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Title: A Struggle for Rome, v. 1

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Release Date: May 6, 2010 [EBook #32271]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Charles Bowen, page scans provided by the Web Archive

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A STRUGGLE FOR ROME.

BY

FELIX DAHN.

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN

BY

LILY WOLFFSOHN.

"If there be anything more powerful than Fate,
It is the courage which bears it undismayed."

GEIBEL.

**IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. I.**

**LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON.**

1878.

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PREFACE.

These pictures of the sixth century originated in my studies for the following works:

"The Kings of the Goths," vol. ii., iii., iv. Munich and Würzburg, 1862-66.

"Procopius of Cæsarea:" a contribution to the historiography of the migration of nations and the decay of the Roman Empire. Berlin, 1865.

By referring to these works, the reader may distinguish the details and changes which the romance has added to the reality.

In history the events here described filled a period of almost thirty years' duration. From reasons easily understood, it was necessary to shorten, or at least to disguise, this long interval.

The character of the Roman hero of the story, Cethegus Cæsarius, is a pure invention. That such a person existed is, however, known.

The work was begun at Munich in 1859, continued at Ravenna, Italy, and concluded at Königsberg in 1876.

FELIX DAHN.

KÖNIGSBERG: *January*, 1876.

A STRUGGLE FOR ROME.

BOOK I.

THEODORIC.

"Dietericus de Berne, de quo cantant rustici usque hodie."

CHAPTER I.

It was a sultry summer night of the year five hundred and twenty-six, A.D.

Thick clouds lay low over the dark surface of the Adrea, whose shores and waters were melted together in undistinguishable gloom; only now and then a flash of distant lightning lit up the silent city of Ravenna. At unequal intervals the wind swept through the ilexes and pines on the range of hills which rise at some distance to the west of the town, and which were once crowned by a temple of Neptune. At that time already half ruined, it has now almost completely disappeared, leaving only the most scanty traces.

It was quiet on the bosky heights; only sometimes a piece of rock, loosened by storms, clattered down the stony declivity, and at last splashed into the marshy waters of the canals and ditches which belted the entire circle of the sea-fortress; or a weather-beaten slab slipped from the tabled roof of the old temple and fell breaking on to the marble steps--forebodings of the threatened fall of the whole building.

But these dismal sounds seemed to be unnoticed by a man who sat immovable on the second step of the flight which led into the temple, leaning his back against the topmost step and looking silently and fixedly across the declivity in the direction of the city below.

He sat thus motionless, but waiting eagerly, for a long time. He heeded not that the wind drove the heavy drops which began to fall into his face, and rudely worried the full long beard that flowed down to his iron belt, almost entirely covering his broad breast with shining white hair.

At last he rose and descended several of the marble steps: "They come," said he.

The light of a torch which rapidly advanced from the city towards the temple became visible; then quick and heavy footsteps were heard, and shortly after three men ascended the flight of steps.

"Hail, Master Hildebrand, son of Hilding!" cried the advancing torch-bearer, as soon as he reached the row of columns of the Pronaos or antehall, in which time had made some gaps. He spoke in the Gothic tongue, and had a peculiarly melodious voice. He carried his torch in a sort of lantern--beautiful Corinthian bronze-work on the handle, transparent ivory forming the four-sided screen and the arched and ornamentally-perforated lid--and lifting it high, put it into the iron ring that held together the shattered centre column.

The white light fell upon a face beautiful as that of Apollo, with laughing light-blue eyes; his fair hair was parted in the middle of his forehead into two long and flowing tresses, which fell right and left upon his shoulders. His mouth and nose, finely, almost softly chiselled, were of perfect form; the first down of a bright golden beard covered his pleasant lip and gently-dimpled chin. He wore only white garments--a war-mantle of fine wool, held up on the right shoulder by a clasp in the form of a griffin, and a Roman tunic of soft silk, both embroidered with a stripe of gold. White leather straps fastened the sandals to his feet, and reached, laced cross-wise, to his knees. Two broad gold rings encircled his naked and shining white arms. And as he stood reposing after his exertion, his right hand clasping a tall lance which served him both for staff and weapon, his left resting on his hip, looking down upon his slower companions, it seemed as if there had again entered the grey old temple some youthful godlike form of its happiest days.

The second of the new-comers had, in spite of a general family likeness, an expression totally different from that of the torch-bearer.

He was some years older, his form was stouter and broader. Low down upon his bull-neck grew his short, thick, and curly brown hair. He was of almost gigantic height and strength. There were wanting in his face the sunny shimmer, the trusting joy and hope which illumined the features of his younger brother. Instead of these, there was in his whole appearance an expression of bear-like strength and bear-like courage; he wore a shaggy wolf-skin, the jaws of which shaded his head like a cowl, a simple woollen doublet beneath, and on his right shoulder he carried a short and heavy club made of the hard root of an oak.

The third comer followed the others with a cautious step; a middle-aged man with a dignified and prudent expression of countenance. He wore the steel helmet, the sword, and the brown war-mantle of the Gothic footmen. His straight light-brown hair was cut square across the forehead--an ancient Germanic mode of wearing the hair, which one often sees represented on Roman triumphal columns, and which has been preserved by the German peasant to this day. The regular features of his open face, his grey and steady eyes, were full of reflective manliness and sober repose.

When he, too, had reached the cella of the temple, and had greeted the old man, the torch-bearer cried in an eager voice:

"Well, old Master Hildebrand, a fine adventure must it be to which thou hast bidden us on such an inhospitable night, and in this wilderness of art and nature! Speak--what is it?"

Instead of replying, the old man turned to the last comer and asked: "Where is the fourth whom I invited?"

"He wished to go alone. He shunned us all. Thou knowest his manner well."

"There he comes!" cried the beautiful youth, pointing to another side of the hill. And, in fact, a man of very peculiar appearance now drew near.

The full glare of the torch illumined a ghastly-pale face that seemed almost bloodless. Long and shining black locks, like dark snakes, hung dishevelled from his uncovered head. Arched black brows and long lashes shaded large and melancholy dark eyes, full of repressed fire. A sharply-cut eagle nose bent towards the fine and smoothly-shaven mouth, around which resigned

grief had traced deep lines.

His form and bearing were still young; but pain seemed to have prematurely ripened his soul.

He wore a coat of mail and greaves of black steel, and in his right hand gleamed a battle-axe with a long lance-like shaft. He merely greeted the others with a nod of the head, and placing himself behind the old man, who now bade them all four step close to the pillar on which the torch was fixed, began in a suppressed voice:

"I appointed you to meet me here to listen to earnest words, which must be spoken, unheard, to faithful men. I have sought for months in all the nation, and have chosen you. You are the right men. When you have heard me, you will yourselves feel that you must be silent about this night's meeting."

The third comer, he with the steel helmet, looked at the old man with earnest eyes.

"Speak," said he quietly, "we hear and are silent. Of what wilt thou speak to us?"

"Of our people; of this kingdom of the Goths, which stands close to an abyss!"

"An abyss!" eagerly cried the fair youth. His gigantic brother smiled and lifted his head attentively.

"Yes, an abyss," repeated the old man; "and you alone can hold and save it."

"May Heaven pardon thee thy words!" interrupted the fair youth with vivacity. "Have we not our King Theodoric, whom even his enemies call the Great; the most magnificent hero, the wisest prince in the world? Have we not this smiling land Italia, with all its treasures? What upon earth can compare with the kingdom of the Goths?"

The old man, without heeding his questions, continued:

"Listen to me. The greatness and worth of King Theodoric, my beloved master and my dear son, are best known by Hildebrand, son of Hilding. More than fifty years ago I carried him in these arms, a struggling boy, to his father, and said: 'There is an offspring of a strong race--he will be a joy to thee.' And when he grew up I cut for him his first arrow, and washed his first wound. I accompanied him to the golden city of Byzantium, and guarded him body and soul. When he fought for this lovely land, I went before him, foot by foot, and held the shield over him in thirty battles. He may possibly, since then, have found more learned advisers and friends than his old master-at-arms, but hardly wiser, and surely not more faithful. Long ere the sun shone upon thee, my young falcon, I had experienced a thousand times how strong was his arm, how sharp his eye, how clear his head, how terrible he could be in battle, how friendly over the cup, and how superior he was even to the Greekling in shrewdness. But the old Eagle's wings have become heavy. His battle-years weigh upon him; for he and you, and all your race, cannot bear years like I and my play-fellows; he lies sick in soul and body, mysteriously sick, in his golden hall down there in the Raven-town. The physicians say that though his arm be yet strong, any beat of his heart may kill him with lightning-like rapidity, and with any setting sun he may journey down to the dead. And who is his heir? who will then uphold this kingdom? Amalasintha, his daughter; and Athalaric, his grandson; a woman and a child!"

"The Princess is wise," said he with the helmet and the sword.

"Yes, she writes Greek to the Emperor, and speaks Latin with the pious Cassiodorus. I doubt that she even thinks in Gothic. Woe to us, if she should hold the rudder in a storm!"

"But I see no signs of storm, old man," laughed the torch-bearer, and shook his locks. "From whence will it blow? The Emperor is again reconciled, the Bishop of Rome is installed by the King himself, the Frank princes are his nephews, the Italians are better off under our shield than ever before. I see no danger anywhere."

"The Emperor Justinus is only a weak old man," said he of the sword, assentingly. "I know him."

"But his nephew, who will soon be his successor, and is already his right arm--knowest thou him? Unfathomable as the night and false as the sea is Justinian! I know him well, and fear that which he meditates. I accompanied the last embassy to Byzantium. He came to our camp; he thought me drunk--the fool! he little knows what Hilding's child can drink!--and he questioned me about everything which must be known in order to undo us. Well, he got the right answer from me! But I know as well as I know my name, that this man will again get possession of Italy; and he will not leave in it even the footprint of a Goth!"

"If he can," grumblingly put in the brother of the fair youth.

"Right, friend Hildebad, if he can. And he can do much. Byzantium can do much."

The other shrugged his shoulder

"Knowest thou *how* much?" asked the old man angrily. "For twelve long years our great King

struggled with Byzantium and did not prevail. But at that time thou wast not yet born," he added more quietly.

"Well," interposed the fair youth, coming to his brother's help, "but at that time the Goths stood alone in the strange land. Now we have won a second half. We have a home--Italy. We have brothers-at-arms--the Italians!"

"Italy our home!" cried the old man bitterly; "yes, that is the mistake. And the Italians our allies against Byzantium? Thou young fool!"

"They were our King's own words," answered the rebuffed youth.

"Yes, yes; I know these mad speeches well, that will destroy us all. We are as strange here to-day as forty years ago, when we descended from the mountains; and we shall still be strangers in the land after another thousand years. Here we shall be for ever 'the barbarians.'"

"That is true; but why do we remain barbarians? Whose fault is it but ours? Why do we not learn from the Italians?"

"Be silent," cried the old man, trembling with wrath, "be silent, Totila, with such thoughts; they have become the curse of my house!" Painfully recovering himself, he continued: "The Italians are our deadly enemies, not our brothers. Woe to us if we trust them! Oh that the King had followed my counsel after his victory, and slain all who could carry sword and shield, from the stammering boy to the stammering old man! They will hate us eternally. And they are right. But we, we are the fools to trust them."

There ensued a pause; the youth had become very grave, and asked:

"So thou holdest friendship to be impossible 'twixt them and us?"

"No peace between the sons of Gaul and the Southern folk! A man enters the gold cave of a dragon--he holds the head of the dragon down with an iron fist; the monster begs for life. The man feels compassion because of his glittering scales, and feasts his eyes on the treasures of the cavern. What will the poisonous reptile do? As soon as he can he will sting him stealthily, so that he who spared him dies."

"Well then, let them come, the despicable Greeks!" shouted the gigantic Hildebad; "let the race of vipers dart their forked tongues at us. We will beat them down--so!" And he lifted his club and let it fall heavily, so that the marble slab split into pieces, and the old temple resounded with the blow.

"Yes, they shall try!" cried Totila, and from his eyes shone a martial fire that made him look still more beautiful; "if these unthankful Romans betray us, if the false Byzantines come," he looked with loving pride at his strong brother, "see, old man, we have men like oaks!"

The old master-at-arms nodded, well pleased:

"Yes, Hildebad is very strong, though not quite as strong as Winither, Walamer and others, who were young with me. Against North-men strength is a good thing. But this Southern folk," he continued angrily, "fight from towers and battlements. They carry on war as they might make a reckoning, and at last they reckon a host of heroes into a corner, where they can neither budge nor stir. I know one such arithmetician in Byzantium, who is himself no man, but conquers men. Thou, too, knowest him, Witichis?" So asking, he turned to the man with the sword.

"I know Narses," answered Witichis reflectively. He had become very grave. "What thou hast said, son of Hilding, is, alas! too true. Such thoughts have often crossed my mind, but confusedly, darkly, more a horror than a thought. Thy words are undeniable; the King is at the point of death--the Princess has Grecian sympathies--Justinian is on the watch--the Italians are false as serpents--the generals of Byzantium are magicians in art, but"--here he took a deep breath--"we Goths do not stand alone. Our wise King has made friends and allies in abundance. The King of the Vandals is his brother-in-law, the King of the West Goths his grandson, the Kings of the Burgundians, the Herulians, the Thuringians, the Franks, are related to him; all people honour him as their father; the Sarmatians, even the distant Esthonians on the Baltic, send him skins and yellow amber in homage. Is all that----"

"All that is nothing! It is flattering words and coloured rags! Will the Esthonians help us against Belisarius and Narses with their amber? Woe to us, if we cannot win alone! These grandsons and sons-in-law flatter as long as they tremble, and when they no more tremble, they will threaten. I know the faith of kings! We have enemies around us, open and secret, and no friends beyond ourselves."

A silence ensued, during which all gravely considered the old man's words; the storm rushed howling round the weather-beaten columns and shook the crumbling temple.

Then, looking up from the ground, Witichis was the first to speak:

"The danger is great," said he, firmly and collectedly, "we will hope not unavoidable. Certainly

thou hast not bidden us hither to look deedless at despair. There must be a remedy, so speak; how, thinkest thou, can we help?"

The old man advanced a step towards him and took his hand:

"That's brave, Witichis, son of Waltari. I knew thee well, and will not forget that thou wert the first to speak a word of bold assurance. Yes, I too think we are not yet past help, and I have asked you all to come here, where no Italian hears us, in order to decide upon what is best to be done. First tell me your opinion, then I will speak."

As all remained silent, he turned to the man with the black locks:

"If thy thoughts are ours, speak, Teja! Why art thou ever silent?"

"I am silent because I differ from you."

The others were amazed. Hildebrand spoke:

"What dost thou mean, my son?"

"Hildebad and Totila do not see any danger; thou and Witichis see it and hope; but I saw it long ago, and have no hope."

"Thou seest too darkly; who dare despair before the battle?" said Witichis.

"Shall we perish with our swords in the sheath, without a struggle and without fame?" cried Totila.

"Not without a struggle, my Totila, and not without fame, I am sure," answered Teja, slightly swinging his battle-axe. "We will fight so that it shall never be forgotten in all future ages; fight with highest fame, but without victory. The star of the Goths is setting."

"Meseems, on the contrary, that it will rise very high," cried Totila impatiently. "Let us go to the King; speak to him, Hildebrand, as thou hast spoken to us. He is wise; he will devise means."

The old man shook his head:

"I have spoken to him twenty times. He listens no more. He is tired and will die, and his soul is darkened, I know not by what shadows. What is thy advice, Hildebad?"

"I think," answered Hildebad, proudly raising his head, "that as soon as the old lion has closed his tired eyes, we arm two hosts. Witichis and Teja lead the one before Byzantium and burn it down; with the other I and my brother climb the Alps and destroy Paris, that dragon's nest of the Merovingians, and make it a heap of stones for ever. Then there will be peace in East and West."

"We have no ships against Byzantium," said Witichis.

"And the Franks are seven to one against us," said Hildebrand. "But thy intentions are valiant, Hildebad. Say, what advisest thou, Witichis?"

"I advise a league--weighted with oaths, secured with hostages--of all the Northern races against the Greeks."

"Thou believest in fidelity, because thou thyself art true. My friend, only the Goths can help the Goths. But they must be reminded that they *are* Goths. Listen to me. You are all young, love all manner of things, and have many pleasures. One loves a woman, another weapons, a third has some hope or some grief which is to him as a beloved one. But believe me, a time will come--it may be during your young days--when all these joys and even pains will become worthless as faded wreaths from yesterday's banquet.

"Then many will become soft and pious, forget that which is on earth, and strive for that which is beyond the grave. But that neither you nor I can do. I love the earth, with mountain and wood and meadow and rushing stream; and I love life, with all its hate and long love, its tenacious anger and dumb pride. Of the ethereal life in the wind-clouds which is taught by the Christian priests, I know, and will know, nothing. But there is one possession--when all else is gone--which a true man never loses. Look at me. I am a leafless trunk. I have lost all that rejoiced my life; my wife is dead long since; my sons, my grandchildren are dead: except one, who is worse than dead--who has become an Italian.

"All, all are gone, and now my first love and last pride, my great King, descends tired into his grave. What keeps me still alive? What gives me still courage and will? What drives *me*, an old man, up to this mountain in this night of storm like a youth? What glows beneath my icy beard with pure love, with stubborn pride, and with defiant sorrow? What but the impulse that lies indestructible in our blood, the deep impulsion and attraction to my people, the glowing and all-powerful love of the race that is called Goth; that speaks the noble, sweet, and homely tongue of my parents! This love of race remains like a sacrificial fire in the heart, when all other flames are extinguished; this is the highest sentiment of the human heart; the strongest power in the human soul, true to the death and invincible!"

The old man had spoken with enthusiasm--his hair floated on the wind--he stood like an old priest of the Huns amongst the young men, who clenched their hands upon their weapons.

At last Teja spoke: "Thou art in the right; these flames still glow when all else is spent. They burn in thee--in us--perhaps in a hundred other hearts amongst our brothers; but can this save a whole people? No! And can these fires seize the mass, the thousands, the hundred thousands?"

"They can, my son, they can! Thanks to the gods, that they can!--Hear me. It is now five-and-forty years ago that we Goths, many hundred thousands, were shut up with our wives and children in the ravines of the Hæmus. We were in the greatest need.

"The King's brother had been beaten and killed in a treacherous attack by the Greeks, and all the provisions that he was to bring to us were lost. We lay in the rocky ravines and suffered such hunger, that we cooked grass and leather. Behind us rose the inaccessible precipices; before, and to the left of us, the sea; to the right, in a narrow pass, lay the enemy, threefold our number. Many thousands of us were destroyed by famine or the hardships of the winter; twenty times had we vainly tried to break through the pass.

"We almost despaired. Then there came a messenger from the Emperor to the King, and offered us life, freedom, wine, bread, meat--under one condition: that, separated from each other, four by four, we should be scattered over the whole Roman Empire; none of us should ever again woo a Gothic woman; none should ever again teach his child our tongue or customs; the name and being of Goth should cease to exist, we should become Romans.

"The King sprang up, called us together, and reported this condition to us in a flaming speech, and asked at the end, whether we would rather give up the language, customs and life of our people, or die with him? His words spread like wildfire, the people shouted like a hundred-voiced tumultuous sea; they brandished their weapons, rushed into the pass; the Greeks were swept away as if they had never stood there, and we were victors and free!"

His eyes glittered with pride; after a pause he continued:

"It is this alone which can save us now as then; if once the Goths feel that they fight for their nationality, and to protect the secret jewel that lies in the customs and speech of a people, like a miraculous well-spring, then they may laugh at the hate of the Greeks and the wiles of the Italians. And, first of all, I ask you solemnly: Do you feel as strongly convinced as I do, that this love of our people is our highest aim, our dearest treasure, our strongest shield? Can you say with me: My people is to me the highest, all else is nothing; to my people I will sacrifice all that I have and am. Will you say this, and can you do it?"

"We will; we can!" cried the four men.

"'Tis well," continued the old man. "But Teja is right, all Goths do not feel this as we do, and yet, if it is to be of any use, all *must* feel it. Therefore swear to me, to fill with the spirit of this hour all those with whom you live and act, from now henceforward. Too many of our folk have been dazzled by the foreign splendour; many have donned Grecian clothing and Roman thoughts; they are ashamed to be called barbarians; they wish to forget, and to make it forgotten, that they are Goths--woe to the fools! They have torn their hearts out of their bosoms, and yet wish to live; they are like leaves that have proudly loosened themselves from the parent stem. The wind will come and blow them into the mire and dirt to decay; but the stem will still stand in the midst of the storm, and will keep alive whatever clings to it faithfully. Therefore awaken and warn the people. Tell the boys the legends of their forefathers, relate the battles of the Huns, the victories over the Romans; show the men the threatening danger, and that nationality alone is our shield; warn your sisters that they may embrace no Roman and no would-be Roman; teach your wives and your brides that they must sacrifice everything, even themselves and you, to the fortune of the good Goths, so that when the enemy come, they may find a strong, proud, united people, against which they shall break themselves like waves upon a rock. Will you aid me in this?"

"Yes," they cried, "we will!"

"I believe you," continued the old man; "I believe you on your mere word. Not to bind you faster--for what can bind the false?--but because I cling to old custom, and because *that* succeeds best which is done after the manner of our forefathers--follow me."

CHAPTER II.

Hildebrand took the torch from the column, and went across the inner space, past the cella of the temple, past the ruined high altar, past the bases of the statues of the gods--long since fallen--to the porticum or back of the edifice. Silently his companions followed the old man, who led them down the steps into the open field.

After a short walk they stopped under an ancient holm, whose mighty boughs held off storm and rain like a roof.

A strange sight presented itself under this oak, which, however, at once reminded the old man's Gothic companions of a custom of ancient heathen times in their distant Northern home.

Under the oak a strip of thick turf, only a foot broad, but several yards long, had been cut loose from the ground; the two ends of the strip still lay in the shallow ditch thus formed, but in the middle it was raised over and supported by three long spears of unequal length, which were fixed into the ground, the tallest spear being in the middle, so that the whole arrangement formed a triangle, under which several men could stand commodiously between the shafts of the spears.

In the ditch stood a brazen cauldron filled with water, near it lay a pointed and sharp butcher's knife, of extremely ancient form; the haft was made of the horn of the ure-ox, the blade of flint.

The old man came forward, stuck the torch into the earth close to the cauldron, and then stepped, right foot foremost, into the ditch; he turned to the east and bent his head, then he beckoned to his friends to join him, putting his finger to his lip in sign of silence. Without a sound the four men stepped into the ditch beside him, Witichis and Teja to his right, the two brothers to his left, and all five joined hands in a solemn chain.

Then the old man loosened his hands from those of Witichis and Hildebad, who stood next to him, and knelt down. First he took up a handful of the black mould and threw it over his left shoulder; then he dipped his other hand into the cauldron and sprinkled the water to the right behind him. After this he blew into the windy night-air that rustled in his long beard; and, lastly, he swung the torch from right to left over his head. Then he again stuck it into the earth and spoke in murmuring tones:

"Hear me, ancient earth, welling water, ethereal air, flickering flame! Listen to me well and preserve my words. Here stand five men of the race of Graut, Teja and Totila, Hildebad and Hildebrand, and Witichis, Waltari's son.

"We stand here in a quiet hour
To bind a bond between blood-brethren,
For ever and ever and every day.
In closest communion as kindred companions.
In friendship and feud, in revenge and right.
One hope, one hate, one love, one lament,
As we drop to one drop
Our blood as blood-brethren."

At these words he bared his left arm, the others did the same; close together they stretched their five arms over the cauldron, the old man lifted the sharp flint-knife, and with one stroke scratched the skin of his own and the others' forearms, so that the blood of all flowed in red drops into the brazen cauldron. Then they retook their former positions, and the old man continued murmuring:

"And we swear the solemn oath,
To sacrifice all that is ours,
House, horse, and armour,
Court, kindred, and cattle,
Wife, weapons, and wares,
Son, and servants, and body, and life,
To the glance and glory of the race of Gaut,
To the good Goths.
And who of us would withdraw
From honouring the oath with all sacrifices--"

here he, and at a sign, the others also, stepped out of the ditch from under the strip of turf--

"His red blood shall run unrevenged
Like this water under the wood-sod--"

he lifted the cauldron, poured its bloody contents into the ditch, and then took it out, together with the other implements--

"Upon his head shall the halls of Heaven
Crash cumbrous down and crush him,
Solid as this sod."

At one stroke he struck down the three supporting lance-shafts, and dully fell the heavy turf-roof back into the ditch. The five men now placed themselves again on the spot thus covered by the turf, with their hands entwined, and the old man said in more rapid tones:

"Whosoever does not keep this oath; whosoever does not protect his blood-brother like his own brother during his life, and revenge his death; whosoever refuses to sacrifice everything that he possesses to the people of the Goths, when called upon to do so by a brother in case of necessity, shall be for ever subject to the eternal and infernal powers which reign under the green grass of the earth; good men shall tread with their feet over the perjurer's head, and his name shall be without honour wherever Christian folk ring bells and heathen folk offer sacrifices,

wherever mothers caress their children and the wind blows over the wide world. Say, companions, shall it be thus with the vile perjurer?"

"Thus shall it be with him," repeated the four men.

After a grave pause, Hildebrand loosened the chain of their hands, and said:

"That you may know why I bade you come hither, and how sacred this place is to me, come and see."

With this he lifted the torch and went before them behind the mighty trunk of the oak, in front of which they had taken the oath. Silently his friends followed, and saw with astonishment, that, exactly in a line with the turfy ditch in which they had stood, there yawned a wide and open grave, from which the slab of stone had been rolled away. At the bottom, shining ghastly in the light of the torch, lay three long white skeletons; a few rusty pieces of armour, lance-points, and shield-bosses lay beside them.

The men looked with surprise; now into the grave, now at Hildebrand. He silently held the torch over the chasm for some minutes. At last he said quietly:

"My three sons. They have lain here for more than thirty years. They fell on this mountain in the last battle for the city of Ravenna. They fell in the same hour; to-day is the day. They rushed with joyous shouts against the enemies' spears--for their people."

He ceased. The men looked down with emotion. At last the old man drew himself up and glanced at the sky.

"It is enough," said he, "the stars are paling. Midnight is long since past. You three return into the city. Thou, Teja, wilt surely remain with me; to thee, more than to any other, is given the gift of sorrow, as of song; and keep with me the guard of honour beside the dead."

Teja nodded, and sat down without a word at the foot of the grave, just where he was standing. The old man gave Totila the torch, and leaned opposite Teja against the stone slab. The other three signed to him with a parting gesture. Gravely, and buried in deep thought, they descended to the city.

CHAPTER III.

A few weeks after this midnight meeting near Ravenna an assembly took place in Rome; just as secret, also under protection of night, but held by very different persons for very different aims.

It took place on the Appian Way, near the Cœmeterium of St. Calixtus, in a half-ruined passage of the Catacombs; those mysterious underground ways, which almost make a second city under the streets and squares of Rome.

These secret vaults--originally old burial-places, often the refuge of young Christian communities--are so intricate, and their crossings, terminations, exits, and entrances so difficult to thread, that they can only be entered under the guidance of some one intimately acquainted with their inner recesses.

But the men, whose secret intercourse we are about to watch, feared no danger. They were well led. For it was Silverius, the Catholic archdeacon of the old church of St. Sebastian, who had led his friends direct from the crypt of his basilica down a steep staircase into this branch of the vaults; and the Roman priests had the reputation of having studied the windings of these labyrinths since the days of the first confessor.

The persons assembled also seemed not to have met there for the first time; the gloom of the place made little impression upon them. Indifferently they leaned against the walls of the dismal semi-circular room, which, scantily lighted by a hanging lamp of bronze, formed the termination of the low passage. Indifferently they heard the drops of damp fall from the roof to the floor, or, when their feet now and then struck against white and mouldering bones, they calmly pushed them to one side.

Besides Silverius, there were present a few other orthodox priests, and a number of aristocratic Romans, nobles of the Western Empire, who had remained for centuries in almost hereditary possession of the higher dignities of the state and city.

Silently and attentively they observed the movements of the archdeacon; who, after having mustered those present, and thrown several searching glances into the neighbouring passages--where might be seen, keeping watch in the gloom, some youths in clerical costume--now evidently prepared to open the assembly in form.

Yet once again he went up to a tall man who leaned motionless against the wall opposite to him, and with whom he had repeatedly exchanged glances; and when this man had replied to a questioning gesture by a silent nod, he turned to the others and spoke.

"Beloved in the name of the triune God! Once again are we assembled here to do a holy work. The sword of Edom is brandished over our heads, and King Pharaoh pants for the blood of the children of Israel. We, however, do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul, we fear much more those who may destroy both body and soul in hell-fire. We trust, during the terrors of night, to His help who led His people through the wilderness, in the day by a cloud of smoke, at night by a pillar of fire. And to this we will hold fast: that what we suffer, we suffer for God's sake; what we do, we do to the honour of His name. Thanks to Him, for He has blest our zeal. Small as those of the Gospel were our beginnings, but we are already grown like a tree by the fresh water-springs. With fear and trembling we first assembled here; great was our danger, weak our hope; noble blood of the best has been shed; to-day, if we remain firm in faith, we may boldly say that the throne of King Pharaoh is supported on reeds, and that the days of the heathen are counted in the land."

"To business!" interrupted a young man with short curly black hair and brilliant black eyes. Impatiently he threw his *sagum* (or short cloak) back over his right shoulder, so that his broad sword became visible. "To business, priest! What shall be done to-night?"

Silverius cast a look at the youth, which, with all its unctuous repose, could not quite conceal his lively dissatisfaction at such bold independence. In a sharp tone of voice he continued:

"Those who do not believe in the holiness of our aim, should not, were it only for the sake of their own worldly aims, try to disturb the belief of others in its sanctity. But to-night, my Licinius, my hasty young friend, a new and highly welcome member is to be added to our league; his accession is a visible sign of the grace of God."

"Who will you introduce? Are the conditions fulfilled? Do you answer for him unconditionally, or have you other surety?" So asked another of those present, a man of ripe years with regular features, who, a staff between his feet, sat quietly on a projection of the wall.

"I answer for him, my Scævola; besides, his person? is sufficient---"

"Nothing of the sort. The statutes of our league demand surety, and I insist upon it," said Scævola quietly.

"Good, good; I will be surety, toughest of all jurists!" repeated the priest with a smile.

He made a sign towards one of the passages to the left.

From thence appeared two young *ostiarii* (doorkeepers), leading a man into the middle of the vault, upon whose covered head all eyes were fixed. After a pause, Silverius lifted the cover from the head and shoulders of the new comer.

"Albinus!" cried the others, in surprise, indignation, and anger.

Young Licinius grasped his sword; Scævola slowly rose; confused exclamations sounded from all sides.

"What! Albinus, the traitor?"

The reviled man looked shyly about him; his relaxed features announced inborn cowardice; as if beseeching help he turned his eyes towards the priest.

"Yes, Albinus!" said the latter quietly, thus appealed to. "Will any one of the colleagues speak against him? Let him speak."

"By my Genius!" cried Licinius, before any one could reply, "needs it to be told? We all know who and what Albinus is. A cowardly shameful traitor"--anger suffocated his voice.

"Invectives are no proof," interposed Scævola. "But I ask himself; he shall confess here before us all. Albinus, was it you, or was it not, who, when the existence of our league was betrayed to the tyrant and you alone were accused, looked quietly on and saw the noble Boëthius and Symmachus, our confederates, because they defended you against the tyrant, despoiled of their fortune, persecuted, taken prisoners and executed; while you, the really accused, saved yourself by taking a shameful oath that you would never more trouble yourself about the state, and by suddenly disappearing? Speak, was it you for whose sake the pride of our fatherland fell?"

A murmur of indignation went through the assembly. The accused remained dumb and trembled; even Silverius lost countenance for a moment.

Then the man who was leaning against the wall opposite, raised himself and took a step forward; his mere vicinity seemed to embolden the priest, who again began:

"Friends, what you say has happened, but not as you say it. Before all things, know this: Albinus is the *least* to blame. What he did, he did by my advice."

"By your advice!"

"You dare to confess it?"

"Albinus was accused through the treachery of a slave, who had deciphered the secret writing in the letters to Byzantium. All the tyrant's suspicion was aroused; every appearance of resistance or of connection would increase the danger. The impetuosity of Boëthius and Symmachus, who courageously defended Albinus, was noble but foolish, for it revealed to the barbarians the sentiments of the whole of the Roman aristocracy; and showed that Albinus did not stand alone. They acted against my advice, and alas! have suffered death for so doing. But their zeal was superfluous; for the hand of the Lord suddenly bereft the slave of life before further revelations, and the secret writings of Albinus had been successfully destroyed before his arrest.

"But do you believe that Albinus would have been silent under torture, under the threat of death, if naming his co-conspirators could have saved him? You do not believe it, Albinus himself did not believe it. Therefore it was necessary, before all else, to gain time and to prevent the use of torture. This was accomplished by his oath. Meanwhile, it is true, Boëthius and Symmachus suffered; they could not be saved; but of their silence, even under torture, we were sure.

"Albinus was freed from his prison by a miracle, like St. Paul at Philippi. It was said that he had escaped to Athens, and the tyrant was contented with prohibiting his return. But the triune God has prepared a refuge for him here in His temple until the hour of freedom approaches. In the solitude of His sacred asylum the Lord has touched his heart in a wonderful manner, and, undismayed by the danger of death, which once before had so nearly overtaken him, he again enters into our circle, and offers to the service of God and the fatherland his whole immense fortune. Listen: he has made over all his property to the church of St. Maria Majoris for the uses of our league. Would you despise him and his millions?"

A pause of astonishment ensued; at last Licinius cried:

"Priest, you are as wise as----as a priest. But such wisdom pleases me not."

"Silverius," said the jurist, "you may take the millions. It is fitting that you should do so. But I was the friend of Boëthius; it is not fitting that I should have anything in common with that coward. I cannot forgive him. Away with him!"

"Away with him!" sounded from all sides. Scævola had given utterance to the sentiment of all present. Albinus grew pale; even Silverius quailed under this general indignation. "Cethegus!" whispered he, claiming assistance.

This man, who, until now, had remained silent and had only regarded the speakers with cool superiority, now stepped into the middle of the assembly.

He was tall and lean, but powerful, with a broad breast and muscles of pure steel.

A purple hem on his toga and delicate sandals betrayed riches, rank and taste, but a long brown soldier's mantle hid the remainder of his underclothing. His head was one of those which, once seen, are never again forgotten. His thick and still glossy black hair was cut short, after Roman fashion, round his lofty, almost too prominent forehead and nobly-formed temples. Deep under his finely-arched brows were hidden his narrow eyes, in whose undecided dark-grey colour lay a whole ocean of sunken passions and a still more pronounced expression of the coolest self-control. Round his sharply cut and beardless lips lurked a trait of proud contempt of God and His whole creation.

As he stepped forward, and, with quiet distinction, allowed his eyes to wander over the excited assembly; as he commenced his insinuating yet commanding speech, every one felt his superiority, and few could remain in his presence without a consciousness of subordination.

"Why do you wrangle," he said coldly, "about things that must be done? Who wills the end, must will the means. You will not forgive? As you please! That is of little consequence. But you must and you can forget. I also was a friend of the dead, perhaps their dearest. And yet--I will forget. I do so just because I was their friend. *He* loves them, Scævola, and he alone, who avenges them. For the sake of revenge---- Albinus, your hand!"

All were silent, awed more by the personality than convinced by the reasons of the speaker.

But the jurist still objected:

"Rusticiana, the influential woman, the widow of Boëthius, the daughter of Symmachus, is favourable to our league. Will she remain so if this man enters it? Can she ever forget and forgive? Never!"

"She can. Do not believe me, believe your eyes."

With these words Cethegus quickly turned and entered one of the side-passages, whose opening had been hidden until now by his own person.

Close to the entrance a veiled figure stood listening; he caught her hand:

"Come," whispered he, "come now."

"I cannot! I will not!" was the almost inaudible answer of the resisting woman. "I curse him! I cannot look at him, the wretch!"

"It must be. Come; you can and you shall--for I will have it so." He threw back her veil; one look, and she followed as if deprived of the power of will.

They turned the corner of the entrance:

"Rusticiana!" cried the whole assembly.

"A woman in our meeting!" exclaimed the jurist. "It is against the statutes, the laws."

"Yes, Scævola; but the laws are made for the league, not the league for the laws. And you would never have believed from *me*, that which you now see with your own eyes."

He laid the widow's hand within the trembling right hand of Albinus.

"Look! Rusticiana forgives! Who will now resist?"

Vanquished and overruled, all remained silent. For Cethegus all further proceedings seemed to have lost interest. He retired into the background with Rusticiana. But the priest now said:

"Albinus is a member of the league."

"And the oath that he swore to the tyrant?" hesitatingly asked Scævola.

"Was forced, and he is absolved from it by Holy Church. But now it is time to depart. Let us only conclude the most pressing business. Here, Licinius, is the plan of the fortress of Neapolis: you must have it copied by to-morrow; it goes to Belisarius. Here, Scævola, letters from Byzantium, from Theodora, the pious wife of Justinian: you must answer them. Here, Calpurnius, is an assignment of half a million *solidi* from Albinus: you will send them to the Frankish major domus; he has great influence with his king. Here, Pomponius, is a list of the patriots in Dalmatia; you know men and things there, take notice if important names are omitted. And be it known to all of you, that, according to news received to-day from Ravenna, the hand of the Lord lies heavy on the tyrant. Deep melancholy, too tardy remorse for all his sins, oppresses him, and the consolations of the true faith have not yet penetrated into his soul. Have patience but a little while; the angry voice of the Judge will soon summon him; then comes the day of freedom. At the next Ides, at the same hour, we shall meet here again. The blessing of the Lord be with you!"

A motion of his hand dismissed the assembly; the young priests came out of the side-passage with torches, and led the members, each one singly, in different directions, to the secret exits of the Catacombs.

CHAPTER IV.

Silverius, Cethegus, and Rusticiana went together up the steps which led to the crypt of the basilica of St. Sebastian. From thence they passed through the church into the adjoining house of the archdeacon. On arriving there, Silverius convinced himself that all the inhabitants of the house were asleep, with the exception of an old slave, who was watching in the atrium near a half-extinguished lamp. At a sign from his master he lighted a silver lamp which stood near him, and pressed a secret spring in the marble wainscot of the room.

A slab of marble turned on its hinges and allowed the priest who had taken up the lamp to pass, with his two companions, into a small, low chamber, and then quickly and noiselessly closed behind them, leaving no trace of an opening.

The small chamber, now simply adorned by a tall wooden crucifix, a fall-stool, and a few plain Christian symbols on a golden background, had evidently, as the cushioned shelf which ran round the walls showed, served for those small banquets of one or two guests, whose unrestrained comfort Horace has so often celebrated in song. At the time of which I speak it was the private chamber in which the archdeacon brooded over his most secret priestly or worldly plans.

Cethegus silently seated himself on the *lectus* (a small couch), throwing the superficial glance of a critic at a Mosaic picture inserted into the opposite wall. While the priest was occupied in pouring wine from an amphora with large curving handles into some cups which stood ready, and placing a metal dish of fruit on the bronze tripod table, Rusticiana stood opposite Cethegus, measuring him with an expression of astonishment and indignation.

Scarcely forty years of age, this woman showed traces of a rare--and rather manly--beauty, which had suffered less from time than from violent passions. Here and there her raven-black braids were streaked with white, not grey, and strong lines lay round the mobile corners of her mouth.

She leaned her left hand on the table, and meditatively stroked her brow with her right, while she gazed at Cethegus. At last she spoke.

"Tell me, tell me, Cethegus, what power is this that you have over me? I no more love you. I ought to hate you. I do hate you. And yet I must involuntarily obey you, like a bird under the fascinating eye of a snake. And you place my hand, *this* hand, in that of that miserable man! Say, you evil-doer, what is this power?"

Cethegus was inattentively silent. At last, leaning back, he said: "Habit, Rusticiana, habit."

"Truly, 'tis habit! The habit of a slavery that has existed ever since I can remember. It was natural that as a girl I should admire the handsome son of our neighbours; that I believed in your love was excusable, did you not kiss me? And who could--at that time--know that you were incapable of loving anything--even yourself? That the wife of Boëthius did not smother the mad passion which, as if in sport, you again fanned into a flame, was a sin; but God and the Church have forgiven it. But that I should still, after knowing for years your utter heartlessness, when the glow of passion is extinguished in my veins, that I should still most blindly follow your demoniac will--that is folly enough to make me laugh aloud."

And she laughed wildly, and pressed her right hand to her brow.

The priest stopped in his domestic occupations and looked stealthily at Cethegus. He was intensely interested.

Cethegus leaned his head back against the marble moulding, and with his right hand grasped the drinking-cup which stood before him.

"You are unjust, Rusticiana," he said quietly, "and confused. You mix the sports of Eros with the works of Eris and the Fates. You know that I was the friend of Boëthius, although I kissed his wife. Perhaps just for that reason. I see nothing particular in that. And you--well, Silverius and the saints have forgiven you. You know further, that I hate these Goths, mortally hate them; that I have the will and--more than all others--the power to carry through that which is now your greatest wish, to revenge your father, whom you loved, and your husband, whom you honoured, on these barbarians.

"Therefore you obey my instigations, and you are wise in so doing; for you have a decided talent for intrigue, but your impetuosity often clouds your judgment. It spoils your finest plans. Therefore it is well that you follow cooler guidance. That is all. But now go. Your slave is crouching, drunk with sleep, in the vestibule. She believes that you are in the confessional with friend Silverius. The confession must not last too long. And we also have business to transact. Greet Camilla, your lovely child, for me, and farewell."

He rose, took her hand, and led her gently to the door. She followed reluctantly, nodded to the priest at parting, looked once more at Cethegus, who appeared not to observe her inward emotion, and went out, slightly shaking her head.

Cethegus sat down again and emptied his cup of wine.

"A strange struggle in this woman's nature," remarked Silverius, and sat down by Cethegus with stylus, wax-tablets, letters and documents.

"It is not strange. She wishes to atone for having wronged her husband by avenging him," said Cethegus. "And that she can accomplish this by means of her former lover, makes the sacred duty doubly sweet. To be sure, she is not conscious of it.--But what have we to do?"

The two men now began their business: to consider such points of the conspiracy as they did not judge advisable to communicate to all the members of the league.

"At present," began the archdeacon, "it is above all things necessary to ascertain the amount of this fortune of Albinus, and decide upon its appropriation. We assuredly require money, much money."

"Money affairs are your province,"--said Cethegus, drinking. "I understand them, of course, but they annoy me."

"Further," continued Silverius, "the most influential men in Sicilia, Neapolis, and Apulia must be won over to our cause. Here is the list of their names, with notes annexed. There are men amongst them who are not to be allured by the usual means."

"Give it to me," said Cethegus, "I will manage that," And he cut up a Persian apple.

After an hour's hard work, the most pressing business was settled, and the host replaced the documents, in a secret drawer in the wall behind the crucifix.

The priest was tired, and looked with envy at his companion, whose powerful frame and indefatigable spirit no late hours or exertion seemed able to exhaust.

He expressed something of the sort, as Cethegus again filled the silver cup.

"Practice, friend, strong nerves, and," added Cethegus, smiling, "a good conscience; that is the whole secret."

"Yes, but in earnest, Cethegus, you are a riddle to me in other respects."

"I should hope so."

"Oh ho! do you consider yourself such a superior being that I cannot fathom you?"

"Not at all. But still sufficiently deep to be to others no less a riddle than--to myself. Your pride in your knowledge of mankind may be at ease. I am no wiser about myself than you are. Only fools are transparent."

"In fact," said the priest, expatiating on the subject, "the key to your nature must be difficult to find. For example, look at the members of our league. It is easy to say what motives have led them to join us. The hot young courage of a Licinius; the pig-headed but honest sense of justice of a Scævola; as for myself and the other priests--our zeal for the honour of God."

"Naturally," said Cethegus, drinking.

"Others are induced by ambition, or are in hopes that they may cut off the heads of their creditors in a civil war; or they are tired of the orderly condition of this country under the Goths, or have been offended by one of these foreigners. Most of them have a natural repugnance to the barbarians, and are in the habit of seeing in the Emperor alone the master of Italy. But none of these reasons apply to you, and----"

"And," interrupted Cethegus, "that is very uncomfortable, is it not? For by knowledge of their motives one can govern men. Well, I am sorry, reverend friend, but I cannot help you. I really do not know myself what my motive is. I am so curious about it, that I would gladly tell it to you--and allow myself to be governed--if I could only find it out. Only one thing I feel--that these Goths are my antipathy. I hate these full-blooded fellows, with their broad flaxen beards. I cannot bear their brutal good humour, their ingenuous youthfulness, their stupid heroism, their unbroken natures. It is the impudence of chance, which governs the world, that this country, after such a history, possessing men like--like you and me--should be ruled by these Northern bears!"

He tossed his head indignantly, closed his eyes, and sipped a small quantity of wine.

"That the barbarians must go, we are agreed," said Silverius, "and with this, all is gained as far as I am concerned. For I only await the deliverance of the Church from these heretical barbarians, who deny the divinity of Christ, and make Him a demi-god. I hope that the primacy of all Christendom will, as is fitting, incontestably fall to the share of the Roman Church. But as long as Rome is in the power of the heretics, while the Bishop of Byzantium is supported by the only orthodox and legitimate Emperor----"

"The Bishop of Rome cannot be the first Bishop of Christendom, nor the master of Italy; and therefore the Roman Apostolic See, even when occupied by a Silverius, cannot be what it ought to be--the highest. And yet that is what Silverius wishes."

The priest looked up in surprise.

"Do not be uneasy, reverend friend. I knew this long ago, and have kept your secret, although you did not confide it to me. But further----" He again filled his cup. "Your Falernian has been well stored, but it is too sweet.--Properly speaking, you can but wish that these Goths may evacuate the throne of the Cæsars, and not that the Byzantines should take their place; for in that case the Bishop of Rome would have again a superior bishop and an emperor in Byzantium. You must therefore, instead of the Goths, wish--not for an Emperor--Justinian--but--what else?"

"Either," eagerly interrupted Silverius, "a special Emperor of the Western Empire----"

"Who, however," said Cethegus, completing the sentence, "would be only a puppet in the hands of the holy Petrus----"

"Or a Roman republic, a State of the Church----"

"In which the Bishop of Rome is master, Italy the principal country, and the barbarian kings in Gaul, Germany, and Spain the obedient sons of the Church. All very fine, my friend. But first the enemy must be annihilated, whose spoils you already divide. Therefore let us drink an old Roman toast: 'Woe to the barbarians!'"

He rose and drank to the priest.

"But," he added, "the last night-watch creeps on, and my slaves must find me in the morning in my bedchamber. Farewell!"

With this he drew the *cucullus* (hood) of his mantle over his head and departed.

His host looked after him. "A very important tool!" he said to himself. "It is a good thing that he is only a tool. May he always remain so!"

Cethegus walked away from the Via Appia in a north-westerly direction, towards the Capitol, beneath which, at the northern end of the Via Sacra, his house was situated, to the north-east of

the Forum Romanum.

The cool morning air played refreshingly over his brow. He threw open his mantle and deeply inflated his strong broad chest.

"Yes, I am a riddle," he said to himself. "I join in a conspiracy and go about by night, like a republican or a lover at twenty. And wherefore? Who knows why he breathes? Because he must. And so I do what I must. But one thing is certain, this priest may--perhaps must--become Pope; but he must not remain so long, else farewell my scarcely-avowed thoughts, which are yet but dreams and cloud-mists. Perhaps it may be that from them will arise a storm that will decide my fate. See, it lightens in the east! 'Tis well; I accept the omen!"

With these words he entered his house.

In his bed-chamber he found a letter on the cedar table before his bed, tied with a silken string, and sealed with the royal seal. He cut the string with his dagger, opened the double waxen tablets, and read:

"To Cethegus Cæsarius, the Princeps Senatus, Marcus Aurelius Cassiodorus, Senator.

"Our lord and king lies on his death-bed. His daughter and heiress, Amalasintha, wishes to speak with you before his end.

"You are to undertake the most important office in the kingdom.

"Hasten at once to Ravenna."

CHAPTER V.

Over the King's palace at Ravenna, with all its gloomy splendour and inhospitable spaciousness, lay an air of breathless anxiety.

The old castle of the Cæsars had suffered many disfiguring changes in the course of centuries, and since the Gothic kings, with all their Germanic courtiers, had taken the place of the emperors, it had assumed a very inharmonious aspect, for many chambers, intended for the peculiar customs of Roman life, stood, still retaining the old magnificence of their arrangements, unused and neglected. Cobwebs covered the mosaic of the rich baths of Honorius, and in the toilet-chamber of Placidia the lizards climbed over the marble frames of the silver mirrors on the walls. On the one side, the necessities of a more warlike court had obliged the removal of many walls, in order to change the small rooms of the ancient building into wider halls for arsenals, banqueting and guard-rooms, and, on the other, neighbouring houses had been joined to the palace by new walls, so as to create a stronghold in the middle of the city.

