling in whiteness, with stars of gold. On her head rested a jewelled crown, and her forehead blazed with the diamond moon crescent. Her face was severely beautiful; her eyes were fixed gazing into illimitable space, bearing an expression akin to pain, plainly telling she was there in her official capacity and found no enjoyment.

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Two attendant priestesses stood by with fans of richest make; another held the insignia of the High Priestess, whilst many others, all beautiful girls of Ionia, waited for her whispered bidding.

The eyes of the noble-born Roman Nika instinctively wandered in the direction of the priestess, and were riveted on the sublime splendour of Saronia.

Nika feared, yet desired, to exchange glances. She was strangely fascinated, but the woman she hated with such deadly hate saw her not, or appeared to be ignorant of her presence.

This aroused a deeper feeling in the daughter of Lucius, and she disliked Saronia more intensely. But for fear of those dark, mysterious eyes she would have by this time been using her as a point for criticism.

The Proconsul wondered why she was so silent, and ventured to say:

'Seest thou the great Saronia? Is she not a mighty being? And fancy, she, above all others, the saviour of the life of Chios! What a glorious thing is power, and charity to use it!'

Then for the first time did she speak of her, saying:

'Art thou too in love?'

'Dearest Nika, explain.'

'Explain? I mean what I say. The brilliancy of Saronia dazzles, shall I say, unhinges the mind of Varro? Remember, do not forget, thou admirest a woman who was once my slave.'

'True; I understand it all, and wonder at thy speech.'

'Thou needst not. Men are all alike; they worship every beautiful woman—Paris a Helen, Antony a Cleopatra, and Varro a Saronia, whilst I, for my own part, see in her only a deep, designing woman, part tiger, part serpent. The tiger hath a lovely sleek body with a furious heart; the serpent for its creeping artfulness is a byword for deceit. Do not get within her fatal circle, or she will sting thee to the very core, and then devour thee. I hate her! She has robbed me of my peace, and now, with deep conceit and hellish pride, she deigns not to turn her head this way. Oh that I had the power to curse her!'

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'Fear not, Lady Nika; she will not capture. Thine eyes of blue are sufficient magnets to hold me. Besides, she is bound to chastity, and is as cold as moonlight on a snow-clad mountain.'

'Yes; and thou mayest add, "In her bosom is a hidden fire like an ice-capped volcano with a burning heart." Beware, beware of Saronia! she has two natures, extreme in both. Is Chios here?'

'Yes, Nika; he has just entered.'

'Canst thou point him out amongst the thousands?'

'He sits by the arena-gate.'

'I wonder why he is there. Ah, now I see him! He recognises! I will raise this crimson oleander to my lips, and greet him with a smile. I have a motive; do not be jealous, Varro. Wait!'

Just then the eyes of Saronia turned, and she saw the girl salute Chios, and a darkness like storm-clouds on the top of the mountain spread over the face of the priestess.

Nika looked defiantly—for a moment only; the withering glance of the Temple virgin blanched the Roman's cheeks with fear.

A great shout went up from the multitude; a man of sober mien was brought into the arena armed with a dagger only. Proclamation said this troublesome Christian would fight for his life and faith with one of the fiercest lions of Nubia. He was aged, and took little notice of the proceedings. The people said it was a murder, and not a fight. Even Nika pitied and Varro wondered.

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Presently a messenger came to the Proconsul, and handed to him a message. He read it hastily, and answered 'Yes.'

'What news?' said Venusta.

'A request only from some young athlete offering to do battle for yon poor aged man. It gladdens me; we shall see better fighting. The old man can offer no resistance.'

'Who offers?' said Nika.

'I know not. Some courageous fellow, well paid by the Christians, I presume.'

They had not long to wait. The fighter stepped forward, cast a hasty glance around, bowed towards where Saronia sat, then to the audience.

For a moment the people were speechless. Then a cry arose: 'Chios! noble Chios!'

The Proconsul half arose in his seat by way of protestation, as if he would forbid. 'Twas too late. At that instant a lion was loosed, and rushed into the arena.

Chios stood unmoved. The beast hesitated for a moment, the light striking his flaming eyes. Then, with a roar which reached afar, he crouched, he sprang, but missed his prey. Uttering discontent, he lashed his sides with fury, and sprang again; but the Greek was too quick for him, and a loud shout of applause went up from the mighty concourse. 'Well done, Chios!' resounded from every side.

One person only was unmoved—one only of that vast assembly was calm. On the face of Saronia was the calmness of death. Her eyes followed the infuriated brute, and when she caught its glance it drooped its head and pawed the earth.

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The third attack, and man and beast rolled over in mortal combat. For a while nothing could be ascertained for the dust which arose. Suddenly the lion fell, with a rivulet of blood issuing from

his heart.

Chios arose from the ground, covered with the life-stream of his foe.

Then great shouts of acclaim rent the skies.

'Well fought!' cried they. 'Long live Chios of Ephesus!' resounded through the mighty building.

'Chios deserves a crown of gold,' said the Proconsul.

A perfect reaction set in, occasioned by the heroic act of the Greek. Those who were loud in protestation turned like a summer wind from south to west. All antipathy had fled. The manliness portrayed, risking his life for another, brought full reward. Even the great Saronia approved the act, and admired the man.

Chios took little heed of it all. He quietly slipped aside, and went to his beloved studio. There he always felt happy.

And now he rested, musing upon the past.

'I have not succeeded in my mission,' said he, 'but it shall be accomplished.'

Outside his gate was a poor-looking aged man, inquiring the way to the studio of the great artist.

'Yonder through the myrtle-trees it stands,' replied a passer-by; 'but do not intrude. Let him rest. He is weary from doing battle in the arena on behalf of a worn-out Christian. Do not trouble him for alms. If thou art hungry, here is a trifle to buy bread and fruit.'

'Friend, I am not a beggar; I am he for whom he fought. I must see him.'

'Well, go thy way; thou hast good need to thank him.'

Up the path, through the rows of trees, up to the marble entrance, noiselessly moved the aged man, and gently tapped at the door. [Pg 151]

Chios arose and opened it, saw who was there, and cried:

'Welcome, welcome, good fellow! Come within. Glad am I to see thee safe and well.'

Judah, full of emotion, staggered rather than walked to a seat, weeping as if his heart would break, and, looking up through his tears, exclaimed:

'Chios, blessed art thou! The blessing of one who was ready to perish, the blessing of one who speaks for his God, the blessing of God, rest ever on thee!'

Chios spake never a word; his heart was full.

'Speak to me, Chios the Greek; let me hear thy voice.'

'I know not what to say,' replied Chios. 'I reckoned thy life worth a thousand of mine, and fought that thou mightst live and do work for thy Master.'

'Chios, neither silver nor gold have I to give thee.'

'I require neither.'

'Good. Nevertheless, thy reward awaits thee; thou wilt receive it later on. We fight under the same banner; we shall meet in the same celestial city—the city whose builder is God. The dayspring will glint its glory over thy pathway, and the lustre of morning will bathe thee in heaven. The wings of thy spirit, now folded beside thee, shall spread out their pinions and waft thee o'er oceans of splendour illimitable, urging thee onward from brightness to brightness, raising thee higher and upward and higher till thou standest a messenger swift for the Deity, holding communion with God the Eternal. This is thy destiny. All will be well. Farewell, noble warrior; thou shalt war for the New Faith. 'Tis rumoured the Proconsul promises thee a crown for thy valour. Be thou faithful unto death, and thou shalt receive a crown of life. I have said my thanks. Good-bye—good-bye, noble Chios! My stay in Ephesus will be brief, but thou shalt ever remain in my thoughts, and my prayers shall go forward for my beloved friend.'

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Once more Chios was alone.

'What a noble fellow is that old man—prophetic, powerful, good,' he mused. 'I believe in him. What he says is true. I am altered. A light steals through me—a river of peace winds kindly through my soul! May his blessing rest on me, and all his words be fulfilled.'

'But what of Saronia? We are no nearer by the advent of this strange faith. Shall we part? Must our communion end? Like two swift ships upon the ocean, greet with welcome hail and pass away across the trackless deep, each going its own particular way? No, no, no! this cannot be. We twain must sail the same course, and at night or in storm give aid. We must move together, the same pilot be ours, enter the same haven, dwell in the same invisible land.'

'But can this be? I am drifting, drifting from the old landmarks. She steers by her well-known beacon fires—I strike out alone across an unknown sea in search of a shore which may not exist,

or, if it exists, I may never reach it.

'Oh cruel doubt! Oh the struggle for truth! Oh to know what to do!'

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CHAPTER XXVIII

SPIRITS OF THE DEEP

Saronia the priestess was agitated. She had resolved in her mind the events of the past few days. 'Why was Chios within the grove?' She could solve the problem—foolish man! 'What demon prompted him—what fiend lured him to the verge of death? Could I but see him, warn him, for my prescience tells me he will attempt this thing again. Rash man! How can I save him? Whom can I trust? None!

'Here am I surrounded by the glory of the mightiest Temple, with pillars rising to heaven, whose summit is crowned with the grandest sculptures of Greece; but the birds which nestle in their carvings are freer than Saronia. I walk in power; every behest is law and none dispute me—yet, for the one great thing I would do, that I dare not! What, then, is power—queently power like mine? It is hateful. I sought it not. It was thrust on me, and I wear it like a band of iron. But cease—cease, my soul! Well dost thou know the smouldering fire of life's accumulated love for Chios pent up within thee. Why dost thou tempt blasphemous Saronia to further sin? Hush! Down, dark spirit! quail, ye rebel fires, smoulder till my days be spent—then, with the freedom I covet, I will luxuriate in joy. Until such time, let me fulfil my destiny. Come on, ye clouds of darkness, hide him from my view! Soul, hear me! Crush to the lowest ebb this fire which rises ever and anon into fiercest flame, and combats with my reason! I am divided against myself.

'O goddess, hear me! Let my prayers like sweet incense rise! Bring me strength!...'

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A sullen roar of distant thunder broke on her ears, as if the gods were speaking from the mountains, looming landward past the Temple city.

'Hark! Diana's voice! I will to augury.'

She sped to the window. Naught through the darkness could she see. Suddenly forked lightning winged its course to the east, another flash swept nearer by, and the pillars of the great Temple stood out, lit up with fiery hue. The night-birds flew in wild commotion, shrieking as they went, crying with a solemn wail.

She stood back. Too well she knew the meaning of those sounds, the language by which the invisible speaks to the mortal.

A lightning-flash was seen across the Temple door, another line of fire crossed it from an opposite direction, as if a mighty guardian spirit stood there with sword aflame. A burst of thunder and a mighty crash, and she knew the building had been struck with an arrow from heaven.

Her reason pointed a power at work who dared insult the sacred place—some god greater than Diana warred against her, degrading her home. This was the augury the priestess drew, and wondered greatly at the sign. It was a revelation to her—a spark of virgin light, dim as the faintest dawn. But it shook her faith, and she spread out her hands as one wandering in the night.

Then she laid herself down in the gloom, and her spirit moved out to Chios. She longed to speak to him.

Across the open window a shadow passed blacker than the darkness. She arose and looked out; naught could she see—all was silent. Then a faint voice like a whisper came from the parapet:

'Saronia, it is Chios!'

And in a moment he was beside her, and, throwing aside his mantle, stood before her in all his strength.

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She was appalled, but knew it would be death to both to utter the faintest cry, and with horrible calmness the priestess murmured:

'What, by all the gods, brings thee here?'

'Love! Life without seeing, speaking to thee, is worthless—worse than valueless! I scaled the Parabolus walls, I did the same by yonder parapet; and, by Jove! were they high as Mount Coressus, I would have come. I passed the guards, saw the Temple's frowning brow; the lightning lit my path, and the thundering echoes on the midnight winds were music to my soul. I gazed towards this resting-place, and, when the heavens were lit with flame, saw thee standing alone at the window. 'Twas enough for me. My spirit bounded here long before my body came. Didst thou not feel my influence?'

'Yes, I thought of thee; but thy presence here is too awful to contemplate.'

'No, no, dearest love! this is our fate. Thou art my complement; we cannot long remain asunder.'

Thine essence is a part of myself; thou art my affinity, my counterpart, that which makes my whole, my sun. Remove it, and the whole system is shaken, and wanders into chaos and oblivion. Had I a thousand lives, not one should be reserved; all should be thrown into the balance for thee.'

He caught her in his arms, and his lips met hers.

'Darling, art thou safe whilst I am here?'

'I am safe from mortals, but not from the ire of the goddess. Her great invisible spirit cannot be deceived; all that is enacted here she knows and records.'

'True, dearest; but even Venus loved.'

'Yes; but Diana is cold and chaste. This night bespeaks my fall. To love is disobedience; for me to disobey is dire rebellion.'

'No, no, girl! it is not so! it cannot be! The Being who created us implanted this love; it cannot be born of sin. Man makes laws, and man often breaks them, without calling down the anger of the gods. Lovest thou me, Saronia?' [Pg 156]

'Ah, Chios, that is my crime! What brought thee to the grove of Hecate?'

'Thou.'

'I?'

'Yes, Saronia—to see thee on a most important errand. I strove to find thee in the wood.'

'I thought as much. What was thy mission?'

Resting himself beside her on a couch o'erlaid with gold, he said:

'Canst bear surprise?'

'I think so.'

'Then hear;' and, whispering softly, he said: 'One day there came a man, a minstrel, to my home; sad as the waves telling story of storm were the strains of his song, and sweet as the clear running brook were the sounds from his lyre. He sang of a far-away land. Hast thou heard of the lonely West, where the isles of the Britons lie circled in purple mists?'

'Yes.'

'He sang of a princess priestess who stood at the shrine of their gods. He spoke of a Roman who came to that land and stole the pure heart and the hand of this beautiful girl, and bore her away to the Cyclades, and, further away, to the Tyrian Seas, to a resting-place in Sidon.'

'And what became of her, Chios?'

'Thou shalt hear. Their wedded life was brief. The Roman forsook her. She died of a broken heart, and her babe survived.'

'How sad!' said Saronia.

'Wouldst thou know the name of the British girl?'

'I would.'

'Twas Saronia.'

'Saronia!' gasped the priestess, and, uttering a piercing shriek, she fell back into the arms of Chios. [Pg 157]

He heard footsteps approaching. He knew he must fly. Then, laying her on a couch, he kissed her lovingly, saying:

'We must part, but will meet again. Saronia, dost hear me? I will see thee at the Temple service: an oleander in thy bosom, I come to thee; a myrtle flower, thou comest to me. Farewell, loved one!'

And he plunged into the darkness, and the thunders roared as if the heavens would rend themselves in twain.

The priestess nerved herself and reclined listlessly. When the attendant priestesses entered, she was pale as the white silk enfolded her form.

'What ails the noble lady?' said the foremost of the beautiful maidens.

'It has passed,' said Saronia. 'Summon the guard; bid them go to the Temple and bring me word if disaster has fallen and smitten it. Hear ye the mighty voices of the gods! See the quivering messengers of fire! Haste away and bring me news!'

Then, falling into one of her mysterious reveries, from which no priestess dared disturb her, they noiselessly glided from the room one by one, each bearing a lamp of gold, and Saronia was left alone.

Soon the priestesses returned, with blanched cheeks, saying:

'Lady of Diana, at thy bidding the priests, with escort, entered the sacred edifice, and discovered through the roof the fated bolt had flown, wrecked the altar, and rent the veil; but the statue of the great goddess remains unscathed. The watchmen are dead, blackened corpses. The High Priest, chief of the Megalobyzi, has gone to the Temple. What shall we do?'

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For a moment the mighty priestess was lost in thought—'twas but for a moment; then she raised herself and regained sublime dignity, saying:

'Altar and veil, the work of men's hands, are resistless as man to their fate; but the image of she who is highest in heaven and strongest in hell is safe from the lightnings, the storm, and the warrings of all the invisible hosts which encircle us. And we, her own children, are safe in her keeping—safe in the shade of Diana Triformis. Pour out your prayers, let them rise to the heavens and spread round your homestead and down to the underworlds. Pour out oblations! Chant forth your praise-hymns for mercy on mercy rolling forth like the surging of mightiest billows! Farewell, maidens of the goddess, farewell!'

Saronia that night was sleepless. She had again saved the life of Chios. She had dissembled. To have done otherwise would have been to be the murderess of Chios. Thus thought she.

By the light of the dimly burning lamp she looked like a tigress at bay. Great clouds flitted sullenly across her face, and her eyes were dark as the night, and darker they grew till the shadows which fell on her were as light to them.

The lamp burned low, but she heeded not. Its dying flame pleased her, and the shadows grew deeper, until her form sank into the darkness.

A great war raged within her. It was a battle-ground on which were arrayed spirits, good and evil, fighting for the citadel of her soul. The light from her mistress goddess was hidden, and reason cold as snow sat enthroned upon that lofty mind.

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Her duty was to serve as heretofore, but lurking love rose up in mighty flame enveloping her. She could see Chios only, feel the pressure of his lips, hear the sound of his voice speaking of love, of the minstrel and of the bride of Britain.

'Who was that mysterious woman named Saronia?'

'What caused that strange suspicion and the piercing cry? None other than that by some peculiar affinity I realized that it was she that bore me into this world.'

'Oh that I could have heard the end of the story! Cruel destiny shattered me at the harbour mouth, and I lie stranded a lonely wreck on a bleak shore and tainted with rebellion. Shall I fail now? No; Saronia shall build another self out of the shattered parts. I will arise, shake the stupor from me, stretch out my arms into the darkness. I will robe for divination,' and pointing her finger towards the dead lamp, it sprang into flame, casting a glare around the room.

She arose, cast aside her snowy dress of whitened silk, draped herself in darkest shade, girt her waist with a diamond zone black as night, over her shoulders a mantle hung—a mantle of sable hue studded with stars of silver and gold. On her breast she wore the Ephesian symbols of Air and Water, Earth and Life, and Death. Her eyes shot glances like serpents at war, her bosom was upheaved with the strongest emotion, and she moved to the place where the burning lamp stood, seized it, and stood by an altar raised to the goddess of Hades.

For a moment only was she motionless; then she raised high aloft her jewelled hands, brought them to her lips, kissed them to the Queen of Heaven, and stretched them earthwards to the underworld—to Hecate, the Queen of Hell. Her head lay back; her eyes shone out with mystic sheen; her raven tresses trailed the floor; her gloomy garments lay in graceful folds, dark as the midnight sky without a star or moon, and standing thus, she invoked the goddess Hecate.

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This done, she lit the altar's sacred fire, and incense burnt until the room was filled with odour and the light from the golden lamp grew dim.