In the dried-up *piscina maxima* (large fish-pond) fair-haired boys now romped, and in the marble halls of the *palæstra*¹ neighed the horses of the Gothic guards. So the extensive edifice had the dismal appearance partly of a scarcely-preserved ruin, and partly of a half-finished new erection; and thus the palace of the present ruler seemed a symbol of his Roman-Gothic kingdom, and of his whole half-finished, half-decayed political creation.

On the day, however, on which Cethegus, after years of absence, once again entered the house, there lay heavy upon it a cloud of anxiety, sorrow and gloom, for its royal soul was departing from it.

The great man, who here had guided, for the space of a man's life, the fate of Europe; who was wondered at, with love or with hate, by West and by East; the hero of his age; the powerful Theodoric of Verona, of whose name--even during his lifetime--Legend had possessed herself; the great Amelung, King Theodoric, was about to die.

So said the physicians--if not to himself, yet to his nearest relations--and the report soon spread in the great and populous city.

Although such an end to the secret sufferings of the aged King had been long held possible, the news that the blow was at hand now filled all hearts with the greatest excitement.

The faithful Goths were anxious and grieved, and a dull fear was the predominating feeling even of the Roman population, for here in Ravenna, in the immediate vicinity of the King, the Italians had had frequent opportunities of admiring his mildness and generosity, and of experiencing his beneficence.

And besides, it was feared that after the death of this King, who, during his lifetime--with the single exception of the last contest with the Emperor and the Senate, when Boëthius and Symmachus bled--had protected the Italians from the harshness and violence of his people--a new rule of severity and oppression would commence on the part of the Goths.

And, finally, another and more noble influence was at work; the personality of this hero-King

had been so grand, so majestic, that even those who had often wished for the destruction of himself and his kingdom, could not--at the moment when this luminary was about to be extinguished--revel in a feeling of malicious joy, and were unable to overcome a deep depression.

So, since early morning--when servants from the palace had been seen rushing in all directions, and special messengers hurrying to the houses of the most distinguished Goths and Romans--the town had been in a state of great excitement.

Men stood together by pairs or in groups in the streets, squares and baths, questioning or imparting to each other what they knew; trying to detain some person of importance who came from the palace, and talking of the grave consequences of the approaching catastrophe. Women and children, urged by curiosity, crouched on the thresholds of the houses.

As the day advanced, even the populations of the nearest towns and villages--principally consisting of sorrowing Goths--streamed into the gates of the city to hear the news.

The counsellors of the King, pre-eminently the pretorian prefect, Cassiodorus, who earned great praise for preserving order in those days, had foreseen this excitement, and perhaps expected something worse.

At midnight all the entrances to the palace had been closed, and guarded by Goths. In the Forum Honorum, before the palace, a troop of cavalry had been placed. On the broad marble steps that led up to the grand colonnade of the principal entrance, lay, in picturesque groups, strong companies of Gothic foot-soldiers, armed with shield and spear.

Only there, according to the order of Cassiodorus, could admittance be gained to the palace, and only the two leaders of the infantry--Cyprian, the Roman, and Witichis, the Goth, were allowed to grant permission to enter.

It was to the first of these persons that Cethegus applied.

As he took the well-known way to the King's apartments, he found all the Goths and Romans whose rank or importance had procured them admittance, scattered in groups about the halls and corridors.

In the once noisy banqueting-hall the young leaders of the Gothic hundreds and thousands stood together, silent and sorrowing, or whispering their anxious inquiries, while here and there an elderly man--a companion-at-arms of the dying hero--leaned in the niche of a bow-window, seeking to hide his ungovernable sorrow. In the middle of the hall stood--pressing his head against a pillar and weeping loudly--a rich merchant of Ravenna. The King, now on the point of death, had once pardoned him for joining in a conspiracy, and had prevented his goods from being plundered by the enraged Goths.

Cethegus passed by them all with a cold glance of contempt.

In the next room--a saloon intended for the reception of foreign embassies--he found a number of distinguished Goths--dukes, earls, and other nobles--who evidently were assembled together to consult upon the succession, and the threatened overthrow of all existing conditions.

There was the brave Duke Thulun, who had heroically defended the town of Arles against the Franks; Ibba, the conqueror of Spain; and Pitzza, who had been victorious over the Bulgarians and Gepidians--all mighty warriors, proud of their nobility, which was little less than that of the royal house of Amelung; for they were of the house of Balthe, which, through Alaric, had won the crown of the Visigoths; and no less proud of their services in war, which had protected and extended the kingdom.

Hildebad and Teja were with them. They were the leaders of the party which had long since desired a more severe treatment of the Italians, whom they at once hated and shunned; but had been forced, against their will, to give way to the milder opinions of the King.

What looks of hatred shot from their eyes upon the aristocratic Roman who now came to witness the death of the great Gothic hero!

Cethegus walked quietly past them, and lifted the heavy woollen curtain that divided this from the next apartment--the ante-chamber of the sick-room.

On entering, he greeted with a profound inclination a tall and queenly woman, enveloped in a black mourning veil, who, grave and silent, but composed and without tears, stood before a marble table covered with records. It was Amalasintha, the widowed daughter of Theodoric.

A woman above thirty years of age, she was still extremely, though coldly, beautiful. She wore her rich dark hair parted and waved in the fashion of the Greeks. Her high forehead, her large, open eyes, her straight nose, the pride expressed in her almost manly features, and the majesty of her full form, gave her an imposing dignity, and, clad in a garment folded in true Grecian style, she resembled a Juno of Polycletus which had descended from its pedestal. Her arm, more supporting than supported, was laid within that of a youth of about seventeen years of age--Athalaric, her son, the heir of the kingdom of the Goths.

He did not resemble his mother, but had the nature of his unhappy father, Eutharic, whom a wasting heart disease had hurried to the grave in the bloom of life. For this reason, Amalasintha saw with sorrow that her son grew daily more like his father; and it was no longer a secret at the court of Ravenna that all the signs of the disease were already visible in the young man.

Athalaric was as beautiful as all the other members of this royal house, descended from the gods. Heavy black eyebrows and long eyelashes shaded his beautiful dark eyes, that now melted with an expression of dreamy reverie, and now flashed with intellectual brilliancy. Dark brown tangled locks hung over his pale temples, on which, when he was excited, the blue veins swelled convulsively. On his noble brow physical pain or sad resignation had traced deep lines, strange to see on his youthful countenance. Marble paleness and vivid red quickly alternated in his transparent cheeks. His tall but bent-frame generally seemed to hang, so to speak, on its hinges, as if tired, and only at times he drew himself up with startling suddenness.

He did not notice Cethegus, for, leaning on his mother's breast, he had in his sadness flung his Grecian mantle over that young head, which was soon destined to wear a crown.

At some distance from these two figures, near an open window that afforded a view of the marble steps upon which lay the Gothic warriors, stood, lost in thought, a woman--or was it a girl?--of surprising and dazzling beauty; it was Matasintha, the sister of Athalaric.

She resembled her mother in height and nobleness of form, but her more sharply-cut features were filled with fiery and passionate life, which was only slightly concealed under an aspect of artificial coldness.

Her figure, in which blooming fulness and delicate slenderness were harmoniously blended, reminded one of that Artemis in the arms of Endymion, in the group sculptured by Agesander, which, as legend reports, was banished from the town by the Council of Rhodes because the marble representation of the most perfect maidenly beauty and highest sensuousness had driven the youths of the island to madness and suicide. The magic of ripe virgin beauty trembled over the whole form of Matasintha. Her rich waving hair was of a dark-red colour, with a glimmering metallic light upon it, and had such an extraordinary effect that it had procured for the Princess, even amongst her own nation, whose women were celebrated for their splendid golden locks, the appellation of "Beautiful-hair." Her nose was finely-shaped, with delicately-chiselled nostrils, which quivered at the slightest emotion; and freshly bloomed the full and rosy lips of her lovely mouth. But the most striking feature of this extraordinary beauty was the grey eye, not so much on account of its changing colour as from the wonderful expression with which, though generally lost in reverie, it could sometimes flash with burning passion.

Indeed, as she stood there leaning against the window, in the half-Hellenic, half-Gothic costume, which her fancy had combined, her full white arm wound round the dark column of porphyry, and gazing thoughtfully out into the evening air, her seductive beauty resembled that of those irresistible wood or water-nymphs, whose enchanting power of love has always been celebrated in Northern legend.

And so great was the power of this beauty, that even the burnt-out bosom of Cethegus, who had long known the Princess, was moved to new admiration as he entered.

But his attention was immediately claimed by Cassiodorus--the learned and faithful minister of the King, the first representative of that benevolent but hopeless policy of reconciliation, which had been practised in the Gothic Kingdom for many years--who was standing near Amalasintha.

This old man, whose venerable and mild features were no less filled with an expression of sorrow at the loss of his royal friend than by anxiety for the future of the kingdom, rose, and went with tottering steps towards Cethegus, who reverently bent his head.

The aged man's eyes rested upon him for some moments, swimming in tears; at last he sank sighing upon the cold breast of Cethegus, who despised him for this weakness.

"What a day!" complained Cassiodorus.

"A fateful day," said Cethegus gravely. "Strength and presence of mind are necessary."

"You say truly, patrician, and speak like a Roman," said the Princess, leaving Athalaric--"welcome!"

She gave him her hand, which did not tremble. Her eye was clear and tearless.

"The disciple of the Stoics preserves, even on this day, the wisdom of Zeno and her own composure," said Cethegus.

"Say, rather, that the grace of God wonderfully upholds her soul," said Cassiodorus reprovingly.

"Patrician," began Amalasintha, "the prætorian prefect has proposed you to me for the performance of an important business. His word would be sufficient, even had I not known you so long. You are the self-same Cethegus who transposed the first two songs of the? 'Æneid' into

Grecian hexameters?"

"Infandum renovare jubes, regina, dolorem. A youthful sin, Queen," said Cethegus, smiling. "I bought up all the copies and burnt them on the day on which Tullia's translation appeared."

Tullia was the pseudonym of Amalasintha. Cethegus knew it, but the Princess had no suspicion of his knowledge. She was flattered in her weakest point, and continued:

"You know how it stands with us. My father's moments are counted; according to the report of the physicians, he may, although yet strong and active, die at any moment. Athalaric here is the heir to his crown. But until he has reached the proper age, I shall conduct the regency, and act as his guardian."

"Such is the will of the King, and Goths and Romans have long since agreed to this wise arrangement," said Cethegus.

"They did so, but the mob is fickle. The rough men despise the government of a woman"--and at this thought Amalasintha knit her brow in anger.

"It is certainly contrary to the political principles both of Goths and Romans," said Cassiodorus apologetically. "It is quite a new thing that a woman----"

"Whatever may be thought about it, it is a fact," interposed the Princess. "Nevertheless, I count on the fidelity of the Goths in general, though single aristocratic individuals may aim at the crown. I also fear nothing from the Italians here in Ravenna, nor in most towns. But I fear--Rome and the Romans!"

The attention of Cethegus was arrested. His whole being was suddenly excited, but his countenance remained impassive.

"Rome will never accustom herself to the rule of the Goths; she will always resist us--how can it be otherwise?" added Amalasintha.

It seemed as if the daughter of Theodoric had a Roman soul.

"Therefore we fear," concluded Cassiodorus, "that, at the news of the vacancy of the throne, a movement may break out in Rome against the regency, be it for annexation to Byzantium, be it for the election of an Emperor of the Western Empire."

Cethegus, as if in reflection, cast down his eyes.

"For this reason," quickly interposed the Princess, "everything must be done before the news reaches Rome. A faithful, energetic man must receive the oaths of the garrison for me--I mean for my son; must take possession of the most important gates and squares, intimidate the Senate and the nobles, win the people to my cause, and irrevocably confirm my dominion before it is menaced. And to effect this, Cassiodorus has proposed--you. Speak; will you undertake it?"

At this moment the golden stylus which she held happened to fall to the ground.

Cethegus stooped to pick it up.

He had only this one moment for the crowding thoughts that passed through his mind on hearing this proposal.

Was the conspiracy in the Catacombs betrayed? Was he himself betrayed? Was this a snare laid by the crafty and ambitious woman? Or were the fools really so blind as to press this offer upon him? And if it were so, what should he do? Should he seize the occasion? Should he strike at once, in order to win Rome? And for whom? For Byzantium or for an Emperor of the West? And who should it be? Or were things not yet ripe? Should he, for this once, seemingly practise fidelity?

To resolve these and many other questions, he had only the one moment in which he stooped.

But his quick mind needed no more. He had seen, while in the act of stooping, the unsuspecting, trusting look of Cassiodorus, and, giving the stylus to the Princess, he spoke with decision:

"Queen, I undertake the business."

"That is well," said the Princess.

Cassiodorus pressed his hand.

"When Cassiodorus proposed me for this office," continued Cethegus, "he gave another proof of his deep knowledge of mankind. He has seen the kernel through the shell."

"What do you mean?" asked Amalasintha.

"Queen, appearances might have deceived him. I confess that I do not like to see the

barbarians--pardon, the Goths--reigning in Italy."

"This frankness honours you, and I pardon the feeling in a Roman."

"Besides that, I have taken no interest in public affairs for some years. After having experienced varied passions, I now live in the calm and retirement of my country villas, cultivating the sportive muse, enjoying my books, and untroubled by the cares of kings."

"Beatus ille qui procul negotiis," quoted the learned lady, sighing.

"But, because I honour science, because I, a scholar of Plato, desire that the wise should govern, I wish that a Queen should reign over my fatherland who is only a Goth by birth, but in her soul a Greek, and by her virtues a Roman. For her sake I will sacrifice my leisure to hated business. But only on condition that this shall be my last office of state. I will undertake your commission, and answer for Rome with my head."

"Good; here you will find the legal documents which you will need."

Cethegus looked rapidly through the records.

"This is the manifesto of the young King to the Romans, with your signature. *His* is still wanting."

Amalasintha dipped the Cnidian reed-pen into the vessel filled with crimson ink, which was used by the Amelungs as well as by the Roman Emperors.

"Come, write thy name, my son," she said.

Athalaric, standing and leaning with both arms on the table, had keenly observed Cethegus during the above conversation. Now he stood erect. He was accustomed to act with the usual arrogance of a Crown Prince and the petulance of an invalid.

"No," he said impatiently; "I will not write. Not only because I do not trust this cold Roman--I do not trust you in the least, you proud man--but it is revolting that, while my noble father still breathes, you already quarrel about his crown. You dwarfs! About the crown of a giant! Shame on your insensibility! Behind those curtains the greatest hero of the century is dying, and you think already of the partition of his garment!"

He turned his back upon them and went slowly to the window, where he passed his arm round his lovely sister, and stroked her shining hair. He stood there for some time; she did not notice him.

Suddenly she started from her reverie.

"Athalaric," she whispered, hastily grasping his arm, and pointing at the marble staircase, "who is that man in the blue steel helmet, who is just coming round that pillar? Say, who is it?"

"Let me see," said the youth, bending forward. "That? Oh! that is Earl Witichis, the conqueror of the Gepidæ, a famous hero."

And he told her of the deeds and triumphs of the Earl in the last war.

Meanwhile Cethegus had looked inquiringly at the Princess and the minister.

"Let him alone," sighed Amalasintha. "If he will not, no power on earth can make him."

Further questions on the part of Cethegus were cut short, for the three-fold curtain, that shut out all the noise of the ante-chamber from the King's bedroom, was parted.

It was Elpidios, the Greek physician, who, lifting the heavy folds, now entered, and announced that the sick man, just awakened from a long sleep, had sent him away, in order to be alone with old Hildebrand, who never stirred from his side.

CHAPTER VI.

Theodoric's bed-chamber, which had served the same purpose under the Emperors, was decorated with the heavy splendour of late Roman style.

The superabundant reliefs of the walls and the gilded ornamentation of the ceiling still pictured the victories and triumphal processions of Roman consuls and emperors. Heathen gods and goddesses floated proudly above. Everywhere reigned the same oppressive magnificence.

The extreme simplicity of the Gothic King's couch formed a remarkable contrast to all this pomp.

The oval frame of unpolished oak was raised scarcely a foot from the ground, and contained

few cushions. Only the costly crimson cover which hid the King's feet, and the lion's skin with golden claws that lay before the bed--a present from the King of the Vandals, in Africa--betrayed the royalty of the sick man. All the other furniture of the room was simple, plain, and almost barbarously clumsy.

On a pillar in the background hung the iron shield and broad-sword of the King, which had not been used for many years. At the head of the bed stood the old master-at-arms, with his eyes bent down, anxiously examining the features of the patient, who, leaning on his left arm, turned his majestic countenance towards him.

The King's sparse hair, rubbed off on the temples by years of friction caused by his heavy helmet, was still of a bright brown colour, and without a trace of grey. His heavy brow, sparkling eyes, large nose, and the deep lines in his cheeks, spoke of great tasks and great strength to accomplish them.

The expression of his face was commanding and even sublime; but the benevolent softness of his mouth, in spite of the grim and slightly-grey beard, gave evidence of the mildness and peaceful wisdom by means of which he had raised his kingdom to such a flourishing condition that it had already become a proverb and celebrated in story.

His golden-brown and piercing eyes rested for some time upon his gigantic sick-nurse, with an expression of love and favour.

At last he stretched out his thin, but nervous, right hand.

"Old friend," said he, "we must now take leave of each other."

The old man sank upon his knees and pressed the King's hand to his broad breast.

"Come, my friend, rise! Must I comfort *thee*?"

But Hildebrand remained upon his knees, and only lifted his head so that he could look the King in the face.

"See," said the King, "I know that thou, son of Hilding, hast received from thy ancestors and thy father a deeper knowledge of the ailings of mankind and their healing than all these Grecian physicians and Lydian quack-salvers. And, more than that, thou art sincere. Therefore, I beg thee honestly to confirm me in what I feel to be true. Tell me, must I not die to-day--even before the night?" And he looked at him in a manner that would brook no deception.

But Hildebrand did not wish to deceive him; he had regained his natural composure.

"Yes, King of the Goths, heir of the Amelungs, thou must die; the hand of Death has passed across thy brow. Never again wilt thou see the sun's setting."

"It is well," said Theodoric, without blenching. "Seest thou, the Greek whom I dismissed has lied to me all the day long. And yet time is precious to me."

"Wilt thou again send for the priests?" asked Hildebrand reluctantly.

"No; they can do me no good. I need them no more."

"Sleep has strengthened thee, and lifted the veil from thy soul. Hail! Theodoric, son of Walamer! thou wilt die like a hero!"

"I know," said the King, smiling, "that it was repugnant to thy feelings to see the priests near my couch. Thou art in the right. They cannot help me."

"And now--who or what has helped thee now?"

"God and myself. Hear! And what I am about to say are my parting words. In gratitude for thy fifty years' faithful service, I confide to thine ear alone--not to my daughter, and not to Cassiodorus--that which has so long troubled me. Tell me, what is reported among the people? What is believed was the cause of the melancholy which suddenly overcame me, and originated this disease?"

"The Italians say that it was remorse for the death of Boëthius and Symmachus."

"Didst thou believe this?"

"No; I could not believe that the death of traitors could so affect thee."

"Thou art in the right. Perhaps, according to law, they were not deserving of death; and I loved Boëthius much. But they were traitors a thousand times! Traitors in their thoughts, traitors to my trust, to my heart. I prized these Romans more than the best of my people. And they showed their gratitude by wishing that my crown were the Emperor's; they wrote flattering letters to the Byzantines; they preferred a Justinus and a Justinian to the friendship of a Theodoric! I am not sorry for them; I despise them. Guess again. What didst thou believe?"

"King, thy heir is a youth, and enemies encompass thy throne."

The sick man frowned.

"This time thou art nearer the mark. I always knew the weakness of my kingdom. When at the evening banquet I have shown the proud face of confidence to the foreign ambassadors, at night I have anxiously sighed at its inward disease. Old man, I know that thou hast often considered me all too confident. But none might see me tremble, neither friend nor foe. Else my throne had trembled. I sighed only when alone, and have borne my care in solitude."

"Thou art wisdom itself, my King, and I was a fool!" cried the old man.

"Thou seest," continued the King, stroking the old man's hand, "that I knew in what I displeased thee. I knew also thy blind hatred of these Italians. Believe me, it *is* blind, as was, perhaps, my love of them." Here he stopped and sighed.

"Why wilt thou distress thyself?"

"No, let me continue! I know that my kingdom--the work of my glorious and toilsome life--may easily fall. Perhaps owing to my generosity to these Romans. Be it so! No work of man is eternal, and the error of over-kindness is easily borne!"

"My great King!"

"But, Hildebrand, one night, as I was lying awake, anxious about the danger of my kingdom, there rose before my soul the ghost of another sin! Not of too much kindness, but of bloody force! And woe, woe to me, if my nation is to be destroyed in expiation of the crime of Theodoric! His, *his* image rises before me!"

The sick man spoke with difficulty, and lay for a moment overwhelmed with emotion.

"Whose image? of whom dost thou speak?" asked the old man softly, bending over him.

"Odoacer!" whispered the King, and Hildebrand bowed his head.

At last Theodoric broke the painful silence.

"Yes, old friend, this right hand, as thou knowest, struck down the mighty hero--my guest--at the banquet-table. His hot blood splashed into my face, and an ardent hate flashed upon me from his flaming eyes. A few months past, during the night I speak of, his bloody, pale and angry form rose before me like an avenging god. My heart was contracted, my pulses beat with fever. The fearful conviction came over me that my kingdom would fall and my nation decay, because of this my bloody deed."

This time, after a short pause, Hildebrand, looking up defiantly, said:

"King, why dost thou fret like a woman? Hast thou not struck down hundreds with thine own arm, and thy people thousands at thy behest? Have we not descended from the mountains into this land in more than thirty battles, wading ankle-deep in blood? What is the blood of *one* man to all this? And remember the circumstances. For four years he had defied thee as the ure-ox defies the bear. Twice he had driven thee and thy folk to the brink of destruction. Hunger, sword, and pestilence carried off thy Goths. At last, at last, stubborn Ravenna fell, forced by famine. The deadly enemy lay at thy feet. Then a warning came that he contemplated treason; that he would renew the fearful strife; that he would attack thee and thine that night. What couldst thou do? Call him openly to account? If he were guilty, that could do no good, therefore thou wert beforehand with him, and did that to him in the evening which he intended doing to thee at night. That *one* deed saved thy people, and prevented the renewal of a fearful strife. Thou forgavest all his followers, and for thirty years caused Goths and Italians to live as if in Paradise. And now thou wilt torment thyself with vain remorse? Two nations will ever thank thee for this deed! I--I would have killed him seven times over!"

The old man ceased; his eyes flashed; he looked like an angry giant. But the King shook his head.

"That is nothing, old warrior! I have repeated the same thing to myself a hundred times, and put it into more flattering forms than is possible to thy rude tongue. All in vain! He was a hero--the only one of my kind--and I murdered him without proof of his guilt, for I was jealous, suspicious, aye, it must be said, I was *afraid*--afraid that I should be compelled again to strive with him. It was, and is, and ever will be a sin! I have found no peace in self-excuses. Since that night his image has followed me unceasingly. At the banquet and in the council-chamber; at the hunt, in the church, waking and sleeping. Then Cassiodorus sent the priests and bishops to me. They could not help me. They heard my confession, saw my grief and my faith, and absolved me from all my sins. But peace came not, and though they forgave me, I could not forgive myself. I know not whether it be the old manner of thought inherited from my heathen ancestors, but I cannot hide myself behind the Cross from the ghost of the murdered man! I cannot believe I am freed from my bloody deed by the blood of an innocent God who died upon the Cross!"

Hildebrand's face was suddenly lit up with joy.

"Thou knowest," he whispered in the King's ear, "that I could never believe the priests of the Cross. Speak, oh, speak! dost thou still believe in Thor and Odin? Have *they* helped thee?"

The King smiled and shook his head.

"No, thou incorrigible old heathen! Thy Walhalla is nothing for me. Hear how I was helped. Yesterday I sent the bishops away, and retired into the recesses of my own heart. I thought and wrestled and entreated God, and I became calmer, and, behold! in the night a deep slumber came upon me, such as I had not known for long months. When I awoke, no fever of torture shook my limbs; I felt composed, and my mind clearer; I felt that no grace or miracle of God could undo the deed that I had committed. I knew that if God be indeed a God of vengeance, He could punish me and my house unto the seventh generation, and I dedicated myself and my kingdom to His eternal vengeance. But, if God be just, He cannot visit the sins committed by their King upon the people of the Goths. No, He will not do that. And if ever this people decay, I feel that it will not be owing to my deed; and thus peace hath entered into my soul, and I can die with courage."

He was silent, but Hildebrand bowed his head and kissed the hand which had killed Odoacer.

"These are my parting words to thee, my legacy and thanks for a whole life of fidelity. Now let us dedicate the remaining time to the Goths. Come, assist me to rise, I cannot die amid these cushions. There hang my weapons! Give them to me! No objections! I will, and I can!"

Hildebrand was obliged to obey. With his help the sick man rose, and threw a purple mantle over his shoulders, girded on his sword, set the low helmet-crown on his head, and supporting himself on the shaft of his heavy lance, leaned his back against the thick Doric column in the middle of the room.

"Now call my daughter, and Cassiodorus, and whoever else may be outside."

CHAPTER VII.

The King remained quietly standing, while Hildebrand threw back the curtains of the door on both sides, so that bed-chamber and ante-room now formed one undivided apartment. All those assembled outside--for many Goths and Romans had entered meanwhile--drew near to the King in astonished and reverent silence.

"My daughter," said the King, "are the letters written which are to announce my death and the succession of my grandchild to Byzantium?"

"Here they are," answered Amalasintha.

The King rapidly ran through the rolls of papyrus.

"To Emperor Justinus.--A second: to his nephew, Justinianus. 'Tis true, he will soon wear the crown, and is already the master of his masters. I see by the fine similes that Cassiodorus has written these letters. But hold!" A cloud passed across his face. "'Recommending my youth to your imperial protection!' Protection! That is too much. Alas! if ever you should be obliged to depend on the protection of Byzantium! 'Recommending myself to your *friendship*, is enough from the grandson of Theodoric.'" And he gave the letters back. "Still a third letter to Byzantium? To whom? 'To Theodora, the noble spouse of Justinianus?' What! to the dancer of the circus? To the shameless daughter of the lionkeeper?"

His eye flashed.

"She has great influence upon her husband," interposed Cassiodorus.

"No, no. My daughter shall write to no female who has dishonoured the name of her sex."

And he tore the roll of papyrus into pieces and threw them on the floor. Then, walking over the fragments, he advanced towards the Goths who stood in the middle of the hall.

"My brave Witichis, what will be thy office after my death?"

"I shall review our foot at Tridentum."

"None could do it better! Never yet hast thou claimed the favour which was granted to thee beforehand, when thou wert victorious over the Gepidæ. Hast thou no wish even now?"

"I *have* a wish, my King."

"At last!--that pleases me. Speak."

"A poor jailer, for refusing to apply the torture and for striking at a lictor, is himself

condemned to be put to the torture to-day. Sire, set the man free! To torture is shameful, and----

"The jailer is free; and from this moment torture is abolished in the kingdom of the Goths. Look to it, Cassiodorus! Brave Witichis, give me thy hand. To show to all how much I honour thee, I bequeath thee Wallada, my chestnut charger, in remembrance of this parting hour. And if ever thou art in danger, or--" here he lowered his voice, "would avoid it, whisper my name into the horse's ear. Who will watch over Neapolis? Duke Thulun was too rough. Those gay people must be won by gentle looks."

"Yes. Young Totila will be Count of the Harbour there," answered Cassiodorus.

"Totila! a sunny youth! a Siegfrid; a favourite of the gods! No heart can withstand him. But truly, the hearts of these Italians--" He sighed, and then continued, "Who will assure us of Rome and the Senate?"

"Cethegus Cæsarius," said Cassiodorus, with a motion of his hand, "this noble Roman."

"Cethegus? I know him well. Look at me, Cethegus."

Cethegus, thus addressed, reluctantly raised his eyes, which he had quickly cast down before the steady look of the King. But now, collecting himself, he quietly bore the eagle glance which seemed to penetrate his soul.

"It was a sickly whim, Cethegus, which made a man of your kind withhold himself so long from affairs of state; and from us. Or it was dangerous. Perhaps it is still more dangerous that you--*now*--again take an interest in politics."

"It was not my wish, O King."

"I will answer for him!" cried Cassiodorus.

"Peace, friend! On earth no one can answer for another!--scarcely for himself! But," he continued with a searching look, "this proud intellect--this Cæsar-like intellect--will not betray Italia to the Greeks."

Cethegus had to endure one more sharp look from the golden eagle-eyes. Then the King suddenly grasped his arm, and whispered in his ear: "Listen to my warning. No Roman will ever again flourish on the throne of the Western Empire. Peace! no contradiction. I have warned you. What noise is that outside?" he asked, quickly turning to his daughter; who, in a low voice, was speaking with a Roman messenger.

"Nothing, my King; nothing of importance, my father."

"What! secrets from me? By my crown! Wilt thou govern while I still breathe? I hear the sound of strange tongues outside. Open the doors!"

The doors which divided the outer hall from the ante-room were thrown open. There, in the midst of a number of Goths and Romans, were to be seen several strange and dwarfish forms, clothed in a curious costume, with doublets of wolfskin, pointed caps, and shaggy sheep-skins hanging down their backs. Surprised and impressed by the sudden apparition of the King, they sank upon their knees.

"Ah, messengers from the Avarians! Those robber border-ruffians on our eastern boundaries! Have you brought the owing yearly tribute?"

"Sire, once again we bring it: skins, woollen carpets, swords, shields. There they hang--there they lie. But we hope that next year--we will see----"

"You will see whether the aged Theodoric has become a dotard? You hoped that I was dead? You think that you can refuse the tribute to my successor? You err, spies!"

And he took up, as if proving its worth, one of the swords which the messengers had laid at his feet, together with its sheath, held it firmly by hilt and point, and with a slight effort snapped the steel in two, and threw the pieces on the ground.

"The Avari carry worthless swords," he said quietly. "Come, Athalaric, heir to my kingdom. They do not believe that thou canst bear the weight of my crown. Show them how thou canst throw my spear."

The youth bounded to him. The scarlet hue of ambition flushed his pale face. He swung the heavy spear of his grandfather, and hurled it with such force at a shield which the messengers had leaned against one of the wooden pillars, that it completely pierced it and penetrated deeply into the wood.

The King laid his left hand on the head of his grandchild, and said proudly to the messengers:

"Now go, and tell at home what you have seen."

He turned away; the outer doors were closed, and shut out the amazed Avarians.

"Give me a cup of wine. It may possibly be the last! No, unmixed! In Germanic fashion--" he repulsed the Grecian physician. "Thanks, old Hildebrand, for this draught, so faithfully given. I drink prosperity to the Goths!"

He slowly emptied the goblet; and with a hand yet firm and strong he replaced it on the marble table.

But suddenly, like a flash of lightning, that which the physicians had long expected took place. He staggered, pressed his hand to his heart, and fell backwards into Hildebrand's arms; who, slowly kneeling down, let him gently slide on to the marble pavement, supporting his helmet-crowned head.

For one moment all present held their breath; but the King did not move, and, with a loud cry, Athalaric threw himself upon the corpse.

CHAPTER VIII.

There was another man, besides Cassiodorus, who played a most important, and, as it seemed to the Regency, a very deserving part, in those days of transition. This was no other than Cethegus. He had undertaken the momentous office of Prefect of Rome. As soon as the King had closed his eyes for ever, Cethegus had instantly hurried to his place of trust, and had arrived there before the news of the event had reached that city.

Before daybreak, he had collected the senators together in the *Senatus*, that is, in the closed hall of Domitian, near the temple of Janus Geminus, on the right of the arch of Septimus Severus, and had surrounded the building with Gothic troops. He informed the surprised senators (many of whom he had only recently met in the Catacombs, and had incited to the expulsion of the barbarians) of the already accomplished succession to the throne. He had also, not without many mild hints as to the spears of the Gothic hundreds, which might easily be seen from the hall, taken their oaths of allegiance to Athalaric with a rapidity that brooked no contradiction.

Then he left the "Senatus," where he kept the conscript fathers locked up, until, with the support of the strong Gothic garrison, he had held a meeting of the assembled Romans which he had called in the Flavian amphitheatre, and had won the hearts of the easily-moved "Quirites" for the young King.

He enumerated the generous deeds of Theodoric, promised the same beneficence from his grandson, who was, besides, already acknowledged by all Italy and the provinces, and also by the fathers of the city; announced a general feast for the Roman population, with the gift of bread and wine, as the first act of the new government; and concluded with the proclamation of seven days of games in the Circus (races between twenty-four Spanish four-horsed chariots), with which he himself would celebrate the accession of Athalaric, and his own entrance into office.

At once a thousand voices shouted, with loud huzzas, the names of the Queen-Regent and her son; and still more loudly the name of Cethegus. Then the people joyously dispersed, the imprisoned senators were released, and the Eternal City was won for the Goths.

The Prefect hurried to his house at the foot of the Capitol, locked himself up, and eagerly wrote his report to the Queen-Regent.

But he was soon disturbed by a violent knocking upon the iron door of the house. It was Lucius Licinius, the young Roman whom we have already met in the Catacombs. He struck with the hilt of his sword against the door till the house echoed.

He was followed by Scævola, the jurist, with portentously frowning brow, who had been amongst the imprisoned senators; and by Silverius, the priest, with doubtful mien.

The ostiarius looked prudently through a secret aperture in the wall, and, on recognising Licinius, admitted them.

Licinius rushed impetuously before the others through the well-known vestibule and the colonnade of the atrium to the study of Cethegus.

When Cethegus heard the hastily-approaching footsteps, he rose from the lectus upon which he was lying writing, and put his letters into a casket with a silver lid.

"Ah, the saviours of the fatherland!" he said, smiling, and advanced towards the door.

"Vile traitor!" shouted Licinius, his hand on his sword--anger impeded further speech; he half drew his sword from the sheath.

"Stop! first let him defend himself, if he can," panted Scævola, holding the young man's arm, as he hastened into the room.

"It is impossible that he can have deserted the cause of the Holy Church," said Silverius, as he also entered.

"Impossible!" laughed Licinius. "What! are you mad, or am I? Has he not caused us to be confined in our houses? Has he not shut the gates, and taken the oaths of the mob for the barbarians?"

"Has he not," continued Cethegus, "caught the noble fathers of the city, three hundred in number, and kept them in the Curia, like so many mice in a trap; three hundred aristocratic mice?"

"He dares to mock us? Will you suffer that?" cried Licinius. And Scævola turned pale with anger.

"Well, and what would you have done had you been allowed to act?" asked the Prefect quietly, crossing his arms on his broad breast.

"What should we have done?" cried Licinius. "What we, and you with us, have a hundred times decided upon. As soon as the news of the tyrant's death had arrived, we should have killed all the Goths in the city, proclaimed a Republic, and chosen two consuls---"

"Of the names of Licinius and Scævola; that is the first thing. Well, and then? What then?"

"What then? Freedom would have conquered!"

"Folly would have conquered!" broke out Cethegus in a thundering voice, which startled his accusers. "Well for us that your hands were bound; you would have strangled Hope for ever. Look here, and thank me upon your knees!"

He took some records from another casket, and gave them to his astonished companions.

"There; read! The enemy had been warned, and had thrown the noose round the neck of Rome in a masterly manner. If I had not acted as I did, Earl Witichis would be standing at this moment before the Salarian Gate in the north with ten thousand Goths; to-morrow young Totila would have blockaded the mouth of the Tiber on the south with the fleet from Neapolis; and Duke Thulun would have been approaching the Tomb of Hadrian and the Aurelian Gate from the west, with twenty thousand men. If, this morning early, you had touched a hair of a Goth's head, what would have happened?"

Silverius breathed again. The others were ashamed and silent. But Licinius took heart.

"We should have defied the Goths behind our walls," he said, with a toss of his handsome head.

"Yes, when these walls are restored as I will restore them--for eternity, my Licinius: as they are now--not for a day."

"Then we had died as free citizens," said Scævola.

"You might have done that in the Curie three hours ago," laughed Cethegus, shrugging his shoulders.

Silverius stepped forward with open arms, as if to embrace him--Cethegus drew back.

"You have saved us all, you have saved Church and fatherland! I never doubted you!" exclaimed the priest.

But Licinius grasped the hand of the Prefect, who willingly abandoned it to him.

"I *did* doubt you," he said with charming frankness. "Forgive me, you great Roman! This sword, with which I would have penetrated into your very heart, is henceforward at your service. And when the day of freedom dawns, then no consul, then *salve*, Dictator Cethegus!"

He hurried out with flashing eyes. The Prefect cast a satisfied glance after him.

"Dictator, yes; but only until the Republic is in full security," said the jurist, and followed Licinius.

"To be sure," said Cethegus, with a smile; "then we will wake up Camillus and Brutus, and take up the Republic from the point at which they left it a thousand years ago. Is it not so, Silverius?"

"Prefect of Rome," said the priest, "you know that I was ambitious to conduct the affairs of the fatherland as well as of the Church. After this, I am so no more. You shall lead, I will follow. Swear to me only one thing: the freedom of the Roman Church--free choice of a Pope."

"Certainly," said Cethegus; "but first Silverius must have become Pope. So be it."

The priest departed with a smile upon his lips, but with a weight upon his mind.

"Go," said Cethegus, after a pause, looking in the direction taken by his three visitors. "You will never overthrow a tyrant--you need one!"

This day and hour were decisive for Cethegus. Almost against his will, he was driven by circumstances to entertain new views, feelings, and plans, which he had never, until now, put to himself so clearly, or confessed to be more than mere dreams. He acknowledged that at this moment he was sole master of the situation. He had the two great parties of the period--the Gothic Government and its enemies--completely in his power. And the principal motive-power in the heart of this powerful man, which he had for years thought paralysed, was suddenly aroused to the greatest activity. The unlimited desire--yes, the necessity--to *govern*, made itself all at once serviceable to all the powers of his rich nature, and excited them to violent emotion.

Cornelius Cethegus Cæsarius was the descendant of an old and immensely rich family, whose ancestor had founded the splendour of his house as a general and statesman under Cæsar during the civil wars; it was even rumoured that he was the son of the great Dictator.

Our hero had received from nature various talents and violent passions, and his immense riches gave him the means to develop the first and satisfy the last to the fullest extent. He had received the most careful education that was then possible for a young Roman noble. He practised the fine arts under the best teachers; he studied law, history, and philosophy in the famous schools of Berytus, Alexandria, and Athens with brilliant success. But all this did not satisfy him. He felt the breath of decay in all the art and science of his time. In particular, his study of philosophy had only the effect of destroying the last traces of belief in his soul, without affording him any results. When he returned home from his studies, his father, according to the custom of the time, introduced him to political life, and his brilliant talents raised him quickly from office to office.

But all at once he abandoned his career. As soon as he had made himself master of the affairs of state, he would no longer be a wheel in the great machine of a kingdom from which freedom was excluded, and which, besides, was subject to a barbarian King.

His father died, and Cethegus, being now his own master and possessor of an immense fortune, rushed into the vortex of life, enjoyment, and luxury with all the passion of his nature.

He soon exhausted Rome, and travelled to Byzantium, into Egypt, and even as far as India.

There was no luxury, no innocent or criminal pleasure, in which he did not revel; only a well-steeled frame could have borne the adventures, privations, and dissipations of these journeys.

After twelve years of absence, he returned to Rome.

It was said that he would build magnificent edifices. People expected that he would lead a luxurious life in his houses and villas. They were sadly deceived.

Cethegus only built for himself the convenient little house at the foot of the Capitol, which he decorated in the most tasteful manner; and there he lived in populous Rome like a hermit.

He unexpectedly published a description of his travels, characterising the people and countries which he had visited. The book had an unheard-of success. Cassiodorus and Boëthius sought his friendship, and the great King invited him to his court.

But on a sudden he disappeared from Rome.

What had happened remained a mystery, in spite of all malicious, curious, or sympathetic inquiries.

People told each other that one morning a poor fisherman had found Cethegus unconscious, almost dead, on the shores of the Tiber, outside the gates of the city.

A few weeks later he again was heard of on the north-east frontier of the kingdom, in the inhospitable regions of the Danube, where a bloody war with the Gepidae, Avari, and Sclavonians was raging. There he fought the savage barbarians with death-despising courage, and followed them with a few chosen troops, paid from his private means, into their rocky fortresses, sleeping every night upon the frozen ground. And once, when the Gothic general entrusted to him a larger detachment of troops in order to make an inroad, instead of doing this, he attacked and took Sirmium, the enemy's fortified capital, displaying no less good generalship than courage.

After the conclusion of peace, he travelled into Gaul, Spain, and again to Byzantium; returned thence to Rome, and lived for years in an embittered idleness and retirement, refusing all the military, civil, or scientific offices and honours which Cassiodorus pressed, upon him. He appeared to take no interest in anything but his studies.

A few years before the period at which our story commences, he had brought with him from Gaul a handsome youth, to whom he showed Rome and Italy, and whom he treated with fatherly

love and care. It was said that he would adopt him. As long as his young guest was with him he ceased his lonely life, invited the aristocratic youth of Rome to brilliant feasts in his villas, and, accepting all invitations in return, proved himself the most amiable of guests.

But as soon as he had sent young Julius Montanus, with a stately suite of pedagogues, freedmen, and slaves, to the learned schools of Alexandria, he suddenly broke off all social ties, and retired into impenetrable solitude, seemingly at war with God and the whole world.

Silverius and Rusticana had, with the greatest difficulty, persuaded him to sacrifice his repose, and join in the conspiracy of the Catacombs. He told them that he only became a patriot from tedium. And, in fact, until the death of the King, he had taken part in the conspiracy--the conduct of which, however, was wholly in his and the archdeacon's hands--almost with dislike.

It was now otherwise.

Until now, the inmost sentiment of his being--the desire to test himself in all possible fields of intellectual effort; to overcome all difficulties; to outdo all rivals; to govern, alone and without resistance, every circle that he entered; and, when he had won the crown of victory, carelessly to cast it aside and seek for new tasks--all this had never permitted him to find full satisfaction in any of his aims.

Art, science, luxury, office, fame. Each of these had charmed him. He had excelled in all to an unusual degree, and yet all had left a void in his soul.

To govern, to be the first, to conquer opposing circumstances with all his means of superior power and wisdom, and then to rule crouching men with a rod of iron; this, consciously and unconsciously, had always been his aim. In this alone could he find contentment.

Therefore he now breathed proudly and freely. His icy heart glowed at the thought that he ruled over the two great inimical powers of the time, over both Goths and Romans, with a mere glance of his eye; and from this exquisite feeling of mastery, the conviction arose with demonic force, that there remained but one goal for him and his ambition that was worth living for; but one goal, distant as the sun, and out of the reach of every other man. He believed in his descent from Julius Cæsar, and felt the blood rush through his veins at the thought--Cæsar, Emperor of the West, ruler of the Roman Empire!

A few months ago, when this thought first flashed across his mind--not even a thought, not a wish, only a shadow, a dream--he was startled, and could not help smiling at his own boundless assurance.

He, Emperor and regenerator of the Empire! And Italy trembled under the footsteps of three hundred thousand Goths! And the greatest of all barbarian kings, whose fame filled the earth, sat on his powerful throne in Ravenna!

Even if the power of the Goths were broken, the Franks and Byzantines would stretch their greedy hands over the Alps and across the sea to seize the Italian booty. Two great kingdoms against a single man! For, truly, he stood alone amid his people. How well he knew, how utterly he despised his countrymen, the unworthy descendants of great ancestors! How he laughed at the enthusiasm of a Licinius or a Scævola, who thought to renew the days of the Republic with these degenerate Romans!

He stood alone.

But the feeling only excited his ambition, and, at that moment, when the conspirators had left him, when his superiority had been more plainly proved than ever before, the thoughts which had been a flattering amusement of his moody hours, suddenly ripened and formed themselves into a clear resolve.

Folding his arms across his mighty chest, and measuring the apartment with heavy steps, like a lion in his cage, he spoke to himself in abrupt sentences:

"To drive out the Goths and prevent Franks and Greeks from entering, would not be difficult, with a brave host at one's back; any other man could do it. But alone, quite alone, more hindered than helped by these knaves without marrow in their bones; to accomplish the impossible; to make these cowards heroes; these slaves, Romans; these servants of the priests and barbarians, masters of the world; that, *that* is worth the trouble. To create a new people, a new time, a new world, with the power of his single will and the might of his intellect, is what no mortal has yet accomplished--that would be greater than Cæsar!--*he* led legions of heroes! and yet, it can be done, for it can be imagined. And I, who can imagine it, can do it. Yes, Cethegus, that is an aim for which it is easy to think, to live, to die! Up, and to work! and henceforward, no thought, no feeling, except for this one thing!"

He stood still at last before a colossal statue of Cæsar, sculptured in Parian marble, which--a masterpiece of Arkesilaus, and, according to family tradition, given by Julius Cæsar himself to his son--stood before the writing-divan, the most sacred treasure of the house.

"Hear me, divine Cæsar! great ancestor!" exclaimed Cethegus, "thy descendant dares to rival

thee! There is still something higher than anything which thou hast reached; even to soar at a higher quarry than thou, is immortal; and to fall--to fall from such a height--is the most glorious death. Hail! Once again I know why I live!"

He passed the statue, and threw a glance at some military maps of the Roman Empire, which lay unrolled upon the table.

"First trample upon these barbarians: Rome! Then once more subdue the North: Paris! Then reduce the rebellious East to its old subjection to the Cæsar-city: Byzantium! and farther, even farther, to the Tigris, to the Indus; farther than Alexander; and back to the West, through Scythia and Germania, to the Tiber; the path, Cæsar, which Brutus' dagger cut off for thee. And so to be greater than thou, greater than Alexander---hold, my thought! Enough!"

And the heart of the icy Cethegus flamed and glowed; the veins of his temples throbbed violently; he pressed his burning forehead against the cold marble breast of Julius Cæsar, who majestically looked down upon him.

CHAPTER IX.

The day of the King's death was not only decisive for Cethegus, but also for the conspiracy in the Catacombs, for Italy, and for the Gothic kingdom.

Although the intrigues of the patriots--led by different men, who were not agreed upon the means, nor even upon the aims of their plots--had, till now, made slow and doubtful progress, this state of things was completely altered from the moment when Cethegus took the conduct of affairs into his own strong hands. Only then did the conspiracy become really dangerous to the Goths.

Cethegus untiringly sought to undermine the security of their kingdom. With his great capacity for winning and governing men, and penetrating their motives, he was able daily to increase the number of important members and the means of success. He understood how to avoid the suspicion of the Goths on the one hand, and to prevent any untimely rebellion on the other. For it would have been easy to attack the barbarians in all the towns of the Peninsula on some special day, and to call upon the Byzantines--who had long since been on the watch for such a crisis--to complete the conquest. But in this way the Prefect would not have been able to carry out his secret plans. He would merely have put Byzantine tyranny in the place of Gothic rule. And we know that he had very different intentions. In order to fulfil them, he wished first to create for himself a power in Italy, greater than any other man possessed. Before the foot of a Byzantine was set upon Italian soil, he must become--although in secret--the mightiest man in the country. All must be so prepared that the barbarians should be driven away by Italy itself, that is, by Cethegus, with the least possible help from Byzantium; so that, after the victory, the Emperor could not avoid giving the dominion over the country to its saviour, even if only as a governor. Then he would soon gain time and opportunity to excite the national pride of the Romans against the rule of the "Greek-lings," as they contemptuously called the Byzantines. For, although for two hundred years--since the days of the great Constantine--the glory of the Empire of the world had been removed from widowed Rome to the golden town on the Hellespont, and the sceptre of the sons of Romulus seemed to have passed over to the Greeks; though East and West formed *one* state of antique culture opposed to the barbarian world; yet even now the Romans hated and despised the Greeks as much as in the days when Flaminius declared humbled Hellas to be a freedman of Rome. The old hate was now increased by envy.

Therefore Cethegus was sure of the enthusiasm and support of all Italy, which, after the removal of the barbarians, would also banish the Byzantines from the country; and the crown of Rome, the crown of the Western Empire, would be his certain reward.

And if he succeeded in exciting the newly-awakened national feeling to an offensive war on the other side of the Alps, when he had again erected the throne of the Roman Empire on the ruins of the Frankish Kingdom at Orleans and Paris, then the attempt would not be too rash once again to subdue the Eastern Empire and continue the Empire of the World in the Eternal City from the point at which Trajan and Hadrian had left it.

In order to reach this distant and shining goal, every step on the dizzy path must be taken with the greatest prudence; any stumble might precipitate him into an abyss. In order to gain his end, Cethegus must first of all make sure of Rome; on Rome alone could his plans be based.

Therefore the new Prefect bestowed the greatest care upon the city that had been entrusted to him. He wished to make Rome, morally and physically, his surety of dominion, belonging alone to him, and not to be wrested from him.

His office gave him the best pretext for carrying out his plans. Was it not the duty of the *Præfectus Urbi* to care for the well-being of the populace, and for the preservation and security of the city? He understood perfectly well how to use the rights of his office for the furtherance of his own aims. He easily won the sympathies of all ranks; the nobles honoured in him the head of the conspiracy; he governed the clergy through Silverius, who was the right hand of the pope,

and, by public opinion, appointed his successor, and who showed to the Prefect a devotion that was even surprising to its object. He gained the common people, not only by occasional gifts of bread, and games in the Circus, but also by promoting great undertakings, which, at the cost of the Gothic Government, provided work and sustenance for thousands.

He persuaded Amalasintha to give orders that the fortifications of Rome, which had suffered much more since the reign of Honorius from the inroads of time and the selfishness of Roman architects, than from the Visigoths and Vandals, should be quickly and completely restored "to the honour of the Eternal City, and," as she imagined, "for protection against the Byzantines."

Cethegus himself, and, as was afterwards proved by the unsuccessful sieges of the Goths and Byzantines, with great strategic genius, made the plan of the magnificent works. With the greatest zeal he set about the gigantic task of transforming the immense city, with its circumference of many miles, into a stronghold of the first rank. The thousands of workmen, who well knew to whom they owed their well-paid employment, applauded the Prefect whenever he showed himself upon the ramparts, to examine what progress had been made, or excite to new industry, and, sometimes, to put his own hand to the work. And the deceived Princess assigned one million *solidi* after another for the expenses of fortifications, against which the whole power of her people was shortly to be wrecked and annihilated.

The most important point of these fortifications was the Tomb of Hadrian, known now under the name of Castle St. Angelo. This magnificent edifice, built of blocks of Parian marble, which were laid one upon the other without any uniting cement, lay, at that time, about a stone's-throw from the Aurelian Gate, the flanking walls of which it by far overtopped.

Cethegus had seen at a glance that this incomparably strong building, which until now had been designed for offence *against* the city, might, by very simple means, be converted into a powerful bulwark of defence *for* the city; he caused two walls to be built from the Aurelian Gate towards and around the Mausoleum.

And soon the towering marble castle formed an assault-proof rampart for the Aurelian Gate, so much the more because the Tiber formed a natural fosse close before it. On the top of the wall of the Mausoleum stood about three hundred of the most beautiful statues of bronze, marble, and iron, mostly placed there by Hadrian and his successors. Amongst them were that of the Divus Hadrianus; his beautiful favourite Antinous; a Jupiter of Soter; a Pallas "town-protectress;" and many others. Cethegus rejoiced at the fulfilment of his ideas, and became exceedingly fond of this place, where he used to wander every evening with his beloved Rome spread out at his feet, examining the progress of the works. He had even caused a number of beautiful statues from his own villas to be added to those already existing, in order to increase the splendour of his creation.

CHAPTER X.

Cethegus was obliged to be more prudent in the execution of a second plan, not less necessary for the success of his projects. In order to be able to defy the Goths, and, if needful, the Greeks, from within *his* Rome, as he loved to call it, he was in want--not only of walls, but of soldiers to defend them.

At first he thought of mercenaries, of a body-guard such as had been often kept by high officials, statesmen and generals in those times, such as Belisarius and Narses possessed in Byzantium.

It would have been very easy for him, by means of his riches and the connections he had formed during his travels in Asia, to hire brave troops of the savage Isaurian mountain people, who then played the part of the Swiss of the sixteenth century; but this procedure had two very straitened limits. On the one side he could not, without exhausting the means that were indispensable for other purposes, keep more than a comparatively small band, the kernel of an army, not an army itself. On the other side it was impossible to bring these mercenaries in larger numbers to Italy or Rome, without arousing suspicion. He was obliged to smuggle them over with much cunning--by pairs, singly, or in small groups, to his scattered villas and estates, as his slaves, freedmen, clients, or guests; and to employ them as sailors and ship-officials in the harbour of Ostia, or as workmen in Rome.

Lastly, the Romans themselves would, after all, have to save and defend Rome, and all his plans urged him to re-acustom his fellow-citizens to the use of arms. But Theodoric had wisely excluded the Italians from the army--exceptions were only made in favour of persons who were considered as particularly reliable and in the late unquiet times of his reign, during the process against Boëthius, he had issued orders for the general disarming of all Romans. This measure had certainly never been strictly carried out, but still Cethegus dared not hope that the Queen-Regent would allow him, against the expressed will of her august father and the evident interests of the Goths, to form any considerable forces of Italians.

He contented himself with representing to her, that, by means of a very innocent concession, she could procure for herself the merit of having cancelled Theodoric's hateful measure by a

noble trust; proposing to her that she should allow him to drill and keep under arms only two thousand Roman citizens as a guard for the city; the Romans would be for ever grateful to her that the city did not appear to be solely protected by barbarians.

Amalasintha, who was enthusiastic about Rome, and whose dearest wish was to gain the love of the Romans, gave her consent, and Cethegus began to form his militia, as we should call it. In a proclamation, which sounded like a trumpet-call, he "bid the sons of Scipio take up their old weapons." He promised to double the pay fixed upon by the Princess from his own pocket, to any Roman who voluntarily presented himself. From the thousands who pressed forward he chose the most able. He armed the poor; gave to those who distinguished themselves in the service, Gallic helmets and Spanish swords from his own collections; and, as the most important step, he regularly discharged those who were sufficiently drilled as soon as possible, leaving them their weapons, and enlisted new recruits, so that although at no time more were on the service than the number allowed by Amalasintha, yet, in an incredibly short space of time, many thousands of armed and practised Romans were at the disposal of their adored leader.

While Cethegus added in this manner to the strength of his future capital and formed his future pretorians, he put off his co-conspirators, who constantly urged him to strike, and comforted them with the hope that the proper moment would soon arrive, which, however, he alone could determine. At the same time he kept up constant communication with Byzantium. He wanted to make sure of assistance thence, which could appear upon the scene of action at any hour in which he might desire it, but which would not come without a call, or in such force that it could not easily be again removed. He wished for a good general from Byzantium, who, however, must not be a great statesman; bringing an army sufficiently powerful to support the Italians, but not strong enough to gain the victory without them, or to remain in the country against their will.

We shall see later how, with regard to this, much occurred in accordance with the Prefect's wishes, but just as much against them.

As to the Goths--who at this time were in undisturbed possession of the booty for which Cethegus already mentally quarrelled with the Emperor-- all his endeavour was to rock them into unsuspecting security, to split them into parties, and to uphold a weak government at their head.

The first task was not difficult; for that strong Teutonic race despised, with barbarian pride, all open and secret foes--we have already seen how difficult it was to convince such a youth as Totila, who was otherwise sharp-sighted and clear-headed, of the approach of danger--and the stubborn trust of Hildebrand fully expressed the general disposition of the Goths.

Party spirit was also not wanting in this people.

There were the proud race of the Balthe, with their widely-spread kindred; at their head the three Dukes, Thulun, Ibba, and Pitza. The rich Wölfungs, under the two brothers, Duke Guntharis and Earl Arahad; and many others, who were not much inferior to the Amelungs in the splendour of their ancestry, and jealously guarded their position near the throne. There were also many who endured the guardianship of a woman and the rule of a boy with strong dislike, and who would gladly, according to the ancient rights of the nation, have passed over the royal line, and chosen one of the tried heroes of the nation for their King, But the Amelungs counted many blindly-devoted adherents, who abhorred such sentiments as treasonable.

And, lastly, the whole nation was divided into two parties, one of which, long discontented with the clemency shown to the Italians by Theodoric and his daughter, would gladly have retrieved the mistake which, as they thought, had been made when the country was conquered, and punished the Italians for their secret hate with open violence. The number of those who held milder and nobler opinions--who, like Theodoric himself, were more susceptible to the higher culture of the subjected Italians, and desirous to raise themselves and their people to the same level--was naturally much smaller. At the head of this party stood the Queen.

This woman Cethegus now sought to uphold in the possession of power; for her feminine, weak, and divided government was calculated to undermine the strength of the nation, to excite party spirit and discontent, and to exclude all augmentation of national feeling.

Cethegus trembled at the thought that he might see an energetic man unite the strength of the whole nation. And often the traits of sublimity which occasionally were to be seen in Amalasintha, and, still more, the fiery sparks of repressed feeling which sometimes blazed out in Athalaric's soul, caused him serious uneasiness. Should mother and son betray such feelings more frequently, then, certainly, he would be compelled to overthrow their government as zealously as he had hitherto upheld it.

Meanwhile he rejoiced in the unlimited command which he possessed over the mind of Amalasintha. It had been easy for him to gain it; not only because he, with great subtlety, took advantage of her predilection for learned discussions--in which he was so often vanquished by the seemingly superior knowledge of the Princess that Cassiodorus, who was a witness of their arguments, could not refrain from regretting that the genius of Cethegus, once so brilliant, had rusted for want of practice--but he had touched the proud woman on a much more sensitive subject.

Her great father had been blessed with no son; only this one daughter had been born unto him. The wish for a male heir had been often heard in the mouths of the King and of his people, and had penetrated to the daughter's ears in her childish years. It outraged the feelings of the highly-gifted girl that, merely on account of her sex, she should be put lower than a possible brother, who, as a matter of course, would be more capable and more worthy of governing. So, when a child, she often wept bitter tears because she was not a boy. Of course, as she grew up, she only heard the offensive wish from the lips of her father; every other mouth praised the wonderful talent, the manly spirit and courage of the brilliant Princess. And these praises were not flattery; Amalasintha was, indeed, a wonderful creature. The strength of her will, the power of her intellect, her love of authority, and cold abruptness of manner, far exceeded the limits which generally bound the sphere of feminine grace. The consciousness that when her hand was bestowed, the highest position in the kingdom, and perhaps the crown itself, would be given with it, did not contribute to render her more modest; and her deepest, strongest sentiment was no longer the wish to be a man, but the conviction that, even as a woman, she was as capable of performing all the duties of life and of government as the most gifted man--much more capable than most men--and that she was fated to refute the general prejudice, and to prove the equality of her sex.

The married life of this cold woman with Eutharic, a member of another branch of the family, a man of a genial temperament and high intellect, was of short duration--in a few years Eutharic fell a victim to disease--and not at all happy. She had unwillingly obeyed her husband, and, as a widow, gloried in her freedom. She burnt with the desire to verify her favourite theory in her position as Queen-regent and guardian of her son. She would govern in such a manner, that the proudest man must acknowledge her superiority. We have seen how the anticipation of ruling had enabled her to bear the death of her great father with considerable equanimity. She assumed her high office with the greatest zeal and the most untiring activity. She wished to do everything alone. She thrust aside the aged Cassiodorus, for he was unable to keep pace with the eagerness of her spirit. She would endure no man's advice, and jealously watched over her absolute monarchy.

To none but one of her servants did she willingly and frequently lend her ear: to him who often and loudly praised the manly independence of her mind, and still more often seemed to admire it in secret, and who appeared incapable of conceiving the desire to govern any of her actions: she trusted Cethegus alone.

For he constantly evinced only *one* ambition--that of carrying out all the ideas and plans of the Queen with the most zealous care. He never opposed her favourite endeavours, like Cassiodorus and the heads of the Gothic parties, but supported her therein. He helped her to surround herself with Greeks and Romans; to exclude the young king, as far as possible, from all share in the government; gradually to remove from the court the old Gothic friends of her father, who, in the consciousness of their services and according to old custom, often took upon themselves to speak a word of open blame; to use the money which was intended for men-of-war, horses, and the armament of the Gothic forces, for art and science, or for the embellishment, preservation, and security of Rome; in short, he aided her in every act that would estrange her from her people, or render her government an object of hatred, and her kingdom defenceless.

And if he himself had a plan he always knew how to give his transactions with the Queen such a turn, that she considered herself the promoter of every scheme, and ordered him to execute his most secret wishes as *her* commands.

CHAPTER XI.

In order to gain and support this influence, it can easily be understood that Cethegus was forced to be more at court, and oftener absent from Rome, than was advantageous for his interests in that city.

He therefore endeavoured to bring persons into close connection with the Queen, who would, in part, take his place, warmly defend his interests, and keep him *au fait* of all that passed in the court of Ravenna.

Many Gothic nobles had left the court in anger, and it was necessary to replace their wives in their office near the Queen; and Cethegus determined to use this opportunity to bring Rusticiana, the daughter of Symmachus and wife of Boëthius, once more to court. It was no easy task. For the family of Boëthius, who had been executed as a traitor, had been banished the capital. Before anything could be done, the feeling which the Queen entertained towards this family must be completely altered. Cethegus, however, soon succeeded in appealing to the compassion and magnanimity of Amalasintha, who possessed a noble heart. At the same time she had never really believed in the unproved guilt of the two noble Romans, one of whom, the husband of Rusticiana, she had honoured as an extremely learned man, and, in some points, as her teacher. Cethegus proved to her that by showing favour to this family, either as an act of grace or of justice, she would touch the hearts of all her Roman subjects, and he thus easily persuaded her to pardon the deeply degraded family.

It was much more difficult to persuade the proud and passionate widow of the murdered man to accept this favour, for her whole soul was filled with bitterness against the royal house, and thirst for revenge. Cethegus even feared that when she was in the presence of the "tyrants," her ungovernable hatred might betray itself. In spite of the great influence he had over her, she had repeatedly rejected this plan.

Matters had come to this pass, when, one day, Rusticiana made a discovery which shortly led to the fulfilment of the Prefect's wish.

Rusticiana had a daughter of scarcely sixteen years of age, named Camilla. She was a lovely girl, with a face of the true Roman type, with nobly-formed features and chiselled lips. Intense feeling beamed from her dark eyes; her figure, slender almost to delicacy, was elegant and light as that of a gazelle, and all her movements were agile and graceful. She had loved her unhappy father with all the energy of filial devotion. The stroke that had laid his beloved head low had entered deeply into her own young life; and inconsolable and sacred grief, mixed with passionate admiration for his heroism, filled all her youthful thoughts. A welcome guest at court before her father's death, she had fled with her mother after the catastrophe over the Alps to Gaul, where they had found an asylum with an old friend, while Anicius and Severinus, Camilla's brothers, who had been also condemned, but who were afterwards reprieved and sent into banishment, hastened at once to the court at Byzantium, where they tried to move heaven and earth against the barbarians.

When the first heat of persecution had abated, the two women had returned to Italy, and led a retired life in the house of one of their faithful freedmen at Perusia, whence, as we have seen, Rusticiana had easily found means to join the conspiracy in Rome.

It was in June, that season of the year when the Roman aristocracy--then as at this day--fled the sultry air of the towns, and sought a refuge in their cool villas on the Sabine mountains, or at the sea-coast. The two noble women, used to every luxury, felt extremely ill at ease in the hot and narrow streets of Perusia, and thought with regret of their beautiful villas in Florence and Neapolis, which, together with all the rest of their fortune, had been confiscated by the Gothic Government.

One day, their faithful servant, Corbulo, came to Rusticiana with a strangely embarrassed expression of countenance, and explained to her "how, having long since noticed how much the 'Patrona' suffered under his unworthy roof, and had to endure much annoyance from his handiwork--he being a mason--he had bought a small, a very small, estate, with a still smaller house, in the mountains near Tifernum. However, she must not compare it with the villa near Florentia; but still there ran a little brook near it, which never dried up, even under the dog-star; oaks and cornel-trees gave broad and pleasant shade; ivy grew luxuriantly over a ruined Temple of Faunus; and in the garden he had planted roses, lilies, and violets, such as Donna Camilla loved; and so he hoped that they would mount their mules or litter, and go to their villa like other noble dames."

The ladies, much touched by their old servant's fidelity, gratefully accepted his kindness, and Camilla, who rejoiced like a child in the anticipation of a little change, was more cheerful and animated than she had ever been since her father's death.

Impatiently she urged their departure, and hurried off beforehand the very same day, with Corbulo and his daughter, Daphnidion, leaving her mother to follow as soon as possible with the slaves and baggage.

The sun was already sinking behind the hills of Tifernum when Corbulo, leading Camilla's mule by the bridle, reached an open place in the wood, from whence they first caught sight of the little estate. He had long pleased himself with the thought of the young girl's surprise when he should show her the prettily situated villa.

But he suddenly stood still, struck with surprise; he held his hand before his eyes, fancying that the evening sun dazzled him; he looked around to see if he were really in the right place; but there was no doubt about it! There stood, on the ridge where wood and meadow met, the grey border-stone, in the form of the old frontier-god Terminus, with his pointed head. It was the right place, but the little house was nowhere to be seen; where it should have been, was a thick group of pines and plantains; and besides this, the whole place was changed; green hedges and flowerbeds stood where once cabbages and turnips grew; and where sandpits and the high-road had, till now, marked the limits of his modest property, rose an elegant pavilion.

"The Mother of God and all the superior gods save me!" Cried the mason; "some magic must be at work!"

His daughter hastily handed him the amulet that she carried at her girdle; but she was no wiser than he, for it was the first time that she had visited the new property; and so there was nothing left but to drive the mules forward as fast as possible. Father and daughter, leaping from stone to stone, accompanied the trotting mules to the bottom of the declivity with cries of encouragement.

As they approached, Corbulo certainly discovered the house that he had bought behind the

group of trees, but so changed, renewed, and beautified, that he scarcely recognised it.

His astonishment at the transformation of the whole place tended to increase his superstitious fears. His mouth opened wide, he let the reins fall, stood stock-still, and he was beginning another wonderful speech, intermixed with heathen and Christian interjections, when Camilla, equally astounded, called out:

"But that is the garden where we once lived, the Viridarium of Honorius at Ravenna! The same trees, the same flower-beds, and, by the lake, the little Temple of Venus, just as it once stood on the sea-shore at Ravenna! Oh, how beautiful! What a faithful memory! Corbulo, how did you manage it?" and tears of grateful emotion filled her eyes.

"The devil and all the Lemures take me, if I had anything to do with it! But there comes Cappadox with his club foot; he at least is not bewitched. Speak, then, Cyclops, what has happened here?"

Cappadox, a gigantic, broad-shouldered slave, came limping along with an uncouth smile, and after many questions, told a puzzling tale.

About three weeks ago, a few days after he had been sent to the estate to manage it for his master, who had gone to the marble quarries of Luna, there came from Tifernum a noble Roman with a troop of slaves and workmen and heavily-packed wagons. He inquired if this was the estate bought by the sculptor Corbulo of Perusia for the widow of Boëthius. Upon being answered in the affirmative, he had introduced himself as the Hortulanus Princeps, that is, the superior intendant of the gardens at Ravenna. An old friend of Boëthius--who wished not to tell his name, for fear of the Gothic tyrants--desired to care for his family in secret, and had given orders that their summer residence should be improved and embellished with all possible art. He (Cappadox) was by no means to spoil the intended surprise, and, half-kindly, half by force, they had kept him fast in the villa. Then the intendant had immediately made his plan, and set his men to work. Many neighbouring fields were bought at a high price; and there began such a pulling-down and building-up, such a planting and digging, hammering and knocking, such a cleaning and painting, that it had made him both blind and deaf. When he ventured to meddle or ask questions the workmen laughed in his face.

"And," concluded Cappadox, "it went on in this way till the day before yesterday. Then they had finished, and went away. At first I was afraid, and trembled when I saw all these splendid things growing out of the earth. I thought, if Master Corbulo has to pay for all this, then mercy on my poor back! and I wanted to come and tell you. But they would not let me go; and besides, I knew you were not at home. And when I saw what a ridiculous amount of money the intendant had with him, and how he threw the gold pieces about, as children throw pebbles, I got easier by degrees, and let things go on as they would. Now, master, I know well that you can set me in the stocks, and have me whipped with the vine-branch or even with the scorpion; for you are the master, and Cappadox the servant. But, master, it would scarcely be just! By all the saints and all the gods! For you set me over a few cabbage-fields, and see! they have become an Emperor's garden under my care!"

Camilla had long since dismounted and disappeared, when the servant ended his account.

Her heart beating with joy, she hurried through the garden, the bowers, the house; she flew as if on wings; the active Daphnidion could scarcely follow her. Repeated cries of astonishment and pleasure escaped her lips. Whenever she turned the corner of a path, or round a group of trees, a new picture of the garden at Ravenna met her delighted eyes.

But when she entered the house, and in it found a small room painted, furnished, and decorated exactly like the room in the Imperial Palace, in which she had played away the last days of her childhood, and dreamed the first dreams of her maidenhood; the same pictures upon the hempen tapestry; the same vases and delicate citrean-wood² boxes; and, upon the same small tortoise-shell table, her pretty little harp with its swan's wings; overpowered by so many remembrances, and still more by the feeling of gratitude for such tender friendship, she sank sobbing on the soft cushions of the lectus.

Scarcely could Daphnidion calm her.

"There are still noble hearts in the world; there are still friends of the house of Boëthius!" and she breathed a prayer of deep thankfulness to Heaven.

When her mother arrived the next day, she was scarcely less moved by the strange surprise. She wrote at once to Cethegus in Rome, and asked: "In which of her husband's friends she should seek this secret benefactor?" Within her heart she hoped that it might turn out to be himself.

But the Prefect shook his head over her letter and wrote back: "He knew no one of whom this delicate mode of proceeding reminded him. She should carefully watch for every trace that might lead to the solving of the riddle."

It was not long ere it was solved. Camilla was never tired of traversing the garden, and continually discovering resemblances to its well-known original.

She often extended her rambles beyond the park into the neighbouring wood. She was generally accompanied by the merry Daphnidion, whose similar youth and faithful affection soon won her confidence. Daphnidion had repeatedly remarked to her that they must be followed by a wood-sprite, for it often snapped in the branches and rustled in the grass near them, and yet there nowhere was a man or an animal to be seen.

But Camilla laughed at her superstition, and often persuaded her to venture out again, far away under the green shadows of the elms and plantains.

One hot day, as the two girls penetrated deeper and deeper into the greenwood they discovered a clear-running spring, that issued copiously from a dark porphyry rock. But it had no decided channel, and the thirsty maidens with difficulty collected the single silvery drops.

"What a pity!" cried Camilla, "the delicious water! You should have seen the fountain of the Tritons in the Pinetum³ at Ravenna. How prettily the water rushed from the inflated cheeks of the bronze sea-god, into the wide shell of brown marble! What a pity!" And they passed on.

Some days after they both came again to the same place. Daphnidion, who was walking in front, suddenly stood still with a loud scream, and silently pointed at the spring.

The woodland streamlet had been enclosed. From a bronze Triton's head the water fell, in a bright stream, into a delicate shell of brown marble. Daphnidion, now firmly believing in some magic, turned to fly without further ado; her hands pressed over her eyes, so as not to see the wood-sprite, which was considered to be extremely dangerous, she fled towards the house, calling loudly to her mistress to follow her.

But a thought flashed through Camilla's mind. The spy who had lately followed them was certainly in the vicinity, revelling in their astonishment.

She looked carefully about her. The blossoms of a 'wild rose-bush fell from its shaking boughs to the earth. She quickly stepped towards the thicket, and lo! a young hunter, with spear and game-bag, advanced towards her from out the bushes.

"I am discovered," he said, in a low, shy voice. He looked very handsome in his embarrassment.

But, with a cry of fear, Camilla started back.

"Athalaric!" she stammered, "the King!"

A whole sea of thoughts and feelings rushed through her brain and heart, and, half fainting, she sank upon, the grassy bank beside the spring.

The young King, alarmed and delighted, stood for a few moments speechless before the tender figure lying at his feet. Thirstily his burning eye dwelt upon the beautiful features and noble form. A vivid flush shot like lightning over his pale face.

"Oh, she--she is my death!" he breathed, pressing both hands to his beating heart. "To die now--to die with her!"

Camilla moved her arm, which movement brought him to his senses; he kneeled down beside her, and wetted her temples with the cool water of the spring. She opened her eyes.

"Barbarian! murderer!" she cried shrilly, thrust his hand away, sprang up, and fled like a frightened doe.

Athalaric made no attempt to follow her.

"Barbarian! murderer!" he murmured to himself, in great grief, and buried his glowing forehead in his hands.

CHAPTER XII.

Camilla came home in such extreme excitement, that Daphnidion would not be convinced that she had not seen the nymphs, or even the venerable sylvan god, Picus, himself.

But the maiden threw herself with wild emotion into the arms of her alarmed mother. The strife of confused feelings within her resolved itself into a flood of hot tears, and only later was she able to answer Rusticiana's anxious questions.

A terrible struggle was taking place in the soul of this child. At the court of Ravenna it had not escaped the growing girl that the dark eyes of the beautiful Athalaric often rested upon her with a strange and dreamy expression, and that he eagerly listened to every tone of her voice. But a suspicion of deeper affection had never entered into her mind. The Prince, reserved and shy, cast down his eyes whenever she met his look with an unembarrassed and inquisitive glance. Were

they not both at that time almost children?

She did not know how to interpret Athalaric's manner--he scarcely could do so himself--and it had never occurred to her to reflect why she so gladly lived near him; why she liked to follow the bold flights of his thoughts and imaginations, differing so much from those of all other playfellows; why she loved to wander silently through the quiet gardens in the evening-light by the side of the silent boy, who often, in the midst of his reverie, addressed her with abrupt, but always significant, words; whose poetical feelings--the feelings of enthusiastic youth--she so completely understood and appreciated.

The tender tissue of this budding inclination was violently torn by the catastrophe of her father's death, and not only gentle sorrow for the murdered man, but glowing hatred of his murderers, took possession of the passionate Roman girl's soul.

At all times Boëthius, even when in the height of his favour at court, had displayed a haughty condescension to the barbarism of the Goths, and, since the catastrophe, all Camilla's companions--her mother, her two brothers (who thirsted for vengeance), and the friends of the house--breathed hatred and contempt, not only for the bloody murderer and tyrant, Theodoric, but for all Goths, and particularly for the daughter and grandson of the King, who, in their eyes, shared his guilt because they had not hindered it.

So the maiden had almost ceased to think of Athalaric, and if he were named, or if, as often happened, his picture entered into her dreams, her hatred of the barbarians was concentrated in a feeling of the greatest abhorrence towards him, perhaps just because, in the depths of her heart, there lurked an involuntary suspicion of the secret inclination which she nourished for the handsome and noble youth.

And now--now he had dared to lay a snare for her unsuspecting heart!

No sooner had she seen him step from the bushes--no sooner did she recognise him, than she at once understood that it was he who had not only enclosed the spring, but caused the alteration of the whole estate. He, the hated enemy; he, the offspring of the cursed race which had shed the blood of her father: the King of the Goths!

The joy with which, during the last few days, she had examined house and garden, was now changed into bitterness. The deadly enemy of her people, of her race, had dared to enrich her; to give her pleasure; to make her happy; for him she had breathed thankful prayers to Heaven! He had been bold enough to follow her steps, to listen to her words, to fulfil her lightest wish; and at the bottom of her soul lay the dreadful certainty that he loved her! The barbarian was insolent enough to show it. The tyrant of Italy dared to hope that the daughter of Boëthius---- Oh, it was too much! and, sobbing violently, she buried her head in the cushions of her couch, to which she had retired, until deep sleep of exhaustion overcame her.

Not long after, Cethegus, who had been hastily sent for, came to visit the troubled woman.

Rusticiana would fain have followed her own and Camilla's first impulse, to fly from the villa and the hated vicinity of the King, and hide her child on the other side of the Alps. But Camilla's condition had, till then, prevented their departure, and as soon as the Prefect entered the house, the flame of their excitement seemed to sink before his cold glances.

He took Rusticiana alone with him into the garden. Leaning his back against a laurel-tree, and supporting his chin on his hand, he listened quietly and attentively to her passionate recital.

"And now, speak," she concluded; "what shall I do? How shall I save my poor child? Whither shall I take her?"

"Whither shall you take Camilla?" he repeated. "To the court, to Ravenna."

Rusticiana started. "Why this ill-timed joke?"

But Cethegus quickly stood erect. "I am in earnest. Be quiet and listen. Fate, that wills the destruction of the barbarians, could have laid no more gracious gifts upon our path. You know how completely I rule the Queen-regent, but you do not know how powerless I am over that obstinate enthusiast, Athalaric. It is enigmatical. The sick youth is, amongst all the nation, the only one who suspects, if he does not see through, me; and I do not know whether he most fears or hates me. That would be a matter of indifference to me if the audacious fellow did not very decidedly and very successfully act against me. Naturally, his opinion weighs heavily with his mother; often more than mine; and he will always grow older, riper, and more dangerous. His spirit exceeds his years; he takes a grave part in the councils of the Regency, and always speaks against me; he often prevails. 'Twas but lately that, against my will, he succeeded in giving the command of the Gothic troops in Rome, in *my* Rome, to that bilious Teja. In short, the young King becomes highly dangerous. Until now I have not the shadow of authority over him. He loves Camilla to his peril; through her we will rule the unruly one."

"Never!" cried Rusticiana; "never as long as I breathe! *I* at the court of the tyrants! My child, Boëthius's daughter, the beloved of Athalaric! Her father's bloody ghost would----"

"Would you avenge that ghost? Yes. Would you ruin the Goths? Yes. Therefore you must consent to everything which will lead to this end."

"Never, by my oath!"

"Woman, do not irritate me, do not oppose me! You know me. By your oath? Have you not sworn blind and unconditional obedience to me, calling down curses on yourself and your children should you break that oath? Caution is necessary when dealing with women! Obey, or tremble for your soul!"

"Fearful man! Shall I sacrifice all my hatred to you and your projects?"

"To me? who speaks of me? I plead *your* cause, I complete *your* revenge. The Goths have done nothing to *me*. *You* disturbed me from my books, *you* called upon me to aid you in destroying these Amelungs; do you repent? Very well. I will return to Horatius and the Stoics. Farewell!"

"Remain, remain! But must Camilla be sacrificed?"

"Folly! Athalaric will be the victim. She shall not love him, she shall only influence him--or," he added, looking sharply at her, "do you fear for her heart?"

"May your tongue be paralysed! *My* daughter love *him*! Rather would I strangle her with these hands!"

But Cethegus had become thoughtful. "It is not for the girl's sake," he thought, "that would not matter--but should she really love him?--the Goth is handsome, intellectual, enthusiastic--Where is your daughter?" he asked aloud.

"In the women's apartment. Even should I wish it, she will never consent--never!"

"We will attempt it. I will go to her."

And they went into the house.

Rusticiana would have entered the room with Cethegus, but he repulsed her.

"I must have her alone," he said, and passed through the curtain.

On seeing him, the beautiful girl rose from the cushions on which she had been resting, lost in helpless reverie. Accustomed to find in this wise and commanding man, her father's old friend, a constant adviser, she greeted him trustfully, as a patient greets his physician.

"You know, Cethegus?"

"Everything!"

"And you bring me help and comfort?"

"I bring you revenge, Camilla!"

That was a new and startling idea! Hitherto to fly, to save herself from this torturing position, had been her only thought. At the most, an angry rejection of the royal gift. But now, revenge! Compensation for all the pain she had suffered! Revenge upon the murderers of her father! Her heart was deeply wounded, and in her veins boiled the hot blood of the south. She rejoiced at the words of her tempter.

"Revenge? Who will revenge me? You?"

"You will revenge yourself; that will be sweeter."

Her eyes flashed.

"On whom?"

"On him. On his house. On all your enemies."

"How can I, a weak and timid girl?"

"Listen to me, Camilla. To you only, to the noble daughter of the noble Boëthius, will I unfold what I would trust to no other woman on earth. There exists a powerful league of patriots, who have sworn to extirpate the barbarians from the face of this country. The sword of revenge hangs trembling over the heads of the tyrants. The fatherland and the shade of your father call upon you to cause it to fall."

"Upon me? *I*--revenge my father? Speak!" cried the maiden, her face glowing as she stroked back the dark locks from her temples.

"There must be a sacrifice. Rome demands it."

"My blood, my life! Like Virginia will I die!"

"No; you shall live to triumph in your revenge. The King loves you. You must go to Ravenna, to court. You shall destroy him by means of his love. We have no power over him, but you will gain the mastery over his soul."

"Destroy him!"

She seemed strangely moved as she spoke thus in a low voice. Her bosom heaved; her voice trembled with the force of her opposing feelings. Tears burst from her eyes, she buried her face in her hands.

Cethegus rose from his seat.

"Pardon me," he said, "I will go. I knew not--that you *loved* the King."

A scream of anger, like that of physical pain, escaped the maiden's lips; she sprang up and grasped his arm.

"Man! who said so? I hate him! Hate him more than I ever knew I could hate!"

"Then prove it, for I do not believe it."

"I will prove it!" she cried; "he shall die!"

She threw back her head; her eyes sparkled fiercely; her dark tresses fell over her shoulders.

"She loves him," thought Cethegus; "but it matters not, for she does not know it. She is only conscious of hating him. All is well."

"He shall not live," repeated Camilla. "You shall see," she added with a wild laugh--"you shall see how I love him! What must I do?"

"Obey me in everything."

"And what do you promise in return? What shall he suffer?"

"Unrequited love."

"Yes, yes, that he shall!"

"His kingdom and his race shall be ruined," continued Cethegus.

"And he will know that it is through *me*!"

"I will take care that he shall know that. When shall we start for Ravenna?"

"To-morrow! No; to-day, this instant." She stopped and grasped his hand. "Cethegus, tell me, am I beautiful?"

"Yes, most beautiful!"

"Ah!" she cried, tossing back her flowing hair, "Athalaric shall love me and perish! Away to Ravenna! I will and must see him!"

And she rushed out of the room.

Her whole soul was thirsting to be with the object of her love and hate.

CHAPTER XIII.

That same day the inhabitants of the villa entered upon their journey to Ravenna.

Cethegus sent a courier forward with a letter from Rusticana to the Queen-regent. Therein the widow of Boëthius declared, "that by the mediation of the Prefect of Rome, she was now ready to accept the repeated invitation to return to court. She did not accept it as an act of pardon, but of conciliation; as a sign that the heirs of Theodoric wished to make amends for the injustice done to the deceased."

This proud letter was written from Rusticana's very heart, and Cethegus knew that such a step would do no harm, and would only exclude any suspicious construction that might be laid upon the sudden change in her sentiments.

Half-way the travellers were met by a messenger bearing the Queen's answer, which bade them welcome to her court.

Arrived in Ravenna, they were received by the Queen with all honours, provided with a retinue, and led into the rooms which they had formerly occupied. They were warmly welcomed by all the Romans at court.

But the anger of the Goths--who abhorred Symmachus and Boëthius as ungrateful traitors--was greatly excited by this measure, which seemed to imply an indirect condemnation of Theodoric. The last remaining friends of that great King indignantly left the Italianised court.

Meanwhile, time, the diversions of the journey, and the arrival at Ravenna, had softened Camilla's excitement. Her anger had the more time to abate, as many weeks elapsed before she met Athalaric; for the young King was dangerously ill.

It was said at court, that while on a visit to Aretium, whither he had gone to enjoy the mountain air, the baths, and the chase, he had drunk from a rocky spring in the woods of Tifernum while heated with hunting, and had thereby brought on a violent attack of his former malady. The fact was, that his followers had found him lying senseless by the side of the spring where he had met Camilla.

The effect of this story upon Camilla was strange. To the hate she bore to Athalaric was now added a slight feeling of compassion, and even a sort of self-reproach. But on the other side, she thanked Heaven that, by this illness, the meeting was postponed, which, now that she was in Ravenna, she feared no less than she had longed for it while far away in Tifernum.

And as she wandered in the wide-spread grounds of the magnificent palace-gardens, she was repeatedly reminded of the anxious care with which Corbulo's little estate had been fashioned after this model.

Days and weeks passed. Nothing was heard of the patient except that he was convalescent, but forbidden to leave his rooms. The physicians and courtiers who surrounded him often expressed to Camilla their admiration of his patience and strength of mind while suffering the most acute pains, his gratitude for the slightest service, and the noble mildness of his disposition.

But when she caught herself listening with pleasure to these words of praise, she frowned angrily, and the thought arose within her: "And he did not oppose the murder of my father!"

One hot July night, after long and restless wakefulness, Camilla towards daybreak had sunk into an uneasy slumber.

Anxious dreams disturbed her.

It seemed to her as if the ceiling of the room, with all its bas-reliefs, were sinking down upon her. Directly over her head was a beautiful young Hypnos, the gentle God of Sleep, modelled by the hand of a Greek.

She dreamed that the drowsy god assumed the earnest, sorrowful features of his pale brother Thanatos.

Softly and slowly the God of Death bent his countenance above her. He approached nearer and nearer. His features became more and more distinct. She already felt his breath upon her forehead. His beautiful lips almost touched her mouth. Then she recognised with affright the pale features--the dark eyes. It was Athalaric! With a scream she started up.

The silver lamp had long since burnt out. The room was dim.

A red light gleamed faintly through the window of spar-gypsum. She rose and opened it. The cocks were crowing, the first rays of the sun gently stole over the sea, of which, beyond the garden, she had a full view. She could no longer bear to remain in the close chamber.

She threw a mantle over her shoulders and hurried softly out of the still silent palace, down the marble steps, and into the garden; across which the fresh morning wind from the neighbouring sea blew towards her.

She hastened towards the sun and the sea, for, to the east, the high walls of the palace gardens rose directly out of the blue waves of the Adriatic.

A gilded lattice-gate, and, beyond it, ten broad steps of white Hymettus marble, led to the little garden-harbour, in which rocked the light-oared gondolas with their lateen sails of purple linen-cloth, fastened with silver chains to the ornamental rams'-heads fixed right and left upon the marble quay.

At the side of the lattice-gate towards the garden, the grounds ended in a spacious rotunda, which was surrounded with broad and shady pines. The ground was laid out with carefully-tended grassplots, intersected by neat paths, and diversified by gay beds of sweet-scented flowers. A spring, ornamentally enclosed, ran down the declivity into the sea. In the centre of this place was a small and antique Temple of Venus, overtopped by a single palm-tree, while burning-red saxifrage grew in the now empty niches of its outer walls. At the right of its long-closed door stood a bronze statue of Æneas. The Julius Cæsar to the left had fallen centuries ago. Theodoric

had placed upon its pedestal a bronze statue of Amala, the mythic forefather of his house.

Between these statues, from the steps of the little fane, was a splendid view through the lattice-gate over the sea, with its woody lagoon-islands, and a group of jagged rocks, called "the Needles of the Amphitrites."

This had been a favourite resort of Camilla's childhood. And it was hither that she now bent her steps, lightly brushing the plentiful dew from the high grass as, with slightly-lifted garments, she hastened along the narrow pathway. She wished to behold the sun rise glowing from the sea.

She advanced from behind the temple, passed to the estrade on the left, and had just set her foot upon the first step which led from the front of the temple to the lattice-gate, when she caught sight of a white figure reclining on the second step, with the head leaning against the balustrade and the face turned towards the sea.

She recognised the black and silky hair; it was the young King.

The meeting was so unexpected that there was no possibility of avoiding it. As if rooted to the ground, she stood still upon the first step.

Athalaric sprang up and quickly turned. His pallid face was illumined by a vivid flush. But he was the first to recover himself, and said:

"Forgive, Camilla. I could not expect you to come here at this hour. I will go; and leave you alone with the rising sun."

And he flung his white mantle over his shoulder.

"Remain, King of the Goths. I have no right to scare you away--and no intention," she added.

Athalaric came a step nearer.

"I thank you. And I beg one favour," he added, smiling. "Do not betray me to my physicians nor to my mother. All day long they shut me up so carefully, that I am obliged to escape before sunrise. For the fresh air, the sea-breeze, does me good; I feel that it cools me. You will not betray me?"

He spoke so quietly. He looked so unembarrassed. This freedom from embarrassment confused Camilla. She would have felt more courageous if he had been more moved. She observed his coolness with pain, but not because she really cared for the Prefect's plans. So, in answer, she only shook her head in silence, and cast down her eyes.

At that moment the rays of the sun reached the spot on which the pair were standing.

The old temple and the bronze of the statues shone in the rosy light; and from the east a broad path of trembling gold was laid upon the smooth flood.

"See, how beautiful!" cried Athalaric, carried away by his admiration. "Look at that bridge of light and glory!"

She joined in his admiration, and looked out over the sea.

"Do you remember, Camilla," he continued slowly, as if lost in recollection, and not looking at her, "do you remember how we played here when we were children? How we dreamed? We said that the golden path painted on the waters by the sun, led to the Islands of the Blessed."

"To the Islands of the Blessed!" repeated Camilla. In secret she was wondering at the delicacy and ease with which, avoiding every allusion to their last meeting, he conversed with her in a manner, which completely disarmed her.

"And look, how the statues glitter, that wonderful pair, Æneas and--Amala! Listen, Camilla, I have something to beg pardon for."

Her heart beat rapidly. He was going to speak of the rebuilding of the Villa and the fountain. The blood rose to her cheeks. She remained silent in painful expectation.

But the youth continued quietly:

"You know how often--you the Roman, and I the Goth--vied with each other here in praises of the glory and fame and manners of our people. Then you stood under the statue of Æneas, and told me of Brutus and Camillus, of Marcellus and the Scipios. And I, leaning against the shield of my ancestor Amala, praised Ermanaric and Alaric and Theodoric. But you spoke more eloquently than I. And often, when the glory of your heroes threatened to outshine mine, I laughed at your dead greatness, and cried, 'The living present and the glowing future belong to my people!'"

"Well, and now?"

"I speak so no more. You have won, Camilla!"

But even while he spoke thus, he looked prouder than ever.

And this expression of superiority revolted the Roman girl. Besides that, she was irritated by the unapproachable coolness with which the King, upon whose passion for her such plans were being founded, stood before her. She did not understand this tranquillity. She had hated him because he had dared to show her his love, and now her hate revived because he was able to conceal it. With the intention to hurt his feelings she slowly said:

"So you acknowledge, King of the Goths, that your barbarians are inferior to the civilised nations?"

"Yes, Camilla," he answered quietly; "but only in one thing: in good luck. In the favours of Fate as well as of Nature. Look at that group of fishermen, who are hanging up their nets on the olive-trees upon the strand. How beautiful are their forms! In motion and repose, in spite of their rags, they are complete statues! Look at that girl with the amphora on her head. And there, at that old woman, who, leaning her head on her arm, lies upon the sand and gazes out dreamily over the sea. Each beggar amongst them looks like a dethroned king. How beautiful they are! At one with themselves and happy! The glory of uninterrupted happiness lies upon them, as it does upon children, or upon noble animals! This is wanting to us barbarians!"

"Is that alone wanting to you?"

"No, Fate is not gracious to us--my poor, glorious people! We have been carried away into a strange world, in which we do not flourish. We resemble the flower of the high Alps, the Edelweiss, which has been carried by the stormy wind to the hot sands of the low-levels. We cannot take root here. We fade and die." And overcome with noble sadness, he turned away and looked over the blue waves.

But Camilla was not in the humour to reflect upon these prophetic words spoken by a king of his people.

"Why did you overstep the mountains which God set as an eternal boundary between your people and ours?" she asked. "Say, why?"

"Do you know," answered Athalaric, without looking at her, almost as if thinking aloud, "do you know why the dark moth flies to the bright flame? Again and again! Warned by no pain, until it is devoured by the beautiful but dangerous element? From what motive? From a sweet madness! And it is just such a sweet madness that has enticed my fellow-Goths away from the fir and the oak to the laurel and the olive. They will burn their wings, the foolish heroes, and will not cease to do so. Who can blame them for it? Look around you! How deeply blue the sky! How deeply blue the sea! And in it are reflected the summits of the pines and the white glitter of the marble temples! And away in the distance arise blue mountains; and out in the waters swim green islands, where the vine clings to the elm. And, above all, the soft, warm and caressing air that illumines the whole with a magic light. What wonders of form and colour does the eye drink, and what sweetness do the delighted senses breathe! This is the magic charm which will for ever entice and undo us!"

The deep emotion of the young King did not fail to make an impression upon Camilla. The tragic force of his words affected her; but she *would* not be moved. She defended herself against the increasing softness of her feelings. She said coldly:

"A whole nation enchanted by this magic, in spite of reason and judgment?" and she looked at him incredulously.

But she was startled; for like lightning flashed the eyes of the youth, and his long-withheld passion broke out suddenly without restraint.

"Yes, I tell thee, maiden! a whole people can nourish a foolish passion, a sweet destructive madness, a deadly longing, as well as--as well as a single man! Yes, Camilla, there is a power in the heart, which, stronger than reason and will, forcibly draws us with open eyes to destruction. But thou knowest it not, and mayst thou never experience it. Never! Farewell!"

He quickly turned away and entered a bowery walk of climbing vines to the right of the temple, which immediately hid him from Camilla, as well as from the windows of the palace. The girl remained standing in deep reflection. His last words echoed strangely in her ears. For a long time she looked out dreamily over the open sea, and at last returned to the palace, filled with strangely conflicting feelings, and in an altered mood.

CHAPTER XIV.

On the same day Cethegus paid a visit to the two ladies. He had come over from Rome on important business, and had just left the privy-council which had been held in the invalid King's room. His energetic features were full of repressed anger.

"To work, Camilla!" he cried. "You are too long about it. This impertinent boy becomes more and more unmanageable. He defies me and Cassiodorus, and even his mother. He is intimate with dangerous people. With old Hildebrand and Witichis and their friends. He sends and receives letters behind our backs. He has managed that the Queen may never hold a council of the regency except in his presence. And in the council he crosses all our plans. This must cease. In one way or another."

"I have no more hope of influencing the King," said Camilla gravely.

"Why? Have you already seen him?"

The girl reflected. She had promised Athalaric not to allow his disobedience to come to the ears of his physicians; and besides, it went against her feelings to desecrate and betray their meeting. So she avoided the question and said:

"If the King refuses to obey his mother, the Queen-regent, he is not likely to suffer himself to be controlled by a young girl."

"What sweet simplicity!" laughed Cethegus. And he dropped the conversation as long as the girl remained in the room. But afterwards, in private, he forced from Rusticiana a promise to manage matters so that her daughter in future might frequently see and speak to the King. It was possible to do this, for Athalaric's health rapidly improved. He became daily more manly and more decided. It seemed as if his opposition to Cethegus strengthened him both bodily and mentally.

In a very short time he again spent many hours of the day in the extensive pleasure-grounds. It was here that his mother and the family of Boëthius frequently met him in the evening.

And while Rusticiana appeared to receive the gracious courtesies of the Queen with answering friendship, listening attentively to her confidential remarks, in order afterwards to report them, word for word, to the Prefect, the two young people walked before them through the shady paths of the garden. Often this select company entered one of the light gondolas in the little harbour, and Athalaric rowed them himself over the blue sea to one of the small wooded isles which lay not far away. On the return home, the purple sails were spread, and the fresh breeze, which always arose at sunset, carried them gently and idly back. Camilla and the King, accompanied by Daphnidion, frequently enjoyed this trip over the waves alone.

Amalasintha naturally saw the danger of increasing by such freedom the inclination of her son for Camilla, which had not escaped her notice; but, above all other considerations, she was thankful for the favourable influence which this companionship evidently exercised upon her son. In Camilla's presence he was quieter and more cheerful; and at the same time more gentle in his manner to herself, which had often been abrupt and violent. He also controlled his feelings with a mastery which was doubly surprising in such an irritable invalid. And, lastly, the Queen-regent, supposing that his inclination should indeed ripen to earnest love, would not be averse to an alliance which promised completely to win the Roman aristocracy, and erase all memory of a cruel deed.

In Camilla a wonderful change was going forward. Day by day, as she more and more clearly saw the noble tenderness, the gifted soul, and the deep and poetical feelings of the young King develop, she felt her hate melt away. With difficulty she recalled to her memory the fate of her father, as an antidote to this sweet poison; she learnt better to distinguish justly which of the Goths and Amelungs had contributed to that fate, and, with growing certainty, she felt that it was unjust to hate Athalaric for a misfortune which he had merely not opposed, and indeed would hardly have been able to prevent. She would have liked, long ago, to speak to him openly, but she mistrusted her own weakness; she shunned it as a sin against father, fatherland, and her own freedom; she trembled as she felt how indispensable this noble youth had become to her, how much she thirsted to hear his melodious voice, and look into his dark and thoughtful eyes. She feared this sinful love--which she could now scarcely conceal from herself--and she would not part with the only weapon that remained to her: the reproach of his passive acquiescence in her father's death.