Her lips parted, and a silvery voice issued, murmuring softly:

Spirits of the mighty ocean,
Ye who lie beneath the waters,
Down—down—fathoms deep!
Ye who roam 'twixt here and Sidon,
Ye who lure the ships to ruin,
Ye who haunt the fated vessel,
Lighting up her masts and cordage
With your quenchless tongues of fire;
Stormy petrels of the sea-foam,
Swiftest of your countless legions,
Appear! Appear!

'Ye are come! Hear me!

'A Roman bore from Britons' land, stole from thence with artful wiles, a maiden blessed with rarest beauty—cheeks of olive, raven hair, eyes of darkest midnight hue, soul as pure as the morning light. He took her to Sidon. He left her—he left her and her child. Troop your way with speed to Sidon. Solve the story which I tell you. Bring me answer from Phœnicia.'

The spirits of the deep bent low their shadowy forms; one by one quickly snatched a grain of burning incense from the altar fire, placed the sparks upon their awful brows, rose together, met the storm-wind howling fiercely, passed it faster than conception, skimmed the foaming crests of billows, swooped again o'er struggling biremes with their crews of doomed seamen. Flew they on with awful swiftness, till the air waves left behind them wound the earth in many circles, till the silent city Sidon slept beneath their hovering pinions; glanced their message to the spirit—Spirit Prince of Ashtoreth. Gained their answer, sailed they westward to Ionia, faster than the coming day-dawn; stood before the great Saronia; hailed her priestess of Diana; whispered forth with frightful meaning:

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'Thou thyself, from her begotten, standest first amongst all women. She, thy mother, princess, priestess, died uncared for, unbeloved—died a rebel to our goddess, worshipping the Jewish Christ—name we scarcely dare to mention.'

Saronia beckoned them away, and when they had fled a tremor seized her; she staggered to a seat, muttering:

'I, also, am a rebel, and worship Eros.'

Starting to her feet, she said:

'Who is this Christ?'

Stretching her arms out into the darkness, she cried:

'Saronia, Saronia, the Saronide, where art thou—my mother who bore me? Let me touch thy hand! Speak to me—to me!'

But she grasped the empty space; not even the echo of a whisper fell. Then she cried again:

'*Thou art beyond my plane, or thou wouldst come to me. Thou art greater than I. Hear me, ye spirits of the air! Listen, spirits of lands and seas! Hearken, ye spirits of Elysium and Hades! Here in the darkness, here in the womb of night, here near the birth of the early dawn, here with a soul storm-tossed and driven, I swear I will find her. Her God shall be mine, and where she riseth I will follow. O light, O truth, O love, let me climb your ladders of gold!*'

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The dawn appeared in the east, breaking the gray on the ocean's rim, and the birds sang forth from the trees in the Sacred Grove.

CHAPTER XXIX

MYRTLE AND OLEANDER

'Varro, goest thou to the Temple to-day?' said Nika.

'Yes, dearest; Chios is to receive the golden crown and freedom of this city.'

'I trust those honours will sit lightly on him.'

'Fear not, Nika. He is very stolid. Really, I do not know what has come to him.'

'I do,' said she laughingly; 'he is in love.'

'Nonsense! Nothing of the kind. He would never trouble about such a thing.'

'How knowest thou?'

'How do I know? Well, really, I cannot answer thee, but thou must know if a man loves there must be something to love. Chios is a confirmed bachelor. I believe he almost hates women; that is to say, as far as making himself a lover. I never even knew him to commit the crime of a weak flirtation.'

'Ah, ah! So much for the reading of a man's mind by a man. Let a woman make up a man, and thou, mighty Roman, read the minds of women. 'Tis more natural.'

'Well, Nika, I must away. I must leave thee. The time is short, and I have business of my own before I go to the Temple. There will be no public demonstration. Chios wishes it so.'

'Before thou dost depart, listen. Something befitting the occasion comes to my mind. Send him a message of congratulation. Write it with thine own hand, and seal it with the stamp of Imperial Rome. He will cherish it more than many crowns.'

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'Very thoughtful of thee. It shall be done. The presentation takes place within the Temple. The great priestess will be there, and, if I can so arrange, she, his preserver, shall present it. Nice idea, is it not?'

'Very.'

'Wilt thou witness the ceremony, Nika?'

'No.'

'Farewell, sweet one; I will return before sundown and tell thee all the news.'

The crown and the congratulation were conveyed to the Temple. When the High Priest read the request of the Proconsul, that Saronia should present them, he smiled, saying:

'Let it be so.'

Saronia thought the request unusual, but the priest said:

'Foster the whim; no harm can come of it.'

It was past noon; the great sun shone out with refulgent glory. Not a cloud sailed the azure depths. The birds were sheltering from the heat between the branches of the citron-trees. An eagle flew by flapping its wings as Chios met the Roman at the gateway of the Sacred Shrine.

They moved towards the marble steps, and, ascending past pronaos and vestibule, went within the gates of ivory and gold and stood near the altar, around which were gathered the High Priest and Priestess and their attendants.

The Proconsul and Chios bowed lowly, and were saluted in return; and the proclamation ran:

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'WHEREAS Chios, the Greek of Ephesus, has proved to the people of this city that he possesses heroic courage, and used it well on behalf of a fallen enemy of the Sacred Goddess:

'THE PROCONSUL, the COUNCIL, and the PEOPLE request that he be crowned with a crown of gold, and, FURTHER, that the Act be proclaimed at the festival of Dionysus at the Great Theatre, and a place be allotted to him in a Tribe and a Thousand:

'THAT he possesses the privilege of occupying a front seat at the games, and is exempt from paying duty on all articles imported or exported by him, and that he has right to leave or enter the city in time of peace or war.

'THIS DECREE to be inscribed by the Temple Wardens in the Great Temple of Artemis, where other grants of citizens have been subscribed.

'THAT ALL MEN MAY KNOW the people of Ephesus delight to honour such deeds of heroism, whether performed on behalf of a friend or an enemy.'

This read, Saronia the High Priestess bade Chios come to her, and taking the crown from an attendant, she placed it on the brow of the Greek, saying: 'Hail, honoured of the Ephesian people!' And at the same time she handed him the letter sealed with the seal of Rome.

As she did so, she looked steadfastly into his eyes, conveying her thought to him: 'Open it not here.'

He saw the oleander and the myrtle both entwined upon her bosom, and this he understood not.

He placed the parchment within the folds of his robe, and after thanking the givers, he retired with the Proconsul.

After passing the precincts of the Temple, the two men wished each other fortune and separated—the Roman to Nika, and Chios to wonder at the twin symbol which graced the bosom of Saronia.

He broke the seal of the parchment; between the folds he saw a tiny scrap. He read it—the other was nothing to him.

'To-morrow, when midnight has passed, haste to the bend of the river Cayster, which flows by the grove of Hecate. Fear nothing. The child of the Bride of Britain will be there.'

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It was from Saronia, and he feared for her. He kissed the tiny scrap passionately.

'I will be there should all the Furies in Hades block the way....'

'By the bend of the river—by the bend of the Cayster which washes the fringe of the horrible grove. I know the place well, where the chrysophrus with golden-coloured head swims to and fro. I know the spot where the iris bends its yellow flowers, where the lordly swans glide past, and the cranes dwell, and the nightingale sings from the silvery leaves of the sacred trees.'

'I will be there, Saronia, my soul, my light, my love! I will be there to strike for thee with the strength of a lion if needs be!'

CHAPTER XXX

BY THE RIVER CAYSTER

The grove of Hecate was filled with beautiful trees—palm and myrtle, cypress and pine, the rich springing laurel, and the holy shoot of the deep blue olive.

Statues studded the wood, and the river Cenchrius watered the ground, and here had been heard the sound of the dance-loving lyre at the feasts of the gods.

Through this tree-clustering wood the fair-haired Muses came to worship, and the Sybil let loose her golden locks when the gods breathed on her.

The Cayster came south to the margin of the grove, moving rapidly northward and westward, sweeping by myriad blooms of the rose and iris, till it flowed from the land to the sea, carrying with it the snow-born waters of Cenchrius, Marnas, and Selinus—all goodly streams which watered the plain of Ephesus. [Pg 166]

The priestess Saronia was thoughtful and calm. Not a ripple of agitation crossed her face as she gave her orders to a sacred slave:

'Summon seven of the Melissæ—my bees, my virgin priestesses.'

She said to them:

'Prepare sacrifice for to-night. I offer to Hecate in the Sacred Grove. Take there a lamb, black as night, and honey of the rarest kind bear ye. Let the slaves dig a new pit, and place an altar therein, that all may be ready when I come. I leave the Temple gate when the watch tells out the hour before midnight. Merina and Smyrna shall accompany me to the confines of the grove.'

That night Chios quietly stole along under the stars until the old road to Smyrna intersected his path; but he did not swerve from his course until he reached the Cayster. Following its sinuous banks, disturbing the wild-fowl as he went, and treading on a carpeting of sweet-scented night-flowers, he soon reached the bend of the river which laved the grove.

There he rested on a block of white marble, brought to be set up as a memorial.

He gazed over the dark and silent stream. He arose, and paced to and fro. Not a sound was heard, save his own footfall and the nightingale's song.

He did not wait long ere he saw the form of a woman moving towards him. [Pg 167]

Stealthily she came.

His heart danced with joy, for well he knew who it was.

'I am here,' cried Saronia.

'Noble girl!' replied Chios, as he kissed her.

'Art thou not fearful of this meeting?' said she.

'No,' replied the Greek. 'I have been told that love which would not dare death is not worthy the name of love.'

'It is death to both if discovered.'

'So much the better,' said he. 'We should then be for ever free.'

'Dost thou guess my mission to thee, Chios?'

'Partly.'

'Well, let me tell thee. I would hear more of the story—more of whom I am.'

'Darling girl, would I could tell thee! I know no more. I have told thee all.'

'Yet, I know more.'

'How?'

'By the power of divination.'

'And what hast thou gained by thy magic?'

'This: she whom thou spoke of is no other than my own mother. Further, she died unknown, uncared for, calling on the name of the Jewish Christ.'

Chios gasped for breath, and started back as if stung by a serpent, exclaiming, with bated breath:

'The Jewish Christ! Can it be true?'

'As true as the morning sun shall rise. I know it true, and judge it passing strange. How such a faith grew in her I know not. The mysteries of this creed I cannot understand, although it grows apace in Ephesus; but this I know: when I called forth into the world of spirits no answer came from her, whereby I am convinced she has gained entrance into a kingdom where the least of its subjects is greater than the mightiest of Diana's followers. I am the Arch-Priestess of yonder sacred Temple. My mother is greater than I, for I could not reach her plane, but—I *will!*'

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'And how, Saronia?'

'I know not.'

'Wilt thou also turn Christian and follow the Nazarene?'

'No; I hate the thought. That faith is darker to me than the rolling blackness of the Styx.'

'What if thou sawest light in the darkness, and found a narrow path leading up to a plane of loveliness where, perchance, thy mother dwells? Wouldst thou not walk in it?'

'Yea, that I would, and would lay down my life to commence the journey. I am not a traitor to my goddess. I have followed her with all my strength, believing her to be the source of my being, and to whom I may return; but conditions are changing in me. My faith tried—it does not totter. Mark well, I say it does not stagger—it trembles only! My soul cries for more light—light—more light! And I cannot satisfy its longings. I ask thee, dost thou know of this Christ?'

'I do. I have sat at the feet of one of His greatest teachers, and he unfolded to me some of its mysteries.'

'Chios, I fear! Go on.'

'What shall I tell thee? I am not a teacher.'

'Art thou a believer?'

'I am, so far as I know; but its mysteries are great. I have scarcely touched the fringe of this new faith.'

'Hast thou, then, cut thyself adrift from the worship of our sacred goddess?'

'I have.'

'Oh, Chios, Chios, this is worse than all! Let me lean upon thee; I am weary—I am weary and alone.'

'No, dearest, thou art not alone, for the Father is with thee.'

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They sat down on the block of white marble. He laid her head upon his shoulder, and the warm tears fell upon his hands; then he whispered:

'Dearest love, take courage. All will be well.'

'No, no, Chios. The strings of the lyre are broken. Saronia is alone.'

And, looking up, with her eyes melting with tenderness towards him, she said:

'The slave became a priestess, and the priestess a broken reed. Thou in spirit hast left me.'

'No, dearest, that is not so. We shall join hands when we fall, like leaves in the autumn time.'

'That may not be so, my love, my Chios, my joy, my life, my soul! Farewell! I am lost to thee, and thou to me, for ever—for ever!'

'No, no, Saronia; we will never part!'

'But we must, unless one resigns the faith; and, if we both believe our own, which can be liar, traitor? Thou shalt keep thine own. To thee it is truth, mine falsehood! I have no call to follow thine—I know not the way. I have espoused myself to the faith of Diana; I adhere to it until a greater than she broods over my spirit, and begets a new light for a new creed; when such shall come to pass I will not fail to do my duty. Until then I follow by the light I possess. This is my determination, dearest Chios. This I will do, and no other.'

'Saronia, this is more than I can bear. My soul sinks into a depth of woe unspeakable. Not that I fear, for, as light hath come to me, so also shall it shine on thee. I have not the gift of a seer, but I know we are one in spirit, must believe alike, worship the same God. As the light first strikes the tops of the mountains and afterwards floods the vale, so it broke first on me, and anon it shall burst on the soul of my Saronia.'

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'Chios, Chios, my spirit thirsteth! Give me this light if thou canst. Give me truth.'

'And still thou lovest me, Saronia?'

'Love thee! Ah! a thousandfold more for fear our love may end with life. I know thou art good. Go thy way; serve thy God. I go mine to the grove yonder, to offer sacrifice to my goddess. Saronia must be true to her trust; let Chios be the same.'

He took her in his arms and kissed her passionately. Holding her head between his hands, he gazed lovingly into her eyes, saying:

'Our love can never die. It is begotten from above. I will come again to thee, and teach thee of the new faith. I have with me a parchment, closely written, given to me by the holy man I saved from death. May I leave it with thee, Saronia? It may be of use. Thou dost not refuse it? May the Christ of God bless thee! And now good-bye. This is our meeting-place. It is unfrequented. Thou knowest how to signal me.'

Drawing her mantle around her tightly, he kissed her again and again, and she vanished into the night.

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CHAPTER XXXI

THE DOOMED CITY

Two men were on the summit of the mountain which overlooked Ephesus. They had been earnestly engaged in conversation for some time, and, as they walked together, Chios said:

'How glorious is the decline of day! How splendid looks the city bathed in the golden light of eve!'

'Ay, true,' replied his companion; 'and I would that its fate led to peace, but it is not so.'

'Seest thou the great city as it lies beneath us, its shrines and palaces like polished silver and burnished gold, and its frowning walls and battlements like a mighty circle of adamant?'

'Look at its many terraced gardens of vine, olive, citron, and pomegranate, and gaze upon its purple-misted sea, and count, if thou canst, the multitude of white-winged ships bringing merchandise to pour into the lap of this mighty mart.'

'The many-toned instruments sending forth their plaintive strain come up upon the perfume-laden air, and the song of the priests from yonder mighty Temple, the wonder of the world, floats lazily by like a vessel drifting with the tide.'

'But, like the city of Salem, o'er which my Master wept, so this is doomed.'

'The time shall come, and ere long, when it shall sicken and die. Those mighty buildings shall be no more. Yea, the mightiest of them, the great Temple of the goddess, shall become a wreck, and its splendour be rent in pieces and distributed amongst the nations, its floorway be covered with the dust of centuries, and its very site be questioned in the minds of men.'

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'The faith of Him I serve shall flourish here and grow until it blazes out like a forest of fire; but for a brief time only, for the place is accursed, and love will grow dim and the light depart. Amidst the din of war men will hurry to and fro in her beautiful streets and squares, pillaging and destroying as they conquer. Her splendid harbour will become a wild morass, a covert for the night-birds when the stormy winds rush over the plain from mountain to sea. Her streets will be deserted and silent, not a footfall be heard where the myriads trod. Nothing shall be left of her save a wilderness of marble ruins and tales of her former grandeur.'

'How terrible!' exclaimed Chios. 'Is that the destiny of beautiful Ephesus?'

'It is so; and well for thee light dawns into thy soul and thy spirit purifies, fitting thee for a brighter home. My time is well-nigh spent. I shall soon go hence.'

'Dost thou leave us?'

'Yes. I go to Rome to work, suffer, and die. Our ways diverge. Yet fear not. We enter the same haven at the right time. When once a man's face is set heavenward, God will not remove him until he be fit to enter His kingdom. I am glad I met thee, and, better still, my Lord and Master moulds thee for the future.'

'Judah, hast thou ever come into contact with the priests of the great theatre?'

'No. Why dost thou ask?'

'I thought if such were the case thou mightest give thine opinion of their faith.'

'That I can do.'

'Well, what think thou of Diana?'

'What think I? That the people who worship her are in earnest. They believe what is told them. Their forefathers did the same. It was good enough for them, so they follow—follow like dogs their master. Now and again those with keener insight step aside and utter protest, sniffing danger. Most of them are whipped into their place again, and all goes on as before.... The priests

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know their work, and are clever. The people may believe the myths and accept them as truths, but their teachers know they are fables, and use them as such to illustrate their faith.

'The worship is one of the senses—ours is spiritual, and needs a spiritual sight only to know as much of God as the soul of man can comprehend. A dreary shore with the great darkness around is to the Christian a temple filled with light. Thou hast friends amongst the worshippers of Diana, Chios?'

'Yes, one especially. She who gave me back my life—the great High Priestess Saronia.'

'Saronia, the High Priestess! I know her. When thou offeredst thy life to preserve mine, I saw her save thee from the lion.'

'What meanest thou?'

'She killed the lion's strength. One look from her could quell many such beasts. Her gaze would stay an eagle in its flight, and bring it earthward to her feet, swifter and surer than an arrow winged with lightning. She is deadly with her power! A mighty foe to those within her sphere, but with a follower of my Master she is powerless. The least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than she, and thou, Chios, art greater than the mighty Saronia. The Spirit which leads thee is the first, the greatest, the Lord of Hosts. All principalities and powers are beneath Him. Before His gaze the rebel prince fell like lightning from heaven.'

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'Listen, friend; I think I read thine heart. Thou lovest this terrific being—is it not so? Tell me. Thy secret shall be well kept. I may help thee.'

'Thou speakest truly. I know I am safe in thine hands. I trust thee to lead the way for my eternal good, and I may confide this portion of my life's history to thee. 'Tis a passion which may never be realized, but I dare hope she may be won for our God—and what a mighty spirit for good she would be!'

'Chios, her great spirit is of no common order. It has lived through the ages, and for the time is deeply buried in its prison of clay. We will awaken her, if we can, from out the cold and damp mists which surround her. This clay form to her is as Hades.'

'How can it be done?'

'This wise. The man who lives in harmony with God has the Deity on his side. He is a son; the Lord is his Father. Speak to Him as a child, and remember His power is infinite—and I will pray the Father and His Son that help may be given thee.'