So she fluctuated from feeling to feeling; all the more hesitatingly, the more mysterious Athalaric's strange reserve became. After all that had happened, she could not doubt that he loved her; and yet--

Not a syllable, not a look betrayed this love. The exclamation with which he had left her at the Temple of Venus was the most important, the only important speech that had escaped him. She could not suspect what the youth had suffered before his love had become not extinguished, but self-denying. And still less in what new feeling he had found manly strength enough for such renunciation.

Her mother, who watched Athalaric with all the keenness of hate, and, in doing so, forgot to observe her own child, appeared even more astonished at his coldness.

"But patience," she said to Cethegus, with whom she often consulted behind Camilla's back. "Patience! soon, in three days' time, you will see him alter."

"It is high time," answered Cethegus. "But upon what grounds do you build?"

"Upon a means which has never yet failed me."

"You will not, surely, mix a love-philtre for him?" asked the Prefect, smiling.

"Certainly I shall. I have done so already."

He looked at her mockingly.

"And are you, then, so superstitious, you, the widow of the great philosopher, Boëthius? Upon my word, in love affairs all women are mad alike!"

"It is neither madness nor superstition," replied Rusticiana quietly. "Our family has possessed this secret charm for more than a hundred years. An Egyptian woman once gave it to one of my female ancestors on the Nile, and it has always proved its power. No woman of my family has ever loved without requital."

"That required no magic," observed the Prefect. "You are a handsome race."

"Spare your sarcasm. The love-philtre is unfailing, and if it has not yet taken effect----"

"So you have really---- What imprudence! How could you, unobserved----"

"Every evening, when he returns from a walk or a row with us, Athalaric takes a cup of spiced Falernian. The physicians ordered it. There are some drops of Arabian balsam in it. The cup always stands ready upon the marble table in front of the temple. Three times I have succeeded in pouring in my potion."

"Well," observed Cethegus, "until now it has done no particular good."

"That is only owing to my impatience. The herbs must be gathered during the new moon. I knew it well enough; but, hurried by your insistence, I tried it during the full moon, and, you see, it was not effectual."

Cethegus shrugged his shoulders.

"But yesterday," she went on, "it was new moon. I was not idle with my golden scissors, and when he drinks now----"

"A second Locusta! Well, *my* comfort is Camilla's beautiful eyes! Does she know of your arts?"

"Not a word to her! She would never suffer it. Silence! She comes!"

The girl entered in great excitement; her oval cheeks were red; a plait of her hair had got loose, and floated over her lovely neck.

"Tell me," she cried, "you who are wise and experienced, tell me what to think! I come from the boat. Oh, he has never loved me, the haughty man! He pities, he is sorry for me! No, that is not the right word. I cannot explain it." And bursting into tears, she hid her face upon her mother's neck.

"What has happened, Camilla?" asked Cethegus.

"Very often before," she began, with a heavy sigh, "an expression played about his mouth, and filled his eyes, as if *he* had been deeply offended by *me*, as if *he* had to forgive, as if *he* had made a great sacrifice for me----"

"Raw boys always imagine it to be a sacrifice, when they are in love."

At this Camilla's eyes flashed; she tossed her head, and turned quickly upon Cethegus.

"Athalaric is no boy, and no one shall laugh at him!"

Cethegus was silent, and quietly dropped his eyelids; but Rusticiana asked in surprise:

"Do you hate the King no more?"

"To the death! He shall be undone, but not mocked!"

"What has happened?" repeated Cethegus.

"To-day I again noticed that puzzling, proud, and cold expression upon his face more distinctly than ever. A little incident occurred which caused the King to speak more plainly. An insect--a beetle--had fallen into the water. The King stooped and took it out, but the little creature turned against the beneficent hand, and bit the fingers that held it. 'The ungrateful thing!' I exclaimed. 'Oh,' said Athalaric, with a bitter smile, 'we wound most those to whom we are most indebted!' and he glanced at me with a sad and proud expression. But, as if he had said too much, he briefly bid me farewell, and went away; but I----" and her bosom heaved, her finely-cut lips were

compressed--"I can bear it no longer! The haughty one! He *shall* love me--or die!"

"That shall he," said Cethegus inaudibly; "one or the other."

CHAPTER XV.

A few days later the court was surprised by a new step towards independence on the part of the young King. He himself summoned a council, a prerogative which, until now, had only been assumed by Amalasintha.

The Queen-regent was not a little astonished when a messenger from her son bade her repair to his apartments, where the King had already assembled several of the highest officials of the realm, both Goths and Romans. Amongst these last were Cassiodorus and Cethegus.

At first the latter had intended to absent himself, in order not by his presence to acknowledge the right which the youth had assumed; he suspected nothing good. But just for this reason he altered his mind.

"I must not turn my back upon danger, I must face it," he said as he prepared for the distasteful assembly.

He found all those who had been invited already collected in the King's chamber. The Queen alone was still absent. When she at last entered, Athalaric, who wore a long and wide purple robe, with the crown of Theodoric shining upon his brow, and his sword at his side, rose from his throne (behind which was a niche covered by a curtain), advanced to the Queen and led her to a second and higher throne, which, however, was placed on the left. So soon as she was seated he began:

"My royal mother, brave Goths, noble Romans! We have assembled you here to make known to you our will. Dangers threatened this kingdom which only we, its King, could avert."

Such a speech had never yet been heard from his lips. All were silent and confounded; Cethegus from prudence; he waited for the proper moment. At last Cassiodorus began:

"Your wise mother and your faithful servant Cassiodorus----"

"My faithful servant Cassiodorus will be silent until his lord and King asks his advice. We are discontented, highly discontented, with that which the advisers of our mother have, until now, done and left undone. It is high time that we ourselves should look to the right. Until now we were too young and too ailing. We feel so no more. We announce to you that we accordingly annul the regency, and take the reins of government into our own hands."

He ceased. Every one remained silent. None wished, like Cassiodorus, to speak and be rebuked.

At length Amalasintha, who was quite stunned by the sudden energy displayed by her son, again found her tongue:

"My son, the age of minority is, according to the laws of the Emperor----"

"The Romans, mother, may abide by the Emperor's laws. We are Goths and live under Gothic law. German youths are of age when the assembled army has declared them capable of bearing arms. We have therefore determined to invite all the generals, counts, and freemen of our realm, as many as will obey our call, from all the provinces of the kingdom, to a review of the army at Ravenna. They will arrive at the next solstitial feast."

All were mute with surprise.

"That will be in fourteen days," said Cassiodorus at last. "Will it be possible to issue summonses in so short a time?"

"They are issued. Hildebrand, my old master-at-arms, and Earl Witichis have thought of everything."

"Who has signed the summonses!" asked Amalasintha, taking courage.

"I alone, dear mother. It was necessary to show those invited that I was old enough to act alone."

"And without my knowledge!" cried the Queen-regent.

"It was done without your knowledge, because otherwise it must have been done against your will."

He ceased. All the Romans were confounded by the suddenly developed energy of the young

King. Only Cethegus was at once resolved to prevent the review at any price. He saw the foundations of all his plans tottering. Gladly would he have come to the help of the regency, which was thus sinking before his very eyes, with all the weight of his oratory; he would have long since gladly crushed the bold efforts of the youth with his calm superiority, but a strange circumstance held his thoughts and tongue enchained as if in magic bonds.

He fancied he heard a noise behind the curtain, and fixed a keen look upon it. He soon remarked beneath it, for the fringes did not quite reach the ground, the feet of a man. But only as far up as the ankles.

Upon these ankles, however, were steel greaves of peculiar construction. He knew these greaves; he knew that they belonged to a full suit of armour of the same make; he knew also, by an instinctive connection of ideas, that the wearer of this armour was hateful and dangerous to him. But still it was impossible for him to say who this enemy was. If he could only have seen the greaves as far up as the knee!

His eyes wandered again and again to the same spot. Against his will his mind was occupied in guessing. And this circumstance kept his attention fixed, at a moment when everything was at stake. He was angry with himself, but he could not tear his thoughts and looks away from the niche.

Meanwhile the King continued without contradiction: "Further, we have recalled the noble Dukes Thulun, Ibba and Pizta, who have left our court in ill-will, from Gaul and Spain. We find that too many Romans and too few Goths surround us. These three brave warriors, together with Earl Witichis, will examine the defences of our kingdom, the fortresses and ships, and will discover and remedy all deficiencies. We expect them to arrive shortly."

"They must at once leave the place again," said Cethegus to himself; but his thoughts repeated, "not without reason is that man concealed behind the curtain."

"Further," resumed Athalaric, "we have ordered Mataswintha, our beautiful sister, to return to court. She was banished to Tarento because she refused to become the wife of an aged Roman. She shall return, the loveliest flower of our realm and an ornament to our court."

"Impossible!" cried Amalasintha; "you attack the rights, not only of the Queen, but of the mother."

"I am the head of the family as soon as I am of age."

"My son, you know how feeble you were only a few weeks ago. Do you really believe that the Gothic warriors will declare you capable of bearing arms?"

The King became as scarlet as his royal purple, partly from shame, partly from anger. Before he could find an answer, a rough voice at his side exclaimed:

"Be not troubled about that, your Majesty! I have been his master," continued the speaker, turning to the assembly: "I tell you that he can measure his strength against any foe; and whom old Hildebrand declares capable of bearing arms is considered so by all the Goths."

Loud applause from all the Goths present confirmed this assertion. Again Cethegus would have put in his word, but a movement behind the curtain drew his attention away. "It is one of my greatest enemies, but who?" he thought.

"There is yet an important matter to make known to you," again began the King with a hasty glance at the niche, which did not escape Cethegus.

"Perhaps an accusation against me," thought the latter; "they want to take me by surprise? They shall not succeed!"

But it surprised him, after all, when the King suddenly called in a loud voice:

"Prefect of Rome! Cethegus Cæsarius!"

Cethegus started; but, quickly recovering himself, bent his head and answered: "My Lord and King!"

"Have you nothing to announce from Rome? What is the feeling of the Quirites? What do people think of the Goths?"

"They are honoured as the people of Theodoric."

"Are they feared?"

"There is no cause to fear them."

"Are they loved?"

Gladly would the Prefect have replied, "There is no cause to love them;" but the King himself

continued:

"So there is no trace of discontent? No cause for uneasiness? Nothing particular in preparation?"

"I have nothing to communicate."

"Then you are badly informed, Prefect of Rome, or badly disposed! What? must I--who have scarcely risen from my sick-bed here at Ravenna--tell you what happens in Rome under your very eyes? The workmen on your bulwarks sing satirical songs against the Goths, against the Queen, against me. Your legions use threatening words while practising the use of their arms. Most probably there exists already a widespread conspiracy, with senators and priests at its head. They assemble by night in secret places. An accomplice of Boëthius, a banished man, Albinus, has been seen in Rome, and do you know where? In the garden of your house."

All eyes--either in astonishment, rage, or fear--were fixed upon Cethegus. Amalasintha trembled for the object of her trust. But he was now quite himself again. Quiet, cool, and silent, he looked full at the King.

"Justify yourself!" exclaimed the King.

"Justify myself? Against a shadow, a report? Against an accusation without accusers? Never!"

"We shall know how to force you."

The Prefect's thin lips curled with contempt.

"I may be murdered upon mere suspicion, without doubt--we Italians have experienced such a thing--but not condemned. There can be no justification opposed to force."

"Justice shall be done, doubt it not. We charge all Romans present with the examination, and leave the sentence to the Roman Senate. Choose a defender."

"I defend myself," said Cethegus coolly. "What is the accusation? Who is my accuser? Where is he?"

"Here!" cried the King, and threw back the curtain.

A Gothic warrior, in a full suit of black armour, stepped forth. We already know him. It was Teja.

The Prefect turned away his eyes in deadly hatred.

Teja spoke.

"I, Teja, son of Tagila, accuse thee, Cethegus Cæsarius, of treason against the Goths. I accuse thee of having hidden the banished traitor, Albinus, in thy house in Rome. Death is the penalty. And, besides this, thou art plotting to subject this country to the Emperor of Byzantium."

"That least of all," said Cethegus coolly, "Prove your accusation."

"I saw Albinus, with my own eyes, entering thy garden fourteen days ago," continued Teja, turning to the assembly. "He came from the Via Sacra, enveloped in a mantle, a wide-brimmed hat upon his head. I had seen him on two former occasions; this time I recognised him. As I went towards him, he disappeared through a door, which closed behind him."

"Since when does my colleague, the brave Commandant of Rome, play the nightly spy?"

"Since he had a Cethegus at his side," retorted Teja. "But as the fugitive escaped, this roll fell from his mantle. It contains the names of distinguished Romans, and opposite to each name notices in an unknown cipher. Here is the roll."

He gave it to the King, who read:

"The names are Silverius, Cethegus, Licinius, Scævola, Calpurnius, Pomponius. Canst thou swear, Teja, that the disguised man was Albinus?"

"I will swear it."

"Prefect of Rome, Earl Teja is a free, unblemished, honourable man. Can you deny it?"

"I deny it. He is not unblemished. His parents lived in an illegal, incestuous marriage; they were sister's children. The Church has cursed their connection and its fruit. He is a bastard, and can not bear witness against a noble Roman of senatorial rank."

A murmur of anger burst from all the Goths present. Teja's pale face became still paler. He grasped his sword.

"Then I will defend my word with my sword," he said, in a voice stifled by rage. "I challenge

thee to mortal combat! God shall judge between us!"

"I am a Roman, and do not act according to your barbaric customs. But even if I were a Goth, I would refuse to fight a bastard!"

"Patience," said Teja, and quietly returned his sword to its sheath. "Patience, my sword; thy day will come!"

The Romans in the room breathed again.

The King resumed:

"However that may be, the accusation is sufficiently well founded to justify the arrest of the said Roman. You, Cassiodorus, will decipher the secret writing. You, Earl Witichis, will hasten to Rome and make sure of the five suspected men; search their houses, and that of the Prefect. Hildebrand, arrest the accused, and take his sword."

"Hold!" said Cethegus. "I will guarantee not to leave Ravenna until this question be settled, with the forfeiture of all my property. I demand an examination upon a free footing; such is the right of a senator."

"Trouble not thyself about that, my son," cried old Hildebrand to the King. "Let me arrest him!"

"Let him alone," answered the King. "He shall have strict justice. Leave him. The accusation has taken him by surprise. He shall have time to prepare his defence. To-morrow at this hour we will meet here again. I dissolve the assembly."

He made a sign with his sceptre. Amalasintha hurried away in the greatest excitement.

The Goths surrounded Teja, greatly pleased; but the Romans passed quickly by Cethegus, avoiding any speech with him.

Cassiodorus alone stepped firmly up to him, laid his hand upon his shoulder, looking searchingly into his eyes, and then asked:

"Cethegus, can I help you?"

"No; I will help myself," answered Cethegus, shaking him off, and went out alone with a proud step.

CHAPTER XVI.

The heavy blow which the young King had so unexpectedly aimed at the whole system of the Regency soon filled the palace and the city with astonishment, fright, or joy. Cassiodorus took the first decided news to the family of Boëthius, at the same time sending Rusticiana to comfort the agitated Queen.

Overwhelmed with questions, he circumstantially related the whole proceeding; and disturbed and indignant though he was, his admiration of the decision and courage of the young King shone unmistakably through his unfriendly report.

Camilla listened with eagerness to every word; pride in the beloved-love's happiest feeling-filled her whole soul.

"There is no doubt," concluded Cassiodorus, sighing, "that Athalaric is our most decided adversary. He sticks to the Gothic party--to Hildebrand and his friends. He will undo the Prefect. Who would have believed it? I cannot help remembering, Rusticiana, how differently he conducted himself with regard to the process against your husband."

Camilla listened attentively.

"At that time we were convinced that he would be the most ardent friend, the most zealous advocate of the Romans."

"I know nothing of it," said Rusticiana.

"It was hushed up. The sentence of death had been pronounced upon Boëthius and his sons. In vain had we all, Amalasintha foremost, appealed to the clemency of the King; his ire was unappeasable. As I again and again besieged him with petitions, he started up in anger and swore by his crown, that he who again dared to petition for the traitors, should repent it in the deepest dungeon of the palace. At that we were all dumb, except one. Athalaric, the boy, would not be repulsed; he wept and prayed, and clung to his grandfather's knees."

Camilla trembled and held her breath.

"And he did not desist," Cassiodorus went on, "until Theodoric, starting up in a rage, pushed him violently away, and delivered him to the guards. The King kept his oath. Athalaric was led into the castle dungeon, and Boëthius was at once executed."

Camilla tottered, felt herself sinking, and caught at a slender pillar near which she was standing.

"But Athalaric had not spoken and suffered in vain," continued Cassiodorus. "The next evening, while at table, the King sorely missed his darling. He remembered with what noble courage the youth had begged for his friend's life, when all men were dumb with fear. At last he rose from his repast, at which he had sat reflecting for some time, and descended in person to the prison, opened the doors, embraced his grandson, and granted his petition to spare the lives of your sons, Rusticiana."

"Away! away to him!" exclaimed Camilla, and hurried, unnoticed, out of the hall.

"At that time," concluded Cassiodorus, "Romans and their friends believed that in the young King they had found their best support; and now--my unfortunate mistress, unhappy mother!" and with this lament upon his lips, he departed.

Rusticiana sat for some time as if stunned. She saw the foundations, upon which she had built her plans of revenge, totter; she sank into a moody reverie.

Longer and longer stretched the shadows of the towers across the court of the palace, into which she was gazing. All at once she was roused by the firm footsteps of a man; Cethegus stood before her. His countenance was cold and dark, but icily calm.

"Cethegus!" cried the distressed woman, hurrying towards him; and would have taken his hand, but his coldness repulsed her.

"All is lost!" she sighed, stopping short.

"Nothing is lost. Calmness is all that is wanting--and promptness," he added, looking round the room.

When he saw that he was alone with her, he put his hand into the folds of his toga.

"Your love-philtre has done no good, Rusticiana. Here is another; more potent. Take it," and he thrust into her hand a small phial made of dark-coloured lava-stone.

She looked into his face with anxious suspicion.

"Do you all at once believe in magic and charms? Who has mixed it?"

"I," he answered, "and *my* potions work."

"You!" a cold shudder ran through her frame.

"Ask no questions, do not delay," he commanded. "It must be done this day! Do you hear? This very day!"

But Rusticiana still hesitated, and looked doubtfully at the bottle in her hand.

Then Cethegus went close to her and lightly touched her shoulder.

"You hesitate?" he said slowly. "Do you know what is at stake? Not only our whole plan! No, blind mother. Still more. Camilla *loves*, loves the King; with all the power of her young soul. Shall the daughter of Boëthius become the paramour of the tyrant?"

With a loud cry Rusticiana started back. That which, during the last few days, had crossed her mind with a terrible suspicion, now became a certainty; she cast one glance at the man who had spoken the cruel word, and hurried away, angrily grasping the phial.

Cethegus looked quietly after her.

"Now, young Prince, we shall see! You were quick, I am quicker. It is strange," he added, "I have long thought that I was incapable of such violent emotion. Life has again a charm. I can again strive, hope, and fear. Even hate. Yes, I hate this boy, who dares to meddle in my affairs with his childish hand. He would defy me--hinder my progress--he boldly crosses my path--he! Well, let him bear the consequences!" And he slowly left the chamber, and turned towards the audience-room of the Queen, where he intentionally showed himself to the assembled crowd, and, by his calmness, gave some degree of confidence to the troubled hearts of the Roman courtiers.

At sunset he went with Cassiodorus and a few other Romans--consulting about his defence for the next day--into the gardens, where he looked about in vain for Camilla.

She, as soon as she had heard the end of Cassiodorus' report, had hurried to the court of the palace, where she hoped to find the King at the exercise of arms with the other young Goths. She

only wished to see him, not yet to speak to him and beg pardon at his feet for the great wrong she had done him.

She had abhorred him, repulsed him, hated him as spotted with the blood of her father--him, who had suffered for her father's sake, who had saved her brothers' lives!

But she did not find the King in the court. The important events of the day kept him confined to his study. His comrades also did not fence to-day. Standing in thick groups, they loudly praised the courage of their young King. Camilla heard this praise with delight. Blushing with pride, she wandered in happy dreams about the garden, seeking the traces of her lover in all her favourite haunts.

Yes, she loved him! Joyfully and proudly she confessed it to herself; he had a thousand times deserved it. What matter that he was a Goth, a barbarian! He was a noble, generous youth, the King of her soul!

She repeatedly told the slave who accompanied her to keep at a distance, so that she might not hear how she again and again murmured the beloved name.

At last she arrived at the Temple of Venus, and sank into sweet dreams of the future, which lay indistinct, but golden-hued, before her. She first of all resolved to declare to her mother and the Prefect that they must no more reckon upon her assistance in any plot against the King. Then she would ask pardon for her fault with moving words, and then--then?

She did not know what would happen then; but she blushed in the midst of her sweet reverie.

Red and perfumed almond-blossoms fell from the bending trees; in the thick oleander near her sang a nightingale; the clear stream glided purling past her to the blue sea, and the waves of this sea rolled softly to her feet, as if doing homage to her love.

CHAPTER XVII.

The sound of approaching footsteps upon the sandy path startled her from her reverie. The step was so rapid and firm, that she did not expect Athalaric. But he it was, changed in appearance and carriage; more manly, stronger, more decided.

"Welcome, welcome, Camilla!" he cried, in a loud and lively voice. "To see you here is the best reward for this troublous day."

He had never spoken to her so before.

"My King!" she whispered, blushing. She cast a beaming look upon him from her dark eyes, then the long and silky lashes fell.

"My King!" She had never before called him so, never given him such a look.

"Your King!" he said, seating himself beside her. "I fear you will call me so no longer, when you learn what has happened to-day."

"I know all."

"You know! Well then, Camilla, be just. Do not scold, I am no tyrant----"

"The noble youth!" she thought. "He excuses himself for his most manly act."

"Heaven knows that I do not hate the Romans. Are they not your people? I honour them and their ancient greatness; I respect their rights; but I must firmly protect my kingdom, Theodoric's creation, and woe to the hand that threatens it! Perhaps," he continued, more slowly and solemnly, "perhaps its doom is already written in the stars. 'Tis all the same. I, its King, must with it stand or fall."

"You say truly, Athalaric, and speak like a King!"

"Thanks, Camilla; how just and good you are today! To such goodness I may well confide what blessing, what healing has come to me. I was a sick and erring dreamer, without support, without joy, gladly sinking to the grave. Then there suddenly came over me a feeling of the danger which threatened this nation, an active anxiety for the welfare of my people, and out of this anxiety grew a warm and mighty love for my Goths; and this ardent and watchful love has strengthened and comforted my heart for a bitterly painful renunciation. What matters *my* happiness, if only my people flourish! See, this thought has made me whole and strong, and truly, I could now venture upon the most daring deed!"

He sprang up and extended both his arms, exclaiming: "Oh, Camilla! this inaction destroys me! Oh that I were mounted and meeting a full-armed foe! Look," he added, more calmly, "the sun is setting. The mirror-like flood invites us. Come, Camilla, come with me in the boat."

Camilla hesitated. She looked around.

"The slave?" asked Athalaric. "Ah, let her alone. There she reposes under the palm by the spring. She sleeps. Come, come quickly, ere the sun sets. Look at the golden ripple on the water--it beckons us!"

"To the Isles of the Blessed?" asked the lovely girl, with a shy look and a slight blush.

"Yes, come to the Blessed Isles!" he answered, delighted, lifted her quickly into the boat, loosed the silver chain from the ram's head upon the quay, sprang in, took the ornamental oar, and pushed off.

Then he laid the oar into the notch at his left hand, and, standing in the stern of the boat, steered and rowed at the same time--a graceful and picturesque movement, and a right Germanic ferryman's custom.

Camilla sat upon a *diphros*, or Grecian folding-stool, in the bow of the boat, and looked into Athalaric's noble face. His dark hair was ruffled by the breeze, and it was pleasant to watch the lithe and graceful motions of his agile form.

Both were silent. Like an arrow the light bark shot through the smooth water. Flecked and rosy cloudlets passed slowly across the sky, the faint breeze was laden with clouds of perfume from the blossoming almond-trees upon the shore, and all around was peace and harmony.

At last the King broke the silence, while giving the boat a strong impulse, so that it obediently shot forwards.

"Do you know of what I am thinking? How splendid it would be to steer a nation--thousands of well-loved lives--securely forward through waves and wind, to happiness and glory! But what were you thinking about, Camilla? You looked so kind, you must have had pleasant thoughts."

She blushed and looked aside into the water.

"Oh, speak! Be frank in this happy hour."

"I was thinking," she said, her pretty head still averted, "how delightful it must be to be steered through the heaving flood of life by a faithful and beloved hand, to whose guidance one could implicitly trust."

"Oh, Camilla, even a barbarian may be trusted--"

"You are no barbarian! Whoever feels so tenderly, thinks so nobly, so generously controls himself, and rewards great ingratitude with kindness, is no barbarian! He is as noble a man as ever Scipio was."

The King ceased to row in his delight; the boat remained motionless.

"Camilla, am I dreaming? Did *you* say that? and to me V 9

"More still, Athalaric! I beseech you to forgive that I have repulsed you so cruelly. Ah! it was from shame and fear."

"Camilla, pearl of my soul----"

Camilla, who had her face turned towards the shore, suddenly cried out:

"What is that? They follow us. The court! the women! my mother!"

It was so. Rusticiana, aroused by the Prefect's terrible warning, had sought for her daughter in the garden. She could not find her. She hurried to the Temple of Venus. In vain. Looking around, she suddenly caught sight of the two--her child, alone with Athalaric--in the boat, far out upon the sea.

Greatly angered, she rushed to the marble table, where the slaves were just preparing the King's evening draught, sent them down the steps to unloose the gondola, won in this way an unobserved moment near the table, and directly afterwards descended the steps with Daphnidion--whom her angry cry had awakened--to the boat.

At this moment the Prefect and his friends, whose walk had also led them to this place, approached from a thick taxus-path. Cethegus followed Rusticiana down the steps and gave her his hand to help her into the gondola.

"It is done!" she whispered to him, and the boat pushed off.

It was just then that the young pair became aware of the movement upon the beach. Camilla stood up; perhaps she suspected that the King would turn the boat, but he cried:

"No; they shall not rob me of this hour, the happiest of my life! I must sip still more of these sweet words. Oh, Camilla, you must tell me more; you must tell me all! Come, we will land upon

that island, they may reach us there."

And rowing rapidly, he pressed with all his might upon the oar, so that the boat flew forward as if winged.

"Will you not speak again?"

"Oh! my friend, my King--do not press me."

He only looked into her lovely face, into her beaming eyes; he paid no more attention to his goal.

"Well, wait--there upon the island; there you shall----"

A renewed and passionate effort, when all at once a dull crash was heard; the boat had struck, and drove, shaking violently, backwards.

"Oh, Heaven!" cried Camilla, springing up and looking towards the bow of the boat. A whole volume of water came foaming towards her. "The boat has burst! we sink!" she cried, turning pale.

"Come here to me; let me see!" cried Athalaric, starting up. "Ah! it is the 'Needles of the Amphitrites!' We are lost!"

The "Needles of the Amphitrites"--we know that they could scarcely be seen from the terrace of the temple--were two narrow, sharp-pointed rocks, lying between the shore and the nearest lagoon island. They scarcely rose above the level of the water; with the slightest wind, the waves washed quite over them.

Athalaric knew the danger of the place, and had always easily avoided it; but this time he had only looked into Camilla's eyes.

At one glance he saw their fearful position.

They could not be saved.

A plank in the bottom of the slightly-made boat had sprung; the water rushed rapidly through the leak. The boat sank deeper and deeper every moment.

He could not hope, with Camilla, to gain the nearest island or the shore by swimming. On the narrow point of the rock scarcely the feet of a sea-eagle could have found a moment's resting-place, and Rusticiana's gondola had only just pushed off from the land.

All this he had seen with lightning-like rapidity, and he cast a horrified look at Camilla.

"Beloved, thou must die!" he cried despairingly. "And through me!" He embraced her passionately.

"Die?" she cried. "Oh no! not so young--not now! Let me live--live with thee!" And she clung closely to his arm.

The tone, the words, cut him to the heart. He tore himself loose; he looked about for rescue. In vain; in vain. The water rose higher and higher; the boat sank more and more rapidly. He threw the oar away.

"It is over--all is over, beloved! Let us take leave!"

"No; we part no more! If we must die--oh! then, away with all the restraints which bind the living!" And, glowing all over, she nestled to his breast. "Oh! let me tell thee, let me confess to thee how much I love thee; how long ago--since--since first I knew thee! All my hate was only bashful love. Oh, God! I loved thee already when I thought I ought to abhor thee! Yes, thou shalt know how I love thee!" And she covered his eyes and mouth with hasty kisses. "Oh! now I will gladly die. Rather die with thee than live without thee! But no"--and she suddenly pushed him away--"thou shalt not die! Leave me here; go! swim--you can easily reach the island alone. Try; and leave me."

"No," he cried, in an ecstasy of joy; "rather die with thee than live without thee! After such painful doubt, at length joyous certainty! From this hour we belong to each other for ever. Come, Camilla, beloved, let us die together!"

A shudder of horror and delight, of love and death, shook their frames. He drew her to him, embraced her with his left arm, and lifted her upon the steer-board of the boat, which scarcely rose a hand's-breadth above the water. Already he prepared for the fatal leap--when suddenly they both uttered a joyful cry.

Round a precipitous promontory which stretched far out into the sea, at a short distance, they saw a ship coming at full speed.

The crew had heard their cry, and, at all events, saw their danger; perhaps had even recognised the person of the King. Forty oars, plunged into the water at the same moment by the rowers on the double deck, gave impetus to the course of the swift vessel, which rustled before the wind with swelling sails.

Those who crowded the deck shouted to them to stand firm; and presently--it was high time--the prow of the bireme lay close over the little boat, which sank immediately after the endangered pair had been taken on board the ship through the opening of the lower deck.

It was a small Gothic guardship. The golden rampant lion, the arms of the Amelungs, shone upon the blue flag. Aligern, a cousin of Teja, commanded it.

"Thanks, brave friends!" said Athalaric, as soon as he could find words. "Thanks! you have not only saved your King, but also your Queen!"

Much astonished, soldiers and sailors surrounded the happy man, who held the weeping Camilla in his arms.

"Hail to our young and beautiful Queen!" cried the red-haired Aligern; and the crew shouted enthusiastically, "Hail! hail to our Queen!"

At this moment the sailing-vessel rustled past Rusticiana's gondola. The sound of this joyous shout aroused the unhappy woman from the stupor of horror into which she had fallen when her two startled oarsmen had discovered the danger of the young couple in the sinking boat, and had at once declared that it was impossible to save them.

On hearing this, she had sunk senseless into Daphnidion's arms. Now she came to herself, and cast a confused glance around her. She was amazed. Was it a dream that she saw, or was it really her daughter who stood on the deck of the Gothic ship, which proudly rustled past, lying on the young King's breast? And did really joyous voices cry, "Hail, Camilla, our Queen?" She stared at the passing vision, speechless and confounded.

But the swiftly-flying ship had already passed her boat and drew near the land. It anchored outside the shallow garden-bay; a boat was lowered, the rescued couple, Aligern, and three sailors sprang into it, and soon they climbed the steps of the quay, where, besides Cethegus and his companions, a crowd of people had collected, who, from the palace or the gardens, had with horror become aware of the danger of the little boat, and now hurried to greet the rescued King.

Accompanied by felicitations and blessings, Athalaric mounted the steps.

"Behold!" he said, on arriving at the temple, "behold, Goths and Romans! behold your Queen, my bride! The God of Death has united us. Is it not so, Camilla?"

She looked up at him, but was terribly startled. The excitement and the sudden change from horror to joy had fearfully shaken the scarcely-recovered King. His countenance was pale as marble; he tottered and convulsively pressed his hand to his breast, as though suffocating.

"For God's sake!" cried Camilla, fearing an attack of his old malady. "The King is unwell! Quick with the wine, the medicine!"

She flew to the table, caught up the silver cup which stood ready, and pressed it into the King's hand.

Cethegus stood close by, and followed Athalaric's every movement with eagerness. The latter had already lifted the cup to his lips, but suddenly removed it, and said, smiling, to Camilla:

"Thou must drink to me, as becomes a Gothic Queen at her court."

And he gave her the goblet. She took it out of his hand.

For a moment the Prefect felt as if on fire.

He was upon the point of darting forward to dash the cup from her hand. But he controlled himself. If he did so, he was irrevocably lost. Not only tomorrow, as guilty of high treason, but at once arrested and accused of poisoning. And with him would be lost the future of Rome and all his ideal world. And for whom? For a love-sick girl, who had faithlessly revolted to his deadly enemy.

"No," he said coldly to himself, clenching his fist; "she or Rome--therefore she!"

And he quietly looked on while the girl, sweetly blushing, sipped somewhat of the wine, which the King then drank to the last dregs.

Athalaric shuddered as he replaced the cup upon the marble table.

"Come up to the palace," he said, shivering, and threw his mantle across his shoulders; "I feel cold."

And he turned away. In doing so he caught sight of Cethegus, stood still for a moment, and looked penetratingly into the Prefect's eyes.

"You here?" he said gloomily, and advanced a step towards him. All at once he shuddered again, and, with a sudden cry, fell prone near the spring.

"Athalaric!" cried Camilla, and threw herself upon him. The old servant Corbulo sprang to her from the group of domestics.

"Help!" he cried; "she is dying--the King!"

"Water, quick! water!" called Cethegus, and he resolutely went to the table, took the silver cup, stooped, rinsed it quickly but thoroughly in the spring, and then bent over the King, who lay in Cassiodorus' arms, while Corbulo laid Camilla's head upon his knee.

Helpless and horrified, the courtiers surrounded the two apparently lifeless forms.

"What has happened? My child!" With this cry Rusticiana, who had just landed, rushed to her daughter's side. "Camilla!" she screamed desperately, "what ails you?"

"Nothing," said Cethegus quietly, examining the two bodies. "It is only a fainting-fit. But his heart-disease has carried off the young King! He is dead!"

BOOK II.

AMALASWINTHA.

"Amalasintha did not despair like a woman, but vigorously defended her royalty."--*Procopius: Wars of the Goths*, i. 2.

CHAPTER I.

Athalaric's sudden death fell like lightning from a clear sky upon the Gothic party, whose hopes, just at this very time, had been raised to such a high pitch. All the measures which the King had taken at their suggestion were paralysed, and the national party was left without a representative in the State; at the head of which the Queen-regent was now placed alone.

Early in the morning of the next day Cassiodorus went to the Prefect of Rome. He found him in a sound and tranquil sleep.

"And you can sleep as quietly as a child after such a blow?"

"I sleep," answered Cethegus, raising himself on his elbow, "in the feeling of renewed security."

"Security! yes, for you; but the kingdom!"

"The kingdom was in more danger through this boy than I. Where is the Queen?"

"She sits speechless beside the open coffin of her son! She has sat there the whole night."

Cethegus sprang up.

"That must not be! It does no good. She belongs to the State, not to this corpse. So much the less because I have heard whispers concerning poison. The young tyrant had many enemies. How about that matter?"

"Very uncertain. The Grecian physician, Elpidios, who examined the corpse, certainly speaks of some striking appearances. But he thinks that if poison has been used it must be a very secret one, quite unknown to him. In the cup from which the unfortunate boy drank there could not be discovered the least trace of suspicious contents. So it is generally believed that excitement had again brought on his former malady, and that this was the cause of his death. But still it is well that, since the moment of your leaving the assembly, *you* were always in the presence of witnesses; grief breeds suspicion."

"How is it with Camilla?" the Prefect inquired further.

"She has never yet awakened from her stupor; the physicians fear the worst. But I came to ask you what shall now be done? The Queen speaks of suppressing the examination concerning you."

"That must not be," cried Cethegus. "I demand an investigation. We will go to her

immediately."

"Will you intrude upon her at the coffin of her son?"

"Yes, I will. Do you shrink from it in your tender consideration? Well then, come afterwards, when I have broken the ice."

He dismissed his visitor and called his slaves to dress him. Shortly afterwards, enveloped in a dark mourning garment, he descended to the vault where the corpse lay exposed. With an imperious gesture he motioned aside the guard and the women of Amalasintha, who kept watch at the door, and entered noiselessly.

It was the low vaulted hall, where, in former times, the corpses of the emperors had been prepared with salves and combustibles for the funeral pyre.

This quiet hall, flagged with dark-green serpentine, the roof of which was supported by short Doric columns of black marble, was never illumined by a ray of sunshine, and at the present moment no other light fell upon the gloomy Byzantine mosaics on the gold ground of the walls than that from four torches, which flickered with an uncertain light near the stone sarcophagus of the young King.

There he lay upon a dark purple mantle; helm, sword, and shield at his head.

Old Hildebrand had wound a wreath of oak-leaves amidst the dark locks. The noble features reposed in pallid and earnest beauty.

At his feet, clad in a long mourning veil, sat the tall form of the Queen, supporting her head upon her left arm, which was laid upon the sarcophagus. Her right hand hung languidly down. She could weep no more.

The crackling of the burning torches was the only sound in this stillness of the grave.

Cethegus entered noiselessly, not unmoved by the poetry of the scene.

But, contracting his brows, he smothered the passing feeling of compassion. He knew that it was necessary to be clear and composed.

He gently drew near and took Amalasintha's relaxed hand.

"Rise, noble lady, you belong to the living, not to the dead."

She looked up, startled.

"You here, Cethegus? What seek you here?"

"A Queen!"

"Oh, you only find a weeping mother!" she cried, sobbing.

"That I cannot believe. The kingdom is in danger, and Amalasintha will show that even a woman can sacrifice her sorrow to the fatherland."

"She can!" replied the Queen, rising. "But look at him. How young! how beautiful! How could Heaven be so cruel!"

"Now, or never!" thought Cethegus, and said aloud: "Heaven is just, severe; not cruel."

"Of what do you speak? What wrong has my noble son committed? Do you dare to accuse him?"

"Not I! But a portion of Holy Writ has been fulfilled upon him: 'Honour thy father and mother, that thy days may be long in the land!' The commandment is also a threat. Yesterday he sinned against his mother and dishonoured her by bold rebellion--to-day he lies here. Therein I see the finger of God."

Amalasintha covered her face. She had heartily forgiven her son while watching beside his coffin. But still this view, these words, powerfully affected her, and drew her attention away from her grief to the well-loved habit of government.

"You wish, O Queen, to suppress my examination, and recall Witichis. Witichis may be recalled. But I demand, as my right, that the prosecution be continued, and I fully expect a solemn acquittal."

"I have never doubted your fidelity. Woe to me, should I be obliged to do so! Tell me that you know of no conspiracy, and all is ended."

She seemed to expect his asseveration,

Cethegus was silent for a short time. Then he quietly said:

"Queen, I know of a conspiracy."

"What say you?" cried the Queen, looking at him threateningly.

"I have chosen this hour and place," continued Cethegus, with a glance at the corpse, "to put a seal to my devotion, so that it may be indelibly impressed upon your heart. Hear and judge me."

"What shall I hear?" said the Queen, now upon her guard, and firmly resolved to allow herself to be neither deceived nor softened.

"I should be a bad Roman, Queen, and you would despise me, if I did not love my nation above all things. That proud nation, which even you, a stranger, love! I know--as you know--that hatred against you as heretics and barbarians still smoulders in the hearts of most Italians. The last harsh deeds of your father have fanned this feeling into a flame. I suspected a conspiracy. I sought and discovered it."

"And concealed it?" said the Queen, rising in anger.

"And concealed it. Until to-day. The blind fools would have sought assistance from the Greeks, and, after destroying the Goths, subjected themselves to the Emperor."

"The vile traitors!" cried Amalasintha.

"The fools! They had already gone so far, that only *one* means was left by which to keep them back: I placed myself at their head."

"Cethegus!"

"In this manner I gained time, and was able to prevent noble, though blind men, from rushing to destruction. I opened their eyes by degrees, and showed them that their plan, if it succeeded, would have only exchanged a mild government for a despotic one. They acknowledged it; they obeyed me; and no Byzantine will ever touch Italian soil, until I call him, I--or you."

"I! Do you rave?"

"Sophocles, your favourite, says, 'Forswear nothing.' Be warned, Queen, for you do not see the pressing danger. Another conspiracy, much more dangerous than that of these Roman enthusiasts, and close to you, threatens you, your kingdom, and the Amelungs' right of sovereignty--a conspiracy of the Goths!"

Amalasintha turned pale.

"You have seen yesterday, to your sorrow, that your hand can no more guide the rudder of this realm. Just as little as could that of your noble son, who was but the tool of your enemies. You know, Queen, that many of your nation are bloodthirsty, barbarous, rapacious, and brutal; they would like to levy contributions upon this land, where Virgil and Tullius wandered. You know that your insolent nobles hate the superiority of your royal house, and would make themselves its equal. You know that the rude Goths think unworthily of woman's vocation for government."

"I know it," she said, proudly and angrily.

"But you do not know that both these parties are united. They are united against you and your Roman predilections. They will overthrow you, or force you to do their will. Cassiodorus and I are to be dismissed from your side, our Senate and our rights to be dissolved, and the kingship to become a shadow. War is to be proclaimed against the Emperor; and force, extortion, and rapine, let loose upon us Romans."

"You paint mere idle phantoms!"

"Was that which happened yesterday an idle phantom? If Heaven had not intervened, would not you--like me--be robbed of all your power? Would you still be mistress in your kingdom, in your house? Are they not already so strong, that the heathen Hildebrand, the countrified Witichis, the gloomy Teja, openly defy your will in the name of your befooled son? Have they not recalled the three rebel dukes? And your perverse daughter, and----"

"True, too true," sighed the Queen.

"If these men should rule--then farewell science, art, and all noble culture! Farewell, Italia, mother of humanity! Then, burst into flame, you white parchments! crumble into fragments, you beautiful statues! Brutality and murder will run rife in these plains, and posterity will bear witness: 'Such things happened in the reign of Amalasintha, the daughter of Theodoric.'"

"Never, never shall that happen! But----"

"You want proofs? I fear you will have them only too soon. However, you see, even now, that you cannot rely upon the Goths, if you wish to prevent such horrors. We alone can protect you against them; we, to whom you already belong by intellect and culture; we Romans. Then, when the barbarians surround your throne with uproar, let me rally the men around you who once

conspired against you: the patriots of Rome! They will protect you and themselves at the same time."

"Cethegus," said the distressed woman, "you influence men easily! Who, tell me, who will answer for the patriots? Who will answer for *your* truth?"

"This paper, Queen, and this! The first contains a correct list of the Roman conspirators. You see, there are many hundred names. This is a list of the members of the Gothic league, whom I certainly could only guess at. But I guess well. With these two papers I give both these parties--I give myself--completely into your hands. You can at any moment reveal me to my own party as a traitor, who, before all things, sought *your* favour. You can expose me to the hatred of the Goths--as soon as you will. I shall be left without adherents. I stand alone; your favour is my only support."

The Queen had glanced over the papers with sparkling eyes. "Cethegus," she exclaimed, "I will always remember your fidelity and this hour!"

And she gave him her hand with emotion.

Cethegus slightly bent his head. "Still one thing more, O Queen. The patriots, henceforward your friends as they are mine, know that the hate of the barbarians, the sword of destruction, hangs over their heads. Their anxious hearts require encouragement. Let me assure them of your high protection. Place your name at the head of this list, and let me thereby give them a visible sign of your favour."

She took the golden stylus and the waxen tablets which he handed to her. For one moment she hesitated; then she quickly signed her name, and gave tablets and stylus back again. "Here! They must be faithful to me; as faithful as yourself!"

At this moment Cassiodorus entered. "O Queen, the Gothic nobles await you. They wish to speak with you."

"I come! They shall learn my will!" she said vehemently; "but you, Cassiodorus, shall be the first to know the decision to which I have come during this trying hour, and which will soon be known to my whole kingdom. Henceforward the Prefect of Rome is the first of my servants, as he is the most faithful. He has the place of honour in my trust and near my throne."

Much astonished, Cassiodorus led the Queen up the dark steps.

Cethegus followed slowly. He held up the tablets in his hand, and said to himself: "Now you are mine, daughter of Theodoric! Your name upon this list severs you for ever from your people!"

CHAPTER II.

As Cethegus emerged from the subterranean chamber into the ground-floor of the palace, and prepared to follow the Queen, his ear was caught and his progress arrested by the solemn and sorrowful tones of flutes. He guessed what it meant.

His first impulse was to turn aside. But he presently decided to remain.

It would happen some time, therefore it was best at once. He must find out how far she was informed.

The tones of the flutes came nearer, alternating with a monotonous dirge. Cethegus stepped into a wide niche of the dark corridor, into which the head of a little procession already turned.

Foremost came, two by two, six noble Roman maidens, covered with grey mourning veils, carrying reversed torches. Then followed a priest, before whom was borne the tall banner of the Cross, with long streamers. Next came a troop of the freedmen of the family of Boëthius, led by Corbulo and the flute-players. Then followed, borne by four Roman girls, an open coffin, covered with flowers. Upon it lay, on a white linen cloth, the dead Camilla, in bridal ornaments, a wreath in her dark hair, an expression of smiling peace upon her slightly-opened lips.

Behind the coffin, with loosened hair, staring fixedly before her, came the unhappy mother, surrounded by matrons, who supported her sinking form.

A company of female slaves closed the procession, which slowly disappeared into the vault.

Cethegus recognised the sobbing Daphnidion, and stopped her.

"When did she die?" he asked calmly.

"Oh, sir, a few hours ago! Oh, the good, kind, beautiful Domna!"

"Did she ever awaken to full consciousness?"

"No, sir, never. Only quite at the last she once more opened her large eyes, and appeared to seek for something. 'Where has he gone?' she asked her mother. 'Ah, I see him!' she then cried, and rose from her cushions. 'Child, my child, where will you go?' cried my mistress, weeping. 'Oh, there!' she replied with a rapturous smile; 'to the Isles of the Blessed!' and she closed her eyes and fell back upon her couch; that lovely smile remained upon her lips--and she was gone, gone for ever!"

"Who has caused her to be brought down here?"

"The Queen. She learned everything, and gave orders that the deceased, as the bride of her son, should be laid beside him and buried in the same tomb."

"But what says the physician? How could she die so suddenly?"

"Alas! the physician saw her only for a moment; he was too much occupied with the royal corpse; and then my mistress would not suffer the strange man to touch her daughter. It is just her heart that has been broken; one can easily die of that! But peace--they come!"

The procession returned in the same order as before, but without the coffin. Daphnidion joined it. Only Rusticiana was missing.

Cethegus quietly walked up and down the corridor, to wait for her.

At last her bowed-down form came slowly up the steps. She staggered and seemed about to fall.

Cethegus quickly caught her arm. "Rusticiana, take courage!"

"You here? God! you also loved her! And we--we two have murdered her!" and she sank upon his shoulder.

"Silence, unhappy woman!" he whispered, looking around.

"Alas! I, her own mother, have killed her! I mixed the fatal draught that caused his death."

"All is well," thought Cethegus. "She has no suspicion that Camilla drank, and still less that I saw her do so.--It is a terrible stroke of Fate!" he said aloud. "But reflect, what would have followed had she lived? She loved him!"

"What would have followed?" cried Rusticiana, receding. "Oh, if she but lived! Who can prevent love? Oh that she had become his--his wife--his mistress, provided only that she lived!"

"But you forget that he *must* have died?"

"Must? Why must he have died? So that you might carry out your ambitious plans? Oh, selfishness without example!"

"They are your plans that I carry out, not mine; how often must I repeat it? *You* have conjured up the God of Revenge, not I. Why do you accuse me if he demand a sacrifice? Think better of it. Farewell."

But Rusticiana violently seized his arm. "And that is all? And you have nothing more--not a word, not a tear for my child? And you would make me believe that you have acted thus to avenge her, to avenge me? You have never had a heart! You did not even love her--coldly you see her die! Ha, curses, curses upon thee!"

"Be silent, frantic woman!"

"Silent! no, I will speak and curse you! Oh that I knew of something that was as dear to you as Camilla was to me! Oh that you, like me, could see your whole life's last and only joy torn away--that you could see it vanish, and despair! If there be a God in heaven you will live to do so!"

Cethegus smiled.

"You do not believe in heavenly vengeance? Well, then, believe in the vengeance of a miserable mother! You shall tremble! I will hasten to the Queen and tell her all! You shall die!"

"And you will die with me."

"With a smile--if only I can see you perish!" and she would have hurried away, but Cethegus held her back with an iron grasp.

"Stop, woman! Do you think that I am not on my guard with such as you? Your sons, Anicius and Severinus, are here in Italy, secretly--in Rome--in my house. You know that death is the penalty of their return. A word--and they die with us. Then you may take to your husband your sons, as well as your daughter, who has died by your means. Her blood upon your head!" and quickly turning the angle of the corridor, he disappeared.

"My sons!" cried Rusticiana, and sank down upon the marble pavement.