'Tell me of the Son.'

'His Son is the Christ. To the Greeks this is foolishness, but be thou led by the Great Spirit, and He will teach thee all things, and thou wilt love the Son, and He will work with thee to win the desire of thy heart.'

'I understand not. These mysteries are well known to thee, and I obey. I am young in the faith, and cannot run.'

'For the present,' replied Judah, 'thou wilt do well in using thy faith; but the time will shortly arrive when thou wilt understand. Great is the mystery, clouds and darkness are around Him. Thou hast placed thy feet upon the ladder; as thou climbest thou wilt emerge into brightness. Trust and learn. As a pilot takes the helm at the harbour-mouth and shapes the course betwixt the sands, so mayst thou give way to the Great Pilot, and thus obtain abundant entrance into the haven whose promontories run out from the eternal shore.'

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'Thou speakest again with authority?'

'I do. For awhile my spirit freed itself from the body, and moved into a sphere unseen, unknown to mortal eye. There I heard truths which no language can convey—not even your beautiful Grecian tongue could reveal them. I heard the language of Heaven, and was taught of God things mysterious and unlawful to utter; but I shall hear the grand rhythm again when I return home.... Now the sun is gone, and the west is banked with night-clouds. Let us depart.'

CHAPTER XXXII

ENDORA

Where the river of Ephesus joins the sea the great rocks stand out as fortresses of the land, and the deep blue waters roll homewards to the shore, urged by a never-changing law bidding them kiss the strand and die.

On the shrill breezy air the sea-birds wheel and soar until their white wings turn to silver as they circle round the sun and sink into its brightness as a star dies into day.

The cliffs are abloom with blossoms of gold, like a garden of woodland flowers. On the summit overlooking the sea stands a temple and shrine to the goddess.

Northward is the mountain of Galleus, with its pine precipices and aerial summits piercing the clouds. At its feet the city of Claros, with temple and groves of ash and mighty oracle sacred to Apollo.

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Further away, from the Cilbianian, and turning west of the lake Selinusian, comes southward a river moving along midst bright oleander and blossoms of myrtle, murmuring adieu to the gods of the river as it passes on its course to the bosom of ocean.

Away to the west and the south, like a misty dream, are the pale-blue tops of Pactyas; between them and the Gallesian range stands the city of Ephesus, Coressus and Pion like sentinel hills guarding its massive gates.

Here on this rock-bound cliff, near the altar, stood Endora, the witch.

The day was young and no one about, and she gazed far out at sea, straining her evil eyes until they seemed to start from their sockets.

She turned with a disappointed air, and, gazing towards the city, cried:

'Doomed art thou! Little did they know I was about. Had Chios known I was there, he would have been more careful. Turned Christian! Loves Saronia!

'I will not betray him. Hag as I be, cursed as I am, all Hades shall not draw me to reveal. This blasted spirit of mine may drift, yet I swear by the father of the gods—no, no, I cannot swear by him! What shall I swear by?

'I swear by Chios and Saronia, mortals like myself, that I will be true, true. Can I be true? No, no, no, I will not betray them. That is all!

'What a curse hangs over this beautiful place! I heard that strange man tell Chios the great city shall die. I know a sibyl has spoken, "That the earth opening and quaking, the Temple of Diana would be swallowed like a ship in a storm into the abyss, and Ephesus, lamenting by the river banks, would inquire for it then inhabited no more." And, who knows, she may be true! What care I? Endora will be far hence. I have to do with the present. I have come to watch for the white sails of the Roman fleet bringing back the Proconsul. I know they are near, expected to-day.

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'Now one long gaze out over the great, cloud-mirroring sea. My eyes are keen. No, they come not, and I go hence.'

She turned landward and saw Saronia.

She cowered towards the sea-flower-blooming sward as the priestess said:

'What doest thou here, woman?'

'Naught, my lady, but for the gathering of fragrant herbs.'

'Thou liest. The wild thyme and its fellows grow not upon this breezy crag, ever washed by the salt sea foam; but, stay, Endora—I know thy name. I would speak with thee. Once when I was a slave thou wert good to me, and told me my star was rising full of splendour. How didst thou know?'

'Noble lady, I spoke not of my own knowledge, but as the spirit prompted me.'

'Again, when thou helped me to escape my persecutors, what impelled thee?'

'The knowledge I was aiding one beloved of Hecate! 'Twas not love—love in me is dead, dead and scentless. The curse—the curse! and it will weigh me down for ever.'

'Art sure of this?'

'Yes, Lady Saronia, I am sure I am accursed of Hecate. In me it takes the form of a dead love with hatred raging through my soul. In others love is rampant and reason dead. Such is the case with one I know. Her curse is to love madly without an echo of love to answer.'

'What was thy crime, Endora?'

'That which neither god nor man can forgive.'

'Tell me.'

'I dare not.'

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'I command thee!'

'No, no; leave me quiet! I have lived in Ephesus these many years. No one knows me, where I came from, what my crime. Bid me leap into the great depths below and gurgle out my life beneath the waters, out of human sight—anything—anything, but grant me silence!'

'I will not! Speak truthfully! The High Priestess of Hecate commands thee.'

The woman's face grew pale as death.

'Wilt thou bury my secret in thy heart, and close thy lips for ever on it?'

'Be quick, say on! First, who art thou?'

'The mother of Chios!'

'Thou!'

'Yes, I am.'

'What art thou?'

'I was a priestess at Delos, where Apollo and Diana came forth—a priestess of the Oracle. Broke my vows; wed; fell to what thou seest me: a priestess of high degree acting—acting the part of a hag. I was doomed to death. The people think me dead, but I live, deserted by the one who caused my fall. I live, thirsting for revenge—I, Endora the witch, eking a crust of bread by fortune-telling and love philtres, bearing the load of Hecate's curse. I they call Endora am no other than Myrtle of Delos! Now, noble Saronia, thou knowest how love is dead, and I the accursed. Oftentimes I come here and gaze across the Ægean Sea towards the far-off sunny isle of Delos, where it lies like a jewel in the sea—Delos, where the laurel trembled at the coming of the unseen gods, where temples, amphitheatres, and colonnades crowned every crest, and filled the vales of the lovely home of Latona.'

For a moment, as Saronia thought of her own mother, a shudder passed. 'Twas but a moment, and the priestess looked as calm as summer eve. [Pg 179]

'Hast thou ever told the story to another?'

'No, no, and no human being but the mighty Saronia should ever have drawn it from me. Thou by thy power dost compel me to act unwillingly. I would far rather have buried it under those blue, seething waters and have ended my course.'

'It is well. See thou dost guard it; see thou dost guard it. Now, what can I do for thee? When humble was my lot and thou sawest my exaltation nigh, thou saidst, "Remember me when thou enterest on thy high estate." What may be done for thee?'

'Nothing. I go my way, leaving in thy keeping my awful secret, and trust thy silence. I go to my den on the mountain side, unwinding my fate. The thread will soon be broken, but ere it snaps my mission will be perfected.'

'Hast thou a mission?'

'As truly as yon passing ship glides on towards the harbour mouth, and until it be accomplished Endora is the witch of Ephesus, the blackened soul. After that, I know not what.'

'Can I aid thee? Gold I have; take some.'

'No. I am not thankless, but have sufficient. Can Endora be of service to *thee*?'

'I fear not.'

'Then adieu. I shall come to this loved spot again. It is the nearest I can come to my beloved Delos.'

She crept away amongst the golden flowers down the side of the cliff. The seagull cried to its mate, the waves dashed up their foam till it mixed with the silvery light, and falling like showers of dew, lay on the lips of the flowers.

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And Saronia, the High Priestess of Diana, stood out against sky and sea, stood out against silver and blue, the great globed sun, a circle of light, forming a halo around her head.

CHAPTER XXXIII

NIKA

'He is away, my lord and master, my wedded husband, the Proconsul of Ephesus. Gone to Rome on State matters. Let him go! There are other Romans here as good as he, perhaps better. I shall mix with them, and, doing so, further hate the man I am tied to, sold to. I hate him! There is but one love in my heart—the love for Chios, who spurns it. Stay! I wonder if there be another beside Chios who may quench this flame devouring me? There may be. And this I determine, wherever I find love in unison, thither will I advance, and that immediately before Varro's return. Varro! Varro! what care I for Varro? I will deceive him if it pleases me. The world will call me vile if they discover. What care I for the world? What care I for the worms which crawl? Many worse than Nika. No, what cares Nika, accursed of Hecate? Take thy pleasure; to love is life, and union of souls is strength even if we be but two—'tis better than one against the hosts of hell! Nika is single-handed; Nika has no kindred soul to join in the fight—Nika the doomed one, against whom the Fates war, around whom the Furies rage. Arouse thyself! Set thy face against what is called goodness, chastity! Defy those principalities and powers which torture thee, laugh at thee,

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shatter thy hopes, damn thee for the next life, before thou puttest aside the vile clay of this, make sport of thy soul ere half the circle of thy days is spent!

'No, no! Enough, enough! I will fill my cup with every pleasure, if well deep enough be found. I will joy in the sunshine, if it be but for one day, like the many-coloured lily which opens to the morning sun and dies at eventide. Away, Nika, to the world of pleasure! But first drink deep of Grecian wine to brace thyself. What care I for peace? I shall be no worse than many of my Romans.'

The sun went down like an angry god, the west was ablaze with lurid gleam, the winds rushed in from the sea and smote the land, burying it with a shroud of foam. The rain descended in torrents and deluged the shore. The storm passed through the great city and away over the mountain-tops. The streets were deserted and a gloom rested on the land.

One solitary human being might have been seen winding her way from place to place, and up the mountain side towards the home of Nika. With wet and clinging garments she hesitated in front of the house. Watching an opportunity, she pushed through the hedgerow of myrtles and stood within the garden. Stealthily she crept from shrub to shrub, now under the shelter of a laurel, then tearing through a mass of roses and trampling under feet the loveliest flowers, scarcely knowing whither she went, but making for a light which filtered through a window of many-coloured glass, until at last she stood in front of it, and dimly saw the overhanging jasmine and the great, white flowers of the magnolia. For a moment the perfume, like an angel guardian, uttered protest and dared approach, but the spirit impelling that form enveloped in soaking garb was one not long to be brooked by sentiment, and she moved like a panther carefully forward, and peered through the casement left open to admit the perfumed air. She gazed anxiously through the opening, and saw the form of the beautiful Nika sitting on a low chair. The double tablet of wax lay upon her knees, and in her hand was an ivory point chased with diamonds. She had just written, and was evidently agitated.

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At the sight of this the soul of the woman without was moved to its very depths, and she longed to behold what was marked on the tablet. The divining power of her spirit asserted itself, and she knew by the writer's look that it was a message of importance, and probably one of love. She waited till Nika had finished it; then the Roman stretched out her white arms and flung herself back in a deep reverie.

The eyes of the witch Endora were directed steadily on her, and as she gazed, Nika fell asleep, and her hands drooped listlessly by her side.

Like a snake, Endora glided into the room, reached the sleeping Roman, then, gently raising the tablet from her knee, she moved as softly and serpent-like from the room, and stole back by the way she came—back through the deserted streets, up the hill Pion to her cave.

Once inside, she bolted the rough door, through the chinks of which the wind moaned.

Lighting her lamp, she stripped off her saturated clothes. Before even she kindled a fire, she drew out the stolen thing, and, with straining eyes, read its contents. Then a hellish satisfaction lit up her haggard face, and she laughed with fiendish glee, murmuring to herself, fearful of listening ears:

'Ha, ha, ha! My mistress Nika, thou hast a lover. Thou art safe now in the meshes of the fowler. The measure thou hast meted out to others shall be measured back to thee again—again, I say. And the house of Venusta shall sorrow, as they say the Egyptians did for their first-born. Not only shall they suffer on thine account; their own sins shall weigh mightily on them. Yea, root and branch shall suffer, and they shall wither away until not a footfall of theirs be heard, nor an echo of their voices resound through their marble home. The witch Endora, like a Cassandra, smells the past, and speaks of evil.'

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'Day after day, night after night, have I been on the trail, tracked her like a bloodhound, haunted her to earth. I lie not; she is worse than I! The Roman shall know all, and Saronia, whom she tortured, be avenged. If her soul is too kind to feed upon such a rare morsel, then the witch of Ephesus—I, Endora—will do so, and gloat over the fate of Nika, proud, despicable daughter of Lucius the Roman! Now let me breathe the air; the stormy air, the sunlight, and the breeze belong to me as much as to the good.'

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CHAPTER XXXIV

THE HOROSCOPE

Nika was pale and worn, and scarcely spoke.

'What ails thee, dearest wife?' said Varro.

'Naught,' replied she; 'tired only. All night long have I watched through the storm. I knew by the signal-fires thou wert off the harbour mouth. Dost thou think I could rest when my lord rode on the top of crested waves, and the creaking timbers of the vessel sang omens fierce and loud? No, no; Nika is of different mould. My father is a warrior and a sailor, and oftentimes has he told me of the fearful perils of the seas.'

'Nika, thou art my darling wife! How hast thou fared during my absence? Hast thou longed for my coming?'

'Truly I have. And sometimes, when cloudy times were over me, I wished me dead rather than alone. Friends tried to cheer me; their work was but mockery, I well knowing naught but thy presence could fill the heart which has but room for one great joy—one which fills it to overflowing.'

'Thou lovest me too much, Nika.'

'Nika never loves but with all her soul,' replied she.

'Tell me, girl, how is our old friend Chios?'

'Chios? I have not seen him for many a day. I may say I have not seen him since thou left for Rome. I am told that strange being has turned voyager. It appears he took it into his head to visit Delos, and a trading-ship passing on its voyage thence called into this port, and Chios embarked.'

'Has he returned?'

'I believe so. I understand he arrived two days since.'

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'I will go and see him shortly.'

A day or two had flown, and Varro was at the studio of Chios.

'Well, my friend,' said the Proconsul, 'how has the time passed with thee since I deserted Ephesus? Hast seen yet the charming Ionian girl who is to smite thy heart like the sharpened beak of a war bireme when it sends its prow into the soft pinewood sides of an enemy's ship? No? Well, I am sorry for thee, Chios. Thou deservedst a better fate. Nika told me of thy wanderings to Delos. Didst thou have pleasure in that lovely isle?'

'I enjoyed it immensely, and learned many quaint stories of the place. I saw the Temple and the rock-cleft chasm through which the priestesses derived inspiration. I heard the story of Myrtille, that she was beautiful and wise as she was lovely; how she broke her vows, and suffered death as a punishment for her crime.'

'How sad those stories are, Chios!'

'Yes, very, but the earth is full of such. Where dost thou spend this evening?'

'Now, Chios, I am going to confide in thee. Guess what it is!'

'I cannot.'

'I have desired to get the horoscope of Nika. They tell me the witch Endora who lives in the side of yonder hill is one of the most eminent calculators of Ionia. Where she received her education 'tis a mystery. She has not been taught in Ephesus. I go to this poor old woman. What sayest thou, Chios?'

'Don't go. No good will come of it.'

'Art thou a seer?'

'No; neither do I understand magic, but somehow I feel you will act wisely in keeping away.'

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'Lovest thou not the mysteries?'

'No.'

'Neither those who love them?'

'I love all my friends, whate'er their faith.'

'Thou art a born diplomatist, Chios; but to-night will find me walking over the long grass leading to the cave of the wise woman of Ephesus.'

That night he did go, and with some intrepidity knocked at the door of the mysterious cave. It was answered by Endora, peering out into the starlit night.

'Whom seekest thou?' said she.

'Endora.'

'I am Endora. What requirest thou?'

'I wish to consult thee.'

'My place is poor for thee. Come within. Now, what is thy requirement?'

'Thou tellest the future?'

'Well?'

'Dost thou cast an horoscope truly?'

'Likely enough.'

'Wilt thou cast from this?'—handing the date and time of birth.

Endora took it, sat down, and commenced her work. Presently she looked up, and said:

'I see enough to assure me that it will fit but the life of one person.'

'And that one?' said Varro.

'A woman, the wife of the Proconsul of Ephesus, and thou art he.'

'This augurs well. I have heard great worth attached to thy wisdom. Now pray tell me hast thou ever seen her?'

'Yes, many times. What dost thou think of thy wife? Art thou jealous of her since thou art come to dive into her future and her past?' [Pg 187]

'No, my woman! No, no; why should I be jealous? She is chaste as she is beautiful, and kind as she is wise. I have fullest confidence in my wife. What seest thou, Endora?'

'I fear,' replied the witch, 'I must have been mistaken; for now I see here a beautiful woman with rippling hair of golden hue flowing back from a snowy brow.'

'Yes, yes; go on. That is right.'

'No, it cannot be the Nika you call wife; she has eyes of blue, deep as the sea, and her cheeks are tinged with the glory of the pomegranate. She stands erect; she walks like a queen.'

'Thou art right, Endora. 'Tis she! Thou art an artist; go further.'

'She has ruby lips, and her teeth are white and smooth as pearl; but within she is a cauldron of ___'

'Stay, wretch!' cried Varro.

'I will not. A cauldron of lies! A sink of deception! A tiger whelp! A soul drowning in iniquity, destined to wander in darkness for ages on ages!'

'Stop—stop thy murderous tongue! It must be, as thou sayest, some other—not Nika!'

'No, no. Thou shalt not stay me; I will go on. It—is—thy—wife! She is beautiful without, but within I see her as I say.'

'Poor thing! thou art deceived. Thou art delirious; I pity thee, and will get physician's aid for thee. I go now. Here is some gold. Rest thyself. Thine is a case demanding pity.'

'I take not your gold; I want not your pity. I am sane. Would I had been born a drivelling idiot, and remained so to this present!' [Pg 188]

'But surely, woman, thou canst not be other than mad to say such horrible things about Nika, my wife, my greatest treasure!'

'I am not mad, noble man; but speak the truth, and speak it plainly. Thy wife deceives thee. She is vile!'

'Curse your gray locks! I will smite you where you stand if you do not retract those blackened lies!'

'Listen, Proconsul: I will not withdraw what I have said, but will further tear the veil from off thy deluded eyes. I have known her long, and watched her well—the reason, mine. I have followed in the groove of her life; but, to come to the present, thou hast been from Ephesus, leaving thy beautiful Nika behind—leaving thy soul's happiness with her. How has she repaid thee? How! By giving her love to—'

'Silence, thou reptile of hell!' And he sprang forward, clutching the woman by the throat.

Her face grew dark and her eyes started; her mouth twitched convulsively, as if she essayed to speak.

Maddened with fury, Varro still clutched her with the grip of death, holding her out at arms' length, glaring at her like a tiger with its prey.

With one supreme effort the woman gathered together her dying strength sufficiently to enable her to thrust her hand into the folds of her dress and draw forth a tablet and hold it out towards him.

Instinctively he relaxed his grip, and the witch cried out:

'Read! Read!'

He grasped the tablet, opened it, and saw the signature of Nika.

Endora fell, her face lying on the stony floor. He heeded her not, but, with a face as death-like as that of the witch, glanced down the lines of the tablet.

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Then, with a moan such as is heard when the weary storm tells its sad tale through the cypress-trees, he sat down and buried his face in his hands.

For some time he remained in the same position, until a sigh came from the prostrate woman.

He arose and went towards her, saying:

'Whatever may be thy sins, in this I am the sinner for bruising thee.'

He gave her wine, damped her furrowed, fevered brow, raised her from the floor, and watched by her until she had fully regained consciousness.

She murmured:

'I do not blame thee. Were I a man, I would have done likewise. Endora pities thee. Thou hast wedded a snake, and she has stung thee. What wilt thou do?'

'Charge her.'

'And should she deny?'

'She shall be tried by the rites of the Virgin Cave of Hecate.'

He arose, and, throwing his mantle around him, strode out into the night down the hillside to his home.

On his arrival, Nika met him with honeyed words and sweetest smiles, but he passed her coldly, and went to his chamber—not to sleep. The room seemed filled with choking air. He opened the window and let in a cooling draught, and the moonlight, faint and low, stole softly across the floor.

For a moment he rested, buried in thought, scarcely knowing what to do. His face betrayed great passion. He arose, and paced the room until the day dawned over the sea, when he fell upon a couch, and passed into a dreamy sleep.

When the morning had fully come, he went out and breathed the cool virgin air, but soon returned.

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His wife met him again with all the ease that duplicity can command.

'And where hast thou been, Varro? Why so cold yesternight to thy loving wife?'

'Nika, thou art false, false! What hast thou been doing whilst I journeyed to Rome?'

'What dost thou mean?'

'Mean! Just what I say. I am not a man to bandy words. Thou art unfaithful to me. Dost thou deny it?'

'I do. I swear by Jove I am guiltless! I have traducers, and they lie!'

'Knowest thou this writing, Nika?' And, drawing the tablet from his bosom, he said: 'Dost thou recognise this?'

For a moment, and just a moment only, as a bird flies past and hides the moon, her face assumed an ashen hue, but a crimson blush rushed in and retired, leaving sufficient colour to make her beauty more enchanting. Then, throwing her proud head back on her shoulders, she laughed, saying:

'Dear old jealous husband! I can explain all, I see. I understand what has ruffled your pretty plumage. I remember the other night writing on that tablet—a great joke!—and again she laughed out merrily.

'I will tell thee, Varro. For want of something to do, I sat down and read the love poems by Andros. Yes, Varro. Art thou listening? Well, what do you think? A sudden idea came into my mind to try if I could write an epistle to an imaginary lover. So I did, just for amusement, Varro. I laid the tablet in my lap and fell asleep, and lo! when I awoke it was gone; and, strangely enough, you, Varro, bring it to me. This is all, dear. Of course, thou believest me?'

'No, I believe it not. Thou shalt no longer be wife of mine until thou provest thyself. This affair is not a secret in Ephesus, and men of Ionia and nobles of Rome shall never point the finger of scorn at Varro. If thou art true, fear not; if false, then take thy reward.'

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'What meanest thou, husband? Thou art not serious? How can I prove other than by my word?'

'Thou forgettest there is a tribunal for such offences.'

'True. Tell me.'

'The Virgin Cave of Hecate.'

'The cave! Saronia!' shrieked Nika, and fell to the floor a helpless form.

The Roman took her up and laid her on a couch, her hair flowing in golden masses to the ground, and her face like the face of death when Chios painted her!

He called a slave to attend to Nika, hurried to his apartment, and sent word to Venusta instructing her to come immediately, stating her daughter was ill.

Venusta came, and was terror-stricken at her daughter's appearance, and that day the wife of the Proconsul was removed to her mother's home on the side of Mount Coressus.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE VIRGIN CAVE

In the Sacred Grove of Hecate, where the sun lit up the cypress-trees, and the birds sang on the billowy branches of the cluster-pine, and laurels greeted the gods, waving their dark-green foliage on the whispering air; where roses twined like weary children round the olive-trees, and oleanders, white as snow and pink as rosy dawn, bent down and kissed the murmuring brook; where the pale narcissi mirrored themselves in silent pools like stars of silver on the solemn sea, and the maddening perfume of that lovely flower mingled with the odour of the sweet grass, wild thyme, and violets—here the blue celandine and hyacinth vied in colour with the saffron flower and scarlet poppy, sacred to Diana, and every bloom was the emblem of a god; and the nymphs kept guard o'er sacred trees, and naiades revelled in gayest dance the long night through.

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The Sacred Cave was here—the Virgin Cave of Hecate, around which, like lost souls out of place, grew alder, dark, deadly aconite, and branches green of juniper, waiting their call to burn as incense to the infernal goddess.

A winding pathway led down to the cave, the cave of trial.

Its doors were strong, of olive wood, with tracings wrought in gold. On either side uprose stout pillars of malachite; and over the entrance, in curious marble richly carved, were figures of Hecate in judgment.

Within this cave none but the pure might enter. There was the sacred syrinx—should a woman go therein, the doors closed by invisible hands. If pure, a soft and heavenly strain was heard, and the doors opening of their own accord, the honoured woman appeared crowned with a garland of leaves of pine; but if guilty, sobs and disconsolate weeping were audible, and the people passed away, leaving her to her fate. And after three suns had risen and set, the High Priestess entered, found the cave empty, and the syrinx fallen to the ground.

This was the day Nika would enter the cave. No hope had come. Day after day she had gazed over the blue sea with the vain thought that she might catch a glimpse of her father's fleet returning. Not a vestige of it hove in sight. To the last she buoyed herself with the hope that aid would come and save her from this frightful ordeal; but no. The sky was cloudless, the ocean calm—calm and unruffled as a sleeping child.

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The priests and priestesses of the Temple would accompany her in solemn procession, and Nika, clad in garments of black, would be taken to the Sacred Grove. Torch-bearers and heralds would lead them by the tufts of yellow iris down the winding path to the cave, outside which an altar stood, and the great Saronia waited, with head thrown back and hands outspread towards the ground; her raven hair flowed down and lay in waves on folds of costly yellow silk bestudded with stars; her face was calm as death, rigid as a marble statue; emotion showed no place in that mysterious being.

Five beautiful girls, the loveliest of Ionia, priestesses of the goddess, bees of the Temple, waited on her; but the beauty and dignity of the great High Priestess outshone them all, as the rising sun puts out the light of the silvery stars.

The black lamb had been sacrificed to Hecate, and its crimson blood streamed over the altar into the earth.

The priestesses were hidden from view by a turning in the way, and it was only when the last tall lines of myrtles were passed that they could be seen. But the clanging of cymbals was near, the strains of the lyre broke in, and the low tones of the mellow flute kept up a sacred melody.

The first of the heralds drew near the altar sacrifice, stood still a moment, then blew a blast which made the blossoms quiver; and the procession came with measured tread, carrying

banners many-coloured, and bearing symbols of the goddess which glittered in the sunlight.

Nika, pale and trembling, stood within a circle of the priests, enveloped by the many standards which they bore.

Suddenly the silken shields were lowered, the circle broke in twain, and formed a guard on either side; and Nika, looking down between the lines, saw the dark face and towering form of Saronia standing by the altar. [Pg 194]

With one loud, piercing cry of anguish, the girl rushed madly towards her, and when within three paces plucked a jewelled dagger from her bosom, and made to plunge it into the heart of her former slave.

One look from the mystic eyes of the High Priestess overawed her, and she shielded her face with her mantle of black.

No tremor passed the face of the High Priestess. It was fixed like a cold, pale moon in the cloudless sky. She could have slain Nika had she chosen. Her glistening dagger remained untouched. She heeded it not, but moved solemnly towards the cowering girl, holding forth her hands as she approached her, saying:

'Lean on me, fair woman of Rome. I may make thy burden less.'

The eyes of Nika rolled back their maddening look, and gazed into those of the priestess.

'O Saronia, Saronia, save me! or, if thou canst not, then forgive!'

For the first time the face of the High Priestess relaxed, and it was veiled with a look of pity.

'Would I could help thee, Nika! In this case I have not power. I stand here, not to punish, but to perform the sacred rites my office demands; but I forgive thee, forgive thee, Nika, whatever may be thy fate.'

The low tones of Diana's hymn broke the stillness, and Saronia led the trembling woman to the Virgin Cave of Hecate.

The great doors swung back, the doors of olive were wide apart, and soft Ionian music floated by like the rhythm of angels' wings. [Pg 195]

'Nika—let me kiss thee, Nika.'

And Saronia took the face bestrewn with golden hair between her jewelled hands, and passionately kissed the trembling lips of the daughter of Lucius.

Then she led the fated woman to the cave, and left her.

The great doors flew back like the jaws of death, and in a moment or two sounds of weeping were heard, and the people turned away. Full well they knew the syrinx had fallen, and Nika was gone—for ever.

CHAPTER XXXVI

REVERIE

The passing of Nika spoke strongly to Saronia. She had lived with her, served with her, felt the keen injustice of her nature, and now the end had come.

Had it been woman against woman, she would not have crushed the Roman; but it was not so. It was a woman in conflict with the goddess. Saronia had been powerless to help, and dared not question the vengeance of Hecate.

She sympathized with Lucius, her old master, always kind; pictured him returning to Ephesus, hastening to his home on the Coressian hill, expecting loving greeting, hearing the dreadful death of his only child from a broken-hearted wife. She saw the tears streaming down the face of the weather-beaten mariner, and watched the wrecked soul as it looked out through the lustreless eyes.

It was horrible to think of all this, and to dwell on the thought that question after question would arise in his mind why the Fates did not sooner bring him home that he might have saved her—fought for her, if need be; and, above all, why did not Saronia protect her against the power of the Roman, Proconsul though he was? He would revert back to the time when he saw her at the altar steps looking sweetly on him and his sailors when they came to pray. [Pg 196]

All the agony of Lucius came before her, and her spirit was clouded with gloom.

She threw herself down, and buried her beautiful face, sighing as if her heart would rend in twain. She was a woman, not a goddess—a woman with sympathies keen enough to feel for others, even to the binding up of the broken-hearted and offering forgiveness to her most violent foe.

A mysterious link had suddenly snapped in her chain of destiny. What it was she could not divine.

The death of Nika moved her in a peculiar manner, such as nothing else had done since the deep of her being was broken up by the call of the great spirit to follow the goddess.

It was a dark chapter in her life's history, and she earnestly desired to know its hidden meaning; she would wait patiently until the time came when all should be revealed.

She arose, looked towards the sea, and saw in vision the white sails of the fleet of Lucius bringing him to port.

A storm crossed her face, as when the icy winds of winter furrow the waves and clouds swoop down to wed the foaming main. Her whole nature trembled like the shaken hull of a tempest-haunted ship. The spirit of Hecate was on her, and the voice of the terrible goddess rang out in her soul:

'Tell him the curse hath killed her! Say the gods are avenged!'

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When the evening had come, Saronia retired and lay on a couch of black marble. The windows of the room were thrown open to admit what little breeze there was; the honeysuckle and jasmine climbed the walls like rival lovers, and breathed their perfume on the priestess.

She looked towards the Temple; the sun threw rays aslant the roof and pillars, and it shone resplendent in the dying day.

In the rear of it sprang up against the sky tall trees of cluster-pine and ash, further away rose the great mountains, and behind them the golden gates of the setting sun, and beyond all, soft clouds cradled in light floated like temple domes of a great spiritual city.

The soul of the priestess was drawn away towards the glorious vision, and for a while she had forgotten herself. Darkness had changed to light, and she longed to be beyond all the uncertainty of this troubled existence, and move into a sphere where hope might be lost in love—where she would see things as they are, see them with the truth of a risen soul, not as she now saw them, with a soul straining to gaze at spiritual beauty through a mass of corruption, a shroud of earthly mould.

Her spirit struggled to free itself, to spread out its pinions and soar into an element of its own; but the time had not yet arrived for the prisoner to be free—her prison was bolted with bars of brass.

As the shadows deepened on the floor of that sacred room, and the last flickering light of day played between her tresses, turning her silvery robes to gray, it was evident her mind was much agitated—influenced in a marked degree.

She took from her bosom the parchment Chios had given—the manuscript which taught the Christian creed—and, grasping it firmly with her right hand, walked towards the window, looking lovingly and long at the great Temple. She moved away, murmuring:

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'I will see Chios. I will see him, and know more of his faith.'

Thus was this magnificent spirit besieged by contending forces. She stood like a mountain peak encircled with storm, like a beacon on a rock lashed by the fury of the maddening seas, like a ship in a valley of waves, rudderless, shroudless, with creaking timbers and sailless yards.

Her first thought was, under the cover of night, to fly to the studio of Chios. No, he would not be there. A better way suggested itself.

She stood erect, with face towards where the city lay, and, stretching out both hands, she threw a wave of will forward in search of Endora. It reached her at her mountain home.

The witch sprang to her feet, and the command of Saronia came to her: 'Come to the Temple tomorrow morn. Bring me a gift of roses.'

That night the priestess rested, slumbering till the sun arose and the mists on the mountains had cleared away. Then she awoke, and went forth to the morning service. As she passed by, many beasts were being sacrificed at the altar in front of the Temple, portions of the flesh and basins of blood were being carried within.

She stood beside the sacrifice in the midst of the Temple, heard the crackling wood as it slowly burned up the pieces, watched the smoke until it ascended, freely passing out through the aperture in the roof; then she knew the sacrifice was accepted of the goddess.

The omen at one time would have been to her one of great joy. Now another voice was echoing: 'Sacrifices and burnt-offerings I have no pleasure in. The true sacrifice is a broken and a contrite heart.'

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As soon as she could, she turned from the Temple and sought the quiet of her room, sitting by the window where the sunlight kissed the roses and the breezes fanned her cheeks.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE MESSAGE

As the day advanced a message was brought to the priestess that a woman was without who wished to speak to her, and that she carried roses in her hand, an offering to Diana.

'Let her come to me,' said Saronia.

'Come within and seat thyself. I have much to say to thee, mother of Chios. I know I may trust thee. Thou wilt never betray?'

'No. By all that is left for my eternal salvation, I swear to be true!'

'Then hear me. Take this message to Chios. I must see him.'

'Thou knowest, lady, Chios is a Christian?'

'I do. Dost thou know aught of this sect, seeing thou movest abroad among the people?'

'O noble Saronia, 'tis a mighty God they serve.'

'What meanest thou?'

'I will tell thee. One day there came to my house the sons of Sceva; they came to cast out a spirit of evil from a tortured man.'

'Did they succeed?'

'No. Miserably failed! And I, by my power, tried by Hecate to draw him forth, but I could not.'

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'By what process did they attempt this?'

'They invoked the name of the Jewish Christ, but the spirit rebelled against them, and disowned their power. They had made a cross, the symbol of that God, to carry out their plan, and when they had fled and I also looked back, I saw the cross all lit with glorious sheen in the hands of the man, and the spirit had come out of him. I fear this faith; Diana, Hecate are servants to it, and this Christ will prevail in Ephesus. I would this God would shield me from the curse, and I would lie at His feet in gratitude and joy.'

'Endora, thou speakest strange sayings. Art thou certain of all those things, or are they phantasies of the mind?'

'They are true, noble Saronia, as true as yonder Temple is the shrine of thy goddess; true as there is a central sun in the universe, around which all other suns revolve. And this Christ, they say, is the great spiritual orb, the grand Spirit of the whole around which every other intelligence moves, and to whom every spirit in the vast domains shall bow. It's a terrible thought, is it not?'

'Why?'

'Because, if this saying be true, Diana is no more. She is not supreme, and will fade away as the ages grow, dwindling into nothingness, and her teaching be but a beautiful story.'

'Ah! Endora, thou speakest wisely. Truly thou art acting a part in assuming the craft of a low-born fortune-teller. I see thou art skilled in words, and still hast the soul and wisdom of a priestess; as a diamond thou wilt sparkle, begrimed as thou art with the adverse circumstances of thy life. Thou hast interested me. It is well one should know what is propagated around her. Hast thou any more respecting this strange belief?'

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'Only this: One day when on the mountain yonder two men were near. I hid, but close enough to listen.'

'Who were they?'

'One was Chios, the other his teacher, one of the chiefs of the Christians.'

'What did they say?'

'I heard the old man speak in prophecy, saying the time was not far away when the beautiful city beneath them should crumble to decay, the temples perish, and the altars be broken and buried deep in the earth, until men should seek for the glories and religion of Ephesus, but should search in vain—that the faith of the goddess should be but a broken note in the great hymn which the ages sing. More he said, but all of the same import.'

'What kind of man was this prophet?'

'He was mean in appearance, possessing an intellect like the mind of a god. His eyes were piercing, and his spirit consumed his flesh; his body was but a disguise. Surely within that frail and plainly-built structure there resided a soul which has circled around the central throne of the King of the universe. He is a messenger from Him, whoever He may be.'

'Endora—Myrtle may I call thee?—go! Be careful of the message to Chios. My life—everything depends on its safe delivery. Place it carefully, and speed away. The message demands action this

day.'

Endora crept up the avenue of myrtles to the door of Chios, and timidly knocked at it.

'I have a message for thee.'

'From whom didst thou receive it?'

'From the High Priestess, Saronia.'

'What knowest thou of her? Thou mockest me.'

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'No, I do not. Read it. Thou wilt see her in every line.'

He eagerly glanced at the message, and turned deadly pale.

'Come within, Endora.'

'Thou knowest my name. How so?'

'It matters little. I know thy name.'

As the old woman moved into the studio, a strange, weird light lit up her cold, sinister face, and she gazed around at the beauties displayed there.

'Sit down and rest. Dost thou know the contents of this message?'

'No.'

'Then I will tell thee. Saronia has trusted thee; I must. She cannot err; her judgment is good, and I abide by it.'

'Ah, ah!' laughed Endora. 'I am safe, noble Greek. Thou canst trust me. The High Priestess confides in me; Chios may do the same. Shall I swear?'

'No; but look into my eyes, and tell me thou wilt be true.'

As she gazed into his eyes a shudder passed through her, and for an instant she reeled as if drunken. Recovering herself, she said:

'Art thou satisfied?'

He made no reply.

Endora cried:

'Speak—speak out straight from thy heart, or I will not receive thy secret!'

'Yes; I can trust thee,' replied Chios. 'Why, I do not know. I am safe in thine hands. Who art thou? What art thou?'