A few days after, the widow of Boëthius, with Corbulo and Daphnidion, left the court for ever. In vain the Queen sought to detain her.

The faithful freedman took her back to the sheltered Villa of Tifernum, which she now deeply regretted ever having left. There, in the place of the little Temple of Venus, she erected a basilica, in the crypt of which an urn was placed, containing the hearts of the two lovers.

In her passionate soul her prayers for the salvation of her child were inseparably bound up with a petition for revenge upon Cethegus, whose real share in Camilla's death she did not even suspect; she only felt that he had used mother and daughter as tools for his plans, and had sacrificed the girl's happiness and life with heartless coldness.

And scarcely less continuously than the flame of the eternal lamp before the urn, the prayer and the curse of the lonely mother rose up to heaven.

The hour came which disclosed to her all the Prefect's guilt, and the vengeance which she called down from heaven did not tarry.

CHAPTER III.

At the court of Ravenna there ensued a bitter and obstinate strife.

The Gothic patriots, although deeply grieved at the sudden death of their youthful King, and, for the moment, overpowered, were very soon re-encouraged by their indefatigable leaders.

The high consideration in which Hildebrand was held, the quiet strength of Witichis, who had returned, and Teja's watchful zeal, operated continuously.

We have seen that these men had succeeded in inducing Athalaric to shake off the authority of his mother. It was now easy for them to find ever new adherents amongst the Goths against a government in which the hated Cethegus would come more than ever to the front.

The feeling in the army and the Germanic population of Ravenna was sufficiently prepared for a decisive stroke. The old master-at-arms with difficulty restrained the discontented, until, strengthened by important confederates, they could be more certain of success.

These confederates were the three dukes, Thulun, Ibba, and Pitza, whom Amalasintha had driven away from court, and whom her son had so lately recalled.

Thulun and Ibba were brothers; Pitza was their cousin.

Another brother of the former, Duke Alaric, had been condemned to death some years ago on account of a pretended conspiracy, and since his flight (for he had succeeded in escaping) nothing had been heard of him. They were the offspring of the celebrated race of the Balthe, who had worn the crown of the Visigoths, and were scarcely inferior in ancient descent and rank to the Amelungs. Their pedigree, like that of the Royal House, descended from the gods. The wealth of their possessions in land and dependent colonies, and the fame of their warlike deeds, enhanced the power and glory of their house.

It was said amongst the people that Theodoric had, for a while, thought of passing over his daughter and her son, and, in the interest of the kingdom, of appointing the powerful Duke Thulun as his successor. And, after the death of Athalaric, the patriots were decided, in case of the worst--that is, if the Queen could not be persuaded to renounce her system--once more to entertain this idea.

Cethegus saw the threatening tempest. He saw how Gothic national feeling, awakened by Hildebrand and his friends, grew more opposed to the Romanising Regency. He indignantly confessed to himself that he had no real power with which to keep down discontent. Ravenna was not his Rome, where he controlled all proceedings, where he had again accustomed the citizens to the use of arms, and attached them to his person; here all the troops were Goths, and he could only fear that they would reply to an order for the arrest of Hildebrand or Witichis by open rebellion. So he took a bold resolution to free himself at one stroke from the net which encompassed him in Ravenna. He decided to take the Queen, if necessary by force, to Rome. There he was mighty, had weapons and adherents; there Amalasintha would be exclusively in his power, and the Goths would be frustrated.

To his delight, the Queen entered into his plan with eagerness. She longed to be out of these walls, where she appeared to be more a prisoner than a ruler. She longed for Rome, freedom, and power.

Cethegus took his measures with his usual rapidity. He was obliged to renounce the shorter way by land, for upon the broad Via Flaminia, as well as on the other roads from Ravenna to Rome, escorts of Gothic troops were stationed, and it was therefore to be feared that their flight by any of these ways would be easily discovered, and perhaps impeded.

Fortunately the Prefect remembered that the Navarchus, or captain of the galleys, Pomponius, one of the conspirators, was cruising about in chase of African pirates on the east coast of the Adriatic, with three triremes, manned by Romans. To him he sent an order to appear in the harbour of Ravenna on the night of the Feast of Epiphany. He hoped, while the town was occupied with religious festivities, to reach the ships with Amalasintha easily and safely from the gardens of the palace, when they would be taken by sea past the Gothic positions to Teate. Thence the way to Rome was short and safe.

With this plan in his mind--his messenger had safely gone and returned with the promise of Pomponius to appear punctually--the Prefect smiled at the daily increasing hate and insolence of the Goths, who observed his position of favourite with bitter displeasure.

He warned Amalasintha to be patient and not, by an outbreak of her royal wrath against the "rebels," to occasion a collision before the day of deliverance, which might easily render vain all plans of rescue.

The Feast of Epiphany arrived. The people crowded the basilicas and squares of the city. The jewels of the treasury were ready ordered and packed, as well as the most important documents of the archives. It was mid-day.

Amalasintha and the Prefect had just told their friend Cassiodorus of their plan, the boldness of which at first startled him, but he very soon perceived its prudence.

They were just about to leave the room where they had told him of their intentions, when suddenly the uproar made by the populace--who were crowding before the palace--became louder and more violent; threats, cries of exultation, and the clatter of arms arose promiscuously.

Cethegus threw back the curtain of the large bay-window, but he only saw the last of the crowd pressing through the open gates of the palace.

It was not possible to discover the cause of this excitement. Already the uproar was ascending the staircase of the palace. The noise of altercations with the attendants was audible; the clash of weapons; and soon approaching and heavy footsteps.

Amalasintha did not tremble; she tightly grasped the dragon's head which decorated the throne-seat, to which Cassiodorus had again led her.

Meanwhile Cethegus hurried to meet the intruders.

"Halt!" he called from the threshold of the chamber. "The Queen is visible for no one."

For one moment there was complete silence.

Then a powerful voice called out: "If for thee, Roman, also for us, for her Gothic brethren. Forwards!"

And again the roar of voices arose, and in a moment Cethegus, without the application of any particular violence, was pushed by the press, as if by an irresistible tide, into the farthest corner of the hall, and the foremost intruders stood close before the throne.

They were Hildebrand, Witichis, Teja, a gigantic Goth, unknown to Cethegus, and near this last--there was no doubt about it--the three dukes, Thulun, Ibba, and Pizta, in full armour--three splendid warriors.

The intruders bowed before the throne. Then Duke Thulun called to those behind him, with the gesture of a born ruler:

"Goths, wait yet a short time without! We will try; in your name, to adjust things with the Queen. If we do not succeed, we will call upon you to act--you know in what manner."

With a shout of applause, the crowd behind him willingly withdrew, and were soon lost in the outer passages and halls of the palace.

"Daughter of Theodoric," began Duke Thulun, "we are come because thy son, the King, recalled us. Unfortunately we find he is no more alive. We know that thou hast no delight in seeing us here."

"If you know it," said Amalasintha with dignity, "how dare you, notwithstanding, appear before our eyes? Who allows you to intrude upon us against our will?"

"Necessity enjoins it, Highness--necessity, which has often forced stronger bolts than the whims of a woman. We have to announce to thee the demands of thy people, which thou wilt fulfil."

"What language! Knowest thou before whom thou standest, Duke Thulun?"

"Before the daughter of the Amelungs; whose child I honour, even when she errs and transgresses!"

"Rebel!" cried Amalasintha, and rose indignantly from her throne. "Thy *King* stands before thee!"

But Thulun smiled.

"It would be wiser, Amalasintha, to be silent upon this point. King Theodoric charged thee with the guardianship of thy son--thee, a woman! It was against the law; but we Goths did not interfere between him and his kindred. He wished this boy to be his successor. That was not prudent; but the nobles and people have honoured the race of the Amelungs and the wish of a King, who else was ever wise. But he never wished, and we should never have allowed, that after the death of that boy a woman should reign over us--the spindle over the spear."

"So you refuse to acknowledge me as your Queen?" she cried indignantly. "And thou, too, Hildebrand, old friend of Theodoric, thou disownest his daughter?"

"Queen," said the old man, "would that thou wouldst prevent it!"

Thulun continued:

"We do not disown thee--not yet. I only answer thee thus because thou boastest of thy right, and thou must know that thou hast no right. But as we gladly honour noble birth--in which we honour ourselves--and because at this moment it might lead to evil dissensions in the kingdom if we deprived thee of the crown, I will repeat the conditions under which thou mayst continue to wear it."

Amalasintha suffered terribly. How gladly would she have delivered the bold man who spoke such words into the hands of the executioner! And she was obliged to listen helplessly! Tears rose to her eyes; she repressed them, but at the same time sank back exhausted upon the throne, supported by Cassiodorus.

Meanwhile Cethegus had made his way to her side.

"Concede everything," he whispered; "it is forced and null. And to-night Pomponius will arrive."

"Speak!" said Cassiodorus; "but spare the woman, barbarians!"

"Ha! ha!" laughed Duke Pitza. "She will not be treated like a woman. She is our *King*!"

"Peace, cousin!" said Duke Thulun reprovingly; "she is of noble blood. First," he continued, "thou must dismiss the Prefect of Rome. He is said to be an enemy of the Goths; he may not advise the Gothic Queen. Earl Witichis will take his place near thy throne."

"Agreed!" said Cethegus himself, instead of Amalasintha.

"Secondly, thou wilt declare, in a proclamation, that for the future no order of thine can be executed which is not signed by Hildebrand or Witichis; and that no law is valid without the ratification of the National Assembly."

The Queen started up angrily; but Cethegus held her arm.

"Pomponius comes to-night," he whispered. Then he said aloud, "This also is agreed to."

"The third condition," resumed Thulun, "is one which thou wilt as willingly grant as we ask it. We three Balthes have not learned to bow our heads in a prince's court. The roof here is too low for us. It is better that Amelungs and Balthes live as far apart as the eagle and the falcon. And the realm needs our weapons upon its boundaries. Our neighbours think that the land is orphaned since thy great father died, Avari, Gepidæ, and Slavonians fearlessly overstep the frontiers. In order to punish these three nations, thou wilt equip three armies, each of thirty thousand; and we three Balthes will lead them, as thy generals, to the east and to the north."

"The whole military force also in their hands--not bad!" thought Cethegus. "Accepted!" he cried aloud, smiling.

"And what remains to me," asked Amalasintha, "when I have granted all this?"

"A golden crown upon a white forehead," said Duke Ibba.

"Thou canst write like a Greek," re-commenced Thulun. "Such arts are not learned in vain. This parchment should contain all that we demand; my slave has written it down." He gave it to Witichis to examine. "Is it so? 'Tis well. That thou wilt sign, Princess. Good. We have finished. Now, Hildebrand, speak with yonder Roman."

But Teja was beforehand. He advanced to the Prefect, trembling with hate, his sword in his hand.

"Prefect of Rome," said he, "blood has been shed--precious, noble, Gothic blood! It consecrates the furious strife which will soon be kindled. Blood, which thou shalt atone----"

His voice was suffocated with rage.

"Bah!" cried Hildebad--for he was the tall Goth--pushing him aside. "Make not such a to-do about it! My dear brother can easily part with a little superfluous blood; and the others lost more than he could spare. There, thou black devil!" he cried, turning to Cethegus, and holding a broadsword close before his eyes, "knowest thou that?"

"Pomponius's sword!" cried Cethegus, turning pale and staggering back a step.

Amalasintha and Cassiodorus asked in alarm,

"Pomponius?"

"Aha!" laughed Hildebad. "That is shocking, is it not? Nothing will come of the water-party!"

"Where is Pomponius--my Navarchus?" asked Amalasintha vehemently.

"With the sharks, Queen, in deep water."

"Ha! death and destruction!" exclaimed Cethegus, now carried away by his anger. "How happened that?"

"Merrily enough! My brother Totila--thou surely knowest him?--lay in the harbour of Ancona with two little ships. Thy friend Pomponius had had for some days such an insolent expression of countenance, and had let fall such bragging words, that it struck even my unsuspecting brother. One morning Pomponius suddenly disappeared from the harbour with his three triremes. Totila smelt a rat, spread all sail, pursued him, overtook him off Pisaurum, stopped him, went on board with me and a few others, and asked him whither he would be going."

"He had no right to do so. Pomponius will have given him no answer."

"He did so, for all that, most excellent Cethegus! When he saw that we were only ten upon his ship, he laughed, and cried, 'Whither sail I? To Ravenna, thou downy-beard, to save the Queen from your claws, and take her to. Rome!' And he therewith made a sign to his crew. But we, too, threw our shields before us, and--hurrah! how the swords flew from the sheaths! It was hard work--ten to forty! But happily it did not last long. Our comrades in the nearest ship heard the iron rattle, and were quickly alongside with their boats, and climbed the bulwarks like cats. Now we had the upper hand; but the Navarchus--to give the devil his due!--would not yield; fought like to madman, and pierced my brother's arm through his shield, so that the blood spouted. But then my brother got into a rage too, and ran his spear through the other's body, so that he fell like an ox. 'Greet the Prefect,' he said, as he lay dying, 'give him my sword, his gift, back again, and tell him that no one can cheat Death, else I had kept my word!' I swore to him that I would confirm his words. He was a brave man. Here is the sword."

Cethegus took it in silence.

"The ships yielded, and my brother took them back to Ancona. But I sailed here with the swiftest, and met the three Balthes in the harbour, just at the right moment."

A pause ensued, during which Cethegus and Amalasintha bitterly contemplated their desperate position. Cethegus had consented to everything in the sure hope of flight, which was now frustrated. His well-considered plan was balked; balked by Totila; and hatred of this name entered deeply into the Prefect's soul. His grim reflections were interrupted by the voice of Thulun, asking:

"Well, Amalasintha, wilt thou sign? or shall we call upon the Goths to choose a King?"

At these words Cethegus quickly recovered himself. He took the tablets from the hand of the Duke and handed them to the Queen.

"It is necessary, O Queen," he said in a low voice; "you have no choice."

Cassiodorus gave her the stylus, she wrote her name and Thulun received the tablets.

"Tis well," said he; "we go to announce to the Goths that their kingdom is saved. Thou, Cassiodorus, accompany us to bear witness that all has been done without violence."

At a sign from Amalasintha the senator obeyed, and followed the Gothic leaders to the Forum before the palace.

When the Queen found herself alone with Cethegus, she started from her seat. She could no longer restrain her tears. She passionately struck her forehead. Her pride was terribly humbled. She felt the shame of this hour more deeply than the loss of husband, father, or even of her son.

"Then this," she cried, weeping loudly, "this is man's superiority! Brutal, clumsy force! O, Cethegus, all is lost!"

"Not all, Queen, only a plan. I beg you to keep me in kindly remembrance," he added coldly. "I

go to Rome."

"What? you will leave me at this moment? You, you have made me give all these promises, which rob me of my throne, and now you forsake me! Oh! it were better that I had resisted, I should then have remained indeed a Queen, even if they had set the crown upon the head of that rebel Duke!"

"Certainly," thought Cethegus, "better for you, worse for me. No, no hero shall ever again wear this Gothic crown." He had quickly seen that Amalasintha could no longer serve him, and just as quickly he gave her up. He was already thinking of a new tool for his plans. Yet he decided to disclose to her a portion of his thoughts, in order that she might not act upon her own account, contradict her promises, and thereby cause the crown to obvert to Thulun. "I go, O Queen," he said; "but I do not therefore forsake you. Here I can no longer serve you. They have banished me from your side, and will guard you as jealously as a lover his mistress."

"But what shall I do with these promises? what with the three dukes?"

"Wait, and, at present, submit. And as to the three dukes," he added hesitatingly, "they go to the wars--perhaps they will never return."

"Perhaps!" sighed the Queen. "Of what use is a 'perhaps?'"

Cethegus came close to her.

"As soon as you wish it--they *shall* never return."

The woman trembled:

"Murder? Terrible man, of what are you thinking?"

"Of what is necessary. Murder is a wrong expression. It is self-defence. Or a punishment. If you had now the power, you would have a perfect right to kill them. They are rebels. They force your royal will. They kill your Navarchus; they deserve death."

"And they *shall* die," whispered Amalasintha to herself, clenching her fist; "they shall not live, these brutal men, who force a Queen to do their behest. You are right--they shall die!"

"They must die--they and," he added in a tone of intense hatred, "and--the young hero!"

"Wherefore Totila? He is the handsomest and most valiant youth in the nation!"

"He dies!" growled Cethegus. "Oh that he would die ten times over!" And such bitter hatred flamed from his eyes, that, suddenly seen in a man of such a cold nature, it both startled and terrified Amalasintha.

"I shall send you from Rome," he continued rapidly in a low tone, "three trusty men, Isaurian mercenaries. These you will send after the three Balthes, as soon as they have reached their several camps. You understand that *you*, the Queen, send them; for they are executioners, no murderers. The three dukes must fall on the same day--I myself will care for handsome Totila--the bold stroke will alarm the whole nation. During the first consternation of the Goths I will hurry here from Rome, with troops, to your aid. Farewell."

He departed, and left alone the helpless woman, upon whose ear now broke the shouts of the assembled multitude from the Forum in front of the palace, extolling the success of their leaders and the submission of Amalasintha.

She felt quite forsaken. She suspected that the last promise of the Prefect was little more than an empty word of comfort to palliate his departure. Overcome by sorrow, she rested her cheek upon her beautiful hand, and was lost for some time in futile meditations.

Suddenly the curtain at the entrance rustled. An officer of the palace stood before her.

"Ambassadors from Byzantium desire an audience. Justinus is dead. His nephew Justinianus is Emperor. He tenders a brotherly greeting and his friendship."

"Justinianus!" This name penetrated the very soul of the unhappy woman. She saw herself robbed of her son, thwarted by her people, forsaken by Cethegus. In her sad musings she had been seeking in vain for help and support, and, with a sigh of relief, she again repeated, "Justinianus--Byzantium!"

CHAPTER IV.

In the woods of Fiesole, a modern wanderer coming from Florence will find to the right of the high-road the ruins of an extensive villa-like edifice. Ivy, saxifrage and wild roses vie with each other in concealing the ruins. For centuries the peasants in the neighbouring villages have

carried away stones from this place in order to dam up the earth of their vineyards on the slopes of the hills. But even yet the remains clearly show where once stood the colonnade before the house, where the central hall, and where the wall of the court.

Weeds grow luxuriantly in the meadows where once lay in shining order the beautiful gardens; nothing has been left of them except the wide marble basin of a long dried-up fountain, in whose pebble-filled runnels the lizards now sun themselves.

But in the days of our story the place looked very different. "The Villa of Mæcenas at Fæsulæ," as the building, probably with little or no reason, was called at that time, was inhabited by happy people; the house ordered by a woman's careful hand; the garden enlivened by childhood's bright laughter.

The climbing clematis was gracefully trained up the slender shafts of the Corinthian columns in front of the house, and the cheerful vine shaded the flat roof. The winding walks in the garden were strewn with white sand, and in the outhouses dedicated to domestic uses reigned an order and cleanliness which was never to be found in a household served by Roman slaves alone.

It was sunset.

The men and maid servants were returning from the fields. The heavily-laden hay-carts swung along, drawn by horses which were evidently not of Italian breed. The shepherds were driving goats and sheep home from the hills, accompanied by large dogs, which scampered on in front, barking joyously.

Close before the yard gate, a couple of Roman slaves, with shrill voices and mad gestures, were urging on the panting horses of a cruelly over-laden wagon, not with whips, but with sticks, the iron points of which they stuck again and again into the same sore place upon the poor animals' hides. In spite of this, no advance was made, for a large stone lay just in front of the left fore-wheel of the wagon, which the angry and impatient drivers did not notice.

"Forwards, beast! and son of a beast!" screamed one of them to the struggling horse; "forwards, thou Gothic sluggard!" Another stab with the iron point, a renewed and desperate pull; but the wheel did not go over the stone, and the tortured animal fell on its knees, threatening to upset the wagon by its struggles.

At this the rage of the driver was redoubled. "Wait, thou rascal!" he shouted, and struck at the eye of the panting animal.

But he only struck once; the next moment he himself fell under a heavy blow.

"Davus, thou wicked dog!" growled a powerful voice, and, twice as tall, and certainly twice as broad as the frightened tormentor, there stood over the fallen man a gigantic Goth, who rained down blows upon him with a thick cudgel. "Thou miserable coward," said he, giving him a final kick, "I will teach thee how to treat a creature which is ten times better than thyself. I verily believe, thou rascal, that thou treatest the beast ill, because he comes from the other side of the mountains! If I catch thee at it again, I will break every bone in thy body. Now get up, and unload--thou shalt carry every swath that is too much into the barn upon thine own back. Forwards!"

With a malicious glance at his punisher the beaten man rose, and, limping, prepared to obey.

The Goth had immediately helped the struggling horse to its feet, and now carefully washed its broken knees with his own evening drink of wine and water.

He had scarcely finished his task, when the clear voice of a boy called urgently from a neighbouring stable:

"Wachis, come here; Wachis!"

"I'm coming, Athalwin, my boy! What's the matter?" And he already stood in the open door of the stable near a handsome boy of about seven years of age, who angrily stroked his long yellow hair from his glowing face, and with great trouble repressed two large tears of rage that *would* spring into his blue eyes. He held a pretty wooden sword in his right hand, and shook it threateningly at a black-browed slave who stood opposite to him, with his head insolently thrust forward and his fists clenched. "What is the matter here?" repeated Wachis, crossing the threshold.

"The chesnut has again nothing to drink; and only look! Two gadflies have sucked themselves fast upon his shoulder, where he cannot get at them with his tail, and I cannot reach with my hand; and that bad Cacus there won't do what I tell him; and I am sure he has been scolding at me in Latin, which I don't understand."

Wachis drew nearer with a threatening look.

"I only said," said Cacus, slowly receding, "that I must first eat my millet. The beast may wait. In our country men come before beasts."

"Indeed, thou dunce!" said Wachis, as he killed the gadflies; "in our country the horse eats before the rider! Make haste!"

But Cacus was strong and obstinate; he tossed his head and said:

"Here, we are in *our* country, and *our* customs must be followed."

"Oho, thou cursed blockhead! wilt thou obey?" asked Wachis, raising his hand.

"Obey? Not thee! Thou art only a slave like me. And my parents lived in this house when such as thou were stealing cows and sheep on the other side of the mountains."

Wachis let his cudgel fall and swung his arms to and fro.

"Listen, Cacus, I have another crow to pluck with thee besides; thou knowest wherefore. Now it can all be done with at the same time."

"Ha, ha!" cried Cacus with a mocking laugh, "about Liuta, the flaxen-haired wench? Bah! I like her no longer, the barbarian. She dances like a heifer!"

"Now it's all up with thee," said Wachis quietly, and caught hold of his adversary.

But Cacus twisted himself like an eel out of the grasp of the Goth, pulled a sharp knife from the folds of his woollen frock and threw it at him. As Wachis stooped the knife whistled only a hair's-breadth past his head, and penetrated deeply into the door-post behind him.

"Well, wait, thou murderous worm!" cried the German, and would have thrown himself upon Cacus, but he felt himself clasped from behind.

It was Davus, who had watched for this moment of revenge.

But now Wachis became exceedingly wroth.

He shook the man off, held him by the nape of the neck with his left hand, got hold of Cacus with his right, and, with the strength of a bear, knocked the heads of his adversaries together, accompanying every knock with an interjection, "There, my boys--that for the knife--and that for the back-spring--and that for the heifer!" And who knows how long this strange litany would have continued, if he had not been interrupted by a loud call.

"Wachis! Cacus! let loose, I tell you," cried the strong fall voice of a woman; and a stately matron, clad in a blue Gothic garment, appeared at the door.

She was not tall, and yet imposing. Her fine figure was more sturdy than slender. Her gold-brown hair was bound in simple but rich braids round her head; her features were regular; more firm than delicate.

An expression of sincerity, worth, and trustfulness lay in her large blue eyes. Her round bare arms showed that she was no stranger to work. At her broad girdle, over which puffed out her brown under-garment of home-spun cloth, rattled a bunch of keys; she rested her left hand quietly upon her hip, and stretched her right commandingly before her.

"Aye, aye, Rauthgundis, mistress mine," said Wachis, letting loose, "must you have your eyes everywhere?"

"Everywhere, when my servants are at mischief. When will you learn to agree? You Italians need a master in the house. But thou, Wachis, shouldst not vex the housewife too. Come, Athalwin, come with me."

And she led the boy away.

She went into a side-yard, filled her raised skirt with grain out of a trough, and fed the fowls and pigeons, which immediately flocked around her.

For a little while Athalwin watched her silently. At last he said:

"Mother, is it true? Is father a robber?"

Rauthgundis suspended her occupation, and looked at the child in surprise.

"Who said so?"

"Who? Eh, the nephew of Calpurnius! We were playing on the great heap of hay in his meadow, and I showed him how far the land belongs to us on the right of the hedge--far and wide--as far as our servants were mowing, and the brook shone in the distance. Then he got angry and said, 'Yes, and all that land once belonged to us, and thy father or thy grandfather stole it, the robbers!'"

"Indeed! And what didst thou reply?"

"Eh, nothing at all, mother. I only threw him over the hay-cock, with his heels in the air. But now I should like to know if it is true."

"No, child, it is not true. Your father did not steal it, but took it openly, because he was stronger and better than these Italians. And heroes have done the same in all ages. And when the Italians were strong and their neighbours weak, they did so most of all. But now come; we must look after the linen that is bleaching on the green."

As they turned their backs upon the stables, and were going towards the grassy hill on the left of the house, they heard the rapid hoof-beats of a horse, which was approaching on the old Roman high-road.

Athalwin climbed quickly to the top of the hill and looked towards the road.

A rider, mounted on an immense brown charger, galloped down the woody heights towards the villa. Brightly sparkled his helmet and the point of the lance, which he carried across his shoulder.

"It is father, mother; it is father!" cried the boy, and ran swift as an arrow down the hill to meet the rider.

Rauthgundis had just now reached the top of the hill. Her heart beat. She shaded her eyes with her hand, to look into the evening-red; then she said in a low happy voice:

"Yes, it is he! my husband."

CHAPTER V.

Meanwhile Athalwin had already reached his father and climbed up his knee, clinging to his foot.

The rider lifted him up with a loving hand, set him before him in the saddle, and spurred his horse into a gallop. The noble animal, once the charger of Theodoric, neighed lustily as he recognised his home and his mistress, and shook his flowing mane.

The rider now reached the hill, and dismounted with the boy.

"My dear wife!" he exclaimed, embracing her tenderly.

"My Witichis!" she answered, blushing with pleasure, and clinging to him; "welcome home!"

"I promised that I would come before the new moon--it was difficult----"

"But thou hast kept thy word, as always."

"My heart drew me here," he said, putting his arm around her.

They went on slowly to the house.

"It seems, Athalwin, that Wallada is of more consequence to thee than thy father," said Witichis, smiling, to the boy, who was leading the horse carefully after them.

"No, father; but give me the lance too--I have not often such a pleasure in this country life;" and dragging the long, heavy shaft of the spear after him with difficulty, he cried out: "Eh! Wachis, Ansbrand! father has come! Fetch the skin of Falernian from the cellar. Father is thirsty after his rapid ride!"

With a smile Witichis stroked the golden curls of the boy, who now hurried past them to the house.

"Well, and how does all go on here?" asked Witichis, looking at Rauthgundis.

"Very well, Witichis. The harvest is all brought in, the grapes crushed, the sheaves housed."

"I do not ask about that," said he, pressing her tenderly to him--"how art thou?"

"As well as a poor woman can be," she answered, looking up at him, "who misses her well-loved husband. Work is the only thing that comforts me, my friend; plenty of occupation, which benumbs a sensitive heart. I often think how thou, far away amongst strange people, must trouble thyself in court and camp, where there is none to cherish thee. At least, I say to myself, he shall find his home well-kept and cheerful when he returns. And it is that, seest thou, which sanctifies and ennobles all the dull routine of work, and makes it dear to me."

"That's my brave wife! But dost thou not too much fatigue thyself?"

"Work is healthy. But vexation, and the men's wickedness, *that* hurts me!"

Witichis stood still.

"Who dares to grieve thee?"

"Ah! the Italian servants, and our Italian neighbours! They all hate us. Woe to us, if they did not fear us. Calpurnius, our neighbour, is so insolent when he knows thou art absent, and the Roman slaves are disobedient and false; our Gothic servants alone are good."

Witichis sighed. They had now arrived at the house, and sat down at a marble table under the colonnade.

"Thou must remember," said Witichis, "that our neighbour was forced to give up to us the third part of his estate and slaves."

"And has kept two-thirds, and his life into the bargain--he ought to thank God!" answered Rauthgundis contemptuously.

Just then Athalwin came running with a basketful of apples, which he had plucked from the tree. Presently Wachis and the other German servants came with wine, meat, and cheese, and greeted their master with a frank clasp of the hand.

"Well done, my children. The mistress praises you. But where are Davus, Cacus, and the others?"

"Pardon, sir," answered Wachis, grinning, "they have a bad conscience."

"Why? What about?"

"Eh!--I think--because I have beaten them little; they are ashamed."

The other men laughed.

"Well, it will do them no harm," said Witichis; "go now to your meal. To-morrow I will examine your work."

The men went.

"What is that about Calpurnius?" asked Witichis, pouring wine into his cup.

Rauthgundis blushed and hesitated.

"He has carried away the hay from the mountain meadow," she then replied, "which our men had mowed; and has put it into his barn by night, and will not return it."

"He will return it quickly enough, I think," said her husband quietly, as he took up his cup and drank.

"Yes," cried Athalwin eagerly, "I think so too! And if he will not, all the better for me! Then we will declare war, and I will go over with Wachis and all the great fellows, with weapons and pikes! He always looks at me so wickedly, the black spy!"

Rauthgundis told him to be silent, and sent him to bed.

"Very well, I will go," he said; "but, father, when thou comest again, thou wilt bring me a real weapon, instead of this stick, wilt thou not?" and he ran into the house.

"Contentions with these Italians never cease," said Witichis; "the very children inherit the feeling. But it causes thee far too much vexation here. So much the more willingly wilt thou do what I now propose: come with me to Ravenna, Rauthgundis, to court."

His wife looked at him with astonishment.

"Thou art joking!" she said incredulously. "Thou hast never before wished it! During the nine years of our married life, it has never entered thy head to take me to court! I believe no one in all the nation knows that a Rauthgundis exists. For a surety, thou hast kept our marriage secret," she added, smiling, "like a crime!"

"Like a treasure!" said Witichis, embracing her.

"I have never asked thee wherefore. I was and am happy; and I thought and think now: he has his reason."

"I had a good reason: it exists no longer. Now thou mayest know all. A few months after I had found thee amid the solitudes of thy mountains, and had conceived an affection for thee, King Theodoric hit upon the strange idea, to unite me in marriage with his sister Amalaberga, the widow of the King of the Thuringians, who needed the protection of a man against her wicked neighbours, the Franks."

"Thou wert to wear a crown?" asked Rauthgundis, with sparkling eyes.

"But Rauthgundis was dearer to me," continued Witichis, "than Queen or crown, and I said, No. It vexed the King exceedingly, and he only forgave me when I told him that probably I should never marry. At that time I could not hope ever to call thee mine; thou knowest how long thy father suspiciously and sternly refused to trust thee to me; but when, notwithstanding, thou wert become my wife, I considered that it would not be wise to show the King the woman for whose sake I had refused his sister."

"But why hast thou concealed all this from me for nine long years?"

"Because," he said, looking lovingly into her eyes, "because I know my Rauthgundis. Thou wouldst ever have imagined I had lost I know not what with that crown! But now the King is dead, and I am permanently bound to the court. Who knows when I shall again rest in the shadow of these columns, in the peace of this roof?"

And he related briefly the fall of the Prefect, and what position he now held near Amalasintha.

Rauthgundis listened attentively; then she took his hand and pressed it.

"It is good, Witichis, that the Goths gradually find out thy worth, and thou art more cheerful, I think, than usual."

"Yes; I feel more contented since I can bear part of the burden of the time. It was much more difficult to stand idly by and see it pressing heavily upon my nation. I am only sorry for the Queen, she is like a prisoner."

"Bah! Why did the woman grasp at the office of a man? Such a thing would never enter my head."

"Thou art no Queen, Rauthgundis, and Amalasintha is proud."

"I am ten times prouder than she! but not so vain. She can never have loved a man, nor understood his nature and worth, otherwise she could not wish to fill a man's place."

"At court that is looked upon in a different manner. But do come with me to Ravenna."

"No, Witichis," she quietly said, rising from her seat, "the court is not fit for me, nor I for the court. I am the child of a mountain farmer, and far too uncultured. Look at this brown neck," she laughed, "and these rough hands! I cannot tinkle on the lyre, or read verses. I should be ill suited for the fine Roman ladies, and thou wouldst have little honour with me."

"Surely thou dost not consider thyself too bad for the court?"

"No, Witichis, too good."

"Well, people must learn to bear with and appreciate each other."

"I could not do that. They could perhaps learn to bear with me, out of fear of thee. But I should daily tell them to their faces that they are hollow, false, and bad!"

"So, then, thou wilt rather do without thy husband for months?"

"Yes, rather do without him, than be near him in a false and unfitting position. Oh, my Witichis!" she added, encircling his neck with her arm, "consider who I am and how thou foundest me! where the last settlements of our people dot the edge of the Alps, high up upon the steep precipices of the Scaranzia; where the youthful Isara breaks foaming out of the ravines into the open plains, there stands my father's lonely farm; there I knew of nought but the hard work of summer upon the quiet alms, of winter in the smoke-blackened hall, spinning with the maids. My mother died early, and my brothers were killed by the Italians. So I grew up lonely, no one near me but my old father, who was as true, but also as hard and close, as his native rocks. There I saw nothing of the world which lay outside our mountains. Only sometimes, from a height, I watched with curiosity a pack-horse going along the road deep below in the valley, laden with salt or wine. I sat through many a shining summer evening upon the jagged peaks of the high Arn, and looked at the sun sinking splendidly over the far-away river Licus; and I wondered what it had seen the whole long summer day, since it had risen over the broad Cenus; and I thought how I should like to know what things looked like at the other side of the Karwandel, or away behind the Brennus, over which my brothers had gone and had never returned. And yet I felt how beautiful it was up there in the green solitude, where I heard the golden eagle screaming in its near eyrie, and where I plucked more lovely flowers than ever grow in the plains, and even, sometimes, heard by night the mountain-wolf howling outside the stable-door, and frightened it away with a torch. In early autumn, too, and in the long winter, I had time to sit and muse; when the white mist-veils spun themselves over the lofty pines; when the mountain wind tore the blocks of stone from our straw-roof, and the avalanches thundered from the precipices. So I grew up, strange to the world beyond the next forest, only at home in the quiet world of my thoughts, and in the narrow life of the peasant. Then thou earnest--I remember it as if it had happened yesterday----"

She ceased, lost in recollection.

"I remember it too, exactly," said Witichis. "I was leading a centumvirate from Juvavia to the Augusta-town on the Licus. I had lost my way and my people. For a long time I had wandered about in the sultry summer day, without finding a path, when I saw smoke rising above a fir-tree grove, and soon I found a hidden farm, and entered the yard-gate. There stood a splendid girl at the pump, lifting a bucket----"

"Look, even here in the valley, in this southern valley of the Alps, it is often too close for me; and I long for a breath of air from the pine-woods of my mountains. But at court, in the narrow gilded chambers! there I should languish and pine away. Leave me here; I shall manage Calpurnius well enough. And thou, I know well, wilt still think of home, wife, and child, when absent in the royal halls."

"Yes, God knows, with longing thoughts! Well then, remain here, and God keep thee, my good wife!"

The second day after this conversation Witichis again rode away up the wooded heights.

The parting hour had made him almost tender; but he had firmly checked the outbreak of feeling which it was so repugnant to his simple and manly nature to indulge in. How the brave man's heart clung to his trusty wife and darling boy!

Behind him trotted Wachis, who would not be prevented from accompanying his master for a short distance.

Suddenly he rode up to him.

"Sir," said he, "I know something."

"Indeed! Why didst not tell it?"

"Because no one asked me about it."

"Well, I ask thee about it."

"Yes; if one is asked, then of course he must answer! The mistress has told you that Calpurnius is such a bad neighbour?"

"Yes; what about that?"

"But she did not tell you since when?"

"No; dost thou know?"

"Well, it was about half a year ago. About that time Calpurnius once met the mistress in the wood, alone as they both thought; but they were not alone. Some one lay in a ditch, and was taking his mid-day nap."

"Thou wert that sluggard!"

"Rightly guessed. And Calpurnius said something to the mistress."

"What did he say?"

"That I did not understand. But the mistress was not idle; she lifted her hand and struck him in the face with such a smack, that it resounded. And since then our neighbour is a bad neighbour, and I wanted to tell you, because I thought the mistress would not wish to vex you about the rascal; but still it is better that you know it. And see! there stands Calpurnius at his house door; do you see? and now farewell, dear master."

And with this he turned his horse and galloped home. But the blood rushed to Witichis' face.

He rode up to his neighbour's door. Calpurnius was about to retreat into the house, but Witichis called to him in such a voice, that he was obliged to remain.

"What do you want with me, neighbour Witichis?" he asked, looking up at him askance.

Witichis drew rein, and stopped his horse close to him. Then he held his clenched iron-gloved fist close before his neighbour's eyes.

"Neighbour Calpurnius," he said quietly, "if I ever strike thee in the face, thou wilt never rise again."

Calpurnius started back in a fright.

But Witichis gave his horse the spur, and rode proudly and slowly upon his way.

CHAPTER VI.

In his study at Rome, comfortably stretched upon the soft cushions of a lectus, lay Cethegus the Prefect.

He was of good cheer.

His examination had ended with full acquittal. Only in case of an immediate search in his house--such as the young King had ordered, but which his death had frustrated--could discovery have been apprehended.

He had succeeded in gaining permission to complete the fortifications of Rome, supplying the funds out of his own exchequer, which circumstance still more increased his influence in that city.

The evening before he had held a meeting in the Catacombs. All the reports were favourable; the patriots were increasing in number and means.

The greater oppression which since the late occurrences at Ravenna weighed upon the Italians, could but serve to add to the ranks of the malcontents; and, which was the main thing, Cethegus now held all the threads of the conspiracy in his own hands. Even the most jealous Republicans implicitly acknowledged the necessity of committing the conduct of affairs, until the day of deliverance, to the most gifted of men.

The feeling against the barbarians had made such progress amongst all Italians, that Cethegus could entertain the project of striking a blow without the help of the Byzantines, as soon as ever Rome was sufficiently fortified.

"For," he repeatedly told himself, "all foreign liberators are easily summoned, but with difficulty discarded."

Musing thus, Cethegus reposed upon his lectus. He laid aside Cæsar's "Civil Wars," the leaves of which he had been turning over, and said to himself:

"The gods must have great things in store for me; whenever I fall, it is like a cat--upon my feet and unhurt. Ah! when things go well with us, we like to share our content with others. But it is too dangerous a pleasure to put trust in another, and Silence is the only faithful goddess. And yet one is human, and would like----"

Here a slave entered--the old Ostiarius Fidus--and silently handed to Cethegus a letter upon a flat golden salver.

"The bearer waits," he said, and left the room.

Cethegus took up the letter. But as soon as he recognised the design upon the wax seal which secured the string twisted round the tablets--the Dioscuri--he cried eagerly, "From Julius--at a happy hour!" hastily untied the string, opened the tablets, and read, his cold and pale countenance flushed with a warmth of pleasure usually wholly strange to him:

"To Cethegus the Prefect, from Julius Montanus.

"How long it is, my fatherly preceptor'--(by Jupiter! that sounds frosty)--'that I have delayed sending you the greeting which I owe you. The last time I wrote from the green banks of the Ilissos, where I sought for traces of Plato in the desolated groves of the Akademia, but found none. I know well that my letter was not cheerful. The sad philosophers, wandering in the lonely schools, surrounded by the oppressions of the Emperor, the suspicion of the priests, and the coldness of the multitude, could only arouse my compassion. My soul was gloomy; I knew not wherefore. I blamed my ingratitude to you, the most generous of all benefactors.'

"He has never given me such intolerable names before," observed Cethegus.

"For two years I have travelled, accompanied by your slaves and freedmen, endowed like a King of the Syrians with your riches, through all Asia and Hellas; I have enjoyed all the beauty and wisdom of the ancients, and my heart is still unsatisfied, my life empty. Not the enthusiastic wisdom of Plato; not the gilded ivory of Phidias; not Homer and not Thucydides gave me what I wanted! At last, at last, here in Neapolis, in this blooming, God-endowed city; here I found what I had unconsciously missed and sought for everywhere. Not dead wisdom, but warm, living happiness.'--(He is in love! At last, thou coy Hippolyte! Thanks, Eros and Anteros!)--'Oh! my guardian, my father! do you know what happiness it is for the first time to call a heart that completely understands you, your own?'--(Ah, Julius!" sighed the Prefect, with a singular expression of softened sentiment, "as if I knew it not?)"--'a heart to which one can freely open his whole soul? Oh! if you have ever proved it, rejoice with me! sacrifice to Jupiter, the fulfiller! For the first time I have found a friend!'

"What does he say?" cried Cethegus indignantly; and starting up with a look of jealous pain, "The ungrateful boy!"

"For thou wilt understand it well, until now I had no bosom friend. You, my fatherly preceptor--"

Cethegus threw the tablets upon the tortoise-shell table, and walked hastily up and down the room.

"Folly!" he then said quietly, took up the letter again, and read on:

"You, so much older, wiser, better, greater than I--you had laid such a weight of gratitude and reverence upon my young soul, that it could never unfold itself to you without reserve. I have also often heard with discouragement the biting wit with which you mocked at all warmth and softness of feeling; and a sharp expression about your proud and closely-compressed mouth has always killed such feelings in me, as the night-frost kills the first violets.'--(Well, at all events, he is sincere!)--'But now I have found a friend--frank, warm, young, and enthusiastic--and I feel a delight hitherto unknown to me. We are one in heart and soul; we wander together on sunny days and moonlight nights through the Elysian fields, and are never at a loss for winged words. But I must soon close this letter. He is a Goth'--(that too!" cried Cethegus, angrily)--"and is named Totila."

Cethegus let drop the hand which held the letter. He said nothing. He only shut his eyes for an instant, and then he quietly read on again:

"And is named Totila. The day after my arrival in Neapolis, as I was lounging through the Forum of Neptune, and admiring some statues under the arches of a neighbouring house which had been exposed for sale by a sculptor, there suddenly rushed at me, out of the door of this house, a grey-haired man with a woollen apron, all over white with plaster, and holding in his hand a pointed tool. He grasped my shoulder and shouted, "Pollux, my Pollux! have I found thee at last!" I thought the old fellow was mad, and said, "You mistake, old man, I am called Julius, and come from Athens." "No," cried he; "thou art named Pollux, and come from Olympus!" And before I knew what had happened, he had pushed me into the house. There I gradually found out what was the matter. It was the sculptor who had exposed the statues. In the ante-chamber stood many half-finished works, and the sculptor explained to me that for years he had been thinking of a group of the Dioscuri. For the Castor he had found a charming model in a young Goth. "But in vain," he continued, "have I prayed to Heaven for an inspiration for my Pollux. He must resemble the Castor; like him, a brother of Helena and a son of Jupiter. Complete similarity of feature and form must be there, and yet the difference must be as apparent as the resemblance; they must each be completely individual. In vain I sought in all the baths and gymnasiums of Neapolis. I could not find the Leda-twin. And now a god--Jupiter himself--has led thee to my door! It struck me like lightning when I saw thee, "There stands my Pollux, just as he ought to look!" And I will never let thee depart living from my house until thou hast promised me thy head and thy body." I willingly promised the strange old man to come again the next day; and I did so the more gladly when I afterwards learnt that my violent friend was Xenarchus, the greatest sculptor in marble and bronze that Italia has known for a long time. The next day I went again, and found my Castor. It was Totila; and I cannot deny that the great resemblance surprised me, although Totila is older, taller, stronger, and incomparably more handsome than I. Xenarchus says that we are like a pale and a gold-coloured citron--for Totila has fairer hair and beard--and just in this manner, the master swears, were the two Dioscuri alike and unlike. So we learnt to know and love each other amongst the statues of the gods and goddesses in the studio of Xenarchus; became, in truth, Castor and Pollux, inseparable and intimate as they; and already the merry populace of Neapolis calls us by these names when we wander arm in arm through the streets. But our new-made friendship was still more quickly ripened by a threatened danger, which might easily have nipped it in the bud. One evening, as usual, we had wandered out of the Porta Nolana to seek refreshment after the heat of the day in the Baths of Tiberius. After the bath--in a mood of sportive tenderness--you will blame it--I had thrown my friend's mantle over me, and set his helmet, decorated with the swan's wings, upon my head. He entered into the joke, and, with a smile, threw my chlamys⁴ around him; and, chatting peacefully, we went back through the pine grove in the gloom of approaching night to the city. All at once a man sprang upon me from a taxus-bush behind me, and I felt cold steel at my throat. But the next moment the murderer lay at my feet, Totila's sword in his breast. Only slightly wounded, I bent over the dying man, and asked him what reason he had to hate and murder me. But he stared in my face, and breathed out, "Not thee--Totila, the Goth!" and he gave a convulsive shiver and was dead. By his costume and weapons, we saw that he was an Isaurian mercenary."

Again the hand which held the letter dropped, and Cethegus pressed the other to his forehead.

"Madness of chance!" he said; "to what mightest thou not have led!" And he read to the end. "Totila said he had many enemies at Ravenna. We reported the incident to Uliaris, the Gothic Earl at Neapolis. He caused the corpse to be examined, and instituted an inquiry--without result. But this grave event has cemented our youthful friendship and consecrated it with blood for ever. It has united us in an earnest and holy bond. The seal-ring of the Dioscuri, which you gave me at parting, was a friendly omen, and it has been pleasantly fulfilled; and when I ask myself to whom is owing all my happiness, it is to you, to you alone, who sent me to this city, where I have found all that I wanted! So may the gods requite you for it! Ah, I see that my letter speaks only of myself and this friendship--write to me speedily, I beg, and let me know how things go with you.--*Vale.*"

A bitter smile passed across the Prefect's expressive mouth, and he again measured the room with rapid strides. At last he stopped, supporting his chin in his hand:

"How can I be so--childish--as to vex myself? It is all very natural, if very foolish. You are sick, Julius. Wait; I will write you a prescription."

And with an expression of pleased malice on his face, he seated himself upon the writing-divan, took a Cnidian reed-pen, and wrote with the red ink from a cup of agate, in the shape of a lion's head, which was screwed into the lectus:

"To Julius Montanus: Cethegus, Prefect of Rome.

"Your touching epistle from Neapolis amused me much. It shows that you have not yet outlived the last childish ailments. When you have laid them aside you will be a man. In order to precipitate this crisis, I will prescribe the best means. You will at once seek for the trader in purple, Valerius Procillus, the oldest friend that I have in Neapolis. He is the richest merchant of the East, an inveterate enemy of the Emperor of Byzantium, and as good a republican as Cato; merely on that account he is my trusted friend. But his daughter, Valeria Procilla, is the most beautiful Roman girl of our time, and a true daughter of the ancient, the heathen world. She is only three years younger than you, and therefore ten times as wise. At the same time her father will not refuse you if you explain to him that Cethegus sues for you. But thou wilt fall deeply in love at first sight! Of this I am sure; although I tell it you beforehand, although you know that I wish it. In her arms you will forget all the friends in the world; when the sun rises, the moon pales. Besides, do you know that your Castor is one of the most dangerous enemies of the Romans? And I once knew a certain Julius who swore: 'Rome before all things!'-- *Vale*."

Cethegus rolled the papyrus together, tied it with a string of red bast, fastened the knot with wax, and pressed his amethyst ring, engraved with a splendid head of Jupiter, upon it. Then he touched a silver eagle which protruded from the marble wainscoting of the room; outside, upon the wall of the vestibule, a bronze thunderbolt struck upon the silver shield of a fallen Titan with a clear bell-like tone. The slave re-entered the room.

"Let the messenger have a bath; give him food and wine, a gold solidus, and this letter. Tomorrow at sunrise he will return to Neapolis."

CHAPTER VII.

Several weeks later we find the grave Prefect in a circle which seemed very ill-suited to his lofty character, or even to his age.

In the singular juxtaposition of heathenism and Christianity which, during the first century succeeding Constantine's conversion, filled the life and manners of the Roman world with such harsh contrasts, the peaceful mingling of the old and the new religious festivals played a striking part. Generally the merry feasts of the ancient gods still existed, together with the great holidays of the Christian Church, though usually robbed of their original significance, of their religious kernel. The people allowed themselves to be deprived of the belief in Jupiter and Juno, of sacrifices and ceremonies, but not of the games, the festivities, the dances and banquets, by which those ceremonies had been accompanied; and the Church was at all times wise and tolerant enough to suffer what she could not prevent. Thus, even the truly heathen Lupercalia, which were distinguished by gross superstition and all kinds of rude excess, were only, and with great difficulty, abolished in the year 496.