'I? I am a poor castaway, cast aside on the dung-heap like a broken lamp! I am a reptile doomed to crawl the earth like the meanest snake. I am Endora of Ephesus, the witch of Mount Pion! Who art *thou*? What a foolish question, when all know thee to be Chios the Greek, the great artist of this mighty city!... Thou art safe in the hands of Endora. Thou art son of some mother who cherished thy young life. Hast thou a mother?'

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'No.'

'Where is she?'

'Dead.'

'Didst thou ever know her?'

Chios was silent, and his eyes looked far away.

'I have faint remembrance of her; she died when I was quite a child.'

'Didst thou love her?'

'Love her? Yes, passionately.'

'Is thy father alive?'

'I never knew him. But enough of this. Sufficient I trust thee in respect of this message. Speak to me on no other subject. It bids me meet the High Priestess to-night near the Sacred Grove, and she requests me to tell thee this and to command thee be there and stand sentinel, to give timely warning if strangers approach.'

'Why or how Saronia confides thus in thee 'tis passing strange. But it must be right. Thou knowest all now. Go thy way. Do thy part for thy mistress, and I will do mine.'

'I will be there,' replied Endora, 'and, if necessary, die for thee.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE DEAD PRIEST

That night, with none to question her, Saronia passed out from the Temple towards the Sacred Grove of Hecate.

Arrived there, she offered sacrifice, and left the dying embers blackening the sacred altar. Perchance some priestess next day should secretly want proof of Saronia's visit. This done, she hastened to the meeting-place on the bank of the Cayster, where Chios awaited her, and, like a faithful hound, Endora stood guard a hundred paces off, the only access to the river's brink.

Saronia and Chios were safe. He spoke first.

'Why comest thou here, my love, and such a fearful night? How the winds search through the trees and tangle thy beautiful tresses!

'What hast thou to say? Thou runnest fearful risk. And yonder woman—canst thou really trust her?'

'Yes, trust her fully; she is safe. I have desired to see thee, Chios, and have dared everything. I would know more of this faith,' and her voice sank to a whisper. 'Since thou gavest me the parchment to read my mind ever reverts to the words of fire it contains. I would know their hidden meaning, trace them to their source, and plant them in my heart were I sure they were words of truth. Thou hast a noble teacher in the man who wrote them. Is it possible, Chios, I may meet him and learn fully? My brain, disorganized, reeling with doubt, will madden me to death. I cannot live without knowing the truth. Tell me, canst thou help me?'

'Saronia, what thou askest is a fearful thing. I wish thee every good, and would pour out my life to serve thee; but hast thou considered—hast thou counted the cost? [Pg 205]

'Thou art the High Priestess of the Ephesian faith, steeped in the ways of Hecate, initiated into the mysteries of life and death, respected by thy followers, looked up to as a pattern for all the world to follow. Hast thou thought of the great sacrifice thou wilt make if perchance thou dost embrace the faith of the despised Nazarene? Consider what will become of thee—what thine end. Thou must fly the Temple, leave its altars, desert thy flock, be pursued until a merciful death blots out the life of the greatest, noblest woman in all Asia! Now, having told thee of this, I am ready to obey; but it shall never enter into thy mind, whatever befall thee, that Chios, who loves thee with a love that Heaven alone can understand, ever drew thee away from a faith which thou hast made thine own to one which perhaps thou mayest not understand.'

'Dearest Chios, I have thought much of this. Many hours have I dwelt on it. I am decided. Saronia will not embrace a new faith until it eclipses the old one. Then, for such a faith, if such there be, Saronia is prepared to die. To gain knowledge of the greatest truth is my mission on earth, and, gaining this, I rise a step nearer the Divine Presence.'

'Thou shalt meet Judah. When wilt thou come?'

'Not too soon, lest suspicion arise. Say, let one week pass, and I will be where thou wilt.'

'Then we meet on the side of Mount Pion at the cave of Endora.'

'Good; it shall be so, Chios.'

'Now let us go. I will see thee into the road leading to the Temple. Fear not detection. The night forbodes a gale. Already the winds whistle through the reeds, and the nodding trees answer to the outriders of the tempest.' [Pg 206]

Suddenly a shriek went up, and was borne on the winds of night.

'What is that?' whispered Saronia. "'Tis like the cry of a parting life.'

'List!' said Chios. "'Tis some bird of evil shrieking the advent of storm.'

They had not long to wait ere another shriek, more deadly than the first, rose up towards the skies.

'Hide thee between the rushes, Saronia. I will see what it means. Stay until I return, whate'er betides.'

The priestess did as she was bidden, and Chios stole softly down the pathway until he saw Endora—the black form of the witch surrounded by the night—and at her feet lay the lifeless form of a man.

For a moment the Greek was terror-stricken, and when his breath had returned he gasped:

'Endora! Endora! what meaneth this?'

'I slew him,' replied she.

'Thou?'

'Yes, I slew him. See, my dagger reeks with blood!' and she held it aloft, pointing it upwards towards the heaven, looking like the statue of a night-fiend.

Then she spoke again:

'Had he a thousand lives, and my arm would not prove weary, I would take them all. Hear me, Chios: I stood guard for thee and Saronia. This dead man tracked her—knew her.'

'Knew her?' repeated Chios.

'Yes, recognised her—and thou. He came, as I have said, and was well-nigh upon you, when the form of Endora stood in the path. He spoke to me; he had lost the scent, did not know which way you had taken—this path or the one that branches off. He asked if I had seen a woman go this way towards the river. I answered "No." "Thou liest!" said he. "Thou knowest her whereabouts; thou knowest who she is—Saronia, the High Priestess, and Chios her lover. Speak out, hag, or I will wrest thy life from out thy vile carcass! Where is she?" Then said I: "Go thy way, man! I know not, and care less." He seized me by the throat, relaxed his hold, bade me speak, gripped it again, bruised me until I felt my life gurgling away. I knew I was not fit to die, and he—*he should not murder me!* He held me by the throat at arms' length, and shook me like a dog; but when he drew me towards him, I used my dagger and let out his life's blood—yes, the life-blood of a traitor!' And, turning her head from Chios, she murmured: 'The life-blood of—thy—father!'

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'Endora! Endora! what hast thou done?'

'Nothing but saved my life and thine and that of the great Saronia, by killing a brute who would have had no mercy had he succeeded. I should have died, thou also, or both banished, and Saronia would have been in the power of this man, who had a passion for her.'

'He?'

'Yes, he.'

Chios stooped down, gently drawing back the mantle which had fallen over the dead man's face, when, to his horror, he discovered who the murdered man was.

Standing erect, he looked into the eyes of Endora.

'Woman, thou hast committed a frightful deed! Thou hast slain the High Priest of the Temple of Diana!'

She stood motionless, silent. Then, raising herself to her full height, she said:

'Chios, this may bring me death;' and she uttered a moan like the sighing of the doomed. 'Take thy dagger, plunge it into my heart! Do not let them torture me! Death from thine hand I would receive as a kiss of love! As for the death of this man, I repent not. I knew him well before I slew. Were he a god, and I could kill, I would have done so!'

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What was to be done? The first impulse of Chios was to call Saronia and tell her all. No; he dared not. She must be free from knowledge of the thing.

He took the dead body and drew it on one side, that Saronia might not perceive it.

Then, ordering Endora home, he went back to the priestess.

'What ails thee, Chios? Thou art agitated. Has aught occurred?'

'No; it must have been the wild bird's shriek. No being was about save Endora. Let us move away.'

And they walked up the pathway past the corpse, and as she passed she shuddered.

'Art thou cold, Saronia?'

'No; but by some strange intuition I feel the presence of the dead.'

'Banish the thought!' said he. "'Tis but the moaning winds which play upon thy soul.'

'Where is Endora, Chios?'

'Gone; I sent her home.'

They arrived at the confines of the grove through which Saronia must pass.

'One kiss, my love,' said the Greek—'one kiss from those sweet lips, and I go to feed upon the memories of Saronia. Do not forget next week at the home of Endora, on the Mountain of Pion. Good-night, dearest—good-night!'

She passed through the Sacred Grove, took with her her implements of sacrifice, and went within the walls which surrounded the Temple. Great gusts of wind came roaring through the pine-trees of the grove, rushed onwards, striking the sacred pile, shrieking and crying with many-sounding voices around the marble pillars, until the mighty Temple was as a great harp on which the

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storm-winds played a solemn requiem for the dead priest.

CHAPTER XXXIX

CONSTERNATION

Next morning some fishermen, who had come down the river Cayster in their boat of many colours and crooked prow, moored it near the spot where Chios and Saronia met the previous night. They lowered the sail, with long yard and streaming pendant, rolled it up carefully, placed it fore and aft across the thwarts, counted their fish, took them with their nets and gaily stepped on shore, singing as they went, with hearts as light as the morning breeze and hopes as bright as the sunlight. For had they not a good catch of golden mullet which would sell well?

They moved happily along the pathway, stooping and gathering the yellow flowers covered with silvery dew. There was plenty of time: the day had just begun, and they would easily gain the market for the early sale.

Suddenly the foremost of them saw the body of the High Priest. He stood aghast. By this time the others came up and stood around, horror-stricken at the sight.

'Who has done this?' said a stalwart Ionian, with curly hair and sparkling eyes.

'Great Jupiter!' cried another. 'Who has committed the foul deed?'

'A priest—a priest of rank!' exclaimed the third. 'See the insignia of office!'

For a moment they knew not what to do. Their position was critical. One suggested they might be suspected of the murder, and they had better get on board their boat and float lower down the stream, keeping silence. [Pg 210]

Others were for going to the city and publishing the calamity, and this prevailed. And they hastened on, and made it known to the guard.

The news of the murder of the Chief Priest of the Temple burst like a thunder-cloud, and spread with great rapidity until Ephesus and its environs rang with the tidings. Messengers hastened along the coast from Teos and Claros to Priene, and over the Meander to the Carian Miletus, to Magnesia and Mysa through to Sardis and Smyrna, in hopes by spreading the news that the murderer, if fled the city, might be taken.

The Agora, Gymnasium, Odeum, Theatre—all the public places were closed. Silence seemed dropping from the heavens and casting out the joys of the people as they hung in groups and spoke in whispers.

As the day passed, the feeling of melancholy wore off, and intense excitement set in. The worshippers of Diana clamoured for instant action, and blamed those who held power for not already capturing the criminal.

Those of sounder judgment cast about for a motive for this deed, but they also were baffled. What business had the priest at night by the river side? Again, a thief had not killed him: everything of value remained upon his person; his jewels were untouched, even to the sacred Ephesian letters set in diamonds and rubies, and the sacred symbol of the shrine in gold and opals fell over his breast in sight of all. There was a great mystery about it. Some few dared to think within themselves that love and jealousy might clear it.

Then it was remembered a custom existed backwards in the years that when a new High Priest was intended to be, the new should slay the old and take his place. And this satisfied many, whilst others who had desired to persecute the Christians clearly saw their hands in the matter, and preached a general massacre. [Pg 211]

At the Temple there was sore distress. Priests went to and fro with silent tread, and the great building resounded with cries and lamentations. The great Priestess Saronia wore on her face a death-like calmness.

She had heard of the fishermen finding the body, and remembered the shriek which arose on the gusty air. She dared not speak; it would sound her own death-knell. She could not confess her presence at the margin of the river that fatal night.

Her lips were sealed, her tongue silenced. But dark suspicions floated through her burning brain. Endora knew of this foul matter. Chios was innocent, but during his absence from her the woman must have told him all, and both held the secret.

All this was too horrible to Saronia. Wild, heaving waves of furious thought rushed through her soul, threatening to engulf her reason, but like a shivering barque she determined to struggle through the breakers to the open sea and know the end.

The Temple was desolate, the High Priest gone away for ever; but little did she know his death had saved her life, and the life of her beloved. [Pg 212]

CHAPTER XL

TWO MASTER MINDS

The stars were shining softly through the mists of a summer night; the moon had touched the western rim; the winds were sleeping low upon the pine-clad hills, and Nature, weary, lay in sweet repose.

On such a night, a week since the High Priest met his fate, Saronia went up the side of Pion to the cave of Endora.

Disguised as she was, Chios did not know her, and she might have passed by unknown had she not turned towards the place where he waited to receive her.

She entered, and sat down wearily. There was great anxiety in her eyes. Chios unfastened the cloak which enveloped her and let it fall back over her shoulders.

'What ails thee, Saronia?'

'What ails me? My heart is rending; I am weary. The soul truly never grows old, but the flesh tires. I am tired of all, and would I were at rest. The surges ever move towards the strand, sometimes gently like the breaking of the day; but with me always the waves beat ruthlessly around my imprisoned spirit, until now, like a drowning man clinging to the last vestige of his wrecked ship, I would fain let go my hold, and sink backwards into the seething waves which wait to engulf me.'

'Do not despair, Saronia.'

'No, I do not despair. I have ever sought to do the right and know the truth, and fear not the future.'

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'I must find the home best suited for this soul, as I have evolved it, but I feel I have no power to go forward, and I may as well cease my yearnings for light. Perchance more may be meted to me in the ages beyond. That I shall live again and move onwards I know. I know this: it is the jewel left me—it is the anchor of my soul. Break the cordage which fastens me to it, and I drift aimless, hopelessly.'

'Nay, nay, Saronia, do not talk in such a strain. What weighs so heavily on thee?'

'The death of the High Priest. Canst thou clear the mystery, Chios?'

He looked towards Endora. The woman stood leaning against the side of the cave, with eyes aglow, and burning with desire to speak. She stood forth, firmly erect, with head thrown back.

'I slew him, lady—slew him in self-defence; killed him to save the truest, noblest woman on earth, and the man who loveth her, Chios the Greek. He would have strangled me, would have wrenched thy whereabouts from me—did try—until his iron grip upon my throat well-nigh put out my life. Now listen, mighty priestess, and you cultured man of Ephesus. The man I slew killed my love and spirit's aspirations years ago—long ago. The dead priest, who rose to be the highest in Asia, was *my husband*—the husband of Endora!'

'Thy husband?' exclaimed Saronia.

'Yea, it is true. He left me to my fate. I followed him hither, watched his career, and saw the people of Ephesus fooled with his whining hypocrisy. He knew me not until the fated night. When he fell I stooped and whispered in his ear my name, but *it was not Endora!* Thou heard'st the second shriek? The whisper of my name caused it. He shattered my life and left me to die; but I did not die, neither will I for his death. My line of life is not broken. I wait events.'

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Saronia was speechless, and Chios quivered like a leaf on a restless tree. Gathering strength, he staggered towards the door to breathe the air, and the two women were left alone.

Endora felt the power of the priestess, and dared not speak.

'Hast thou told Chios who thou art? Does he know thou art his mother, and by thine own hand thou hast slain his sire?'

'No, and the secret kills me. Oh that I could die, disappear from the gaze of my son! Thou canst fancy my bursting soul, how my heart aches to hear one loving word from my only child! No, no; this cannot be. Endora, Myrtilé the false, accursed, bloodstained, must never be known to Chios, my son, my son! But when I am gone—it will not be long—when I have finished here, tell him—tell him all, and that to the last my longing soul yearned to behold his manly face. Tell him that a mother's instincts, a mother's love, deadened by the curse, still dwelt within me. Mighty Saronia, thou wilt be left to him. Give him the love which a mother could not reveal. As I have said, I shall soon be on my great journey—yea, before the leaves fall from the trees in autumn.'

'Now to business. Intendest thou to deliver me to be weighed in the scales of justice?'

'No. I mourn over the fatal act. 'Twas done in self-defence. I will not interfere. Wert thou tried, no one would believe thee. I do. My betrayal of thee would rest a murder on my own soul. The Fates must rule. Go thy way, and render thine account in the great hereafter. The gods will judge thee,

and mete out justice. Keep thy counsel. 'Tis better none should know who thou art. Should I outlive thee, I will tell him, and say, blackened as thou art, cursed and full of sin, there was yet a spark of the Divine in thee, a spark which anon shall fire and blaze and burn the dross, and leave thee pure and unsullied as the air in which the gods dwell.'

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Chios returned within the cave. The women were silent, until the silence was broken by the footfall of a stranger. It was Judah the Christian.

'What a strange gathering!' murmured Chios, as he went forth to meet his friend.

Endora glided out like a panther, leaving the two men alone with the priestess.

Saronia drew her black cloak closely around her, covering her priestly robes.

Judah knew her. 'Lady of the Temple, thou art safe. Speak; I will not betray thee. Thou art not the first who came in this way. A young ruler in Judea came to my Master by night and learned of Him, and what thou wilt hear from me are the echoes of that Master's voice. Say on.'

Then answered Saronia. 'Behold in me a priestess of the goddess Diana, skilled in the mysteries of her faith, touching the fringe of knowledge as it emanates from my divine mistress, carrying with me a belief hoary with the ages. But a short time since it permeated every cranny of my being, leaving no room for doubt until I heard from Chios thou hadst won him to thy faith. Knowing Chios well, and observing his peace, the things thou hast told him now rise for hearing in my soul. Judah, if thou hast more of truth than I, then show it me! I have power—power to cast around us darkness—thick darkness—and anon fill this darkened cave with spirits of fire, so that it shall blaze with light! Believest thou this? I do not boast to show this power, but to prove I seek not power, but truth and peace. Speak.'

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Then said he: 'Thou hast no power here. Thou art shorn of thy strength. The presence of my God is too strong! Invoke thy goddess, or thy gods; they will be dumb to thee. I challenge thee, invoke thy spirits! Call them hither, they will be as dead men to thee!'

She arose, towering with majestic beauty, and, stretching forth her arms, whispered, with a voice full of command:

Spirits of the Temple Altar,
Ye who guard the sacrifice,
Ye whose pinions never weary
Serving Hecate, Diana,
Serving Luna, Queen of Heaven,
Come ye, by my summons bidden,
Light your torches deep in Hades,
Wave your brightness in this darkness,
Fill this place with light and splendour!

But Saronia was powerless. Her strength was gone, and she stood aghast. Looking first at Chios, then at Judah, she spoke not a word, and her eyes were filled with tears as she learned a greater than Diana was there, and the priestess was a broken reed.

It was then Judah spoke:

'Holy Father, by whose power the north was stretched over the empty space, whose o'ershadowing wings give shelter to unnumbered souls, whose mercy endureth for ever! Holy Son, reclining on the bosom of the Father when the morning stars sang together and the sons of God shouted for joy! Holy Spirit, dispensing peace! Holy Trinity, Great Eternal, Love illimitable—hear Thy servant, and show us Thy goodness!'

Then a Presence passed between them, and Saronia knew the Christ of God was there; but He entered not into her soul.

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She saw by the smile of peace on the Christian's face that he recognised his God and was holding communion with Him. And the priestess hid her face, not daring to look upon that holy sight.

'Saronia,' said Judah, 'thy God stands by! Wilt thou worship?'

She raised her eyes upwards to the rugged roof of the cave, and, starting to her feet, cried:

'God of gods, if such Thou be—Spirit of the Mighty Ages—hail! I feel Thy power; it encircles me! I fear Thee, but I do not love. No, no! Saronia came not here to be captured or fascinated by fleeting spasm of fear! My mind is wrought to think and judge dispassionately. No show of power, no tinge of joy or veil of peace, will hold me off from the circle of my faith, which hath taught me knowledge deep and high, all glinting with flames of truth, strong as the moon gives when harvest-time is here. What I ask for is more light—sunlight—that may show me the truth with radiant splendour of a summer day. Canst thou, holy man, bestow this?'

For a moment the power of her mighty mind astounded Judah. Never before had he encountered such a being. He looked on her as she stood erect in all her loveliness, saying:

'Thou art a princess amongst spirits! The wisdom of man will not convince thee. Thou must be taught of God! Thy knowledge is great, Saronia; but listen. Many mighty spirits have wheeled and circled around the throne of the Eternal, dashing from their wings the heavenly sheen, the

brilliance brighter than a myriad suns, as they touched the halo of splendour which surrounds Jehovah. Many of them fell—fell, I say—like lightning from heaven, shorn of their radiance through dire rebellion. They knew the very source of truth, gazed upon the very ocean of it, and fell, carrying knowledge with them and a mighty power, by which they now work evil instead of good, leaving peace and love behind.

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'Perchance thou hast been taught of them—filled thy pitcher at their polluted fountain. Wilt thou be satisfied with it, or rise and rise until thou ministerest to Deity? Thou, too, wilt be a rebel if thou closest thy gates against the truth. Thine eyes are clouded, and mercy waits with loving hands to take the veil away!

'Thou seekest light, and even now, although thou knowest it not, thou art on the very verge of the kingdom. And, mark well, when the set time comes, and thy vision is purified, the glory of God will surround thee like a mighty ocean without a shore. The index of my mind points that I should say good-bye. The seed which has been sown must die, and from it rise life and beauty to be crowned with a harvest of flowers. Farewell, mighty Saronia! Farewell, beloved Chios!'

And he passed out into the starlight, the angels of God guarding him in mighty phalanx, deep and broad like a river of glory.

Endora saw him leave, and a shudder passed over her as she trod the ground sanctified by the footsteps of the holy man.

'Where hast thou been, Endora?' said the priestess.

'Listening,' said the witch. 'I did my best not to play eavesdropper, but by an irresistible power I was drawn to the half-open door, and heard the words of Judah, and, on my soul, I would I were as pure as he!'

'Art thou also being tainted with this new faith, Endora?'

'No, no; but what may I expect from mine own? I am borne on the outer circle of it, accursed, knowing my fate. Who can blame me if I strike from my orbit like a wandering star, with the hope of coming within the influence of some other God greater than Hecate? Perhaps He may take me to His care. Did I not hear Judah say the mercy of his God endureth for ever? If so, may I not taste of it? I will try, and ere to-morrow's sun will have arisen I will have burnt my charms, my books, my Ephesian spells, and stand out fearlessly, awaiting the passing by of the Great Spirit of that mighty God. Perchance, seeing a naked, starving soul, He may throw around me a garment of mercy, a mantle of love, and I may yet atone, and worship at His feet. There is a story told that He sheltered Magdalene—and why not me? Most noble priestess, I read thee well enough to know thy great mind, stored with the greater mysteries, is broad enough, high enough, deep enough to let a struggling spirit work out its best destiny. I know thou wilt consent that to Endora be allowed the fullest light she can get to lead on to something better than the cold doom which now awaits her. Say, noble priestess—say! I feel I am parting from thee. Some links in the mighty spell which binds me are already broken. Some great influence is at work moulding my soul to something good. I will let it work. I will be passive in the hands of this great Potter, and out of darkness—gross darkness and sin—He may bring forth a being clothed with radiant immortality. Already a new dawn upheaveth, and more peace than Endora hath experienced in a lifetime now broods over her.'

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And she fell on the cold, stony floor, and lay at the feet of the priestess.

Saronia, the High Priestess, arose, looking lovingly towards Chios.

'Go thy way, dear Chios; leave this woman to me. No good can now come of thy presence. Our mission is accomplished. We have spoken with him we came to see. His words are graven on my heart, and will have due consideration; and greater than all he said is the fact that here before me lies this Endora, a marvel to my soul—a being steeped in sin, accursed of the goddess, moved upon by this mighty spiritual influence, talking of peace, and a dawn of love, mercy, and radiant life! This to me is far greater miracle than if Mount Pion had changed places with Coressus, or the deep blue sea rolled over the Ephesian plain, making the great Temple of Diana an island of marble in the midst of the waters.'

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Chios and Saronia stood at the entrance of that lonely cave.

'Let me kiss thee, Saronia; let me place my hand upon thy head. I have been silent, knowing a greater than I was present. I knew thee too well to meddle with the workings of thy mind. We shall meet again shortly, shall we not, loved one?'

'Probably.'

'Thou wilt send by the hand of Endora?'

'Good-bye, Chios—good-bye! Take this flower of myrtle from me.'

She plucked it from her bosom, kissed its fragrant petals, and gave it to him.

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CHAPTER XLI

DAYBREAK

The meeting with Chios and the Christian in the cave of the Ephesian sorceress had worked on the mind of the priestess. She was agitated like a ship cast in the way where two seas meet. Two great tides were bearing on her, which should carry her on its bosom. On the one hand, she had the traditions of the goddess, like a mighty river coursing down the ages, backed by a power which could command the living and the dead; on the other, she had presented to her a God of love, and the teachings which brought her dead mother to the Christ of God, permeated the soul of her lover, and gave peace to Endora, the accursed of Hecate.

Before her rose the great Temple, glistening white in the sunlight, rearing its majestic pillars skywards, throwing shadows to the west. She saw the train of priests move up the marble stairway and disappear within, and heard the hymn of morning rise on the trembling air.

In striking contrast before her stretched out a vision of the hated sect, the followers of the despised Nazarene, the little band of outcasts, who for fear of the people worshipped their God in the silent watches of the night, when the city was asleep—worshipped Him without gorgeous ritual or templed home, and standing ready, well knowing that as each day dawned the setting sun might cast its rays upon their lifeless bodies lying uncared for in the Ephesian arena.

All this floated before her, drifting by, dark and ominously, like the shadow of a great cloud on the face of the waters.

She saw herself a fugitive, hiding on the mountain-sides of yonder snow-capped Tmolus, where many others of the Christians had already fled for safety from the cruel fate in store for them. [Pg 222]

She saw herself a wanderer, an outcast, pursued to the death. Which should it be? High Priestess of Diana, clothed with mystery, strong in power, standing on the loftiest peak of fame, with a nation at her feet, and the issues of life and death in her hands; or a child in the new kingdom of love and peace?

A thousand spirit-voices sang chorus to her soul, bidding her beware, now flowing with soft cadence in winning measure and tones of entreaty, now rising in one vast tumultuous threatening as if they would break the earth asunder. She stood unawed, listening; then cried:

'Stand back! Saronia is a free spirit! What are ye? If I seek the truth, what spirit amongst you dare bar the way to a soul which floats upwards to the source of its being? Nay, none of you! Not even the son of the morning who fell from heaven!'

Day after day hung wearily on Saronia; she was of such nature as no half-measure would satisfy. She was awakening from the mist of ages. She had heard of a great spiritual life which was without alloy, where the spirit evolved more and more into the likeness of the great First Cause, and her mind broadened out to seek the fuller light.

When the nightingale sang to its mate and the sweet-scented flowers gave perfume in exchange for the earth-born dew, when the winds of the night lay cradled, when the voice of the toiler was still, and the sheen of the star of the west melted into the cold, gray sea, when the city slept on in the darkness, Saronia looked out to the mountains, the mountains which sheltered the exiles, the fugitive followers of God. [Pg 223]

'Twas death before death to the priestess; 'twas the death of the old faith, the birth of the new—the new one awakening the soul from its slumber, refining the spirit, remoulding her nature, and bringing together the Christ and His loved one.

The night-winds leapt from their slumbers, and shrieked like a soul in pain, trampled the flowers in their fury, flew round the pine-clad mountains, circled and circled again, till the girl was entombed in a whirlwind, a whirlwind with centre of calm.

Within that sanctuary, guarded by the angel of the covenant, stood Saronia, undismayed, determined, decided to serve the Son of Jehovah.

Her next step was to break away from the Temple service. Many methods came to her—one such as to leave the place without disturbance, to quietly move away; to flee; to live and breathe the fresh air, until hunted down to meet death in the arena of the great theatre of Ephesus. But to Saronia this was cowardly, and she resolved to meet her fate at once. Life to her was valueless save for the good she might do. But what greater good could she do than to openly witness for the new faith before the priests and priestesses of the great Temple of Diana, and receive the martyr's crown? It was a fitting prelude to the entrance into the great life—to the life which ended never.

She would call an assembly of the priests and priestesses, and tell them from her own lips the story of her new-born love. The time was fixed, and as it was no uncommon thing for the priests and priestesses to meet their chief in solemn assembly, no particular notice was taken of Saronia's action in calling such.

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So, at eventide, when the worship for the day was over, and the sun had set, and the outer gates leading into the Temple were closed, the priests and priestesses gathered before the great altar, to listen to the voice of their beloved priestess.

The scene was one of solemn grandeur, as the priests with garments of many-coloured textures ranged themselves in crescent rows on the right of the altar as you enter the massive gates at the chief entrance. On the left of the altar, in the same manner, stood the priestesses, loveliest of the Ionian women, draped in white, yellow, rose-coloured, and azure garments, with here and there a robe of black, sacred to Hecate; whilst other maidens, flower-bearers, libation-carriers, and incense-girls, stood between the priests and priestesses, ready to place their offerings on the altar in honour of Diana.

All was ready, all were expectant, when the great High Priestess, Saronia, came forward in flowing robes of white, costly silk, and stood in all her magnificent beauty.

The offering to the goddess was soon made, but Saronia stood in silent meditation; neither had the soft cadences of sweet Ionian music from the costliest instruments any charm. Then, when their harmonies fell low and died in plaintive echoes, Saronia looked upwards through the open roof towards the circle of azure sky, until a calm, a radiant calm, o'erspread her face, making her seem like a visitant from the heavens.... During this brief pause a profound solemnity pervaded the assembly—a quietude in which even the rustle of a leaf would have seemed discord.

The people, spellbound by the force of her character and the beauty of the Priestess, held their breath and earnestly waited.

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Then spoke Saronia to them, in a voice full of love and hope, saying:

'Priestesses and priests, and all you gathered here, listen to the words of Saronia. Me you found helpless at your gates, a slave seeking shelter, seeking sanctuary at the shrine of great Diana, whose image, hidden by a veil of purple and gold, towers majestically behind me.

'You brought me within the precincts of this mighty Temple, and cared for me tenderly.

'After awhile you thought me fit to serve your goddess.

'Step by step I rose until, with one bound, I became the High Priestess.

'My spirit, yearning with desire to understand the hidden meaning of your mystic faith, became a receptacle for all the teachings of your goddess. My mind became permeated with your creed, and every fibre of my nature shaken and respondent to the spirit's voice, as leaves move to the breathings of the winds.

'In this spiritual ecstasy I revelled and moved on from mystery to mystery, diving into the deep ocean of your sacred knowledge, satisfying my soul with draughts of wisdom from the choicest fountains of your faith; and, as I swept into the mysteries of your creed, my spirit became intoxicated with delight, and seemed to purify by contact with the unseen presence of your goddess.

'Light after light flooded my vision, and I, the poor wanderer seeking for truth and rest, was carried onwards as a mighty rushing wind, accumulating knowledge as I went, until I was borne into a vale of peace and rested for a while drinking in the delirious joys of my new-found life.

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'Power was given to me, power of which I dare not speak, save only to those who are initiated into the mysteries of your veiled goddess Hecate.

'Wisdom and power were bestowed on me, and, with the power I possessed, I dealt out beneficence in accordance with the precepts of Diana—Diana Triformis; and thus from stage to stage my life has moved. But the soul has an eternal longing for greater knowledge and greater truths, and this was the case with Saronia, your priestess.

'As a wild gazelle springs from crag to crag, over shadowed chasms, in search of food, so I moved on, seeking joy and truth and knowledge, until I in spirit reached a sea-girt shore, and could no further go. Not that my desire failed, but aid came not to ferry me over the darkling waters.

'I stood calling on my goddess to point a way to the other shore, on which stood templed cities with domes and towers rising high into the pearly sheen of a glorious light. But no answer came.... From the spiritual city across the sea came a flowing light like a moving star. It came, and resolved into beauteous form, until a

Spirit, priestly, kingly, clothed with heaven, stood beside me, and spoke peace to my awakening soul, saying, "I will guide thee."...

'But it was not a messenger of Diana.'

'Of whom, then?' shouted the priests.

"'Twas the Angel of the new faith,' replied the priestess.

'Traitor! traitor!' thundered the people. 'Hear! She defames the great Diana! Take her away—away quickly, lest she pollute the altar!'

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Gazing steadily on the multitude, her dark eyes flashing fire, she cried:

'No, no! Back! Use not your force. 'Tis needless. I might have fled the Temple, sought refuge in the mountains, escaped your fury, but she who has been your High Priestess would not have the seal of cowardice stamped upon her soul. Saronia will go to her death, trusting in the Christ of God.'

'Take her away,' shouted the priests, 'lest she speaks again that accursed name! She is beside herself; the spirit of Saronia has fled, another has entered, accursed—accursed!'

'Kill the body,' said the people, 'lest it darken the Temple!'

The priests closed around, ruthlessly dragging her from before the altar to the Temple cells, and thrust her in, dethroned, disgraced.

The priests wailed:

'Woe! Woe! Woe! O goddess! O goddess! O mighty goddess! The omens are grievous: the High Priest is dead; thy priestess denies thee. Thine altar is lonely. The Temple polluted. Arise! Arise! Scatter thy foes! Great goddess, arise! Deliver us! Forsake us not! Forsake us not!'

CHAPTER XLII

VARRO

'Thou hast heard,' said the Proconsul, 'that Saronia has abjured her faith in the great Diana, and is a prisoner within the Temple where once she reigned supreme, second only to the goddess?'

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'Yes,' replied Chios, 'I have, and my heart is nearly dead. Can anything be done to save her?'

'I think not. The Roman State cannot interfere in such matters. The faiths of the empire are manifold. Beside, Nero has enough on his hands, and knows better than to stir up the passions of the Ionian people for the sake of a woman who in no way interferes with his caprice. No, my dear fellow; I am afraid all will be settled by the Temple custom, and Saronia must accept her fate.'

'But, Varro, Proconsul, thou hast power here second only to the Emperor, and perhaps greater. The State allows great latitude. Where is Lucius?'

'At sea.'

'Where?'

'I cannot tell thee, Chios.'

'Where was he when last thou heardst?'

'At Rome, receiving orders from Nero.'

'Varro, thou canst tell me of his whereabouts, if thou carest.'

'I can say only that ere long he will arrive at Ephesus, but he cannot help thee, noble Chios. A weightier charge than thou knowest awaits the priestess.'

'What is it?'

'Murder!'

'Murder! Of whom?'

'The High Priest.'

''Tis a lie!' spoke out the Greek.

'Perhaps so,' replied Varro; 'but circumstances are against her. After her arrest, in her room was found a pair of sandals, stained underneath with human blood.'

'Merciful God!' exclaimed Chios.

'Listen further. It is well known that on the fateful night she went to the Sacred Grove, close to the river Cayster, where the priest was found. Do not be jealous, good fellow. The prying eyes of

an attendant priestess reports that a man supposed to be her lover was seen in the company of this beautiful woman, even in the company of Saronia, the haughty Saronia, priestess of Diana! Now, Chios, looking at such evidences, the conclusion drawn is that, afraid of being exposed by the priest, who also must have seen her, she or her lover slew him, and Saronia, conscience-stricken, knowing such an act could never be forgiven by her Lady Saviour, left her faith, and, with cunning hypocrisy, pretends the Christian, thinking perhaps she may gain sympathy or help from that hated crew. Now, Chios, does this satisfy thee?'

'No,' said he; 'it is all untrue. Christian she may be; murderess—never!'

'Then thou dost still believe in her?'

'Yes; to shed the last drop of my life's blood, and may Heaven grant me such an opportunity!'

'Nonsense—nonsense, Chios! Too long hast thou been infatuated by this mysterious being. Methought for some time past no good would come to thee by such a passion, and let me warn thee ere too late. Be careful, or thou wilt be netted in this sad event. Lie low, my friend, and let her meet her fate. Thou canst do no good, and may empty on thy head unmeasured ills.'

'No, Varro. Were those looming ills more numerous than the hairs which grow upon my aching head I would meet them, embrace them, to save Saronia one pang of grief or pain. Nevertheless, I thank thee for thy kindly counsel, but the mind of the Greek is made up. If she suffer, I suffer with her. If she die, Chios dies. Not as the coward dies—I will die trying to save her life. No threats, no danger, no death will stop me. I am fixed to this purpose. I know she is as pure as heaven, and honoured from thence. Were Chios half so holy he would consider himself blessed.

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'Roman, thou hast no good blood for her, wouldst not move a finger to protect her; but I, with an unshaken belief in her goodness, will do my best. Good-bye, noble Proconsul. Saronia may yet appeal in Rome!'

'What! Before Nero?'

'Yes.'

'Take care, Chios!'

'Say on.'

'Why, the fleeing slave taking shelter in the forest gloom and sleeping in the tiger's lair would fare as well. Ah, ah, Chios! Thou art short-sighted. Saronia, a lovely woman, and a Christian, seeking Nero as judge! Why, he would judge her meet for the arena or his mistress, and make thee a slave into the bargain if thou interfered!'

The teeth of Chios were firmly set, and his face became livid. He dared not vent his rage on the chosen man of the Emperor and the Senate of Rome, but his looks spoke louder than words.

Varro saw all at a glance, and said:

'Thou dost not meet my words.'

'No. Silent am I for her dear sake. Watch my actions. They may answer thee.'

'I will, and be careful of the moonstruck lover. I wish thee well, old friend. Thou art a good fellow. I have done my best to tempt thee from this wild crusade, and would on my soul I had succeeded. But there is no cure for love, and thou art in love—a phantom love. Do not lose thyself in a wild morass.'

'Fear not, Varro. If I love, so didst thou. Mine may grow, and joy with awakening purity and loveliness; thine is blighted and dead, and from thy dead love springs up the hate thou bearest towards Saronia, thinking she in some mysterious way o'ershadowed Nika.'

'Silence, man!'