The days of the Floralia were come, which formerly were celebrated over the whole continent with noisy games and dances, as being specially a feast of happy youth; and which, in the days we speak of, were at least passed in banqueting and drinking.

And so the two Licinii, with their circle of young gallants and patricians, had made an appointment to meet together for a symposium upon the principal holiday of the Floralia, to which, as at our picnics, every one contributed his share of food and wine.

The guests assembled at the house of young Kallistratos, an amiable and rich Greek from Corinth, who had settled in Rome to enjoy an artistic leisure, and had built, near the gardens of Sallust, a tasteful house, which became the focus of luxury and polite society.

Besides the rich Roman aristocracy, this house was particularly frequented by artists and scholars; and also by that stratum of the Roman youth, which could spare little time and thought from its horses, chariots and dogs for the State, and which until now had therefore been inaccessible to the influence of the Prefect.

For this reason Cethegus was well-pleased when young Lucius Licinius, now his most devoted

adherent, brought him an invitation from the Corinthian.

"I know," said Licinius modestly, "that we can offer you no appropriate entertainment; and if the Falernian and Cyprian, with which Kallistratos regales his guests, do not entice you, you can decline to come."

"No, my son; I will come," said Cethegus; "and it is not the old Cyprian which tempts me, but the young Romans."

Kallistratos, who loved to display his Grecian origin, had built his house in the midst of Rome in Grecian style; not in the style then prevalent, but in that of the free Greece of Pericles, which, by contrast with the tasteless overcharging usual in Rome in those days, made an impression of noble simplicity.

Through a narrow passage one entered the peristyle, or open court, surrounded by a colonnade, in the centre of which a splashing fountain fell into a coloured marble basin. The colonnade, open to the north, contained, besides other rooms, the banqueting hall, in which the company was now assembled.

Cethegus had stipulated that he should not be present at the *cœna*, or actual banquet, but only at the *compotatio*, the drinking-bout which followed.

So he found the friends in the elegant drinking-room, where the bronze lamps upon the tortoise-shell slabs on the walls were already lighted, and the guests, crowned with roses and ivy, lay upon the cushions of the horse-shoe-shaped triclinium.

A stupefying mixture of wine-odours and flower-scents, a glare of torches and glow of colour, met him upon the threshold.

"*Salve*, Cethegus!" cried the host, as he entered. "You find but a small party."

Cethegus ordered the slave who followed him, a beautiful and slender young Moor, whose finely-shaped limbs were rather revealed than hidden by the scarlet gauze of his light tunic, to unloose his sandals. Meanwhile he counted the guests.

"Not less than the Graces, nor more than the Muses," he said with a smile.

"Quick, choose a wreath," said Kallistratos, "and take your place up there, upon the seat of honour on the couch. We have chosen you beforehand for the king of the feast."

The Prefect was determined to charm these young people. He knew how well he could do so, and that day he wished to make a particular impression. He chose a crown of roses, and took the ivory sceptre, which a Syrian slave handed to him upon his knees.

Placing the rose-wreath on his head, he raised the sceptre with dignity.

"Thus I put an end to your freedom!"

"A born ruler!" cried Kallistratos, half in joke, half in earnest.

"But I will be a gentle tyrant! My first law: one-third water--two-thirds wine."

"Oho!" cried Lucius Licinius, and drank to him, "*bene te!* you govern luxuriously. Equal parts is usually our strongest mixture."

"Yes, friend," said Cethegus, smiling, and seating himself upon the corner seat of the central triclinium, the "Consul's seat," "but I took lessons in drinking amongst the Egyptians; they drink pure wine. Ho, cupbearer--what is he called?"

"Ganymede--he is from Phrygia. Fine fellow--eh?"

"So, Ganymede, obey thy Jupiter, and place near each guest; a patera of Mamertine wine--but near Balbus two, because he is a countryman."

The young people laughed.

Balbus was a rich Sicilian proprietor, still quite young, and already very stout.

"Bah!" said he, laughing, "ivy round my head, and an amethyst on my finger--I defy the power of Bacchus!"

"Well, at which wine have you arrived?" asked Cethegus, at the same time signing to the Moor who now stood behind him, and who at once brought a second wreath of roses, and, this time, wound it about his neck.

"Must of Setinum, with honey from Hymettus, was the last. There, try it!" said Piso, the roguish poet, whose epigrams and anacreontics could not be copied quickly enough by the booksellers; and whose finances, notwithstanding, were always in poetical disorder. He handed to the Prefect what we should call a *vexing-cup*, a bronze serpent's-head, which, lifted carelessly

to the lips, violently shot a stream of wine into the drinker's throat.

But Cethegus knew the trick, drank carefully, and returned the cup.

"I like your *dry* wit better, Piso," he said, laughing; and snatched a wax tablet from a fold in the other's garment.

"Oh, give it me back," said Piso; "it is no verses--just the contrary--a list of my debts for wine and horses."

"Well," observed Cethegus, "I have taken it--so it and they are mine. To-morrow you may fetch the quittance at my house; but not for nothing--for one of your most spiteful epigrams upon my pious friend Silverius."

"Oh, Cethegus!" cried the poet, delighted and flattered, "how spiteful one can be for 40,000 solidi! Woe to the holy man of God!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"And the dessert--how far have you got there?" asked Cethegus, "already at the apples? are these they?" and he looked, screwing up his eyes, at two heaped-up fruit-baskets, which stood upon a bronze table with ivory legs.

"Ha, victory!" laughed Marcus Licinius, Lucius's younger brother, who amused himself with the then fashionable pastime of modelling in wax. "There! you see my art, Kallistratos! The Prefect thinks that my waxen apples, which I gave you yesterday, are real."

"Ah, indeed!" cried Cethegus, as if astonished, although he had long since noticed the smell of the wax with dislike. "Yes, art deceives the most acute. With whom did you learn? I should like to put similar ornaments in my Kyzikenian hall."

"I am an autodidact," said Marcus proudly, "and to-morrow I will send you my new Persian apples--for you honour art."

"But is the sitting at an end?" asked the Prefect, resting his left arm on the cushions of the triclinium.

"No," cried the host, "I will confess the truth. As I could not reckon upon the king of our feast until the dessert, I have prepared a little after-feast to be taken with the wine."

"Oh, you sinner!" cried Balbus, wiping his greasy lips upon the rough purple Turkish table-cover, "and I have eaten such a terrible quantity of your *becca-ficchi*!"

"It is against the agreement!" cried Marcus Licinius.

"It will spoil my manners," said the merry Piso gravely.

"Say, is that Hellenic simplicity?" asked Lucius Licinius.

"Peace, friends!" and Cethegus comforted them with a quotation: "'E'en unexpected hurt, a Roman bears unmoved.'"

"The Hellenic host must adjust himself according to his guests," said Kallistratos, excusing himself. "I feared you would not come again if I offered you Marathonian fare."

"Well, at least confess with what you menace us," cried Cethegus. "Thou, Nomenclator! read the bill of fare. I will then decide upon the suitable wines."

The slave--a handsome Lydian boy, dressed in a garment of blue Pelusian linen, slit up to the knee--came close to Cethegus at the cypress-wood table, and read from a little tablet which he carried fastened to a golden chain about his neck:

"Fresh oysters from Britannia, in tunny-sauce, with lettuce."

"With this dish, Falernian from Fundi," said Cethegus at once. "But where is the sideboard with the cups? Good wine deserves handsome goblets."

"There is the sideboard!" And at a sign from the host, a curtain, which had concealed a corner of the room opposite the guests, dropped.

A cry of astonishment ran round the table.

The richness of the service displayed, and the taste with which it was arranged, surprised even these fastidious feasters.

Upon the marble slab of a side-table stood a roomy silver carriage, with golden wheels and

bronze horses. It was a model of a booty-wagon, such as were used in Roman triumphal processions, and, like a costly booty, within it was piled, in seeming disorder, but with an artistic hand, a quantity of goblets, glasses, and salvers, of every shape and material.

"By Mars the Victor!" laughed the Prefect, "the first Roman triumph for two hundred years! A rare sight! Dare I destroy it?"

"You are the man to set it up again," said Lucius, with fire.

"Do you think so? Let us try! First, we will have that goblet of pistachio-wood for the Falernian."

"Wind-thrushes from the Tagus, with asparagus from Tarento," continued the Lydian, reading the bill of fare.

"With that, red Massikian from Sinuessa, to be drunk out of that amethyst goblet."

"Young lobsters from Trapezunt, with flamingo-tongues."

"Stop! By holy Bacchus!" cried Balbus, "it is the torture of Tantalus. It is all the same to me out of what I drink, whether from pistachio-wood or amethyst; but to listen to this list of divine dainties with a dry throat, is more than I can stand. Down with Cethegus, the tyrant! Let him die, if he lets us thirst!"

"I feel as if I were Emperor, and heard the roar of the faithful Roman populace! I will save my life and yield. Serve the dishes, slaves."

At this the sound of flutes was heard from an outer room, and six slaves entered, marching in time to the music, with ivy in their shining, anointed locks, and dressed in red mantles and white tunics. They gave to each guest a snowy cloth of finest Sidonian linen, with purple fringes.

"Oh," cried Massurius, a young merchant who traded principally with beautiful slaves of both sexes, and enjoyed the rather doubtful reputation of being a great critic in such wares, "the best cloth is beautiful hair," and he passed his hands through the locks of a Ganymede who was kneeling near him.

"But, Kallistratos, I hope those flutes are of the female sex. Up with the curtain; let the girls in."

"Not yet," ordered Cethegus. "First drink, then kiss. Without Bacchus and Ceres, you know----"

"Venus freezes, but not Massurius!"

All at once lyres and citharas sounded from the side room, and there entered a procession of eight youths in shining silken garments of a gold-green colour. Foremost the "dresser" and the "carver." The other six bore dishes upon their heads. They passed the guests with measured steps, and halted at the sideboard of citron-wood. While they were busy there, castanets and cymbals were heard from another part of the house; the large double doors turned upon their shining bronze hinges, and a swarm of slaves in the becoming costume of Corinthian youths streamed into the room.

Some handed bread in ornamentally-perforated baskets; others whisked the flies away with fans of ostrich feathers and palm-leaves; some gracefully poured oil into the wall-lamps from double-handled vases; whilst others swept the crumbs from the mosaic pavement with besoms of Egyptian reeds, or helped Ganymede to fill the cups, which now were circling merrily.

The conversation grew more rapid and animated, and Cethegus, who, although he remained cool and collected, seemed to be quite lost in the enjoyment of the moment, charmed the young guests by his youthful gaiety.

"What do you say?" asked the host, "shall we play dice between the dishes? There stands the dice-box, near Piso."

"Well, Massurius," observed Cethegus, with a sarcastic look at the slave-dealer, "will you try your luck with me once more? Will you bet against me? Give him the dice-box, Syphax," he said to the Moor.

"Mercury forbid!" answered Massurius, with comical fright. "Have nothing to do with the Prefect he has inherited the luck of his ancestor, Julius Cæsar."

"Omen accipio!" laughed Cethegus. "I accept the omen, with the dagger of Brutus into the bargain."

"I tell you, he is a magician! Only lately he won an unwinnable bet against me about this black demon," and the speaker threw a cactus-fig at the slave's face, but Syphax caught it cleverly with his shining white teeth, and quietly ate it up.

"Well done, Syphax!" said Cethegus. "Roses from the thorns of the enemy! Thou canst become

a conjurer as soon as I let thee free."

"Syphax does not wish to be free: he will always be your Syphax, and save your life as you saved his."

"What is that--thy life?" asked Lucius Licinius.

"Did you pardon him?" asked Marcus.

"More than that, I bought him off."

"Yes, with my money!" grumbled Massurius.

"You know that I immediately gave him the money I won from you as his private possession," answered Cethegus.

"What about this bet? Let us hear. Perhaps it will afford a subject for my epigrams," said Piso.

"Retire, Syphax. There! the cook is bringing us his masterpiece, it seems."

CHAPTER IX.

It was a turbot weighing six pounds, which for years had been fed with goose-liver in the sea-water fishponds of Kallistratos. The much-prized "Rhombus" was served upon a silver dish, with a little golden crown on its head.

"All ye gods, and thou, Prophet Jonah!" stammered Balbus, sinking back upon the cushions, "that fish is worth more than I!"

"Peace, friend," said Piso, "let not Cato hear thee, who said, 'Woe to that city where a fish is worth more than an ox.'"

A burst of laughter, and the loud call of "*Euge belle!*" drowned the angry exclamation of the half-drunken Sicilian.

The fish was carved, and was found delicious.

"Now, slaves, away with the weak Massikian. A noble fish must swim in noble liquid. Quick, Syphax, the wine which I have contributed to the banquet will suit exactly. Go, and let the amphora, which the slaves have set in snow outside, be brought in, and with it the cups of yellow amber."

"What rare thing have you brought--from what country?" asked Kallistratos.

"Ask this far-travelled Odysseus, from what hemisphere," said Piso.

"You must guess. And whoever guesses right, or whoever has already tasted this wine, shall have an amphora from me as large as this."

Two slaves, crowned with ivy, dragged in the immense dark-coloured vase; it was of brown-black porphyry and of a singular shape, inscribed with hieroglyphics and well closed at the neck with plaster.

"By the Styx! does it come from Tartarus? It is indeed a black fellow!" said Marcus, laughing.

"But it has a white soul--show, Syphax."

The Nubian carefully knocked off the plaster with an ebony hammer which Ganymede handed to him, took out the stopper of palm-rind with a bronze hook, poured away the oil which swam at the top of the wine, and filled the cups. A strong and intoxicating odour arose from the white and sticky fluid.

Every one drank with an air of examination.

"A drink fit for the gods!" cried Balbus, setting down his cup.

"But as strong as liquid fire," said Kallistratos.

"I do not know it," said Lucius Licinius.

"Nor I," affirmed Marcus Licinius.

"And I am happy to make its acquaintance," said Piso, and held his empty cup to Syphax.

"Well," said the host, turning to an, until now, almost silent guest at his right hand, "well, Furius, valiant sailor, discoverer and adventurer! you who have sailed round the world, is *your*

wisdom also at fault?"

The guest slightly raised himself from the cushions. He was a handsome athletic man of about thirty years of age, with a bronzed weather-beaten complexion, coal-black, deep-set eyes, dazzling white teeth, and a full beard, trimmed in Oriental fashion. But before he could speak Kallistratos interposed:

"By Jupiter Xenios! I believe you do not know each other!"

Cethegus measured his unknown and attractive companion with a keen look.

"I know the Prefect of Rome," said the silent guest.

"Well, Cethegus," said Kallistratos, "this is my Vulcanic friend, Furius Ahalla, from Corsica, the richest ship-owner of the West; deep as night and hot as fire. He possesses fifty houses, villas and palaces on all the coasts of Europe, Asia, and Africa; twenty galleys; a few thousand slaves and sailors, and----"

"And a very talkative friend," concluded the Corsican. "Prefect, I am sorry for you, but the amphora is mine. I know the wine." And he took a Kibitz-egg and broke the shell with a silver spoon.

"Hardly," said Cethegus with a sarcastic smile.

"Nevertheless I do know it. It is Isis-wine. From Memphis." And the Corsican quietly sipped the golden yolk of his egg.

Cethegus looked at him in surprise.

"Well guessed!" he then said. "Where have you tasted it?"

"Necessarily in the same place as you. It flows only from one source," said the Corsican, smiling.

"Enough of your secrets! No riddles under the rose!" cried Piso.

"Where have you two weasels found the same nest?" asked Kallistratos.

"Indeed," said Cethegus, "you may as well know it. In Old Egypt, and particularly in holy Memphis, there remain near the Christian settlers and monks in the deserts, men, and especially women, who still cling to their old faith; who will not forsake Apis and Osiris, and cherish faithfully the sweet worship of Isis. They fly from the surface, where the Church has victoriously planted the cross of the ascetics, to the secret bosom of Mother Earth with their holy and beloved religious ceremonies. They still keep, hidden below the pyramids of Cheops, a few hundred amphoras of the strong wine which intoxicated the initiated at the orgies of joy and love. The secret is kept from generation to generation, there is always only one priestess who knows the cellar and keeps the key. I kissed the priestess and she let me in. She was like a wild cat, but her wine was good; and at parting she gave me five amphoras to take on board my ship."

"I did not get as far as that with Smerda," said the Corsican. "She let me drink in the cellar, but at parting she only gave me this." And he bared his brown throat.

"A dagger-stab of jealousy!" laughed Cethegus. "Well, I am glad that the daughter has not degenerated. In my time, that is, when the mother let me drink, the little Smerda still ran about in baby-frocks. Long live the Nile and sweet Isis!" And the two men drank to each other. But yet they were vexed that they shared a secret which each believed he had possessed alone.

The others, however, were charmed by the amiable humour of the icy Prefect, who chatted with them as youthfully as the youngest amongst them, and who now, when the favourite theme of young men at the wine-cup had been introduced--love adventures and stories of lovely women--bubbled over with anecdotes of jests and tricks, of most of which he had himself been witness. Every one stormed him with questions. The Corsican alone remained dumb and cold.

"Say," cried the host, and signed to the cup-bearer just as a burst of mirth caused by one of these stories had ceased; "tell us, you man of varied experience--Egyptian Isis-girls, Gallic Druidesses, black-haired daughters of Syria, and my plastic sisters of Hellas--all these you know and understand how to value; but tell us, have you ever loved a Germanic woman?"

"No," said Cethegus, "they were always too insipid for me."

"Oho!" said Kallistratos; "that is saying too much. I tell you, I was mad all the last calendars for a German girl; she was not at all insipid."

"What? you, Kallistratos of Corinth, the countryman of Aspasia and Helena, you could burn for a barbarian woman? Oh, wicked Eros, sense-confuser, man-shamer!"

"Well, I acknowledge it was an error of the senses. I have never before experienced such."

"Relate, relate!" cried all the others.

CHAPTER X.

"With pleasure," said the host, smoothing his cushions; "although I play no brilliant part in the story. Well, some time ago I was returning home from the baths of Abaskanthus at about the eighth hour. In the street I found a woman's litter, accompanied by four slaves, who, I believe, were captive Gepidians. And exactly opposite the door of my house stood two veiled women, their calanticas thrown over their heads. One wore the garment of a slave, but the other was very richly and tastefully dressed; and the little that could be seen of her figure was divine. Such a graceful walk, such slender ankles, such an arched instep! As I approached they entered the litter and were gone. But I--you know that a sculptor's blood flows in the veins of every Greek--I dreamt all night of the slender ankles and the light step. The next day at noon, as I opened the door to go, as usual, to the bibliographers in the Forum, I saw the same litter hurrying away. I confess--though I am not usually vain--I thought that this time I had made a conquest; I wished it so much. And I could no longer doubt it, when, coming home again at the eighth hour, I saw my strange beauty, this time unaccompanied, slip past me and hurry to her litter. I could not follow the quick-footed slaves, so I entered my house, full of happy thoughts. The ostiarius met me and said:

"Sir, a veiled female slave waits in the library.'

"I hurried to the room with a beating heart. It was really the slave whom I had seen yesterday. She threw back her mantle; a handsome coquettish Moor or Carthaginian--I know the sort--looked at me with sly eyes.

"I claim the reward of a messenger, Kallistratos,' she said; 'I bring you good news.'

"I took her hand and would have patted her cheek--for who desires to win the mistress must kiss the slave--but she laughed and said:

"No, not Eros; Hermes sends me. My mistress"--I listened eagerly. 'My mistress is--a passionate lover of art. She offers you three thousand solidi for the bust of Ares which stands in the niche at the door of your house.'"

The young guests laughed loudly, Cethegus joining in their merriment.

"Well, laugh away!" continued the host, smiling; "but I assure you I did not laugh. My dreams were dashed to pieces, and I said, greatly vexed, 'I do not sell my busts.' The slave offered five thousand, ten thousand solidi. I turned my back upon her and opened the door. Then the sly puss said, 'I know that Kallistratos is indignant because he expected an adventure, and only found a money-affair. He is a Greek, and loves beauty; he burns with curiosity to see my mistress.' This was so true, that I could only smile. 'Well,' she said, 'you shall see her, and then I will renew my last offer. Should you still refuse, at least you will have had the advantage of satisfying your curiosity. To-morrow, at the eighth hour, the litter will come again. Then be ready with your Ares.' And she slipped away. I cannot deny that my curiosity was aroused. Quite decided not to give up my Ares, and yet to see this beauteous art-enthusiast, I waited impatiently for the appointed hour. It came, and with it the litter. I stood watching at my open door. The slave descended. 'Come,' she called to me, 'you shall see her.' Trembling with excitement, I stepped forward, the curtain fell, and I saw----"

"Well?" cried Marcus, bending forward, his cup in his hand.

"What I shall never again forget! a face, friends, of unimagined beauty. Cypris and Artemis in one! I was dazzled. But I hurried back, lifted the Ares from its niche, gave it to the Punic slave, refused her money, and staggered into my house as confused as if I had seen a wood-nymph."

"Well, that is wonderful," laughed Massurius; "you are else no novice in the works of Eros."

"But," asked Cethegus, "how do you know that your charmer was a Goth?"

"She had dark-red hair, and a milk-white skin, and black eyebrows."

"Oh, ye gods!" thought Cethegus. But he was silent and waited. No one present uttered the name. "They do not know her.--And when was this?" he asked his host.

"During the last calendars."

"Quite right," thought Cethegus. "She came at that time from Tarentum through Rome to Ravenna. She rested here for three days."

"And so," said Piso, laughing, "you gave your Ares for a look at a beautiful woman! A bad bargain! This time, Mercury and Venus were allies. Poor Kallistratos!"

"Oh," said Kallistratos, "the bust was not worth so very much. It was modern work. Ion of

Neapolis made it three years, ago. But I tell you, I would give a Phidias for such a look."

"An ideal head?" asked Cethegus indifferently, and lifted admiringly the bronze mixing-vase which stood before him.

"No; the model was a barbarian--some Gothic earl or other--Watichis or Witichas--who can remember these hyperborean names," said Kalistratos, as he peeled a peach.

Cethegus reflectively sipped his wine from the cup of amber.

CHAPTER XI.

"Well, one might put up with the barbarian women," cried Marcus Licinius, "but may Orcus devour their brothers!" and he tore the faded rose-wreath from his head--the flowers could ill bear the close air of the room--and replaced it by a fresh one. "Not only have they deprived us of liberty--they even beat us upon the field of love, with the daughters of Hesperia. Only lately, the beautiful Lavinia shut the door upon my brother, and received the foxy-haired Aligern."

"Barbaric taste!" observed Lucius, shrugging his shoulders, and taking to his Isis-wine, as if to comfort himself. "You know the Goths too, Furius; is it not an error of taste?"

"I do not know your rival," answered the Corsican; "but there are youths enough among the Goths who might well be dangerous to a woman. And an adventure occurs to me, which I lately discovered, but of which, certainly, the point is still wanting."

"That does not matter; tell it to us," said Kallistratos, putting his hands into the luke-warm water, which was now handed round in Corinthian bronze vessels; "perhaps we can find the point."

"The hero of my story," began Furius, "is the handsomest of all the Goths."

"Ah, the young Totila," interrupted Piso, and gave his cameo-decorated cup to be filled with iced wine.

"The same. I have known him for years, and like him exceedingly, as all must who have ever looked into his sunny face; not to speak of the fact"--and here the shadow of some grave remembrance flitted across the Corsican's face, as he hesitated--"that I am under an obligation to him."

"It seems that you are in love with the fair-haired youth," said Massurius sarcastically, and throwing to the slave he had brought with him a kerchief full of Picentinian biscuits, to take home with him.

"No; but he has been very friendly to me, as he is to every one with whom he comes into contact; and very often he had the harbour-watch in the Italian ports where I landed."

"Yes, he has rendered great services to the Gothic navy," said Lucius Licinius.

"As well as to their cavalry," concurred Marcus. "The slender youth is the best rider in his nation."

"Well, I met him last in Neapolis. We were well-pleased to meet, but it was in vain that I pressed him to share our merry suppers on board my ship."

"Oh, those suppers are both celebrated and ill-famed," observed Balbus; "you have always the most fiery wines."

"And the most fiery girls," added Massurius.

"However that may be, Totila always pleaded business, and was not to be persuaded. Imagine that! business after the eighth hour in Neapolis, when the most industrious are lazy! Naturally, it was only an excuse. I promised myself to find out his pranks, and, at evening, loitered near his house in the Via Lata. And truly, the very first evening he came out, looking carefully about him, and, to my surprise, in disguise. He was dressed like a gardener, with a travelling-cap well drawn down over his face, and a cloak folded closely about him. I dogged his footsteps. He went straight through the town to the Porta Capuana. Close to the gate stands a large tower, inhabited by the gate-keeper, an old patriarchal Jew, whom King Theodoric, on account of his great fidelity, entrusted with the office of warder. My Goth stood still before the house, and gently clapped his hands. A little side-door, which I had not remarked before, opened noiselessly, and Totila slipped in like an eel."

"Ho, ho!" interrupted Piso eagerly, "I know both the Jew and his child Miriam--a splendid large-eyed girl! The most beautiful daughter of Israel, the pearl of the East! Her lips are red as pomegranates, her eyes are deep sea-blue, her cheeks have the rosy bloom of the peach."

"Well done, Piso," said Cethegus, smiling; "your poem is very beautiful."

"No," he answered, "Miriam herself is living poetry."

"The Jewess is proud," grumbled Massurius, "she scorned my gold with a look as if no one had ever bought a woman before."

"So the haughty Goth," said Lucius Licinius, "who walks with an air as if he earned all heaven's stars upon his curly head, has condescended to a Jewess."

"So I thought, and I determined, at the next opportunity, to laugh at the youth for his predilection for musk. But nothing of the sort! A few days later, I was obliged to go to Capua. I started before daybreak to avoid the heat. I drove out of the town through the Porta Capuana, just as it was dawning, and as I rattled over the hard stones before the Jews' tower, I thought with envy of Totila, and said to myself that he was then lying in the embrace of two white arms. But at the second milestone from the gate, walking towards the town, with two empty flower-baskets hanging over his breast and back, dressed in a gardener's costume, just as before, whom should I meet but Totila! Therefore he was not lying in Miriam's arms; the Jewess was not his sweetheart, but perhaps his confidante; and who knows where the flower that this gardener cherishes blooms? The lucky fellow! Only consider that on the Via Capuana stand all the villas and pleasure-houses of the first families of Neapolis, and that in these gardens flourish and bloom the loveliest of women."

"By my genius!" cried Lucius Licinius, lifting his wreathed goblet, "in that region live the most beautiful women of Italia--cursed be the Goths!"

"No," shouted Massurius, glowing with wine, "cursed be Kallistratos and the Corsican! who offer us strange love-stories, as the stork offered the fox food from narrow-necked flasks. Now, O mine host, let your girls in, if you have ordered any. You need not excite our expectation any further."

"Yes, yes! the girls! the dancers! the players!" cried the young guests all together.

"Hold!" said the host. "When Aphrodite comes, she must tread upon flowers. This glass I dedicate to thee, Flora!"

He sprang up, and dashed a costly crystal cup against the tabled ceiling, so that it broke with a loud ring. As soon as the glass struck the ceiling, the whole of it opened like a trap-door, and a thick rain of flowers of all kinds fell upon the heads of the astonished guests; roses from Pæstum, violets from Thurii, myrtles from Tarentum; covering with scented bunches the tessellated floor, the tables, the cushions, and the heads of the drinkers.

"Never," cried Cethegus, "did Venus descend more beautifully upon Paphos!"

Kallistratos clapped his hands.

To the sound of lyre and flute the centre wall of the room, directly opposite the triclinium, parted; four short-robed female dancers, chosen for their beauty, in Persian costume, that is, dressed in transparent rose-coloured gauze, sprang, clashing their cymbals, from behind a bush of blooming oleander.

Behind them came a large carriage in the form of a fan-shaped shell, with golden wheels, pushed by eight young female slaves. Four girls, playing on the flute, and dressed in Lydian garments--purple and white with gold-embroidered mantles--walked before, and upon the seat of the carriage rested, in a half-lying position, and covered with roses, Aphrodite herself; a blooming girl of enchanting, voluptuous beauty, whose almost only garment was an imitation of Aphrodite's girdle of the Graces.

"Ha, by Eros and Anteros!" cried Massurius, and sprang down from the triclinium with an unsteady step amidst the group.

"Let us draw lots for the girls," said Piso; "I have new dice made from the bones of the gazelle. Let us inaugurate them."

"Let our festal King decide," proposed Marcus.

"No, freedom! freedom at least in love!" cried Massurius, and roughly caught the goddess by the arm; "and music. Hey there! Music!"

"Music!" ordered Kallistratos.

But before the cymbal-players could begin, the entrance-doors were hastily thrown open, and pushing the slaves who tried to stop him aside, Scævola rushed in. He was deadly pale.

"You here! I really find you here, Cethegus! at this moment!" he cried.

"What's the matter?" asked the Prefect, quietly taking the wreath of roses off his head.

"What's the matter!" repeated Scævola. "The fatherland trembles between Scylla and Charybdis! The Gothic Dukes, Thulun, Ibba, and Pitza----"

"Well?" asked Lucius Licinius.

"Are murdered!"

"Triumph!" shouted the young Roman, and let loose the dancer whom he held in his arms.

"A fine triumph!" said the jurist angrily. "When the news reached Ravenna, the mob accused the Queen; they stormed the palace--but Amalasintha had escaped."

"Whither?" asked Cethegus, starting up.

"Whither! Upon a Grecian ship--to Byzantium."

Cethegus frowned and silently set down his cup.

"But the worst is that the Goths mean to dethrone her, and choose a King."

"A King?" said Cethegus. "Well, I will call the Senate together. The Romans, too, shall choose."

"Whom? what shall we choose?" asked Scævola.

But Cethegus was not obliged to answer.

Before he could speak Lucius shouted:

"A Dictator! Away, away to the Senate!"

"To the Senate!" repeated Cethegus majestically. "Syphax, my mantle!"

"Here, master, and the sword as well," whispered the Moor. "I always bring it with me, in case of need."

And host and guests, staggering, followed Cethegus, who, the only completely sober man amongst them, was the first out of the house and into the street.

CHAPTER XII.

In one of the small rooms of the Emperor's palace in Byzantium, a short time after the Feast of the Floralia, a little man of insignificant appearance was pacing to and fro, lost in anxious thought.

The room was quiet and lonely. Although outside it was broad daylight, the bay-window, which looked into the court of the extensive edifice, was thickly hung with heavy curtains of gold-brocade. Equally costly stuffs covered the mosaic floor, so that no noise accompanied the footsteps of the solitary inmate.

A softened light filled the room. Relieved against the golden background of the walls, stood a row of small white busts of the Christian Emperors since Constantine. Exactly over a writing divan, hung a large cross of massive gold. Whenever the little man passed this, he bent before it; for in the middle of the gold, and covered with glass, a splinter of wood was enclosed, said to be a piece of the true Cross. At last he stopped before a map, which, representing the *orbis Romanus*, and traced upon a parchment with a purple border, covered one of the walls.

After a long and searching look, he sighed and covered his eyes with his hands. They were not beautiful, nor was his face noble; but his features were exceedingly suggestive both of good and evil. Mistrust, cunning and vigilance lay in the restless glance of his deep-set eyes; deep wrinkles, more the result of care than of age, furrowed his projecting forehead and hollow cheeks.

"Who can foresee the result?" he exclaimed, sighing again, and rubbing his long and bony hands. "I am unceasingly impelled to do it. A spirit has entered my bosom, and it warns me repeatedly. But is it an angel of the Lord or a demon? Who can interpret my dream? Forgive, Thou Triune God, forgive Thy most zealous servant! Thou hast cursed him who interprets dreams. And yet Joseph interpreted the dreams of King Pharaoh, and Jacob saw the heavens open; and their dreams were from Thee. Shall I, dare I venture?"

Again he walked to and fro; and who knows how long he would have continued to do so, had not the purple curtains of the doorway been gently drawn aside. A slave, glittering with gold, threw himself on the ground before the little man, with his arms crossed on his breast.

"Emperor, the patricians whom you summoned have arrived.

"Patience!" said the Emperor to himself, and seated himself upon a couch, of which the supports were made of gold and ivory. "Quick with the shoes and the chlamys!"

The slave drew a pair of sandals with thick soles and high heels upon the Emperor's feet, which added some inches to his height, and threw over his shoulders a rich mantle worked all over with stars of gold, kissing each article as he touched it. After a repetition of the humble prostration, which had lately been introduced at Byzantium in this aggravated form of Oriental submission, the slave withdrew.

Emperor Justinian placed himself opposite the entrance in the attitude in which he was accustomed to give audience, resting his left arm upon a broken porphyry column from the Temple of Jerusalem.

The curtain at the entrance was again parted, and three men entered, with the same salutation as the slave; and yet they were the first men of the empire, as was shown by their characteristic heads and intellectual features, still more than by their richly-decorated garments.

"We have summoned you," began the Emperor, without noticing their humble greeting, "to hear your advice concerning Italy. You have had all necessary information--the letters of the Queen-regent, and the documents of the patriotic party. You have also had three days to reflect. Speak first, Magister Militum."

And he turned to the tallest of the three, a man of stately and heroic figure, clad in a full suit of richly-gilded armour. His well-opened, light-brown eyes were frank and confident; his large, straight nose and full cheeks gave his face an expression of health and strength. There was something Herculean about his broad chest and powerful thighs and arms; but his mouth, in spite of the fierce beard, was mild and good-humoured.

"Sire," he said, in a full, deep-chested voice, "the advice of Belisarius is always, 'Attack the enemy!' At your command, I lately destroyed the Kingdom of the Vandals, in Africa, with fifteen thousand men. Give me thirty thousand, and I will lay the Gothic crown at your feet."

"'Tis well," said the Emperor approvingly. "Your words have done me good. What say you, Tribonianus, pearl of jurists?"

The jurist was little shorter than Belisarius, but not so broad-shouldered and stout-limbed. His high, grave forehead, quiet eyes, and expressive mouth, bore witness to a powerful mind.

"Emperor," said he firmly, "I warn you against this war. It is unjust."

Justinian started up indignantly.

"Unjust!--to recover that which belongs to the Roman Empire!"

"Which *did* belong. Your predecessor, Zeno, ceded the West to Theodoric and his Goths when they had overthrown the usurper Odoacer."

"Theodoric was to be the Viceregent of the Emperor, not the King of Italy."

"Admitted. But after he had become King--as he could not fail to do, for a Theodoric could never be the servant of another--the Emperor Anastasius, your uncle Justinus, and, later, you yourself, acknowledged him and his kingdom."

"That was under the pressure of necessity. Now that they are in need, and I the stronger, I revoke that acknowledgment."

"That is exactly what I call unjust."

"You are blunt and disagreeable, Tribonianus, and a tough disputant. You are excellently fitted to compile my pandects. I will never again ask your advice in politics. What has justice to do with politics?"

"Justice, Justinianus, is the best policy."

"Bah! Alexander and Cæsar thought differently."

"But, first, they never completed their work; and, secondly----"

He stopped.

"Well, secondly?"

"Secondly, you are not Cæsar, nor are you Alexander."

All were silent. After a pause, the Emperor said quietly:

"You are very frank, Tribonianus."

"Always, Justinianus."

The Emperor quickly turned to the third of his advisers:

"Well, what is your opinion, Narses?"

CHAPTER XIII.

Narses was a stunted little man, considerably shorter than Justinian, for which reason the latter stooped, when speaking with him, much more than was necessary. He was bald, his complexion a sickly yellow, his right shoulder higher than his left, and he limped a little on the left foot, supporting himself upon a stick with a golden crutch. But his eagle eye was so commanding, that it annulled any disagreeable impression made by his insignificant figure, and lent to his plain countenance the consecration of intellectual greatness, while the expression of painful resignation and cool superiority about his mouth had even a singular charm. When addressed by the Emperor, Narses quickly banished from his lips a cold smile, which had been excited by the jurist's moral politics, and raised his head.

"Emperor," he said, in a sharp, decided voice, "I would dissuade you from this war--for the present."

The Emperor bit his lips in vexation.

"Also from reasons of justice?" he asked, almost sarcastically.

"I said: for the present."

"Why?"

"Because what is necessary precedes what is pleasant. He who has to defend his own house should not break into strange dwellings."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, that no danger threatens your empire from the West, from the Goths. The enemy who can, and perhaps will, destroy it, comes from the East."

"The Persians!" cried Justinian contemptuously.

"Since when," interposed Belisarius, "since when does Narses, my great rival, fear the Persians?"

"Narses fears no one," answered the latter, without looking at his interrogator, "neither the Persians whom he has beaten, nor you whom the Persians have beaten. But he knows the Orient. If not the Persians, then it will be others who follow them. The tempest which threatens Byzantium approaches from the Tigris, not from the Tiber."

"Well, and what does that mean?"

"It means, that it is a shameful thing for you, O Emperor, and for the Roman name which we still bear, that you should, year by year, buy peace from Chosroes, the Persian Khan, at the cost of many hundredweights of gold."

The Emperor's face flushed scarlet.

"How can you put such a meaning upon gifts, subsidies?"

"Gifts! If they are not forthcoming but a week after the day of payment, Chosroes, the son of Cabades, burns your villages! Subsidies! With them he pays Huns and Saracens, the most dangerous enemies of your frontiers!"

Justinian walked rapidly through the room.

"What do you then advise?" he said at last, stopping short before Narses.

"Not to attack the Goths without necessity or reason, when we can scarcely defend ourselves from the Persians. To put forth the whole power of your empire in order to abolish this shameful tribute; to prevent the depredations on your frontiers; to rebuild the burnt towns of Antiochia, Dara, and Edessa; to win back the provinces which you lost, in spite of the valiant sword of Belisarius; and to protect your frontiers by a seven-fold girdle of fortresses from the Euphrates to the Araxes. And when you have completed this necessary work--and I fear much you cannot complete it--then you may follow where Fame leads."

Justinianus slightly shook his head.

"You are displeasing to me, Narses," he said bitterly.

"I knew that long ago," Narses answered quietly.

"And not indispensable," cried Belisarius proudly. "Do not listen, my great Emperor, to this

small doubter. Give me the thirty thousand, and I wager my right hand that I will conquer Italy for you."

"And I wager my head, which is more," said Narses, "that Belisarius will conquer Italy neither with thirty, nor with sixty, nor with a hundred thousand men."

"Well," asked Justinianus, "and who can do it, and with what forces?"

"I," said Narses, "with eighty thousand."

Belisarius grew red with anger; he was silent for want of words.

"You have never yet, with all your self-esteem, Narses," said the jurist, "vaunted yourself thus highly above your rival."

"I do not now, Tribonianus. See, the difference is this: Belisarius is a great hero, and I am not; but I am a great general, and Belisarius is not, and none but a great general can conquer the Goths."

Belisarius drew himself up to his full height, and angrily grasped his sword. He looked as if he would have gladly crushed the cripple near him.

The Emperor defended him. "Belisarius no great general! Envy blinds you, Narses."

"I envy Belisarius nothing, not even," answered Narses, slightly sighing, "his health. He would h& a great general if he were not so great a hero. Every battle which he has lost, he has lost through too great heroism."

"That can not be said of you, Narses," retorted Belisarius.

"No, Belisarius, for I have never yet lost a battle."

An angry retort from Belisarius was cut short by the entrance of a slave, who, lifting the curtain, announced:

"Alexandros, sire, who was sent to Ravenna, has landed an hour ago, and asks----"

"Bring him in! Here!" cried the Emperor, hastily starting from his seat. He impatiently signed to the ambassador, who entered at once, to rise from his obeisance.

"Well, Alexandros, you came back alone?"

The ambassador--a handsome and still young man--repeated: "Alone."

"But your last report said--In what condition have you left the Gothic kingdom?"

"In great confusion. I wrote in my last report that the Queen had decided to rid herself of her three most haughty enemies. Should the attempt fail, she would be no longer safe in Italy, and she begged to be allowed, in that case, to go in my ship to Epidamnus, and from thence to escape to Byzantium."

"And I accepted the proposal readily. Well, and the attempt?"

"Succeeded. The three dukes are no more. But the rumour had reached Ravenna that the most dangerous of them, Duke Thulun, was only wounded. This induced the Queen--as, besides, the Goths threateningly surrounded the palace--to escape to my ship. We weighed anchor, but soon after we had left the harbour, off Ariminum, Earl Witichis overtook us with superior numbers, boarded us, and demanded that Amalasintha should return, guaranteeing her safety until a solemn examination had taken place before the National Assembly. When she learnt from him that Duke Thulun had succumbed to his wounds, and saw from the proposal of Witichis that he and his powerful friends did not yet believe in her guilt, and as, besides, she apprehended compulsion, she consented to return with him to Ravenna. But first, on board the *Sophia*, she wrote this letter to you, and sends you this present from her treasury."

"Of that later. Tell me further, how do things, stand now in Italy?"

"Well for you, O great Emperor! An exaggerated account of the rebellion of the Goths at Ravenna and of the flight of the Queen to Byzantium, has flown through the whole country. Already many encounters have taken place between Romans and barbarians. In Rome itself the patriots wished to strike a blow at once; to choose a Dictator in the Senate, and call for your assistance. But this step would have been premature, for the Queen was in the hands of the Goths, and only the firmness of the clever man who heads the conspiracy of the Catacombs prevented it."

"The Prefect of Rome?" asked Justinian.

"Cethegus. He mistrusted the reports. The conspirators wished to surprise the Goths, proclaim you Emperor of the West, and choose him, meanwhile, for Dictator. But he literally allowed them

to put the dagger to his throat in the Curia, and said, No."

"A courageous man!" said Belisarius.

"A dangerous man!" said Narses.

"An hour after," continued the ambassador, "news, arrived of Amalasintha's return, and things remained as they were. That gloomy warrior, Teja, had sworn to render Rome a pasture for cattle, if a drop of Gothic blood were shed. I learned all this on my intentionally slow coast voyage to Brundisium. But I have something still better to announce. I have found zealous friends of Byzantium, not only among the Romans, but also among the Goths, and even in the members of the Royal Family."

"Whom mean you?"

"In Tuscany there lives a rich proprietor, Prince Theodahad, the cousin of Amalasintha."

"To be sure! he is the last male of the Amelung family, is he not?"

"The last. He and, still more, Gothelindis, his clever but wicked wife, the proud daughter of the Balthe, mortally hate the Queen. He, because she opposed the measureless avarice with which he sought to appropriate the property of all his neighbours; she, from reasons which I could not discover, but which, I believe, originated during the girlhood of the two Princesses; enough, her hate is deadly. Now, these two have promised me to help you in every possible way to win Italy back. She will be satisfied, it seems, with the destruction of the object of her hatred; he, however, demands a rich reward."

"He shall have it."

"His support is important, for he already possesses half Tuscany--the noble family of the Wölfungs owns the other half--and can easily bring it into our power; and also because he expects, if Amalasintha falls, to seat himself upon her throne. Here are letters from him and Gothelindis. But, first of all, read the writing from the Queen--- I believe it is very important."

CHAPTER XIV.

The Emperor opened the tablets, and read:

"To Justinian, Emperor of the Romans, Amalasintha, Queen of the Goths and the Italians."

"Queen of the Italians!" laughed Justinian; "what an insane title!"

"From Alexandros you will learn how Eris and Ate haunt this land. I am like a lonely palm-tree which is tossed by opposing winds. Each day increases the barbarians' enmity to me, and daily I become more estranged from them; and the Romans, however much I try to conciliate them, can never forget that I am of Germanic origin. Till now I have defied all danger with a firm spirit; but I can do so no longer, if my palace and my person are not in security. I cannot rely upon any party in this country. Therefore I appeal to you, as my royal brother. It is the dignity of all rulers, and the peace of Italy, which you will protect. Send me, I beseech you, a trustworthy troop, a life-guard"--the Emperor cast a significant look at Belisarius--"a troop of some thousand men, with a leader who will be unconditionally devoted to me. They shall occupy the palace; it is a fortress in itself. As to Rome, these troops must, above all things, keep from me the Prefect Cethegus, who is as full of duplicity as he is powerful, and who deserted me in the danger into which he himself had led me. If necessary, they must ruin him. When I have overthrown my enemies, and secured my kingdom, as I trust in Heaven and my own strength that I shall, I will send back troops and leader richly laden with gifts, and still more with warm thanks.--*Vale*."

Justinian clasped the wax-tablets tightly in his hand; his eyes shone; his plain features were ennobled by an expression of high intellectual power; and the present moment showed, that together with many weaknesses and littlenesses, he possessed strength and greatness: the greatness of diplomatic genius.

"In this letter," he cried at last, with sparkling eyes, "I hold Italy and the Gothic kingdom!"

And, much agitated, he paced the room with long strides, even forgetting to bow before the Cross.

"A life-guard! that she shall have! But not a few thousand men; many thousands--more than she will like; and you, Belisarius, shall lead them."

"Deign to look at the presents," said Alexandros, pointing to a costly shrine of cypress-wood,

inlaid with gold, which a slave had set down behind him. "Here is the key."

And he held out a little box of tortoise-shell, which was closed with the Queen's seal.

"Her picture is there too," he said, raising his voice as if by accident.

At the moment in which Alexandros raised his voice, the head of a woman was protruded gently and unnoticed through the curtain, and two sparkling black eyes looked keenly at the Emperor.

Justinian opened the shrine, quickly pushed aside its costly contents, and hastily caught up a simple tablet of polished box-wood, with a small golden frame.

A cry of astonishment involuntarily burst from his lips, his eyes sparkled, and he showed the picture to Belisarius.

"A splendid woman! What majesty on her brow! One sees that she is a born ruler--a king's daughter!" and he gazed admiringly at the noble features.

The curtain rustled, and the listener entered.

It was Theodora, the Empress. A seductive apparition.

All the arts of woman's inventive genius in a time of refined luxury, and all the means of an empire, were daily called into requisition, in order to keep the beauty of this woman--who had impaired it only too much by a life of unbridled sensuality--fresh and dazzling. Gold-dust gave to her blue-black hair a metallic brilliancy; it was carefully combed up from the nape of her neck, in order to show the beautiful shape of her head, and its fine set upon her shoulders. Her eyebrows and eye-lashes were dyed black with Arabian antimony; and so carefully was the red of her lips put on, that even Justinian, who kissed those lips, never suspected an aid to Nature by means of Phœnician scarlet. Every tiny hair on her alabaster arm had been carefully destroyed: and the delicate rose-colour of her finger-nails was the daily care of a specially-appointed slave.

And yet, without all these arts, Theodora, who was not yet forty years of age, would have passed for an extremely lovely woman. Her countenance was certainly not noble; no noble, or even proud spirit, spoke from her fatigued and weirdly shining eyes; round her lips played an habitual smile, the dimples of which indicated the place of the first future wrinkle; and her cheeks, beneath the eyes, showed traces of exhaustion.

But as she now gracefully moved towards the Emperor, delicately holding up the heavy folds of her dark-yellow silk robes with her left hand, her whole appearance produced a bewitching charm, similar to the sweet and soothing scent of Indian balsam which she shed around her.

"What pleases my imperial lord so much? May I share his delight?" she asked in a sweet and flattering voice.

Those present prostrated themselves before the Empress, scarcely less humbly than before the Emperor.

Justinian started upon seeing her, as if he had been caught in some culpable act, and tried to conceal the portrait in the folds of his chlamys. But it was too late. The Empress had already fixed her quick eyes upon it.

"We are admiring," said the Emperor, "the--the fine chasing of the gold frame."

And, blushing, he gave her the portrait.

"Well," said Theodora, smiling, "there is not much to admire in the frame. But the picture is not bad. It is surely the Gothic Queen?"

The ambassador bowed assent.

"Not bad, as I said before; but barbaric, severe, unwomanly. How old may she be, Alexandros?"

"About forty-five."

Justinian looked at the picture and then at the ambassador.

"The picture was taken fifteen years ago," said Alexandros, as if in explanation.

"No," said the Emperor, "you mistake; here stands the date, according to the indiction⁵ and the consul, and the date of her accession; it is of this year."

An awkward pause ensued.

"Well," stammered Alexandros, "then the artists flatter like----"

"Like courtiers," concluded the Emperor.

But Theodora came to the ambassador's aid.

"Why do we chatter about portraits and the age of strange women, when we should think only of the empire? What news brings Alexandras? Are you decided, Justinianus?"

"Almost. I only wished to hear your opinion, and, I know, you are in favour of war."

Narses quietly interposed. "Wherefore, sire, did you not at once tell us that the Empress was in favour of war? We could have spared our words."

"What! would you insinuate that I am the slave of my wife?"

"Guard your tongue better," said Theodora angrily. "Many who seemed invulnerable, have been stung by their own sharp tongues."

"You are very imprudent, Narses," said Justinian.

"Emperor," he answered, "I have long since ceased to be prudent. We live in a time, in a realm, and at a court, where, for any word that we speak or leave unspoken, we may fall into disgrace and be ruined. As any word of mine may cause my death, I will at least die for words that please me."

The Emperor smiled.

"You must confess, patrician, that I can bear a great deal of plain-speaking."

"You are by nature great, O Justinianus, and a magnanimous ruler; else Narses would not serve you. But Omphale rendered even Hercules small."

The eyes of the Empress shone with hatred.

Justinianus became uneasy.

"Go," he said, "I will consult with the Empress alone. To-morrow you shall hear my decision."

CHAPTER XV.

No sooner were they gone, than Justinian went up to his wife, and pressed a kiss upon her white forehead.

"Forgive him," he said, "he means well."

"I know it," she answered, returning the kiss. "It is for this reason, and because he is indispensable as a foil to Belisarius, that he still lives."

"You are right, as always," cried Justinian, putting his arm round her, and thus walking with her up and down the room.

"What does he intend to do?" thought Theodora; "this tenderness indicates a bad conscience."

"You are right," he repeated, "God has denied me the spirit which decides the fate of battles, and, in compensation, has given me these two men of victory---*fortunately* two of them. Their jealousy of each other secures my dominion better than their fidelity. Either of these generals alone would be a continual danger to the state, and on the day that they become friends, my throne will shake. You continue to excite their mutual dislike?"

"It is easy to excite. There is as natural an antipathy between them as between fire and water. And every spiteful remark of the eunuch I tell with indignation to my friend Antonina, the wife and mistress of the hero Belisarius."

"And I repeat every rudeness of this hero to the irritable cripple. But to our consultation. Since receiving the report of Alexandros, I am almost decided upon the expedition to Italy."

"Whom will you send?"

"Belisarius, of course. He promises to accomplish with thirty thousand, that which Narses will scarcely undertake with eighty thousand."

"Do you think that so small a force will be sufficient?"

"No. But the honour of Belisarius is engaged. He will exert his utmost strength, and yet will not quite succeed."

"That will be wholesome for him. For, since the war with the Vandals, his pride has become

insupportable."

"But," continued the Emperor, "he will accomplish three-fourths of the work. Then I will recall him, march myself with sixty thousand, taking Narses with me, and easily finish the remaining fourth of the task. Then I, too, shall be called a great general and a conqueror."

"Finely thought out!" cried Theodora, with sincere admiration of his subtlety: "your plan is ripe."

"However," said Justinian, sighing and stopping in his walk, "Narses is right; I must confess it. It would be better for my empire if I defended it from the Persians, instead of attacking the Goths. It would be wiser and safer policy. For, at some time or other, destruction will come from the East."

"Let it come! It may not be for centuries, when the only thing remembered of Justinianus will be the fame of having reconquered Italy as well as Africa. Is it your office to take thought for the future? Those who come after you may care for their present; let yours be your only care."

"But if it should then be said: had Justinian defended his kingdom instead of making conquests, it would now be better? If they say: Justinian's victories have destroyed the empire?"

"No one will speak thus. Mankind is dazzled by the glory of Fame. And yet another thing--" and now the earnestness of deep conviction chased the expression of cunning persuasiveness from the seductive features of the Empress.

"I suspect what you are about to say; but continue."

"You are not only an Emperor, you are a man. Your salvation must be dearer to you than even your kingdom. Many a bloody step was taken upon the path, upon *our* path--which led to the height to which we have attained, to the glory of our empire. Many harsh deeds were necessary; life and treasures, and many a dangerous foe were--enough! It is true that, with part of these treasures, we are building a temple to the glory of Christ, which alone will make our name immortal upon earth. But for Heaven--who knows if that be sufficient! Let us"--and her eyes glowed with fanatic fire--"let us destroy the unbelievers, and seek the path to grace and pardon over the bodies of the enemies of Christ!"

Justinian pressed her hand.

"The Persians, too, are the enemies of Christ; they are even heathens."

"Have you forgotten the teaching of the Prophet: 'heretics are seven times worse than heathens?' The true faith has been revealed to them and they have despised it. That is the sin against the Holy Ghost, which will never be forgiven on earth or in heaven. But you are the sword which shall destroy these God-forsaken Arians! They are the most hated enemies of Christ; they know Him, and still deny that He is God. Already you have overthrown the heretic Vandals in Africa, and smothered error in blood and fire. Now Italy calls upon you; Rome, the place where the blood of the prince of Apostles was shed, the holy city, must no longer be subject to the heretics. Justinian, recall her to the true faith!"

She ceased.

The Emperor looked up at the golden cross and sighed deeply.

"You unveil the inmost depths of my heart. It is this feeling which, mightier still than love of fame and victory, urges me to this war. But am I capable, am I worthy of achieving such a holy work to the honour of God? Will He consummate such a great deed by my sinful hand? I doubt; I waver. Was the dream which came to me last night sent from Heaven? What was its meaning? did it incite to the attempt or warn me off? Well, your mother, Komito, the prophetess of Cyprus, had great wisdom in interpreting dreams and warnings----"

"And you know that the gift is inherited. Did I not foretell the result of the war with the Vandals from your dreams?"

"Then you shall also explain this last dream to me. You know that I waver in my best plans, if an omen speaks against them. Listen then. But"--and he cast an uneasy glance at his wife--"but remember that it was but a *dream*, and no man can answer for his dreams."

"Certainly; God sends them.--What shall I hear?" she added to herself.

"Last night I fell asleep while meditating over the last reports about Amala--about Italy. I dreamed that I was wandering in a landscape with seven hills. Under a laurel-tree there reposed the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. I stood before her and looked at her with delight. Suddenly there rushed out of a thicket at my right hand a growling bear, and, from the rocks to the left, a hissing snake, and darted at the sleeping woman. She woke and called my name. I quickly caught her up, and, pressing her to my bosom, fled. Looking back, I saw that the bear crushed the snake, while the snake stung the bear to death."

"Well, and the woman?"

"The woman pressed a hasty kiss upon my forehead and suddenly vanished. I awoke and stretched out my arms for her in vain. The woman," he continued quickly, before Theodora had time to reflect, "is, of course, Italy."

"Certainly," said the Empress quietly, but her bosom heaved. "Your dream is most happy. The bear and the snake are barbarians and Italians, who strive for the city upon the seven hills. You tear it from their grasp, and let them mutually destroy each other."

"But she vanishes--she does not remain."

"She remains. She kisses you and disappears in your arms. So will Italy be swallowed up in your empire."

"You are right!" said Justinian, springing up. "Thanks, my wise wife. You are the light of my soul! I will venture. Belisarius shall march." He was about to call the attendant, but suddenly stopped short. "One thing more," and casting down his eyes he took Theodora's hand.

"Ah!" thought Theodora, "now it is coming."

"When we have destroyed the kingdom of the Goths, and have with the Queen's help taken Ravenna--what--what shall be done with her, the Princess?"

"What shall be done with her?" repeated Theodora with well-feigned composure. "That which was done with the King of the Vandals. She shall come here, to Byzantium."

Justinian breathed again.

"It rejoices me that you have at once interpreted my thought," and he kissed her slender white hand with real pleasure.

"More than that," said Theodora. "She will enter into our plans all the more willingly if she can look forward to an honourable reception here. So I will myself write her a sisterly epistle inviting her to come. In case of need she shall ever find an asylum in my heart."

"You do not know," interrupted Justinian eagerly, "how much you will assist our victory by so doing. The daughter of Theodoric must be completely weaned from her people. She shall herself lead us to Ravenna."

"But if so, you cannot immediately send Belisarius with an army. It would only awaken her suspicions and make her rebellious. She must first be completely in our power and the barbarians must have begun an internecine war, before the sword of Belisarius flies from its sheath."

"But at least he must henceforth be in the vicinity."

"Certainly, perhaps in Sicily. The disturbances in Africa afford the best excuse for sending a fleet into those waters. And as soon as the net is sunk Belisarius must draw it together."

"But who shall sink it?"

Theodora reflected for a few moments; then she said:

"The most gifted man in the West; Cethegus Cæsarius, the Prefect of Rome, the friend of my youth."

"Quite right. But not he alone. He is a Roman, no subject of mine; and I am not sure of him. Whom shall I send? Once again Alexandros?"

"No," said Theodora, "he is too young for such a task. No." And she became thoughtfully silent. "Justinian," she said at last, "you shall see that I can sacrifice my personal dislikes for the sake of the empire, when it is necessary to choose the right man. I propose my enemy, Petros, the cousin of Narses, the fellow-student of the Prefect, the sly rhetorician--send him!"

"Theodora!" cried the Emperor, embracing her; "God himself has given you to me! Cethegus--Petros--Belisarius. Barbarians! you are lost!"

CHAPTER XVI.

The morning following this conversation the beautiful Empress rose in great good-humour from her swelling cushions, which were filled with the delicate neck-feathers of the Pontian crane, and covered with pale yellow silk.

Before the bed stood a tripod holding a silver basin, representing Oceanus; in it lay a massive golden ball. The Empress lifted the ball and let it fall clanging into the basin. The clear tone roused the Syrian slave who slept in the ante-room. She entered, and, approaching the bed of the Empress with her arms crossed upon her bosom, drew back the heavy violet-coloured curtains of

Chinese silk. Then she took a soft Iberian sponge, which, soaked in asses' milk, lay in a crystal dish, and carefully wiped off the coating of oily paste with which the neck and face of her mistress were covered during the night.

Next she knelt down before the bed, her face bent almost to the earth, and stretched out her hand to the Empress, who, taking it, slowly set her foot upon the neck of the kneeling girl, and sprang elastically to the ground.

The slave rose and threw over her mistress, who, clad only in an under-tunic of the finest lawn, sat upon the palm-wood frame of the bed--a fine dressing-mantle of rose-coloured stuff. Then she made a profound obeisance, turned to the door, cried "Agave!" and disappeared.

Agave, a young and beautiful Thessalian girl, entered the room. She rolled a washstand of citrean-wood, covered with countless boxes and bottles, close before her mistress, and began to rub her face, neck, and hands with soft cloths dipped in different wines and essences. This task completed, the Empress rose from the bedside and stepped on to a couch covered with panther's skins.

"The large bath towards mid-day," she said.

Agave pushed an oval bath of terebinthus-wood, covered outside with tortoise-shell and filled with deliciously-scented water, in front of the divan, and lifted the little white feet of the Empress into it. Afterwards she loosened the net of gold-thread which confined the luxurious hair of her mistress during the night, letting the rich dark coils fall over neck and shoulders, and departed in her turn, calling "Galatea!"

Galatea was an aged slave, the nurse, attendant, and, we regret to add, the procuress of Theodora, when the latter was only the bespangled daughter of Acacius the lion-keeper, and, while yet almost a child, the already deeply-corrupted favourite of the great Circus.

Galatea had faithfully shared all the humiliations and triumphs, the vices and cunning of the adventuress's life until the latter had attained to the imperial throne.

"How hast thou slept, my dove?" asked Galatea, handing to Theodora in a vessel of amber the aromatic essence which the town of Adana, in Sicily, was forced to send in large quantities for the Empress's use as a yearly tribute.

"Well; I dreamt of him."

"Of Alexandros?"

"No, thou fool! of the handsome Anicius."

"But Alexandros has been waiting for some time already; outside in the secret niche."

"He is impatient," said the Empress, smiling; "well then, let him in!"

And she leaned back upon the long divan, drawing a cover of purple silk over her; but the delicate ankles of her beautiful feet remained visible.

Galatea bolted the principal door, through which she had entered, and crossed the room to the opposite corner, which was filled by a colossal bronze statue of Justinian. She touched a spring, and the seemingly immovable mass turned on one side, exposing a small opening in the wall, which was completely hidden by the statue in its normal position. A dark curtain was drawn before this opening. Galatea lifted the curtain and Alexandros hurried in. He threw himself on his knees before the Empress, caught her small hand and covered it with kisses.

Theodora gently drew it away.

"It is very imprudent, Alexandros," said she, leaning back her lovely head, "to admit a lover to the toilet of his mistress. What says the poet: 'All things serve beauty. Yet it is no pleasant sight to see that in preparation which only pleases when complete.' But I promised, when you left for Ravenna, to admit you to my toilet, and you richly deserve your reward. You have ventured much for me. Fasten the braids tighter," she cried to Galatea, who had now commenced the task, entrusted to her alone, of dressing the splendid hair of her mistress. "You have risked your life for me, Alexandros!" and she gave him two fingers of her right hand.

"Oh, Theodora!" cried the youth, "to gain but this one moment I would die ten times over!"

"But," she continued, "why did you not send me a copy of the barbarian Queen's last letter to Justinian?"

"It was not possible; there was no time. I could send no more messengers from my ship. I barely succeeded, after landing, in sending you word that her picture was among the presents. You came just at the right moment!"

"Yes; what would become of me if I did not pay Justinian's door-keepers twice as well as he? But, most imprudent of ambassadors! how stupid you were about the date!"

"Oh, loveliest daughter of Cyprus! I had not seen you for months! I could think of nothing but you and your wonderful beauty!"

"Well, I suppose I must forgive you.--Galatea, bring me the black fillet.--You are a better lover than a statesman, Alexandros. Therefore I have kept you here. Yes, you were to have gone once more to Ravenna! But I think I will send an older ambassador, and keep the young one for myself. Shall I?"

Alexandros, becoming bolder and more ardent, sprang up and pressed a kiss upon her rosy lips.

"Hold, traitor!" she scolded, and struck his cheek lightly with a fan of flamingo-feathers. "Enough for to-day. To-morrow you may come again, and tell me about the barbarian beauties. I must have the next hour for another."

"For another!" cried Alexandros, starting back. "So what they whisper in the gymnasiums and baths of Byzantium is true! You ever faithless----"

"Theodora's friends must never be jealous," laughed the Empress. It was no sweet laughter. "But this time you may be quite easy; you shall meet him yourself. Go."

Galatea took the reluctant lover by the shoulders, without ceremony, and pushed him behind the statue and out of the secret door.

Theodora now seated herself upright, and fastened the loose folds of her long under-garment with her girdle.

CHAPTER XVII.

Galatea appeared again immediately, accompanied by a little round-backed man, who looked much older than his forty-years justified. His wise, but pinched features, piercing eyes, and cunning mouth, made a disagreeable impression on all who observed him.

Theodora returned his creeping salutation by a slight nod. Galatea began to paint her eyebrows.

"Empress," the new-comer began, "I wonder at your courage. If I were seen here! A moment's rashness would render vain the prudence of nine years!"

"But you will not be seen, Petros," said Theodora quietly. "This is the only hour in which I am secure from Justinian's importunate tenderness. It is his hour of prayer. I must profit by it as much as I can. God preserve his piety! Galatea, my wine. What! Surely, thou dost not fear to leave me alone with this dangerous seducer?"

The old woman left the room with a hateful grin upon her lips, and soon returned with a jug of sweet heated Chian-wine in one hand, and a cup of honey and water in the other.

"I could not arrange our meeting in the church as usual, where, in the dark confessional, you look exactly like a priest. The Emperor will call you before church-time, and you must be thoroughly instructed beforehand."

"What is then to be done?"

"Petros," answered Theodora, leaning comfortably back and sipping the sweet mixture which Galatea now handed to her, "the day has come which will reward all our years of patience, and make you a great man."

"It is time, indeed!" observed Petros.

"Do not be impatient, friend.--Galatea, a little more honey.--In order to put you into the right humour for to-day's business, it will be well to remind you of the past, of the manner in which our--friendship originated."

"What mean you? Wherefore----"

"For many reasons. To begin. You were the cousin and adherent of my deadly enemy, Narses. Consequently, you were my enemy too. For years you acted against me in your cousin's service, hurting me but little, and still less benefiting yourself. For Narses, your virtuous friend, considers it a point of honour never to do anything for his relations; so that, unlike other courtiers of the realm, he may never be accused of nepotism. Out of pure friendship and virtue, he left you unpromoted. You remained a simple writer and a poor man. But a clever man like you knows how to help himself. You forged--you doubled the amount of the Emperor's dues. Besides what was demanded by the Emperor, the provinces paid another tax, which Petros and the tax-gatherers

shared amongst themselves. For a time all went on smoothly. But once----"

"Empress, I beseech you!"

"I shall soon have finished, friend. But once you had the misfortune to have a new tax-gatherer, who valued the favour of the Empress more than the share of booty which you promised him. He entered into your plans, allowed you to forge the documents--and showed them to me!"

"The wretch!" murmured Petros.

"Yes, it was bad enough," said Theodora smiling, and setting down her glass. "So I had the neck of my sly enemy, the confidant of the hated eunuch, under my foot; and, I must confess, I had a great desire to trample upon him. But I sacrificed a short revenge for a great and enduring advantage. I called you to me, and told you to choose whether you would die or serve me for life. You were kind enough to choose the last, and, still the greatest enemies in the eyes of the world, we have secretly worked together for years. No sooner has Narses formed a plan, than you reveal it to me. I have rewarded you well. You are now a rich man."

"Not worth mentioning."

"Oh, indeed, ungrateful man! My treasurer knows better. You are *very* rich."

"Yes, but without dignity or rank. My fellow-students are patricians, great men in the East and West; like Cethegus in Rome, and Procopius here."

"Patience! From this day you will quickly climb the ladder of ambition. It was necessary to keep something in reserve. Listen; to-morrow you go as ambassador to Ravenna."

"As imperial ambassador!" cried Petros, rejoiced.

"Through my influence. But that is not all. You will receive circumstantial directions from Justinian to undermine the kingdom of the Goths, and smooth the path of Belisarius in Italy."

"Shall I obey these directions, or not?"

"Obey them. But you will receive another order, which Justinian will particularly recommend to your notice; that is, to save the daughter of Theodoric from the hands of her enemies at any price, and bring her to Byzantium. Here is a letter from me to her, which presses her to take refuge in my arms."

"'Tis well," said Petros, taking the letter. "I will bring her here immediately."

Theodora, like an angry snake, started up on her couch with such impetuosity, that Petros and Galatea retreated in affright.

"No, no, Petros! no!" she exclaimed. "For this reason I send you. She must *not* come to Byzantium! She must not live!"

Confounded, Petros let the letter fall.

"Oh, Empress!" he whispered; "murder?"

"Peace!" cried Theodora, in a hoarse voice; and her eyes sparkled cruelly. "She must die!"

"Die? Oh, Empress! wherefore?"

"There is no need for you to know that. But stay; I will tell you, for it will give the spur to your courage. Listen." She seized his arm wildly, and whispered in his ear, "Justinian, the traitor, has conceived a passion for her!"

"Theodora!" cried Petros, startled.

The Empress fell back upon her couch.

"But he has never seen her," stammered Petros.

"He has seen her portrait. He already dreams of her. He has fallen in love with her picture."

"You have never yet had a rival."

"No; nor ever will."

"You are so beautiful."

"Amalasintha is younger."

"You are so wise; you are Justinian's counsellor the confidant of his most secret thoughts."

"It is just this which annoys him. And"--she again caught his arm--"remember, she is a King's daughter, a born ruler; and I--am the plebeian daughter of a lion-keeper! Ridiculous and insane though it be, Justinian, in his purple, forgets that he is the son of a shepherd from the Dardanelles. He has imbibed the madness of Kings; he, himself an adventurer, chatters about innate majesty, about the mystery of royal blood! I have no protection against such whims. I fear nothing from all the women in the world. But this King's daughter----" She angrily started up, and clenched her small fist. "Beware, Justinian!" she cried, pacing the room. "With this eye and hand I have subdued lions and tigers; let us see if I cannot keep this fox in royal purple at my feet." She re-seated herself. "In short, Amalasintha dies," she said, suddenly becoming quite cool again.

"Yes," said Petros, "but not through me. You have bloodthirsty servants enough; send them. I am a man who will talk----"

"You are a man who will die if you do not obey! You, my supposed enemy, must do it. None of my friends can venture it without arousing suspicion."

"Theodora," said Petros, forgetting himself, "take care! To murder the daughter of Theodoric, a born Queen----"

"Ha, ha!" said Theodora, in a rage, "you, too, miserable man, are dazzled by the 'born Queen!' All men are fools, still more than rascals! Listen, Petros--the day when the news of her death arrives from Ravenna, you shall be a senator and a patrician."

The man's eyes sparkled, but cowardice or conscience were still stronger than ambition.

"No," he said decidedly, "I would rather lose the court and all my plans."

"You will lose your life, wretch!" cried Theodora. "Oh, you think you are safe, because I burnt the forged documents before your eyes! You fool! they were false! Look here; here I hold your life in my hands!"

She dragged a yellow parchment from a roll of documents, and showed it to Petros, who, completely subdued, fell upon his knees at her feet.

"Command me!" he stammered, "I obey." Just then a knocking was heard at the principal door.

"Away!" cried the Empress, "take my letter to the Queen from the ground, and think over what I have said: patrician if she dies, torture and death if she lives. Go!"

Galatea pushed the bewildered man through the secret entrance, turned the statue into its place again, and went to open the great door.

CHAPTER XVIII.

There entered a stately woman, taller and of coarser frame than the small and delicate Empress; not so seductively beautiful, but younger and more blooming, with a fresh complexion and natural manners.

"Welcome, Antonina, sister of my heart! Come to my arms!" cried the Empress to the newcomer, who humbly bent before her.

Antonina obeyed in silence.

"How hollow her eyes have become," she thought, as she rose from the embrace.

"How bony is the soldier's wife!" said the delicate Empress to herself, and looked at her friend.

"You are as blooming as Hebe!" she said aloud, "and how well the white silk becomes your fresh complexion. Have you anything to tell me of--of him?" she asked indifferently, and took from the wash-stand a much-dreaded instrument, a sharp lancet with an ivory handle, with which clumsy, or even only unfortunate, slaves were often pricked by their angry mistress.

"Not to-day," whispered Antonina, blushing. "I did not see him yesterday."

"I believe it!" said Theodora to herself, with a hidden smile.

"Oh, how painfully I shall miss you soon!" she added aloud, stroking Antonina's full round arm. "Perhaps Belisarius will sail next week, and you, most faithful of all wives, will go with him. Which of your friends will accompany you?"

"Procopius," answered Antonina, "and--" she added, casting down her eyes--"the two sons of Boëthius."

"Ah, indeed," remarked the Empress, smiling, "I understand. In the freedom of the camp you hope to please yourself with the handsome youth, undisturbed; and while our hero, Belisarius,

fighters battles and conquers cities----"

"You guess rightly. But I have a request to make. You are fortunate. Alexandros, your handsome friend, has returned; he remains near you, and is his own master; but Anicius, you know, is still under the strict guardianship of his elder brother, Severinus. Never would he--who thinks of nothing but fighting for freedom and revenge--suffer this tender friendship. He would repeatedly disturb our intimacy. Therefore do me a favour: do not let Severinus follow us! When we are on board with Anicius, keep the elder brother in Byzantium, either by cunning or by force. You can do it easily--you are the Empress!"

"That is not bad," laughed Theodora. "What stratagems! One can see that you have learned from Belisarius."

Antonina blushed violently.

"Oh, do not name him! Do not mock me! You know best from whom I learnt to do that for which I must blush."

Theodora shot a fierce glance at her friend, who, without noticing it, continued: "Heaven knows that Belisarius himself was not more faithful than I, until I came to this court! It was you, Empress, who taught me that these selfish men, occupied with affairs of state, war, and ambition, neglect us when they have become our husbands, and no longer value us when they possess us. You taught me that it is no sin to accept the innocent homage, the flattering devotion which is denied to us by our husbands, from friends who court us because they still hope. God is my witness, that it is nothing but this sweet incense which Belisarius denies me, and which my vain weak heart sorely needs, that I expect from Anicius."

"Fortunately for me, it will soon tire him out," said Theodora to herself.

"And yet," continued Antonina, "even this, I fear, is a sin against Belisarius. Oh, how great, how noble he is! If only he were not too great for this little heart." And she buried her face in her hands.

"The pitiful creature!" thought the Empress, "too weak for vice, as for virtue."

At this moment Agave, the beautiful Thessalian slave, entered the room with a large bunch of splendid roses.

"From him," she whispered to her mistress.

"From whom?" asked Theodora.

But Antonina just then looked up, and Agave made a sign of warning. The Empress, in order to occupy her, gave Antonina the roses.

"If you please, put them into that marble vase."

As Antonina turned her back upon them to obey, Agave whispered: "From him whom you kept hidden here all day yesterday; from the handsome Anicius," the pretty girl added, blushing.

But she had scarcely uttered the imprudent words, than she gave a loud cry, and held her left arm to her lips.

The Empress struck her in the face with the still bloody lancet.

"I will teach you to notice whether men are handsome or ugly," she cried furiously. "You will keep to the spinning-room for four weeks. Go at once! and do not show yourself again in my ante-rooms."

The weeping girl left the room, hiding her face in her dress.

"What has she done?" asked Antonina, coming forward.

"She let the scent-bottle fall," answered Galatea quickly, and picked one up from the floor. "Mistress, I have finished."

"Then let the dressers in, and whoever else waits in the ante-room. Will you, meanwhile, look at these verses, Antonina? They are the newest poems of Arator, 'The Deeds of the Apostles,' and very edifying. This particularly, 'The Stoning of St. Stephen.' But read, and judge for yourself."

Galatea opened wide the doors of the principal entrance. A whole troop of slaves and freed-women streamed in. Some occupied themselves with clearing away the articles of toilet hitherto used; others swung censers with aromatic incense, or sprinkled balsam about the room from narrow-necked flasks. But most of them were busy about the person of the Empress, who now completed her toilet.

Galatea took off the rose-coloured tunic.

"Berenice," she cried, "bring the Milesian tunic, with the purple stripe and gold tassels. To-day is Sunday ."

While the experienced old woman was artfully fastening into the knot of the Empress's hair a costly gold needle, its head formed of a gem, engraved with a head of Venus, the Empress asked: "What news, from the city, Delphine?"

"You have won, mistress!" answered Delphine, kneeling down with the gilded sandals; "your colours, the blue, have beaten the green; both with the horses and the chariots!"

"What a triumph!" cried Theodora joyfully. "A bet of two centenaria of gold; it is mine! News? Whence? from Italy?" she cried to a slave who just entered with letters.

"Yes, mistress, from Florence; from the Gothic Princess, Gothelindis. I know the Gorgon-seal; and from Silverius, the archdeacon."

"Give me them," said Theodora, "I will take them with me to church. The mirror, Elpis."

A young slave came forward with an oval plate of brilliantly-polished silver, in a gold frame, richly set with pearls, and standing on a strong foot of ivory.

Poor Elpis had a hard service.

During the completion of the toilet she had to hold the heavy plate, and, following every movement of her restless mistress, turn it, so that the latter could always look at her own reflection, and woe to Elpis if she were too late in turning!

"What is there to buy, Zephyris?" the Empress asked a dark-skinned Lybian freed-woman, who just then brought her a tame snake to caress, which lay in a small basket upon soft moss.

"Oh, nothing particular," answered the Lybian. "Come, Glauke," she added, taking a snowy white chlamys, embroidered with gold, from a clothes-press, and carefully spreading it out upon her arms, waited until Glauke took it from her, and, at one throw, arranged it in graceful folds upon the shoulders of the Empress, clasping it with the white girdle, and fastening one end upon her pearly shoulder with a golden brooch, which, formed in the shape of the dove of Venus, now represented the sign of the Holy Ghost.

Glauke, the daughter of an Athenian sculptor, had studied the folds of the chlamys for years, and for this reason had been bought by the Empress at a cost of many thousand solidi. The whole day long this was her sole occupation.

"Sweet-scented soap-balls," said Zephyris, "have just arrived from Spain. A new Milesian fairy-tale has just come out. And the old Egyptian is there again, with his Nile-water," she added in a low tone; "he says it is unfailing. The Persian Queen, who was childless for eight years----"

Theodora turned away sighing; a shadow passed across her smooth face.

"Send him away," she said; "this hope is past forever." And, for a moment, it seemed as if she would have sunk into a melancholy reverie.

But she roused herself, and, beckoning to Galatea, she went back to her bed, took a crushed wreath of ivy which lay upon the pillow, and gave it to the old woman, whispering:

"For Anicius, send it to him. The jewels, Erigone!"

Erigone, with the help of two other slaves, brought forward, with great trouble, a heavy bronze casket, the lid of which, representing the workshop of Vulcan in embossed figures, was closed with the seal of the Empress.

Erigone showed that the seal was intact, and then opened the lid. Many a girl stood upon her tiptoes to catch a glance at the shining treasures.

"Will you wear the summer rings, mistress?" asked Erigone.

"No," said Theodora, looking into the casket, "the time for those is over. Give me the heavy ones, the emeralds."

Erigone handed to her rings, earrings, and bracelet.

"How beautifully," said Antonina, looking up from her pious verses, "how beautifully the white of the pearls contrasts with the green of the stones."

"It was one of Cleopatra's treasures," said the Empress indifferently; "the Jew swore to its pedigree."

"But you linger long," said Antonina. "Justinian's litter was already waiting as I came up."

"Yes, mistress," said a young slave anxiously, "the slave at the sundial has already announced the fourth hour. Hasten, mistress!"

A prick with the lancet was the only answer.

"Would you teach your Empress!" but she whispered to Antonina: "We must not spoil the men; they must always wait for us, never we for them. My ostrich fan, Thais. Go, Ione, tell the Cappadocian slaves to come to my litter." And she turned to go.

"Oh, Theodora!" cried Antonina quickly, "do not forget my request."

"No," answered Theodora, suddenly standing still, "certainly not! And that you may be quite sure, I will give the order into your own hands. My wax-tablets and the stylus!"

Galatea brought them in haste.

Theodora wrote, and whispered to her friend:

"The Prefect of the harbour is one of my old friends. He blindly obeys me. Read what I write."

"To Aristarchus the Prefect, Theodora the Empress.

"When Severinus, the son of Boëthius, is about to go on board the ship of Belisarius, keep him back, if necessary, by force; and send him to my rooms. He is appointed my chamberlain."

"Is that right, dear sister?" she whispered.

"A thousand thanks!" said Antonina, with beaming eyes.

"But," said the Empress suddenly, putting her hand to her neck, "have we forgotten the principal thing? My amulet! the Mercury. Please, Antonina; there it hangs."

Antonina turned hastily to fetch the little golden Mercury, which hung, by a silk cord, on the bed of the Empress.

Meanwhile Theodora quickly crossed out the word "Severinus," and wrote instead "Anicius." She closed the tablets, tied them, and fastened the string with her seal.

"Here is the amulet," said Antonina, returning.

"And here is the order," said the Empress, smiling. "You can give it to Aristarchus yourself at the moment of departure. Now," she cried, "let us go. To the church!"

CHAPTER XIX.

In Neapolis, that Italian city over which the tempest then gathering at Byzantium was soon to burst in its first violence, no presentiment of the coming danger was felt.

On the charming declivities of Posilippo, or on the shore to the south-east of the city, there wandered, day by day, two handsome youths, exchanging confidences with all the enthusiasm of youthful friendship. They were the "Dioscuri," Julius and Totila.

Oh, happy time! when the uncorrupted soul, breathing the fresh morning air of life, as yet untired and undeceived, and drunk with the ecstasy of ambitious dreams, is urged to impart to an equally young, equally rich and equally enthusiastic nature its overflowing sentiments!

The noblest resolves are strengthened, and imagination wings its way to the very gates of heaven, in the happy certainty that he who listens will understand.

When the wreath upon our brows is faded, and the harvest of our life is ripe, we may smile at these dreams of youth and youthful friendship; but it is no smile of mockery; it is tinged with the melancholy with which we think of the sweet, exhilarating airs of spring, while inhaling the breath of decay in autumn.

The young Goth and the young Roman had met at the age most favourable to the formation of the bond of friendship. Totila's sunny soul had preserved all the dewy bloom of youth; with smiling eyes he looked forth into the smiling future. He loved his fellow-creatures, and won all hearts by his amiability and the joyous frankness of his disposition. He believed in the complete victory of good over evil. Where meanness and wickedness met him in his path, he trod them into the dust with the holy anger of an archangel; from the depths of his gentle nature the latent heroic strength broke forth, and he did not rest until the hated elements were destroyed. But the disturbance was forgotten as soon as overcome, and life and the world again appeared to him as harmonious as his own soul. He walked through the crowded streets of Neapolis with a song upon his lips, the idol of the girls, the pride of his brothers in arms.

With such a nature Totila was the favourite of all who knew him, receiving and imparting happiness. Even his quiet friend imbibed somewhat of the charm of his temperament.

Julius Montanus, of a sensitive and thoughtful disposition, of an almost feminine nature, had been early left an orphan, and, awed by the immense superiority of his guardian Cethegus, had grown up shy, lonely and studious. More oppressed than elevated by the cheerless science of his time, he was apt; to look upon life as earnest and almost sad. He was inclined to subject all things to the severe test of superhuman perfection, and his natural self-distrust might easily have darkened into melancholy.

At a happy moment Totila's friendship shone into the inmost depths of his heart, and penetrated it with such a sunny warmth that his noble nature was thereby enabled to rise with elasticity from a severe shock which it received by means of this very friendship.

Let us hear what he himself wrote about this circumstance to the Prefect.

"To Cethegus the Prefect, Julius Montanus.

"The cold-hearted reply to my enthusiastic report of my newly-formed friendship to Totila, at first--surely contrary to your wish--hurt me sorely, but later it was the means of enhancing the happiness of this friendship in a manner, however, which you could neither foresee nor wish. Sorrow caused by you was soon changed into sorrow for *you*. Though at first I felt hurt because you treated my deepest feelings as the mere enthusiasm of a sickly boy, and tried to assail my profoundest convictions with bitter mockery--only *tried*, for they are unassailable--this feeling was soon changed into one of compassion for you. It is sad that a man like you, so rich in intellect, should be so poor in heart. It is sad that you do not know the happiness of self-denial, or of that unselfish love, which is called in the language of a belief--more laughed at than credited by you, but to which each day of pain draws me closer--*caritas*! Forgive the freedom of my words. I know I have never yet addressed such to you, but I have only lately become *what* I am. Perhaps it was not wholly with injustice that, in your last letter, you blamed the traces of childishness which you found in me. I believe that they have disappeared since then, and I speak to you now as a *man*. Your 'medicine' has certainly accelerated my development, but not in your sense of the word and not according to your wish. It has brought me pain, holy and refining; it has put my friendship to a severe test, and, God be thanked, the fire has not destroyed it, but hardened it for ever. Read on and you will wonder at the manner in which Heaven has carried out your plans! Though pained at your letter, I very soon, with my habitual obedience, sought your friend, Valerius Procillus, the trader in purple. He had already left the town for his charming villa. There I followed him, and found a man of much experience, and a zealous friend of freedom and of his country. His daughter Valeria is a jewel! You prophesied truly. My intention of being extremely reserved melted at her sight like mist before the sun. It seemed to me as if Electra or Cassandra, Clœlia or Virginia, stood before me! But still more than by her great beauty, I was charmed by the grace of her mind as it unfolded itself before me. Her father at once invited me to remain as his guest, and under his roof I have spent the happiest days of my life. Valeria lives in the poetry of the ancients. How her melodious voice lent splendour to the choruses of Æschylus, and melancholy to Antigone's lament! We read together for hours, and when she rose from her chair in her enthusiasm, when her dark hair waved freely over her shoulders and her eyes flashed with an almost unearthly fire, she looked indeed wonderfully beautiful. Her character gains an additional charm from a circumstance which may cause her much future grief, and which runs through her life like a cruel rent. You will guess what I mean, for you know the history of her family. You know better than I how it happened that her mother dedicated Valeria at her birth to a lonely virgin life, passed in works of piety, but that her rich father, more worldly than heavenly-minded, bought her release from this vow at the cost of a church and a cloister. But Valeria believes that Heaven will not accept dead gold for a living soul; she does not feel released from this vow, of which she thinks not with love but with fear. For you were right when you wrote that she is a true child of the ancient heathen world. Not only that, but she is the true child of her father, yet still she cannot altogether renounce the pious Christianity of her mother; it lives within her, not as a blessing, but as an overpowering curse; as the inevitable fetter of that fatal vow. This strange conflict of feeling tortures her, but it ennobles her also. Who knows how the struggle will be ended? Heaven alone which will decide her fate. This inward strife attracts me. You know that Christian faith and atheistic philosophy struggle for the victory in my soul. To my astonishment, faith has increased during these days of sorrow, and it almost seems to me that happiness leads to heathen wisdom, and pain and misfortune to Christ. But you have still to learn the cause of my suffering. When I became at first aware of my growing passion, I was full of joyful hope. Valerius, perhaps already influenced by you, observed my attention to Valeria with no dislike; perhaps the only thing he disapproved in me was, that I did not sufficiently share in his dreams of a renewed Roman Republic, or his in hatred of the Byzantines; in whom he sees the deadly enemies, not only of his family, but of Italy. Valeria, too, soon bestowed her friendship upon me, and who knows if at that time this friendship and her reverence to her father's wishes would not have sufficed to induce her to accept my love. But I thank--shall I say God or Fate?--that this did not happen. To sacrifice Valeria to a married life of indifference would have been a sacrilege. I do not know what strange feeling prevented me from speaking the word, which, at that time, would have made her mine. I loved her deeply; but each time that I was about to take courage and sue to her father for her hand, a feeling crept over me as if I were trespassing on another's property; as if I were not worthy of her, or not intended for her; and I was silent and

controlled my beating heart. One day, at the sixth hour--it was sultry and the sun scorched both land and sea--I went to seek coolness and shade in the grotto of the garden. I entered through the oleander-bushes. There Valeria reposed upon a soft, mossy bank, one hand resting upon her gently-heaving bosom, the other placed beneath her head, which was still crowned with a wreath of asphodels worn during the evening meal. I stood before her trembling; she had never looked so lovely. I bent over her, lost in admiration; my heart beat quickly. I bent still lower, and would have kissed her delicate rosy mouth, but all at once a thought oppressed me: what you are about to do is a robbery! Totila! my whole soul cried within me, and as gently as I had come I left her. Totila! why had I never thought of him before? I reproached myself for having almost forgotten the brother of my heart in my new happiness. The next day I returned to Neapolis to fetch him. I praised the beauty of the maiden, but I could not prevail on myself to tell him of my love. I preferred that he should come and find it out for himself. On our arrival at the villa we did not find Valeria in the house. So I led Totila into the garden--Valeria is passionately fond of flowers--and as we issued from an avenue, she appeared before us in all her dazzling beauty. She was standing before a statue of her father and crowning it with freshly-plucked roses, which she held heaped up in a fold of her tunic.

"It was a surprisingly beautiful picture--this lovely girl, framed in the dark green of the taxus-bushes, her right hand uplifted to the white marble statue, the other pressing the corner of her robe to her bosom--and the effect upon Totila was overpowering. With a cry of astonishment, he remained rooted to the ground before her. She looked up and started. The roses fell from her dress to the ground; she did not notice it. Their eyes had met, and her cheeks were covered with blushes. At a glance I saw that her and my fate was decided. They loved each other at first sight! This certainly pierced my soul like a burning arrow. But only for a moment did I feel this unmixed pain. The next, as I looked at the two, I felt unselfishly glad that they had found each other; for it seemed as if the Power which creates the souls and bodies of mortals, had formed them of one material for each other. They belonged to each other, like morning sunshine and morning flowers. Now I knew what mysterious feeling had kept me apart from Valeria, and caused me to pronounce his name. By the wisdom of God, or in the course of the stars, it had been decided that Valeria should be Totila's, and that I should not step in between them.

"Permit me to leave the rest untold; for my nature is still so selfish, the holy precept of self-denial has still so little power over me, that--I am ashamed to confess it--my heart often fails me, instead of beating with happiness at the good fortune of my friends. As two flames mingle inseparably together, so their hearts were united. They love each other, and are as happy as the immortal gods. To me remains the joy of witnessing their bliss, and helping them to conceal it from the eyes of their father, who will scarcely give his child to the barbarian as long as he sees in Totila *only* the barbarian. But I keep my love and its sacrificial death a secret from my friend; he does not guess, nor shall he ever learn, that which would only disturb his happiness. You see now, Cethegus, how far from your aim a god has turned your plan. You would have given to me this jewel of Italy, and instead it is laid at Totila's feet. You would have destroyed my friendship, and have, instead, freed it, in the furnace of self-immolation, from all earthly dross, and made it immortal. You would have made me a man through the joy of love, and I have become a man through love's pain. Farewell, and revere the guidance of Heaven!"

CHAPTER XX.

We will not attempt to describe the effect of this letter upon the Prefect, but will rather accompany the two friends upon one of their evening walks on the charming shores of the Gulf of Neapolis.

After an early cœna, they wandered through the city, and out of the Porta Nolana, which was still decorated with some half-ruined reliefs, illustrating the victories of one of the Roman Emperors over the barbarians.

Totila stood still and admired the beautiful sculpture.

"Who can be that Emperor," he asked his friend, "on the car of victory, with the winged lightning in his hand, like a Jupiter Tonans?"

"That is Marcus Aurelius," said Julius, and would have walked on.

"Oh, stay a while! And who are those four prisoners in chains, with the long waving hair, who drag the car?"

"They are Germanic Kings."

"But of what family?" asked Totila. "Look there, an inscription--'*Gothi extincti*'--the Goths annihilated!" and, laughing loudly, the young Goth struck the marble column with the palm of his hand, and walked quickly through the gate. "A lie in marble!" he cried, looking back. "That Emperor never thought that one day a Gothic Count in Neapolis would give his boast the lie!"

"Yes, nations are like the changing leaves upon the tree," said Julius thoughtfully. "Who will govern this land after you?"

Totila stood still.

"AFTER US?" he asked in astonishment.

"What! You do not think that your Goths will endure for ever amongst the nations?"

"I don't know that," said Totila, walking on.

"My friend, Babylonians and Persians, Greeks and Macedonians, and, as it seems, we Romans also, had their appointed time. They flourished, ripened, and decayed. Will it be otherwise with the Goths?"

"I do not know," answered Totila uneasily. "I never thought about it. It has never occurred to me that a time might come when my nation----" He hesitated, as if it were a sin even to express the thought. "How can one imagine such a thing? I think as little about it as I do about--death!"

"That is like you, my Totila."

"And it is like you, Julius, to tease yourself and others with such dreams."

"Dreams! You forget that for me and for my nation it has already become a reality. You forget that I am a Roman. I cannot deceive myself like most men; it is all over with us. The sceptre has gone from us to you. It was not without much painful thought that I learned to forget that you, my bosom friend, are a barbarian, the enemy of my country."

"But it is not so, by the light of the sun!" interrupted Totila eagerly. "Do I find this harsh thought in you too? Look around you! When, tell me, when has Italy ever flourished more than under our protection? Scarcely in the time of Augustus! You teach us science and art; we give you peace and protection. Can one imagine a finer correlation? Harmony amongst Romans and Goths may create an entirely new era, more splendid than has ever existed."

"Harmony! But it does not exist. You are to us a strange people, divided from us by speech and faith, by race and customs, and by centuries of hatred. Once we robbed you of your freedom; now you have robbed us of ours. Between us yawns a wide abyss."

"You reject my favourite idea."

"It is a dream!"

"No, it is truth. I feel it, and perhaps the time will come when I can prove it. I would build all the fabric of my life upon it."

"Then were it built upon a noble delusion. No bridge between Romans and barbarians!"

"Then," said Totila, with some heat, "I do not understand how you can live--how you could take me----"

"Do not complete your sentence," said Julius gravely. "It was not easy; it was most painful self-denial. Only after a sharp struggle with selfish feelings did I succeed. But at last I have ceased to live only in my nation. The faith which already unites Romans and barbarians as nothing else could; which more and more powerfully conquered my repugnant reason by grief and pain--pain which turned to joy--brought peace to me in the conflict of my soul. In this one thing I may already boast that I am a Christian; I live for mankind, not alone for my nation. I am a man, and no longer a mere Roman. Therefore I can love you, the barbarian, like a brother. Are we not brothers of one family--that of humanity? Therefore I can bear to live, even after seeing my nation die. I live for humanity; that is my people."

"No!" cried Totila vehemently; "that I could never do. I can, and will, live only for my nation. My nationality is the air in which alone my soul can breathe. Why should we not endure eternally, or as long as this earth endures? Persians and Greeks? We are of better stuff! Need we fall because they have decayed? We are still in the strength of our youth. Ah, no! If the day should ever come when the Goths fall, may I not live to see it! Oh, ye gods! let us not linger like these sickly Greeks, who cannot live and cannot die. No; if it must be, send a fearful tempest, and let us perish suddenly and gloriously all, all! and I the foremost!"

He had excited himself to the warmest enthusiasm. He sprang up from the marble bench upon which they had been seated, and shook his lance in the air.

"My friend," said Julius, looking at him kindly, "how well this ardour becomes you! But reflect; such a conflict could only be kindled against *us*, against my nation, and should I----"

"If ever such a strife arose, you should cling to your nation, body and soul, that is clear. You think that would interfere with our friendship? Not in the least. Two heroes can cleave each other to the marrow, and yet remain the best friends. Ha! I should rejoice to meet you in battle, with spear and shield."

Julius smiled: "My friendship is not of so grim a nature, my savage Goth! These doubts have tormented me for some time, and all my philosophers together could give me no peace. Only

since I learned, in my sorrow, that I owe service to God in heaven alone, and must, on earth, live for humanity, and not for a nation----"

"Softly, friend," cried Totila, "where is this humanity of which you rave? I do not see it. I see only Goths, Romans, and Byzantines! I know of no humanity somewhere up in the sky, above the existing peoples. I serve humanity by serving my nation! I cannot do otherwise. I can not strip off the skin in which I was born. I speak like a Goth, in Gothic words, not in a language of general humanity: there is no such thing. And as I speak like a Goth, so I feel like a Goth. I can appreciate strange nations certainly; I can admire your art, your science, and, in part, your state, in which everything is so strictly ordered. We can learn much from you; but I could not and would not exchange, even with a people of angels. Ah! my brave Goths! At the bottom of my heart their faults are dearer to me than your virtues!"

"How differently I feel, and yet I am a Roman."

"You are no Roman! Forgive me, friend, it is long since a Roman existed, else I could never be the Count of the Harbour of Neapolis. No one can feel as you do, whose nation yet exists; and all must feel as I do, who belong to a living people."

Julius was silent for a short time. "If it be indeed so, then happy I! If I have lost the earth, I have gained heaven! What are nations, what are states, what is the earth? Not here below is the home of my immortal soul, which longs for a kingdom where all is divine and eternal!"

"Stop, Julius," said Totila, standing still, and striking his lance upon the ground. "Here upon earth have I a firm footing; here let me stand and live, doing good, and enjoying what is beautiful. I will not follow you into your heaven. I cannot. I honour your dreams and your longing for holiness; but I do not share your feelings. You know," he added, smiling, "that I am an inveterate heathen, like Valeria--my Valeria! I remember her at the right moment. Your earth-forsaking dreams make us forget the dearest things upon that earth! Look, we have reached the city again; the sun sinks rapidly here in the south, and before nightfall I must take some seeds to the garden of Valerius. A fine gardener," he laughed, "to forget his flowers. Farewell. I turn to the right."

"Farewell. Greet Valeria for me. I shall go home and read."

"What are you reading now? still Plato?"

"No, Augustinus. Farewell!"

CHAPTER XXI.

Totila, avoiding the more thickly populated parts of the inner town, hurried through the suburbs towards the Porta Capuana and the tower of Isaac, the Jewish gate-keeper.

This tower stood on the right of the gate, and had strong walls and a massive arched roof. It was divided into different stories, each being smaller than the one below it. In the top story, close to the battlements, were two low but roomy chambers, intended for the dwelling of the gate-keeper.

There lived the old Jew, with Miriam, his beautiful daughter.

In the largest of these two rooms--where, against the walls, hung a row of heavy keys belonging to the principal and side doors of this important gate, a curved signal-horn, and the spear of the gate-keeper--sat Isaac, the aged warder, a tall, bony figure, with the hooked nose and arched and bushy eyebrows of his nation. He sat upon a reed mat, with his legs crossed, a long staff laid upon his knees, listening attentively to the words of a young, ill-favoured-looking man, evidently an Israelite, whose hard, sober features were expressive of all the cunning of his race.

"Look here, father Isaac," he was saying, in a thin, unpleasant voice, "my words are no vain words, and do not come only from the heart, which is blind, but from the mind, which is sharp to discern. I have brought letter and document for every word that I speak. Here is my appointment as architect of all the aqueducts in Italy; fifty gold solidi yearly, and ten more for every new undertaking. I have just reconstructed the half-ruined aqueduct for this city of Neapolis; in this purse are the ten solidi, money down. Thou seest I can keep a wife, and besides, I am thy cousin Rachel's son, so do not let me speak in vain, but give me Miriam, thy child, to wife, so that she may set my house in order."