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'No, I will not be silent. I speak to thee as Varro. I speak not to the Proconsul of Ionia. I say, were Saronia not Saronia and I asked thy aid, thou wouldst give it; but now thy spirit reaches out for pretext to blast the one thy faithless wife abhorred. Is not thine a mad, dead love? Come, change thy mind, and help me. I tell thee, Saronia never hurt thy Nika, and she is as innocent of this murder as the truest spirit of God. Now, noble friend, wilt thou not help me?'

'What can I do, Chios? I cannot interfere.'

'Then, promise thou wilt not pursue.'

'Is she really innocent?'

'Yes.'

'Dost thou know this?'

'Yes.'

'And swear it?'

'I do.'

'Then, if Varro cannot help Saronia, he will not pursue her.'

CHAPTER XLIII

MYSTERY

Chios sent for Endora. There was a calm light in her eyes such as he had never before seen. Ere he could speak, she said:

'I know: it is of Saronia thou wouldst speak.'

'True, woman. Dost thou know she is charged with the murder of the High Priest?'

'I know all. Fear not, Chios. Saronia shall not suffer for the crime I have committed.'

'Rash woman! how canst thou atone? She is a prisoner, and has abjured her faith.'

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'That may be, noble Chios; but take my word for once: the guilty shall suffer for their own sins. This vile body of mine shall be torn limb from limb rather than one hair of her head shall be plucked. No more of evil for me!'

'Now, listen, Endora. Your heart is right, but your words are idle. She must be saved, but in another way. I will rescue her. Thou knowest the Temple, and must find where she is lodged. Find out if access is possible; bring me full account, and great reward shall be thine. Canst thou do this?'

'Yes; but not for reward.'

'What then?'

'For love I bear to her.'

'Very well. Be it so. Lose no time. She is already under a sentence of death, and will die. Go! go! Great God! what a death. Oh that I might die for her! The Ephesians gathered together to make sport—to make sport of Saronia the beautiful, my love! Polluted by the touch of a coarse gaoler. A sight to gratify the Romans, a jest for the rabble of Ephesus, and a cruel death ending all. She who has wielded the sceptre of power, highest and brightest among the women of Ionia, commanded spirits in legions from the underworld, stopped the eagles in their flight, turned the courses of the clouds, baring the face of the silvery moon; she who has dropped the sceptre of this power, and robed herself with a trust in God—shall she be forsaken? No, no! It cannot be so. If she could breathe out her life supported by these arms of mine; if I could but close her lovely eyes in death and kiss her whitening brow, then could I fall also asleep and awake to meet her on the other shore.'

'Chios!' said the Proconsul, interrupting the Greek. 'How fares my friend? I have news for thee.'

'Good, or evil?'

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'Judge thou. The Roman fleet, under the command of Lucius, is in the offing. Their numbers crowd the sea.'

'Lucius! The fleet! Lucius!' exclaimed Chios.

'True; Lucius is almost here.'

'Why comes there such a multitude of ships?' said Chios. 'Is there reason?'

'There may be. This much I confide in thee: ere many hours have passed, the mighty walls of this great city will glisten with the spears of Roman men, in number such as Ephesus has never seen since Claudian ruled or Nero wielded power. To-morrow will be a great day—the streets so full of Roman soldiers that standing-room will not be left for rioters.'

'What does this portend?'

'Nothing save a military show of Roman power. Nevertheless, thou wilt do well to keep within doors *to-morrow*.'

'Why?'

'Because I wish it so. Thou wilt be at home to-morrow, eh, Chios? Chios, dost hear me?'

'I hear thee, but will not obey. Dost think I could remain here to-morrow, when it is the day for Saronia's murder? and thou, too, hast consented to this deed of shame. Roman, Roman, thou art false!'

'Peace, Chios! Peace! What I have promised thee, I will do. Hast thou Chian wine? Bring it forth; let us quaff it together.'

'Now hark ye. I go back to Rome. I hate this place. The associations are not to my liking. She whom I once loved has gone. It is not congenial to me to meet Lucius. My story has reached

Rome, reached Nero, but that does not affect me. Nothing pleases him better than to keep a respectable gulf between a Proconsul and Lucius, the fighting admiral, well knowing we shall not connive to rebel against him. But there must exist a feeling, a strong feeling, between Lucius and—*your friend*. Of course, Lucius is haughty; too much Roman blood runs in his veins to openly disapprove of what befell his daughter, well knowing, also, she deserved it. But a father cannot help feeling. I am better away. A Roman city draped in purple suits me better than Ephesus; and if I can close in with Nero's set, I gain more wealth in one year than in a lifetime here. I wonder how Lucius will receive the news of his wife's death?'

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'Venusta dead!'

'Yes. I thought thou didst know of it.'

'No. When did she die?'

'She died on the day Saronia abjured her faith and was disgraced. The shock of joy killed her.'

'This, too, is sad.'

'Why so? Her loss will be felt by Lucius only. He is old, and will mourn briefly. Besides, he will have his hands full for awhile. Come, cheer up, man; thou shalt go with me to Rome, and I will make thee merry. Thou hast never really lived yet. I am away. Don't forget. Remain home to-morrow to receive me. I will come before thou art required at the arena; and, should I not, then do not stay. Be in time; there will be a goodly show, but—Saronia shall not be there. Hear ye, Chios?'

'What dost thou mean?'

'No more than I have said. Good-bye, good friend.'

And Varro was gone.

'What a strange being!' exclaimed Chios. 'What does he mean? I cannot understand him. I believe he means good, and knows more than he says, and intends to help. Some great mystery attaches itself to those warlike preparations. I must be patient until to-morrow, desist from going to the Temple to-night to rescue her. He goes to Rome. It is well known he is a staunch friend of Nero. Lucius is not. What can this great fleet of many thousand armed men mean? To-morrow will solve the problem, for what is to be done will be done quickly.'

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CHAPTER XLIV

ACRATUS, THE TEMPLE SPOILER

The next day at early dawn the harbour was filled with shipping. There were the light-sailing laburnæ, the stately biremes, majestic triremes, and quadriremes, with sterns rising high and crowned with castellated cabins, each with its great square yard and spray-beaten sail. On every prow blazed forth a sign, and on each quarter shone the image of a tutelary god. The ship of Lucius was among them, with great red flag denoting rank, and bearing a murderous ram, the fiercest of them all.

Masses of Roman troops, with polished shields and glittering arms, thronged the vessels. Two legions were there—one half of them Prætorian men, with tribunes and centurions, with Acratus, the freed man of Nero, to lead them.

The great sails were closely furled, and the ships moored in regular order towards the quays. At the sound of trumpets the soldiers disembarked, and were hailed welcome by a host of Roman warriors who were stationed in Ephesus.

Soon the city was crowded with armed men, and on the walls the silver eagles shone resplendent in the sunlight.

The people were confounded. No tumult, no voice of war, yet the place was filled with martial strains, and Roman troops lined the ways from the city port, past the great Gymnasium, Forum, Theatre, away up the streets towards the city gates and onwards to the Temple Way. All was occupied with soldiers. A swift messenger had come into the Agora, telling the breathless people the Roman troops reached past the Temple and surrounded it, paying no respect to sacred groves or old traditions of the Temple's rights.

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'What could this mean?' exclaimed the Ephesians.

They had not long to wait for an answer. Soon it was known that a body of priests, standing in the way of the Romans, guarding the precincts of the holy shrine, had been struck down—dead. And the swarming hosts of Nero had poured within, and finding the Temple closed, battered down the beautiful gates of gold and ivory, and were carousing within the sacred place.

Nothing was too vile for the plunderers. They had received their orders from the arch-fiend Nero, and license for themselves. They were to sack the Temple, and take the spoils to Rome. Such

must be accomplished, no matter how.

The great space within the parabolus walls running around the Temple of Diana with the white brow was filled with laughing, jesting soldiers. They had not an enemy to fight against. 'Twas a cold-blooded affair. They were fighting-men, and in battle would have told well, but as robbers they were ashamed of their work. Acratus foresaw this, and gave them wine, and the wine brought forth lawlessness.

Virgin priestesses ran to and fro with hair dishevelled, crying on their goddess, only to fall into the hands of Syrians, Africans, and Gauls—vile allies, a part of Nero's guard, sent with the regular Roman troops, to act as drunken jackals; and each of these, so far as he could, took a virgin priestess for his mate, and no restriction was put on them by Acratus.

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The beautiful veil concealing the image of the holy goddess was pulled down. The gold and the jewels adorning it and the great statue were torn from their strong settings, and piled up on the marble floor.

On the sacred altar the soldiers lit their fires and cooked their rations, and washed themselves with the water of the holy fountain Hypelæus—the fountain ornamented by Thrason, and the altar sacred to the genius of Ionia. What cared those brutal marauders? Had not he who sent them desecrated everything, even the statue of the Syrian goddess, and laughed at it? What harm if they should do the same?

Within, the Temple was one horrible scene of lewd riot and plunder; without, the people were rising in masses, and thousands from adjacent towns were gathering around the city walls, and all crying loudly for revenge; but none could enter. The Romans held the gates, and every tower and battlement along the great red-brick walls, hard as adamant, was crowded with glistening spears. Nothing could be done from without, and there was little chance of help to come from within. A scheme was proposed to burn the fleet, but this got noised abroad too early, and the ships were moved from the wharves to the centre of the city port.

The day wore on in tumult and distress, and the people, seeing no chance of saving the treasures of their holy place, gave way to grief, loudly charging Saronia as the cause of all. The murder of the High Priest, her blasphemy in the Temple, and the want of action in not killing her right away, was the cause of the desertion of the goddess from her home.

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CHAPTER XLV

REVELATION

In the Temple Varro, the Proconsul, and Acratus held counsel. They were standing near the altar, with the last light of evening falling upon them.

Near to the fallen image of the goddess Diana were the smaller statues in marble, bronze, silver, and gold—lamps and paterii, vases richly chased and candelabrii, instruments of the Temple, costly golden, jewelled things, all were piled up in heaps.

From behind this profusion of rarest art, now lying like so much rubbish, a Roman was dragging a woman who appeared quite dead. Her hair hung in masses over her face, hiding a part of it, hiding a face which was crimson with blood. Her garments were torn, and the soldier threw her down close to where the two chiefs stood.

'Thank the gods!' muttered he.

'What hast thou, fellow?' said Acratus.

'A woman,' replied the man.

'Yes, yes, I know; but where didst thou find her? I thought all those maidens netted long ago.'

'I will tell my noble master. In hunting through those rooms behind the altar, I came quite by chance upon a cell which had escaped the notice of our soldiers when they threaded their way through the winding passages below. I burst open the door, looked in, and saw that beautiful creature. "Ah, ah!" said I. "By the gods, I have a royal prize!" But, as I advanced to take her, I found her a perfect demon of the bad type. I tried soft words. She replied: "Stand back! I know your mission." I threatened, and made to take her. She arose, flew at me with terrible menace, such as I shall carry with me. I seized her roughly, but, with lightning swiftness, she plucked the dagger from my belt, and would have pinned me to the wall had I not unhanded her. She flew through the winding passages like a forest-hound, up the stairway to the rooms behind. Then out she passed, and stood just there behind the statue. I followed, knowing I should capture her. I heard her cry, "Oh, woe! Oh, woe! Oh, woe!" Then she stretched up her arms, both of them, high aloft in the air, as if she would reach down something from the skies, and said, "My God! my God!" and fell to the ground. I took her up, thinking it was a faint; but, finding her dead, I dropped her there, and wish I had never seen her!'

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The man passed on, leaving Varro and Acratus in deep converse. The quick eye of the Proconsul

saw the form of the woman move. He went towards her, actuated by some strange fascination, and spoke to her, but no voice came back. Then he lifted the waves of hair from her face and cried:

'O ye gods, it is she! It is Saronia!'

He bent low and whispered her name. Her eyes opened and gazed on him, and then at the desolation around her, and she closed them again as if in sleep.

'Hi! Here fellow, fill yon golden bowl with water! Quick! quick! and follow me, or I will kill thee for delay!'

Varro took Saronia in his arms, and bore her within one of the Temple rooms, bathed her cheeks, whispering softly:

'Thou art safe, Saronia. Thou shalt go to Chios!'

At these words, fresh life came back, and she took the hand of the Proconsul in hers, and, looking into his face, she said:

'Tell me, is it all a dream, or am I mad?'

'No, thou art not mad or dreaming. What thou seest is real. The Temple of thy goddess will be bereft of its riches to adorn the golden house of Nero. This now is nothing to thee. As I have said, thou shalt go to Chios—to Chios! Rest tranquilly; I will guard thee. When evening settles down, I have means of escape for thee.'

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He sent for wine and fruit and raiment. Having done this, he despatched two messengers, one to Endora (for Saronia wished it so) and another to Chios. He charged the soldiers:

'Bring the old woman from the cave on the top of yonder hill! Be careful no evil befall her, or thou wilt suffer.'

The night was now closing in, and fires were burning high upon the mountains and the plain, showing where the people had encamped, and on the stillness of the evening air ever and anon arose loud shouts and wailings.

'Who is that beautiful woman in yonder room?' said Acratus.

'That is naught to thee,' said the Proconsul.

'I know, I know, but Nero would rather possess her than all the riches of Ephesus or Pergamos.'

'Curse thee for the thought! Hold back thy words! Silence! In Ionia I am master.'

'I hope no offence, most noble.'

'No, not this time, but be careful for the future. Thou hast to sack Pergamos yet, and—well, never mind, enough has been said.'

At this stage an aged woman came towards them; tottering with fear, and led by two Roman soldiers.

Acratus turned away muttering:

'He shall pay dearly for his speech.'

'Thou hast brought her safely. Thanks for thy vigilance amidst the crowded streets. This way, woman—this way, Endora. Come with me. Here is Saronia; be careful of her; take her to Chios! Tell him I will follow as soon as I can. Again, on yonder couch sufficient raiment lies, brought from Saronia's own wardrobe. Divest her of those soiled garments, disguise her, and lead to where her lover lives.'

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'What of the rabble?' said Endora. 'The streets are filled with soldiers and rioters, the ground strewn with slain. May we stay here under thy protection during the night?'

'No; I go hence shortly, and to-morrow it will be worse. Go. Tell it not—to-morrow will be worse! I will give you guard, but thou must be careful, nevertheless, that Saronia be not known, or the people will kill her. No harm shall come from my soldiers. They shall be faithful. I also will be faithful, for Chios's sake, as long as the grass grows and the rivers flow to the ocean. If any injury come, it will be from the hands of the furious mob. I give her into thy charge, and will send guard for both. I can do no more. Again, I say, be careful!'

Out they went into the darkness—out into the storm of blood.

For a while all went well as they passed between the lines of the watchful Romans. They had traversed most of the way and were close to the studio of Chios, where the troops were thinnest. There the people gathered together in angry crowds.

Suddenly the ruffians saw the women, and cried out:

'Here are two Ephesians in the pay of the Romans! Spies, traitors, guides to the Temple

plunderers! Kill them!' And they fell on them with mad fury.

Instantly they were surrounded by the soldiers and encircled as in a net.

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Exasperated and maddened by the day's proceedings, they would die in the attempt to kill the women. Roughly handled as they were, one of them had time to draw a dagger from his belt and aimed to plunge it into the bosom of Saronia. The glistening blade was falling towards her, but quicker than its descent was Endora, who threw herself between them and received the blow. She fell, crying:

'She is young; take me!'

And, as she lay dying, the murderer also fell, pierced by a dozen spears.

The people fell back, shouting:

'Great is Diana of the Ephesians!' Whilst the savage troops replied gruffly: 'But Nero of Rome is greater!'

Endora spoke a few words—dying words—and her head fell back into the arms of Saronia, and all was over—Endora was dead.

They were about to proceed and leave the body, but the queenly form of Saronia asserted itself as she stood with eyes dilated and form erect, crying:

'Soldiers of Rome, bear carefully with you this dead body!'

'No, no!' they replied. 'Hasten away to safety. The dead suffer not.'

But still she stood transfixed, and, raising her voice, she said:

'Do as I bid you, or I refuse to move; and if I remain, it is at your peril.'

They saw in her no common person, and reluctantly obeyed, one taking his cloak and wrapping it round the corpse, whilst others took their scarves and bound their spears together, and placed her on them as a bier, the torches, reeking with flame, casting over her a lurid glow. And thus they hurriedly passed away, with a circle of shields and glittering spears protecting the living and the dead.

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The road became clearer, so that when the soldiers arrived at the garden of Chios no Ephesian eye witnessed them pass up the marble steps into the lonely sanctuary.

As they entered, and laid the dead burden on the floor, Chios saw Saronia.

'Great God, what is this? What does it mean?'

'Hold thy peace,' said she. 'Not now. Later thou shalt know.'

The soldiers withdrew, having accomplished the safety of one only. A deep silence for a moment reigned. Neither spoke. Both hearts were too full for speech. Chios took the hands of Saronia and clasped them within his own, and with silent joy gazed into her face.

She broke the silence with an agonizing cry. Going towards the lifeless form, she uncovered the cold, dead face, and, stooping, kissed the snowy brow, sobbing:

'Oh, Endora, Endora, thou hast proved thy love! Thou hast proved thy love to me!'

'Endora!' exclaimed Chios. 'Is it Endora?'

'Yes, it is Endora. She received the death intended for me. Look well at her, Chios. Gaze on her peaceful face. Gaze on her face. Dost thou recognise who she was? It is meet thou shouldst know, for she loved thee dearly.'

Chios was like a man stupefied with wine.

'What dost thou mean, Saronia? I know her not, save as the mountain sorceress.'

'True, Chios. That is the answer I might have expected. But one day, not so very long ago, I visited the Ephesian shore, and on a rocky eminence where an altar stands— Thou knowest the place where the seas dash up?'

'Yes, I know, Saronia.'

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'Well, there I met Endora—quite by chance—and spoke to her, and found from her that she at one time lived at Delos.'

'Delos?'

'Yes, Chios, Delos. And thou hast heard of Myrtille the priestess?'

'Yes, that I have. I heard fully of her when last I visited the isle. A sad story.'

'Yes, 'twas sad, and strange to know that Endora was no other than Myrtille.'

'But, Saronia, she died.'

'No, no! She lived on unknown, and this lifeless form is she.'

'Poor Myrtille!' said Chios. 'I wonder what became of her child. A boy it was.'

'I wonder,' said Saronia. 'Didst thou ever know thy mother, Chios? I have never heard thee speak of her.'

'Oh, Saronia, Myrtille—Endora—asked me the same. Is there meaning in all this? What may it portend?'

'It means, Chios, that she is thy mother.'

'Mine? Mine? My mother?'

'Yes, thine, Chios.'

He went out amongst the myrtle-trees; he breathed the calm, cool air. Along the Temple Way he saw the lights of torches burning brightly. The people had thinned away, and exhaustion like a funeral pall hung over those remaining. Many slept in the streets, some overcome with rage, others with wine, whilst from distant quarters now and again rose the stifled cry of angry men and frantic women.

Chios paced up and down, lost in reverie. He heard not the call of the Roman guard or the groaning of the city. He was absorbed, thinking of his dead mother and of the safety of Saronia. What could he best do for her? Should he go to Lucius and ask his help? He knew that quickly the Roman fleet would put to sea with the stolen treasures of the Temple, and Saronia would be sought for and slain. To stay in Ephesus was certain death for her. In Rome perhaps worse awaited her. Should he hire a trading ship and escape? He was a freed man, and could leave the city unquestioned in time of war or siege. No, that would not do. He could go himself, but could not take another. Besides, the mariners of the craft, if such proved available, would know her, and refuse to aid the fallen rebel priestess. Well he knew those sailors, fit for strife or storm, had the warmest corners of their hearts filled with admiration for their faith and their goddess. He saw no alternative. Go to Lucius he must.

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The day was dawning; the first light was uplifting. He went noiselessly within his apartment and gazed upon her face. She slept.

Carefully retreating, as if an empire depended on his footfall, he left the room, secured the door, hastened down the streets. As yet the people were not astir. Until he reached well into the city near the Odeum, he had little opposition, but there the troops questioned him. He had special business with Lucius, the commander of the Roman fleet, and must see him.

'Thou canst not,' replied the guard. 'He sleeps on board the warship, and will not come on shore until the sun is high.'

'I tell thee,' said Chios, 'I must see Lucius immediately.'

'And I tell thee it is impossible.'

'Nothing is impossible to a soldier! Nothing shall be impossible to me! Let me pass to the wharves, or I will see the Tribune. Is he here?'

Chios claimed from the Tribune a right, as a free citizen, to pass to the port, which was granted.

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He sent by boat a message to Lucius that he would speak with him, and a reply came back requesting the Greek to come at once.

They met; their hearts went out to each other. Were they not old and dear friends?

'What brings thee here, Chios? Art thou persecuted by this unseemly tumult?'

'No, Lucius. Not so. I came to plead for a helpless woman.'

'Who is she?'

'Saronia. Once thy slave—thy—'

'I cannot help thee.'

The face of the sailor grew clouded, dark, and a fire rose up and glittered through his eyes.

'No, no, no! I cannot help! This girl, like an evil star, has rested over my home—that home, once filled with joy, now desolate, the loved ones gone away. Would that I had never heard the name of this mysterious being, Saronia! She has engendered strife, murdered the High Priest, and cut adrift from her faith. Let her answer for her crimes as my child did.'

'No, no!' exclaimed Chios. 'She did no murder. Oh, Lucius, my friend, listen! This slave girl was ever good to thee—good as thou wert kind. Hast thou not looked into her eyes, and, meeting thine, spoke they not sincere love for thee? Is this not so? True, she left thine home, but of this we will not now speak—she was born to rule, and could not serve as a slave. She chose not her destiny—it was written for her; she did not make it. I say again, she did not make it any more than she chose her dignity of birth! Born from a long line of warriors on the one side and a princess priestess on the other, how could she serve?'

'Thou art rambling, Chios! The excitement of yesterday makes inroads on thy mind.'

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'Nay, noble Lucius. Chios is not mad, but soon will be. Help, Lucius! Help for Saronia!'

The Roman remained stolid, silent.

'Let me go on—let me speak,' said Chios. 'As I have said, of such noble descent, her soul awakened, arose, towered above all others. She, the slave, became the priestess of yonder mighty Temple, which Nero of Rome has sent the vile Acratus to plunder. Fortunately, before this robbery took place, Saronia had stepped from the old faith into the new. Had she not, her blood would have crimsoned the great altar of Diana—she would have laid down her life for her goddess! Now this precious life is in the hands of Lucius. Wilt thou loose the silver thread and let her go?'

'Were her father here—a warrior like unto thyself, armed, full of power, with hosts of warships under his command, the strongest sanctuary under heaven—say, Lucius, would he not clasp her in his arms, and, covering her with kisses, bear her away? What would you say of him if he, knowing she were his child, refused to save—sailed away with all his hosts, leaving her for brutal sport and a hideous death?'

'He would be worthy of death,' said the Roman.

'Now hear me, Lucius. Thou art the father—of—Saronia. She, thy child—'

'By the gods, thou mockest me!'

'No, I am serious. I know your secret. You sailed to Britain, tore the princess priestess from her island home, sailed across the seas to Sidon; there deserted wife and child. The mother died, the daughter lived—became a foundling, then a slave, Saronia! Afterwards thou didst take to wife the Roman, Venusta.'

'Hold—hold, Chios! It is all true. It comes back to me!'

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'By a strange fate she met thy Roman daughter. How could there be peace—the first-born a slave, the second a tyrant? I, Chios, admired the nobleness, the beauty, of this slave, until I worshipped her and loved her beyond expression. I would have purchased her with all I had, not knowing who she was—would have wed her. The Fates ordered otherwise, and she arose, as you know, until she became the mightiest woman of the land; and because her great spirit towered beyond the faith which environed her, and she accepted the faith of the Highest, her goodness became a crime in the eyes of the Ephesian people. But again, Lucius, she is thy child! Wilt thou save her?'

'Save her, Chios? 'Tis the least I can do. There shall be no mistake in this matter; and I will order guard enough to fetch her should all the soldiers in Ephesus be required.'

And Chios went back to his studio to prepare for the removal of Saronia.

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CHAPTER XLVI

THE CROWN OF LIFE

Acratus was at the head of his plunderers. Nothing was too small or great for his rapacious maw. He came up the marble steps of the studio of Chios and knocked violently.

'Hast thou anything within?' said the tyrant.

'Nothing for thee,' said Chios.

'But we must see for ourselves,' and he pushed rudely by, followed by a dozen or more armed men, and as he rushed within he beheld Saronia.

'By heavens!' said he. 'Here is a greater than all thy marbles. This is the second time I have fallen in the way of this beautiful tigress. Look ye here: is this thy wife?'

'No,' said Chios.

'Thou art her lover, then?'

'That is my business. Mind thine own.'

'Thou art in a jesting mood. We will see how we can instruct thee to respect Acratus. Take this woman; she is known to the Proconsul and must not stay here. Take her to the fortress, and say I sent her, and I will deal with her anon. No, no, that will not do. Take her to the ship of Lucius, commander of the fleet, and say, "Care for her; she belongs to Acratus." Take her away. What is her name, fellow?'

'Saronia,' said Chios.

'Eh, and a pretty name, too. Now away, soldiers, to Lucius!'

Saronia looked appealingly to Chios.

'Wilt thou let me speak with her before she leaves?' said Chios.

'Yes, yes; thou canst speak to her.'

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Chios drew Saronia aside, saying:

'Thou seest the position. They will take thee whither thou shouldst go, to Lucius. I will follow thee;' and he slipped into her bosom unseen a parchment sealed and addressed to Lucius. 'Now, do as I wish, my love, and Chios will soon be with thee, and Lucius thou canst trust.'

'Oh, Chios, is not this fraught with danger?'

'No; it is the only course, and it is well for thee,' and kissing her, he said, 'Just for an hour or so and we meet. This is ordered wisely.'

Then they led her off, guarded by a body of armed men, Chios saying to himself:

'Little does that villain know he sends her to her father.'

As Acratus was turning to follow his men, he looked around to see if anything might satisfy his greed, when he discovered the dead body of Endora lying beneath a coverlet, and raising it, he saw the face of the murdered.

'What is this?' said he. 'Another surprise. Killed! Who is she? What meaneth it?'

'She is my mother, killed by one of the Ephesian mob. Wouldst thou also rob me of her dead body?'

'Cease thy prating, fool! Men's mothers are not murdered in this way. There is foul play. Thou shalt answer for this. Ho there, men!' calling on those outside. 'Take this murderer away. Take him to the Temple. I shall be there shortly, and will see to this.'

'Hands away!' cried Chios. 'I am not my mother's murderer.'

'Seize him!' cried Acratus. 'Bring him forth!' and they dragged him from his mother's side to without the studio, where by this time many Ephesians had gathered, and when they saw him, they cried:

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'Chios the Christian! Down with him!'

The fierce mob closed in, and the Romans cared not nor hindered—closed in around him till he was trampled under their feet, until one, perhaps more malignant than the rest, plunged a dagger in the bosom of the half-dead man. And Chios lifted up his feeble voice to heaven, crying:

'My God! my God! Saronia!'

The multitude laughed and jeered, and the sun shone down upon the fated city.

'Take him up, men, and carry him within. Better he be out of sight.'

And they laid him on the marble floor at the feet of his mother, Myrtilé of Delos.

Then Acratus chuckled within himself:

'Thank the gods he is gone. Not a nice thing to have a lover prying about, disturbing one's happiness. I saw him kiss her. He had the last; the next shall be mine, not Nero's! I will take care the brute never sets eyes on such loveliness. No, no; I will tame those dark eyes to look into mine, and train those crimson, oleander lips to bear me rich kisses of love. Now then, men, away! Saronia by this time has almost reached the wharves. I will load the spoils to-day, and to-morrow they leave. I will take my prize, the gloomy-eyed girl, with me to Pergamos, where I have more temples to rifle, and then, overflowing with wealth, I'll back to Rome.' And he moved away towards the Temple, muttering to himself: 'What care I for Varro the Proconsul? He cannot stay me in my career, armed as I am with mandate from Nero. He will vex and threaten should he know I have that woman. But it must end there. Acratus is supreme in this expedition, and cannot be interfered with, for Nero's sake.'

That day was employed by thousands of men carrying away the wealth of the Temple. Great bronze statues and marbled loveliness were dragged through the streets and shipped—shipped with ivory and gorgeous draperies; large sacks filled with treasure, gold, silver, and precious stones, instruments of music of rarest workmanship and paintings priceless, worth many times their weight in gold, became the property of the spoilers, until the great Temple was left desolate like a ship stripped of her cordage and sails, masts, and yards; the crew gone—a lonely hull on an open shore.

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The people could not stop this tide of locusts. So they had it all their own way, save where some more noble than the rest were struck down for defending their goddess.

Saronia was taken on board the ship to Lucius. When she was handed on to the deck, he was about to thank the guard, who said:

'I deliver to you this woman, most noble Lucius. She belongs to Acratus, and he wishes you to care for her until he claims her.'

'Does he? Go, tell that reptile that should he put foot on board this ship to claim this woman, I will order my men to throw him into the sea, and drown him like a dog. Now begone!'

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CHAPTER XLVII

PARTING

'Saronia,' said Lucius, 'thou art here. Come this way; thou art safe at last. Rest calmly as to the future. Whilst brave sailors may defend thee, no harm can come. I go on shore to fetch thy beloved Chios, and procure what is needed for thee, and thou shalt have attendance from that home wherein thou didst once reside. I am rejoiced to see thee. Think not of the past, Saronia. The past is gone far behind, and thou must think only of the joys of the future—all stored up for thee. I am alone in this great wilderness, and thou shalt be unto me as a child, and Chios shall be my son.'

'And Chios, thou wilt bring him, noble Lucius, kind as thou art valiant?'

'Bring him, girl? Certainly! The ship would refuse her helm were the best man in Ephesus left behind. Retire within, and make thyself pleased with the apartments set aside for thee.'

Then did Lucius with a light heart move to the shore, and hastened to the studio that he might greet Chios, and bring him with him to join Saronia. He went quietly up the way between the lines of flowers, heard the gentle breathings of the winds through the trees, and the song of birds which knew not of sorrow fell upon his ear.

He knocked at the door, but no one came. 'Is he from home? I hope not.' Then he gently opened the door, looked in, and an ominous silence fell around. Presently he walked within, saying, 'I shall explore this little place myself. It seems plain sailing, and needs not a pilot.' But, horror-stricken, he fell back a pace or two on seeing the body of Chios lying dead upon the floor, and beside him his mother, with her pale face looking up towards the azure and gold-starred ceiling (for Saronia had warned him of Endora's death).

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For a moment Lucius was stricken as if a battle had gone against him. Then, gaining courage, he advanced, and, touching the body gently, said:

'Chios, my boy, Chios, art thou really gone?'

But no voice came back to him, and he knew too well that the noble spirit had fled. His first thought was of Saronia. What would she think of him? What would she do?

Then he sped from that house of death to order burial of the mother and son upon the flower-crowned hill of Pion, and went his way, bowed down with grief.

When Lucius arrived on board, accompanied with maiden slaves carrying raiment, precious jewels, flowers and fruits for Saronia, he found her anxiously awaiting him, and she immediately asked for Chios.

'He cannot come to-night,' replied he. 'He makes preparations to leave, and will not finish in time to join us. Thou must rest to-night, and gain strength after all the exciting events which have transpired. Thou hast here now trusty attendants who will minister to thy utmost wish. Rest thee to-night, child, and may the gods or thy God give thee sweet and pleasant dreams. Lucius will watch over thee, and the spirits of the good shield thee. Good-night, Saronia, and may to-morrow's sun rise full of joy for thee.'

Lucius knew full well that at early dawn the ship would sail. What could he do to break this awful news to her? Kill her he feared it would. If he remained another day he could not bring back the dead, and a question arose in his mind that, if Chios did not come next morning, Saronia at all hazards would refuse to proceed. He considered the position, and, having his crew on board and all prepared, he determined to cast adrift.

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No, he could not do this. How could he face his daughter on the morrow without Chios? Would it not look like piracy to take her away? Could she believe otherwise than that it was all trickery? No; he must speak with her that very night. He knew the power of Saronia's mind, and it was best it should be done at once. He called one of the attendant slaves.

'Go, see if thy lady sleeps, and, if not, ask her permission for Lucius to speak with her.'

The girl came back and told him that Saronia sent word to Lucius saying she was too sorrowful to sleep, and would be happy to receive him.

Then, for the first time in his life, the courage of the hardy sailor forsook him, and he moved

forward tremblingly.

'Good friend,' said she, 'in the hour of distress thou wouldst speak with Saronia?'

'Yes, but my heart is too full.'

'Say on. I may even comfort thee, although I myself am sad; but, stay, here is a little packet Chios gave me for thee. It is sealed. Perhaps it may be of great interest. Methinks it is, or Chios would not have sent it.'

He took it from her, broke open the seals, and read it, saying:

'It is all true. Thank the gods, she is safe at last, and where recompense may be made. Saronia, thou knowest of thy mother?'

'Yes.'

'And thou also knowest of thy father? He forsook her and thee.'

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'Yes.'

'Thou didst not know him?'

'No, good sire.'

'Couldst thou forgive him, Saronia? Couldst thou forgive him, if he sought forgiveness?'

'Yea, for "mercy endureth for ever."'

'Then let Lucius kiss his child!'

'Art thou my father?'

'I am. Read this parchment which thou hast brought from the hands of Chios. It tells its own story.'

'Ah! now I see it all, and my life is no longer a mystery. Driven, as I have been, through a perilous maze of fate, I am on the verge of a brighter existence. It is well, father, we have met before I part from thee, perhaps for ever.'

'What dost thou mean, child?'

'I scarcely know, but a great vision stretches out into the future, a great life spreads out before me, but it is not an earth-life. This spirit of mine seems to be preparing to quit this form of clay; as a voyager standing on the strand ready to start on a long voyage, so stands my spirit.'

'Oh, Saronia, do not speak thus! Nothing ails thee. Thou art young, lovely, and in the bloom of life, and must not give way to such forebodings. Rest now with thine aged father awhile; bear him company until he sails into the great distance, casts anchor, furls sails, in a peaceful haven.'

'Would that I could! But our time here is limited to the beating of one heart's throb; and, as I have already said, my spirit, which is myself, stands ready to put out the lamp and leave. Where is Chios, father? Why is he not here? Where is my noble love? He is away, but yet I feel his presence near me. What does this mean, father? My sight grows dim, my breath fails me; too well I know the spirit's presence. Chios is dead, is he not? He is! He calls from beyond his body! Where does his body lie? Tell me! Tell me quickly, father! Thou wilt act the better part by letting me know all. Where is he? Speak, by the love thou bearest for thy only child! Where is Chios?'

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'Oh, Saronia, why wouldst thou know? Thou wilt see him soon.'

'Yes; I shall see him soon;' and she fell back motionless.

Lucius raised her up and called assistance. After awhile she rallied, and looked up into the face of her father, saying:

'Kiss me, dearest one. It is well that Chios should have left first. We cannot remain apart; the great circle of our affinity will soon be completed. Watch over Saronia. It will soon end.'

The mighty fleet prepared to leave the port of Ephesus. One by one they left the harbour, entered the canal which led to the sea, and, as they cleared the harbour mouth, ranged into two squadrons, one on either side of the entrance; and when the last came out, which bore the flag of Lucius, they formed into two great lines, with the flagship in the rear.

A light breeze sprang up from the north-east, the braces were hauled in, and the ships danced merrily over the deep blue waters of the Ægean Sea windward of Samos, and Scios and Mount Coressus on the starboard hand. The wind was so favourable that the oars were little needed, save that some on the leeside kept stroke that the ships might make good weathering. Behind them rose the hills and mountains which guarded Ephesus, and the villas on their sides shone like spots of crystal; but the sun struck fiercely on the great white Temple of Diana, until it looked like molten silver. Away they sailed towards the Icarian Sea.

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On a couch inlaid with gold reclined Saronia, and the rich curtains of her cabin were thrown back

to allow the sweet, fresh salt air, impregnated with the perfume of roses and myrtle-blossoms, to fan her pale, sad cheeks. The soft eyes were filled with a far-away lustre, as if she saw visions of the future which none else could see. She was looking out upon the setting sun, which cast its golden light along the waves. Suddenly she seemed to grow cheerful, and said:

'Father, art thou here? Let me take thine hand. Where is Chios? He is not here. Is he dead? Thou art silent. He is gone, and I cannot stay. Come nearer to me, father. My bridal day is at hand. Bury me in the sea. Let no eye rest upon my grave. Let the ocean be my sepulchre, and the winds sing my requiem. This is *happiness; this is joy!* The eternal gates are uplifting. Farewell!'

And the spirit of Saronia had fled.

THE END

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TRANSCRIBERS' NOTES

General: corrections to punctuation have been made without individual notes

General: Spelling of Megalobyzi, Megabyzus not standardised as the author has consistently spelt them that way.

Pg vi: Acratas standardised to Acratus

Pg 6: wil corrected to will

Pg 10: cithra as in original

Pg 24: opithodomus corrected to opisthodomus

Pg 83, 213, 228: Heard'st, heardst not standardised as it is unclear whether the author intended them to be different

Pg 95, 174: May'st, mayst not standardised as it is unclear whether the author intended them to be different

Pg 132: spurious "the" removed after "terrible wails, at"

Pg 208: hose corrected to those

Pg 238: candelabrii as in original

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