But the old man stroked his long grey beard, and shook his head slowly.

"Jochem, son of Rachel, I say to thee, leave it alone, leave it alone."

"Why, what hast thou against me? Who in Israel can speak against Jochem?"

"No one. Thou art just and peaceful and industrious, and increasest thy substance, and thy work flourisheth before the Lord. But hast thou ever seen the nightingale mated with the

sparrow, or the slender gazelle with the beast of burden? They do not suit each other; and now, look there, and tell me thyself if thou art fitted for Miriam?"

He softly pushed aside the curtain which shut off the outer chamber. At a large bow-window which commanded a view of the splendid city, the blue sea, and the distant mountains, stood a young girl, holding a strangely-shaped stringed instrument in her arms. The room was filled with the glowing light of the setting sun, which bathed the white garments and the noble features of the girl with a rosy lustre. It played upon her shining black hair, which, stroked back behind the small ears, exposed the delicate temples; and, like this sunshine, a poetical harmony seemed to envelop her whole figure, accompanying her every movement, and every dreamy look of her dark blue eyes, which, filled with gentle thoughts, gazed out over sea and city. Piso, the poet, had called these eyes "dark sea-blue."

As if in a half dream, her fingers touched the strings of her instrument softly, while from her half-open lips there breathed an old and melancholy song:

"By the waters of Babylon
We sat down and wept.
When comes the day when Israel
Shall cease to weep?"

"Shall cease to weep?" she repeated dreamily, and leaned her head upon her arm, which, enclosing the harp, she rested upon the window-sill.

"Look there!" said the old man in a low voice, "is she not as lovely as the rose of Sharon, or the hind upon the mountain, without spot or fleck?"

Before Jochem could answer, there sounded from below three knocks upon the small iron door. Miriam started from her reverie, and hurried down the narrow winding staircase. Jochem went to the window, and his face grew dark and frowning.

"Ha! the Christian! the cursed Christian!" he growled, and clenched his fist. "That fair Goth again, with his insufferable pride! Father Isaac, is that the stag that suits thee for thy hind?"

"Son, speak no mocking word against Isaac! Thou knowest that the youth has set his heart upon a Roman girl; he thinks not of the Pearl of Judah!"

"But perhaps the Pearl of Judah thinks of him!"

"With joy and gratitude, as the lamb thinks of the strong shepherd who has saved it from the jaws of the wolf. Hast thou forgotten, that, when last these cursed Romans hunted for the treasures and gold-heaps of Israel, and burnt down the synagogue with unholy fire, a band of these wicked men chased my poor child through the streets, like a pack of wolves after a white lamb, and tore the veil from her face, and the kerchief from her shoulders? Where was Jochem then, my cousin's son, who had accompanied her? He had fled from danger with swift feet, and had left the dove in the claws of the vulture!"

"I am a man of peace," said Jochem uneasily; "my hand holds not the sword of force."

"But Totila held it, brave as the Lion of Judah; and the Lord was with him. Alone he sprang amid the group of impudent robbers, struck the boldest with his sharp sword, and drove away the others as a falcon frighten crows. He covered my trembling child carefully with her veil, and supporting her tottering footsteps, led her home, unhurt, to the arms of her old father. May Jehovah the Lord bless him for this deed with long life and happiness!"

"Well," said Jochem, taking up his papers, "then I will go: this time for a long while. I must travel over the great waters to transact an important business."

"An important business? With whom?"

"With Justinianus, the Emperor of the East. A portion of the great church, which he is building to the glory of God, in the golden town of Constantine, has fallen in. I have made a plan for the restoration of the building."

The old man sprang up hastily, and struck his stick upon the ground.

"What, Jochem, son of Rachel! wilt thou serve the Romans? Wilt thou serve the Emperor, whose forefathers destroyed the holy city of Zion, and reduced the Temple of the Lord to ashes? Wilt thou build a house for the erring faith, thou, the son of the pious Manasseh? Woe, woe to thee!"

"Why callest thou 'woe,' and knowest not wherefore? Canst thou smell whether a gold piece comes from the hand of a Jew or from that of a Christian? Does it not weigh as heavily and shine as brightly?"

"Son of Manasseh, thou canst not serve God and Mammon."

"But thou thyself art a servant of the unbelievers! Do I not see the warder's keys on the walls

of thy chamber? Dost thou not keep them for these Goths, and openest the doors for their outgoing and incoming, and guardest the castle of their strength?"

"Yes, I do so," said the old man proudly; "and I will watch for them faithfully, day and night, like a dog for its master; and as long as Isaac lives, no enemy of their nation shall enter these gates. For the children of Israel owe fervent thanks to them and to their great King, who was as wise as Solomon and as mighty as Gideon! We owe them such thanks as our forefathers owed to Cyrus, who freed them from the Babylonian captivity. The Romans destroyed the Temple of the Lord, and scattered His people over the face of the earth. They have mocked and beaten us, and burnt our holy places, and plundered our towns, and defiled our houses, and forced our wives, all over this land, and have made many a cruel law against us. But there came this great King from the North, whose seed may Jehovah bless! and he rebuilt our synagogues, and where the Romans had destroyed them, they were obliged to rebuild them with their own hands and their own money. He protected our homes, and whoever injured an Israelite was punished as if he had offended a Christian. He left us our God and our belief, and protected our commerce, and we celebrated the Paschal in such joy and peace as we had never known since the time when the Temple still stood upon Zion. And when a Roman noble had taken my Sarah from me by force, King Theodoric ordered that his proud head should be struck off that very day, and gave me back my wife unhurt. This I will remember as long as my days endure, and I will serve the nation faithfully till death, and once again it shall be said far and wide: as faithful and true as a Jew!"

"Mayst thou not reap ingratitude where thou sowest gratitude," said Jochem, preparing to go; "it seems to me that the time will come, when I shall again sue for Miriam--for the last time. Perhaps, father Isaac, thou wilt then be less proud." And he went through Miriam's chamber and down the steps, where he met Totila.

With an ungracious bow and a piercing look, the little man pressed past the slender Goth, who was obliged to stoop, as he entered the warder's dwelling.

Miriam followed Totila immediately.

"There hangs your gardener's dress," said she in a melodious voice, without raising her long lashes, "and here in the window I have placed the flowers ready. You said lately that she loved the white narcissus. I have taken care to procure some. They smell so sweet!"

"You are a good little maiden, Miriam," said Totila, taking off his helmet with the silver-white swan's wings, and setting it upon the table. "Where is your father?"

"The blessing of the Lord rest upon thy golden locks," said the old man, as he entered the room.

"Good even, faithful Isaac!" cried Totila, taking off the long white mantle which hung from his shoulders, and enveloping himself in a brown cloak, which Miriam took down from the wall. "You good people! without you and your faithful silence, all Neapolis would know of my secret. How can I thank you!"

"Thank?" said Miriam, fixing her beaming eyes upon him, "you have thanked us beforehand to all eternity!"

"No, Miriam," said Totila, pulling a broad-brimmed brown felt hat low down upon his forehead, "that was nothing. Tell me, father Isaac, who is that little man who just went away, and whom I have often met here? It seems to me that he has cast his eyes upon Miriam. Speak frankly. If a dowry is wanting--I would gladly be of use."

"Love is wanting--on her side," said Isaac quietly,

"Then I can certainly do no good! But if her heart has chosen elsewhere--I should like to do something for my Miriam!" and he laid his hand gently upon the maiden's shining hair.

The touch was but slight, but as if a flash of lightning had startled her, Miriam fell suddenly upon her knees. Her head sank upon her bosom, and, crossing her arms, she slipped down at Totila's feet like a flower heavy with dew.

Totila drew back a step in surprise. But the next moment the girl had risen.

"Forgive, it was only a rose--it fell at your feet." She placed the flower upon the table, and seemed so composed, that neither her father nor Totila thought further of the occurrence. "It is growing dark already; make haste, sir!" she said quietly, and gave him a basket containing flowers and plants.

"I go. Valeria is very thankful for all your kindness. I have told her a great deal about you, and she has long wished to see you. Well, perhaps we can soon manage it--to-day is, probably, the last time that I shall need this disguise."

"Do you mean to carry off the daughter of Edom?" cried the old man. "Bring her here! here she will be well hidden!"

"No," interposed Miriam, "not here! no, no!"

"Why not, thou strange child?" asked her father in a tone of annoyance.

"This is no place for a bride--this chamber--it would bring her no blessing."

"Be not uneasy," said Totila, as he went to the door, "I shall soon put an end to secrecy by suing for her hand openly. Farewell!" He hastened out.

Isaac took the spear, the horn, and several keys from the wall, and followed in order to open the gate for Totila, and make the round of all the doors of the great tower.

Miriam remained alone.

For a long time she stood with closed eyes motionless on the same spot.

At last she passed both hands over her forehead and cheeks, and looked about her.

The room was very quiet; through the open window stole the first beam of moonlight. It fell silvery upon Totila's white mantle, which hung in long folds over a chair. Miriam ran and covered the hem of the mantle with burning kisses. She took the glittering helmet, which stood near her upon the table, and pressed it tenderly to her heart with both arms. Then holding it a little way from her, she gazed upon it dreamily for a few moments, and, at last--she could not resist--she lifted it up and placed it upon her lovely head. She started as the heavy bronze touched her forehead, and then, stroking back her dark braids, she pressed the cold hard steel firmly upon her brow. She then took it off, and set it, looking shyly round, in its former place, and going to the window she looked out into the magic moonlight and the scented night-air. Her lips moved as if in prayer, but the words of the prayer were the same old song:

"By the waters of Babylon
We sat down and wept.
O daughter of Zion, when comes the day
Which stills thy heavy pain?"

CHAPTER XXII.

While Miriam was gazing silently at the first pale stars, Totila's impatience soon brought him to the villa of the rich trader, which lay at about an hour's distance from the Porta Capuana.

The slave who kept the gate told him to go to the old Hortularius, Valeria's freedman, who had the care of the garden. This freedman had been admitted to the lovers' confidence, and now took the plants from the supposed gardener's boy, and led him into his sleeping-room, the low windows of which opened into the garden. The next day before sunrise--so taught the mysteries of ancient horticulture--the flowers must be planted, so that the first sunlight which shone upon them in the new soil should be that of the fresh morning. The young Goth waited impatiently in the narrow chamber for the hour at which Valeria would be able to leave her father after their evening meal.

He drew aside the curtain which covered the window and again and again looked up at the sky, measuring the flight of time by the rising of the stars and the progress of the moon. The large garden before him lay bathed in its peaceful light.

In the distance, the plashing of a fountain could be heard, and the cicadas chirped in the myrtles. The warm south wind blew sultry through the night, at times bearing clouds of sweet odour upon its wings; and, from the blooming grove at the end of the garden, the clear song of the nightingale filled the air with melody.

At last Totila could wait no longer. He swung himself noiselessly over the marble sill of the window; the white sand of the narrow path scarcely grated beneath his rapid footsteps, as, avoiding the stream of moonlight, he hurried along under the shrubbery.

On past the dark taxus-trees and the thick olive-groves; past the tall statue of Flora, whose white marble shone ghostly in the moonlight; past the large basin, where six marble dolphins spouted water high into the air; into the thick shrubbery of laurels and tamarinds, and, pressing through the oleanders, he stood before the stalactite grotto, in which a marble nymph of the spring leaned upon a large dark urn. As he entered, a white figure glided from behind the statue.

"Valeria, my lovely rose!" cried Totila, ardently embracing her.

"Leave me, leave me, my beloved!" she said, withdrawing from his arms.

"No, sweet one! I will not leave you. How long, how painfully, I have missed you! Do you hear how sweetly and invitingly the nightingale calls? Inhale the warm air of the summer night and the intoxicating scent of the roses. All breathes joy and love! Oh, let us hold fast these golden hours! My soul cannot contain all its bliss! All thy beauty; all our youth; and this glowing,

blooming summer night. Life rolls in mighty waves through my heart, and bursts it with delight!"

"Oh, Totila, I would gladly lose myself, like you, in the happiness of these hours! But I cannot. The intoxicating perfume, the luxurious warmth of these summer nights are but transient; they breed misfortune. I cannot believe in the happiness of our love!"

"Thou dear fool, why not?"

"I know not. The unhappy doubt which troubles all my life spreads its curse even over our love. How gladly would I love and trust like you! But a warning voice in my heart ever repeats: 'It will not last--thou shalt not be happy!'"

"Then, even in my arms, you are not happy?"

"Yes, and no! The feeling of concealment from my noble father oppresses me. See, Totila, what makes me love you most is not your youthful beauty and strength, nor even your great love for me. It is my pride in your character, in your frank, unclouded and noble character. I have accustomed myself to see you walk through this dark world bright and strong as the God of Light. The noble courage, sure of victory; the enthusiasm and truth of your being, are my pride. That when you approach, all that is mean, little, and unholy must vanish from before you, is my delight. I love you as a mortal loves the Sun-god who approaches him in the fulness of his glory, and therefore I can endure nothing secret about you. Not even the delight of these hours--it is enjoyed by stealth, and that must no longer be----"

"No, Valeria, and shall not! I feel exactly the same. I hate the lie of this disguise; I can bear it no longer! To-morrow I will throw it off and speak openly and freely to your father."

"This decision is the best, for----"

"For it saves your life, young man!" suddenly cried a deep voice, and from the dark background of the grotto a man came forth, in the act of sheathing his sword.

"My father!" cried Valeria, startled, but with courageous composure. Totila put one arm round her.

"Away, Valeria! leave the barbarian!" cried Valerius, stretching out his hand commandingly.

"No, Valerius," cried Totila, pressing Valeria close to his breast; "henceforward her place is on my bosom!"

"Audacious Goth!"

"Hear me, Valerius, and be not angry with us for this deceit. You yourself heard that it was to end tomorrow."

"Fortunately for you, I did. Warned by an old friend, I could still scarcely believe that my daughter--would deceive me. When I was compelled to believe my eyes, I was resolved that your life should pay for her fault. Your words saved you. But now go; you will never again see her face."

Totila would have retorted angrily, but Valeria was beforehand.

"Father," she said quietly, stepping between the two men, "listen to your child. I will not excuse my love, it needs no apology. It is as innocent and heavenly as are the stars. My love is the life of my life. You know me; truth is the air I breathe. By my soul! I will never leave this man!"

"Nor I her!" cried Totila, and took her right-hand.

The young couple stood erect before the old man in the bright moonlight, their noble features filled with sacred enthusiasm. They looked so beautiful that a softened feeling took possession of the angry father.

"Valeria, my child!"

"Oh, my father! you have led all my childish steps with such untiring love that till now I have scarcely missed, though I have deeply regretted, my lost mother. At this moment I miss her for the first time; for now I feel that I need her advocacy. At least let her memory plead for me. Let me bring her picture before you, and remind you of the time when, dying, she called you for the last time to her bedside, and, as you have often told me, confided to you my happiness as a holy legacy."

Valerius pressed his right hand to his forehead; his daughter ventured to take the other; he did not repulse her. Evidently a struggle was going on in his mind. At last he spoke.

"Valeria, without knowing it, you have pleaded strongly. It would be unjust to withhold from you a fact upon which you have mysteriously touched. Your mother's vow, which, however, we had long since annulled, still oppressed her soul. 'If our child,' she said, 'is not to be the bride of Heaven, at least swear to me to honour the freedom of her choice. I know how Roman girls,

particularly in our rank of life, are given in marriage unasked, without love. Such an union is misery on earth and a sin before God. My Valeria will choose nobly; swear to me to give her to the husband of her choice, and to no other!--and I Swore it. But to give my child to a barbarian, to an enemy of Italy! no, no!" And he broke from her grasp.

"Perhaps I am not so barbarous, Valerius, as you think," began Totila. "At least I am the warmest friend of the Romans in all my nation. Believe me, I do not hate you; those whom I abhor are your worst enemies as well as ours--the Byzantines!"

It was a happy speech, for in the heart of the old republican the hatred of Byzantium was the reverse side to his love of freedom and Italy. He was silent, but his eyes rested thoughtfully upon the youth.

"My father," said Valeria, "your child could love no barbarian. Learn to know Totila; and if you still call him a barbarian--I will never become his. I ask nothing of you but this: learn to know him. Decide for yourself whether my choice be noble. He is beloved by all the Goths, and all men are friendly to him--surely you alone will not reject him?"

Again she took her father's hand.

"Oh, learn to know me, Valerius!" begged Totila earnestly, taking his other hand.

The old man sighed. At length he said: "Come with me to your mother's grave, Valeria; there it is amongst the cypresses; there stands the urn containing her heart. Let us think of her--the noblest woman who ever lived--and appeal to her shade. And if your love prove to be true and well placed, then I will perform what I have promised."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A few weeks later, we find Cethegus in the well-known room containing the statue of Cæsar, together with our new acquaintance, Petros, the ambassador of the Emperor Justinian, or rather of the Empress.

The two men had shared a simple meal and had emptied a flask of old Massikian together, exchanging reminiscences of past times--they had been fellow-students, as we already know--and had just left the dinner-room for the study of Cethegus, in order, undisturbed by the attendants, to talk over more confidential affairs.

"As soon as I had convinced myself," said Cethegus, concluding his account of late events, "that the alarming reports from Ravenna were only rumours--perhaps inventions, and, at all events, exaggerated--I opposed the utmost coolness to the excitement and zeal of my friends. Lucius Lucinius, with his fiery temper and foolish enthusiasm, almost spoilt everything. He repeatedly demanded that I should accept the office of Dictator, and literally put his sword to my breast, shouting that I should be compelled to serve the fatherland. He let out so many secrets, that it was fortunate the dark Corsican--who seems to stick to the Goths, no one knows why--took him to be more drunk than he really was. At last news came that Amalasintha had returned, and so people and Senate gradually became more calm."

"And you," said Petros, "have saved Rome for the second time from the revenge of the barbarians--a service which can never be forgotten, and for which all the world, but most of all the Queen, must thank you."

"The Queen--poor woman!" answered Cethegus, shrugging his shoulders. "Who knows how long the Goths, or your imperial master at Byzantium, will leave her upon her throne?"

"What! You mistake entirely!" interrupted Petros eagerly. "My embassy was intended, above all other things, to support her government; and I was just upon the point of asking your advice," he added cunningly, "as to how this can best be done."

But the Prefect leaned back his head against the marble wall, and looked with a smile at the ambassador.

"Oh, Petros! oh, Peter!" he said. "Why so secret? I thought we knew each other better."

"What do you mean?" asked the Byzantine, embarrassed.

"I mean that we have not studied law and history together at Berytus and Athens in vain. I mean that at that time we already, while working together and exchanging our wise thoughts, came to the conclusion that the Emperor must drive out these barbarians, and rule again in Rome as he does in Byzantium. And as I think now just as I did then, you also will surely not have become a different man."

"I must subject my views to those of my master; and Justinian----"

"Naturally burns to rule in Italy."

"But certainly," said Petros, much embarrassed, "cases might occur----"

"Peter," said Cethegus, now rising indignantly, "use no phrases and no lies with me; they do no good. See, Petros, this is your old fault; you are ever too cunning to be wise. You think that you must always lie, and are never courageous enough to be truthful. How can you pretend to me that the Emperor does not mean to have Italy again? Whether he will uphold or overthrow the Queen depends upon whether he thinks he will reach his goal more easily with or without her. What his opinion is I am not to know. But, in spite of all your cunning, the next time we meet I will tell you to your face what he intends to do."

A wicked and bitter smile played upon the ambassador's thin lips.

"Still as proud as ever you were in the schools of logic at Athens," he said spitefully.

"Yes; and at Athens, you know, I was always the first, Procopius the second, and you came third."

Syphax just then entered the room.

"A veiled woman, sir," he said, "awaits you in the Hall of Jupiter."

Glad that the conversation was thus interrupted, for he did not feel capable of arguing with the Prefect, Petros said, with a grin:

"I wish you joy of such an interruption."

"Yes, for your own sake," answered Cethegus, smiling; and left the room.

"You shall one day repent your sarcasm, haughty man!" thought the Byzantine.

In the hall--which received the name of Jupiter from a beautiful statue, sculptured by Glycon of Athens--Cethegus found a woman, clad richly in the Gothic costume. On his entrance, she threw back the cowl of her brown mantle.

"Princess Gothelindis!" cried the Prefect in surprise. "What leads you to me?"

"Revenge!" she answered, in a hoarse voice, and advanced towards him.

Her features were sharp, but not plain; she would even have been called beautiful, but that her left eye was utterly destroyed, and the whole of her left cheek disfigured by a long scar. The wound seemed to bleed afresh as her cheeks flushed while pronouncing the angry word. Such deadly hatred shone from her grey eye, that Cethegus involuntarily retreated.

"Revenge?" he asked. "On whom?"

"On--of that later. Forgive that I disturb you," she added, composing herself. "Your friend Petros of Byzantium is with you, is he not?"

"Yes; but how do you know?"

"Oh! I saw him enter your door before supper," she answered, with assumed indifference.

"That is not true," said Cethegus to himself; "for he was brought in by the garden-gate. So they have made an appointment here, and I was not to know it. What can they want with me?"

"I will not keep you long," continued Gothelindis. "I have only one question to ask of you. Answer briefly, 'yes' or 'no.' I have the power to ruin that woman--the daughter of Theodoric--and I have the will. Are you for me in this, or against me?"

"Oh! friend Petros," thought the Prefect. "Now I already know what you intend to do with Amalasintha. But we will see how far you have gone.--Gothelindis," he said aloud, "I readily believe that you wish to ruin the Gothic Queen; but I doubt if you can do so."

"Listen to me, and then decide whether I can or no. The woman has caused the three dukes to be murdered."

Cethegus shrugged his shoulders. "Many people think that."

"But I can prove it."

"You don't say so?" exclaimed Cethegus incredulously.

"Duke Thulun, as you know, did not die immediately. He was attacked on the Æmilian Way, near my villa at Tannetum. My husbandmen found him and brought him into my house. You know that he was my cousin--I belong to the Balthe family. He died in my arms."

"Well, and what said the sick man in his fever?"

"Fever! Nothing of the sort! As Duke Thulun fell, he wounded his murderer, who was not able

to fly far. My husbandmen sought for him, and found him dying in the nearest wood. He confessed everything to me."

Cethegus imperceptibly compressed his lips.

"Well? What was he? What did he say?"

"He was an Isaurian mercenary," said Gothelindis sharply, "an overlooker of the works on the ramparts at Rome, and he said, 'Cethegus, the Prefect, sent me to the Queen, and the Queen sent me to Duke Thulun!'"

"Who heard his confession besides you?" asked Cethegus.

"No one. And no one shall know of this, if you stand by me. But if not, then----"

"Gothelindis," interrupted the Prefect, "no threats! They are of no use. You must comprehend that they can only aggravate, but not control me. In case of need, I would allow it to come to an open accusation. You are known as the bitter enemy of Amalasintha, and your evidence alone-- you were imprudent enough to confess that no one else heard the declaration of the dying man-- would ruin neither her nor me. You cannot force me to act against the Queen; at the most, you could persuade me, if you can show that it would be to my advantage. And to do this, I myself will propose an ally to you. You certainly know Petros, my friend?"

"Very well; long since."

"Permit me to fetch him to this conference."

He returned to his study.

"Petros, my visitor is the Princess Gothelindis, the wife of Theodahad. She wishes to speak to both of us. Do you know her?"

"I? oh no. I have never seen her," answered Petros quickly.

"'Tis well; follow me."

As soon as they entered the hall, Gothelindis cried out:

"Welcome, old friend! What a surprising meeting!"

Petros was dumb. Cethegus, his hands clasped behind his back, enjoyed the confusion of the Byzantine.

"Do you see, Petros? always too cunning, always unnecessary subtleties! But come, do not be so cast down by the discovery of a trick. So you two have combined together for the Queen's ruin. You wish to persuade me to help you. But before doing so, I must know your intentions exactly. Whom will you place upon Amalasintha's throne? For the way is not yet open for Justinian."

Both were silent for some moments. His clear perception of the situation surprised them. At last Gothelindis spoke:

"Theodahad, my husband, the last of the Amelungs."

"Theodahad, the last of the Amelungs," Cethegus repeated slowly.

Meanwhile, he considered all the advantages and disadvantages of this plan. He reflected that Theodahad, unloved by the Goths, and raised to the throne by Petros, would soon be entirely in the power of the Byzantines, and that the catastrophe would be brought about in a different manner and earlier than he intended. He reflected that he must at all events keep the armies of the East Romans at a distance for the longest possible time, and he decided to keep up the present state of things and support Amalasintha, because thus he would gain time for his preparations. All this he had thought over, weighed, and decided upon, in a few moments.

"And how will you commence proceedings?" he asked gravely.

"We shall desire the Queen to abdicate in favour of my husband, threatening, in case of refusal, to accuse her of murder."

"And if she runs the risk?"

"We will carry out our threat," said Petros, "and raise a storm amongst the Goths, which will--"

"Cost her her life!" cried Gothelindis.

"Perhaps cost her her throne," said Cethegus, "but hardly give it to Theodahad. No, if the Goths are allowed to *choose* a king, he will not bear the name of 'Theodahad.'"

"That is too true," said Gothelindis angrily.

"Then there might easily come a king who would be much less welcome to us all than Amalasintha. And therefore I tell you openly, I am not on your side; I will uphold the Queen."

"Then there is war between us," cried Gothelindis grimly, and turned towards the door. "Come, Petros."

"Softly, friends," said the Byzantine. "Perhaps Cethegus will change his mind when he has read this paper," and he gave the Prefect the letter which Alexandros had brought from Amalasintha to Justinian.

Cethegus read; his features darkened.

"Well," said Petros sarcastically, "will you still support the Queen, who has vowed your ruin? Where would you be if she carried out her plan, and your friends did not watch over you?"

Cethegus scarcely listened to him.

"Pitiful fellow," he thought, "as if it were that! as if the Queen were not quite right! as if I could blame her for it! But the imprudent woman has already done what I only feared from Theodahad. She has ruined herself, and frustrated all my plans; she has already called the Byzantines into the country, and now they will come, whether she will or no. As long as Amalasintha reigns, Justinian will play the part of her protector." And now he turned, in seeming consternation, to the ambassador, and, giving him the letter back, asked: "And if she carries out her intention, when could your troops land?"

"Belisarius is already on the way to Sicily," said Petros, proud of having abashed the Prefect; "in a week he can anchor before Portus."

"Unheard of!" cried Cethegus, this time in real dismay.

"You see," said Gothelindis, who had meanwhile read the letter, "those whom you would uphold wish to ruin you. Be beforehand with them."

"In the name of my Emperor," said Petros, "I summon you to help me to destroy this kingdom of the Goths, and to restore to Italy her freedom. You and your talent are valued as they ought to be at the Emperor's court, and, after the victory, Justinian promises you--the dignity of a senator at Byzantium."

"Is it possible?" cried Cethegus. "But not even this highest; of honours drives me with such eagerness into your plans as my indignation against the ungrateful Queen, who in reward for all my services, threatens my life.--But are you sure?" he asked anxiously, "that Belisarius will not land at once?"

"Do not be uneasy," answered Petros; "it is my hand that will beckon, when it is time. First, Amalasintha must be replaced by Theodahad."

"That is well," thought Cethegus; "with time all is won, and the Byzantines shall not land until I can receive them at the head of Italy in arms.--I am yours," he added aloud, turning to Gothelindis, "and I think I can bring Amalasintha to set the crown upon your husband's head with her own hands. She shall resign the sceptre."

"The Queen will never do that!" cried Gothelindis.

"Perhaps! Her generosity is still greater than her ambition. It is possible to ruin one's enemies through their virtues," said Cethegus thoughtfully. "I am now sure of the thing, and I greet you, Queen of the Goths!" he concluded, with a slight bow.

CHAPTER XXIV.

After the removal of the three dukes, Amalasintha had maintained an expectant attitude. Although by the fall of the heads of the aristocratic opposition she had obtained some freedom of action, yet the National Assembly at Regeta, near Rome, was soon to be held, when she must either completely exculpate herself from all suspicion of murder, or lose her crown, and perhaps her life. Only until the assembly had taken place did Witichis and his adherents promise her their protection. She therefore made every effort to strengthen her position before the decisive moment arrived. She hoped nothing more from Cethegus; she had seen through his selfish motives.

But she hoped that the Italians and the conspirators of the Catacombs, at the head of whose members her own name figured, would prefer her rule, so friendly to the Romans, to that of a king who belonged to the Gothic national party. She ardently longed for the arrival of the body-guard from the Emperor, which would protect her in the first moment of danger; and she was zealously employed in increasing the number of her friends amongst the Goths themselves. She invited many of her father's old followers--zealous adherents of the Amelungs, grey old warriors of great influence with the people, brothers-at-arms and almost play-fellows of old Hildebrand--to

return to Ravenna; particularly the white-bearded Grippa, Theodoric's cupbearer, whose fame was scarcely less influential than that of the old master-at-arms. She overwhelmed him and his comrades with honours, confided the castle of Ravenna to their care, and made them swear to keep faith with the Amelung family. As this connection with popular names was to form a sort of counterbalance to the influence of Witichis, Hildebrand and their friends--and Witichis could not justly prevent her from distinguishing the old friends of Theodoric with honours--so the Queen also looked about for aid against the family of the Balthes and their revenge. With sharp discernment she perceived that this could best be procured from the Wölfungs, whose family possessed great influence and riches in central Italy. At that time the heads of this family were two brothers, Duke Guntharis and Earl Arahad.

To win their alliance she had thought of a peculiarly effective means. For the friendship of the Wölfungs she would offer no less a price than the hand of her beautiful daughter.

In a richly decorated room at Ravenna the mother and daughter were engaged in an earnest but not amicable conversation on this subject.

The Queen was measuring the narrow apartment with hasty steps; all her usual repose of manner gone. She frequently threw an angry look at the beautiful girl, who, leaning against a marble table, stood quietly before her with downcast eyelids.

"Reflect well," cried Amalasintha angrily, and suddenly standing still, "reflect once more! I give you three days' time."

"It is in vain. I shall always speak as I have done to-day," said Matasintha without raising her eyes.

"Then tell me, what have you to say against Earl Arahad?"

"Nothing, except that I cannot love him."

The Queen did not seem to hear her.

"This is quite a different case from the other, when we would have had you marry Cyprianus," she said. "He was old and--which perhaps in your eyes was a greater disadvantage," she added bitterly--"a Roman."

"And yet I was banished to Tarentum because I refused him."

"I hoped that severity would have induced you to change your mind. For months I kept you away from my court, from my motherly heart." A bitter smile curled Matasintha's lovely mouth. "In vain," continued the Queen. "I now call you back----"

"You err. My brother Athalaric called me back!"

"I now offer you another husband. Young, handsome, a Goth of the purest nobility, his rank is at this moment the second in the kingdom. You know, at least you suspect, how sorely my throne, surrounded by enemies, needs protection. He and his powerful brother promise us the help of their whole army. Earl Arahad loves you, and you, you refuse him! Tell me why?"

"Because I do not love him."

"A girl's stupid speech! You are a King's daughter; you ought to sacrifice yourself to your rank, to your kingdom."

"I am a woman," answered Matasintha, raising her sparkling eyes, "and will sacrifice my heart to no power in heaven or on earth!"

"And thus speaks my daughter? Look at me, foolish child. I have striven after great things, and have attained much. As long as men admire what is great, they will name my name. I have won all that life can offer, and yet I never----"

"Loved! I know it," sighed her daughter.

"You know it?"

"Yes; it was the curse of my childhood! I was indeed still a child when my father died. I knew not how to express it, but even then I could feel that his heart missed something, when, sighing deeply, he embraced Athalaric and me, and sighed again. And I loved him all the more tenderly because I felt that he sought love most where it was wanting. Now indeed I know what then I could not explain to myself. You became our father's wife, because, after Theodoric, he stood next to the throne. Ambition, and not love, led you to his arms, and you could only give cold pride in return for his warm affection."

Amalasintha was startled, and stopped again in her restless walk.

"You are very bold!" she said.

"I am your daughter----"

"You speak of love so familiarly--you seem to know it at twenty better than I at fifty. You love!" she cried suddenly, "and thence comes this obstinacy!"

Mataswintha blushed and was silent.

"Speak," cried her angry mother; "confess it or deny it."

Mataswintha cast down her eyes and still kept silence. She had never looked more beautiful.

"Will you deny the truth? Are you afraid, you, a daughter of the Amelungs?"

The girl proudly raised her eyes.

"I am not afraid and I do not deny the truth. Yes, I love."

"And whom, unhappy girl?"

"Not even a god could force me to tell that!"

She looked so decided that Amalasintha did not attempt to learn more.

"Well," she said, "my daughter has no common nature. So I demand of you what is uncommon: to sacrifice all to the highest."

"Mother, I cherish a noble dream in my heart. To me it is the highest. To it I will sacrifice all."

"Mataswintha," said the Queen, "how unqueenly! See, God has blessed you above thousands with beauty of body and mind. You are born to be a queen."

"I will be a queen of love. All praise my beauty. I have proposed to myself, loving and beloved, happy and bestowing happiness, to be a true woman!"

"A woman? is that all your ambition?"

"It is. Oh, would it had been yours!"

"And the realm is nothing to you, the grandchild of Theodoric? Your nation, the Goths, are they of no account?"

"No, mother," said Mataswintha quietly; "it grieves me, it almost makes me ashamed, but I cannot pretend what I do not feel. The word 'Goth' arouses no sentiment in me. Perhaps it is not my fault; you have always despised these Goths and valued these 'barbarians' lightly; that was my first impression; it is enduring. And I hate this crown, this kingdom of the Goths; it has taken the place of my father, of my brother, and of myself in your heart! The Gothic crown has never been anything to me but a hated and inimical power."

"Oh, my child, woe to me if I am guilty of this! If you will not do it for the sake of our kingdom, oh, do it for my sake! I am lost without these Wölfungs. Do it for the sake of my love!" And she took her daughter's hand.

Mataswintha drew back with a bitter smile:

"Mother, do not blaspheme that holy name! Your love? You have never loved me. Nor my brother, nor my father."

"My child! What should I have loved if not you?"

"The crown, mother, and the hated monarchy! How often have you repulsed me before Athalaric's birth, because I was a girl, and you wished for a crown-prince. Think of my father's grave and of----"

"Cease!" cried Amalasintha.

"And Athalaric? Have you ever loved him? Have you not rather loved his right to the throne? Oh, how often have we poor children wept, when we sought the mother and found the Queen!"

"You never complained to me! you do it only now, when I ask you for the sacrifice----"

"Mother, even now it was not for yourself, only for your crown and throne. Put off the crown and you are free from all care. It has brought us no happiness, only pain. You are not threatened--I would sacrifice everything for you--but only your throne, only the golden diadem, the idol of your heart, the curse of my life! Never will I sacrifice my love to this hated crown, never, never, never!" And she crossed her white arms over her bosom as if she would protect her love thus from all assailers.

"Ha!" cried the Queen indignantly, "selfish, heartless child! you confess that you have no feeling for your people, no pride in the crown of your great ancestors! You will not voluntarily

obey the voice of honour; well then, obey force! You deny my love? then feel my severity! You will leave Ravenna at once with your attendants. You will go to Florentia, as the guest of Duke Guntharis; his wife has invited you. Earl Aarahad will accompany you on your journey. Leave me. Time will bend your stubborn will!"

"No power can do that," said Mataswintha, proudly raising her head, and she left the room.

The Queen looked after her silently. Her daughter's reproofs had made a greater impression upon her than she was willing to allow.

"Ambition?" she said to herself. "No, it is not that which fills my soul. I feel that I could protect my realm and render it happy, and truly I could sacrifice my life, as well as my crown, if the well-being of my nation demanded it. Could I not?" she asked herself, doubtfully laying her hand upon her heart.

She was roused from her reverie by Cassiodorus, who entered with bent head and slow steps.

"Well," said Amalasintha, struck by the sad expression of his face, "do you come to tell me of a misfortune?"

"No; only to ask a question."

"What question?"

"Queen," the old man solemnly commenced, "I have served you and your father faithfully for thirty years. I, a Roman, have served the barbarians, for I honoured your virtues, and believed that Italy, no longer capable of self-government, would flourish best under your rule, for your rule was just and mild. I continued to serve you, even when the blood of my best friends--and, as I believe, the most innocent blood--was shed. But they died by law, and not by treachery. I was obliged to honour your father, even where I could not praise him. But now----"

"Now? but now?" repeated the Queen proudly.

"I come now to beg from my friend, may I say my scholar----"

"You may," answered the Queen, softened.

"To beg great Theodoric's noble daughter to speak one single word, a 'yes.' If you can say this 'yes.'--and I pray to God that you can--then I will serve you as faithfully as ever, so long as my grey hairs are spared."

"And if not?"

"And if not, O Queen," answered the old man sadly--"oh, then farewell to you, and to my last joy in this world!"

"What have you to ask?"

"Amalasintha, you know that I was far away on the northern frontiers of the realm, when the rebellion here broke out, when that terrible rumour arose, and that fearful accusation was made. I believed nothing--I hurried here from Tridentum--I arrived two days ago, and not an hour passes, not a Goth do I meet, but a terrible doubt falls heavily upon my heart. And you, too, are changed; restless, inconstant--and yet I cannot believe it. One sincere word of yours will dispel all these mists."

"Why use so many words?" she cried, supporting herself on the arm of her chair. "Ask briefly what you have to ask."

"Say but one simple 'yes.' Are you guiltless of the death of the three dukes?"

"And if I were not, have they not richly deserved their fate?"

"Amalasintha--I beseech you--say 'yes.'"

"You take a very sudden interest in the Gothic rebels!"

"I beseech you," cried the old man, falling on his knees, "daughter of Theodoric, say 'yes,' if you can!"

"Rise!" she cried, turning away with a frown. "You have no right to question me thus."

"No," said the old man quietly, and rising from his knees. "No, not now. From this moment I no longer belong to this world."

"Cassiodorus!" cried the Queen, alarmed.

"Here are the keys of my rooms in the palace. There you will find all the gifts that I have received from you and Theodoric; the documents which assert my dignities, and my seals of office. I go!"

"Whither, my old friend, oh, whither?"

"To the cloister which I founded at Squillacium, in Apulia. Henceforward, far from kings and their deeds, I shall only do God's work upon earth. My soul has long since panted for peace, and now I have nothing left on earth that is dear to me. Accept once more my advice at parting: put away the sceptre from your blood-stained hands. You can bless this realm no longer, you can only bring a curse upon the nation. Think of the salvation of your soul, and may God be gracious to you!" And before the Queen could recover from her consternation, he had disappeared.

She would have hurried after him to call him back but she was met at the door by Petros, the ambassador.

"Stay, Queen," he said in a low and rapid voice, "stay and hear me. I have no time to lose. I am followed."

"Who follows you?"

"People who do not mean so well by you as I do. Deceive yourself no more; the fate of the kingdom is decided; you can hinder it no longer, so save for yourself what you can. I repeat my proposal."

"What proposal?"

"You heard it yesterday."

"That treacherous advice! Never! I shall report it to your master, the Emperor, and beg him to recall you. With you I will confer no more."

"Queen, this is not the moment to spare you. The next ambassador of Justinian is called Belisarius, and he will come with an army!"

"Impossible!" cried the forsaken Queen. "I recall my petition."

"Too late. The fleet of Belisarius already lies off Sicily. The proposal which you thought came from me you have rejected. Learn that the Emperor, and not I, was the propounder, and meant it as a last token of his favour."

"Justinian, my friend, my protector, would thus ruin me and my kingdom!" cried Amalasintha, who began to see the terrible truth.

"Not ruin you, but save you! He will re-conquer this Italy, the cradle of the Roman Empire. This unnatural, impossible kingdom of the Goths is condemned and lost. Leave the sinking ship. Justinian reaches out to you a friendly hand, and the Empress offers you an asylum, if you will deliver Neapolis, Rome, Ravenna, and all the fortresses into the hands of Belisarius, and consent that the Goths shall be led, disarmed, over the Alps."

"Wretched man! Shall I betray my people as you have betrayed me? Too late I see your schemes; I came to you for help, and you will destroy me!"

"Not you, only the barbarians."

"These barbarians are my people; they are my only friends! I see it now, and will stand by them to the death."

"But they will not stand by you."

"Insolent! Out of my sight! Leave my court!"

"You will not listen? Reflect, O Queen! only on this condition can I answer for your life."

"My people in arms shall answer for my life!"

"Hardly. For the last time I ask you----"

"Be silent! I will not give up my crown to Justinian without a struggle."

"Well, then," said Petros to himself, "another must, do it. Enter!" he called aloud at the entrance.

But Cethegus alone appeared from behind the curtain.

"Where is Gothelindis? Where is Theodahad?" whispered Petros.

"I left them outside the palace. The two women hate each other too bitterly. Their passion would spoil all."

"You are not my good angel, Prefect of Rome," said Amalasintha, turning away from him gloomily, as he approached.

"This time perhaps I am," whispered Cethegus, going close up to her. "You have rejected the proposals from Byzantium, as I expected you would. Dismiss that false Greek."

At a sign from the Queen, Petros retired into an ante-room.

"What would you with me, Cethegus? I trust you no longer."

"You have trusted the Emperor instead of me, and you see the consequences."

"I do indeed," she answered in deep grief.

"Queen, I have never deceived you in this: that I love Italy and Rome more than the Goths. You will remember that I never concealed it from you."

"I know it, and do not blame you."

"My dearest wish is to see Italy free. In order to keep the Emperor off, I would uphold your government; but I tell you openly that there is now no hope of this. If you proclaim war against Byzantium, the Goths will no more obey or the Italians trust you."

"And why not? What separates me from the Italians and my people?"

"Your own acts: two unfortunate documents, which, are in Justinian's hands. You yourself first called his arms into Italy--a body-guard from Byzantium!"

Amalasintha grew pale.

"You know----"

"Unfortunately not I alone, but my friends, the conspirators of the Catacombs. Petros showed them, the letter, and they call down curses upon you."

"Then my Goths, at least, remain to me!"

"No longer. Not alone do the adherents of the Balthes seek your life; but the conspirators of Rome have sworn, as soon as war breaks out, to announce to all the world that your name stands at the head of their conspiracy against the Goths--against your own nation! The document, with your signature, is in my hands no longer; it lies in the archives of the conspirators."

"Faithless man!"

"How could I know that you treated with Byzantium behind my back, and thus made enemies of my friends? You see that Byzantium, the Goths, and Italy are all against you. If the war break out under your direction, division will run rife in Italy. No one will obey you, and the kingdom will fall helpless into the hands of Belisarius. Amalasintha, there must be a sacrifice! I demand it of you in the name of Italy, in the name of your people and of mine."

"What sacrifice? I consent to any."

"The greatest sacrifice--your crown. Give it to a man who is capable of uniting the Goths and Italians against Byzantium, and save both nations."

Amalasintha looked at him searchingly. A terrible struggle took place in her soul.

"My crown? It is very dear to me," she said.

"I always held Amalasintha capable of any sacrifice."

"Dare I place confidence in your advice?"

"If it were sweet, you might doubt it; if I flattered your pride you might mistrust me. But I offer you the bitter cup of renunciation. I appeal to your generosity and courage. Make me not ashamed."

"Your last advice was a crime," cried Amalasintha, shuddering.

"I preserved your throne by every possible means as long as it could be upheld, as long as it was necessary for Italy; and I now demand that you should love your people more than your sceptre."

"By God! there you do not err. For my people I have not hesitated to sacrifice the lives of others"--she gladly dwelt on this thought, which appeased her conscience--"and I shall not refuse now to sacrifice my personal ambition. But who will be my successor?"

"Your heir, to whom the crown belongs--Theodahad, the last of the Amelungs."

"What! that feeble creature?"

"He is no hero, it is true; but heroes will obey the nephew of Theodoric if you place him on the

throne. And, consider, his Roman education has won the Italians for him; they will stand by him. They would both fear and hate a king after Hildebrand's heart."

"And rightly," answered the Queen reflectively. "But Gothelindis, Queen!"

Cethegus came nearer, and looked keenly into her eyes.

"Amalasintha is not so mean as to nourish a pitiful feminine enmity when there is need of a noble resolve. You have ever appeared to me nobler than your sex. Now prove it, and decide."

"Not now," said Amalasintha. "My head burns and my brain is confused. Let me alone to-night. You believe me capable of self-sacrifice. I thank you for that at least. To-morrow I will decide."

BOOK III.

THEODAHAD.

"It seemed to Theodahad that to have neighbours was a kind of misfortune."--*Procopius: Wars of the Goths*, i. 3.

CHAPTER I.

The morning after the events before described, a manifesto announced to the astonished inhabitants of Ravenna that the daughter of Theodoric had resigned the crown in favour of her cousin Theodahad, the last male scion of the House of Amelung.

Italians and Goths were summoned to swear the oath of allegiance to their new sovereign.

Cethegus had judged rightly. Amalasintha had felt her conscience oppressed by many a folly, and even by deadly sin. Noble natures seek consolation and atonement in sacrifice and self-denial; and the unhappy woman had been much affected by the reproaches of her daughter and Cassiodorus; therefore the Prefect had found her in a mood favourable for the reception of his advice. The very bitterness of this advice induced her to follow it; indeed, to save her people and expiate her guilt, she would even have endured much greater humiliation.

The change of dynasty was accomplished without difficulty. The Italians at Ravenna were in nowise prepared for rebellion, and Cethegus fed them with hopes of a more favourable opportunity. Besides this, the new King was known and liked by them as a friend of Roman civilisation.

The Goths, however, did not seem inclined to submit to the change without more ado. Prince Theodahad was certainly a man--that was in his favour and an Amelung, which last circumstance weighed heavily; but he was by no means esteemed. Cowardly and unmartial, effeminate in body and mind, he had none of the qualities which the Germans require in their kings. One sole passion filled his soul--avarice, insatiable love of gold. Though very rich, he was constantly engaged in mean quarrels with his neighbours in Tuscany. He well understood the art of increasing his estates by force and cunning, and the weight of his royal rank, and how to wrest their property from his neighbours; "for," says an author of that period, "it seemed to Theodahad that to have neighbours was a kind of misfortune." At the same time, his weak nature was entirely subject to that of his wicked but strong-minded wife.

For all these reasons, the worthiest members of the Gothic nation saw the accession of such a man to the throne of Theodoric with great dislike; and the manifesto had scarcely been published, when Earl Teja, who had shortly before returned to Ravenna with Hildebad, summoned the old master-at-arms and Witichis, and invited them to arouse and direct the discontent of the people, and to set a more worthy man in Theodahad's place.

"You know," he concluded his exhortation, "how favourable is the temper of the people. Since the night of our meeting in the Temple of Mercury, we have incessantly stirred up the nation, and have succeeded in many of our efforts. The noble self-assertion of Athalaric, the victory of the Feast of Epiphany, the prevention of Amalasintha's escape was all our work. Now a favourable opportunity offers. Shall a man who is weaker than a woman step into a woman's place? Have we no more worthy man than Theodahad amongst us?"

"He is right, by Thor and Woden!" cried Hildebad. "Away with these weak Amelungs! Raise a hero upon our shield, and hit about on all sides! Away with the Amelungs!"

"No," said Witichis calmly; "not yet. Perhaps it will come to that at last; but it must not happen sooner than is necessary. The Amelungs have a great party. Theodahad would never part with the

riches, nor Gothelindis with the power of the crown without a struggle; they are strong enough, if not for victory, at least for battle. But strife between brothers is terrible. Necessity alone can justify it; and, at present, that does not exist. Theodahad may try; he is weak, and may easily be led. There is time enough to act if he prove incapable."

"Who knows if then there will be time?" said Teja warningly.

"What dost thou advise, old man?" asked Hildebad, upon whose mind the remarks of Witichis had not been without effect.

"Brothers," answered Hildebrand, stroking his long beard, "you have the choice, and therefore are plagued with doubt. I am spared both, for I am bound. The King's old followers have sworn an oath that, as long as a member of his House lives, they will allow no stranger to occupy the throne."

"What a foolish oath!" cried Hildebad.

"I am old, and yet I do not call it foolish. I know what a blessing rests upon the great and sacred law of inheritance; and the Amelungs are descended from the gods!" he added mysteriously.

"Theodahad is a fine child of the gods!" laughed Hildebad.

"Be silent!" cried the old man angrily. "You modern men understand this no longer. You think you can fathom everything with your miserable reason. The mystery, the secrecy, the magic that lies in blood--for this you have lost all sense. Therefore I have held my peace about such things. But you cannot change me, with my near a hundred years. Do what you like; I shall do what I must."

"Well," said Earl Teja, yielding, "upon thy head be the responsibility. But when this last Amelung is no more----"

"Then the followers of Theodoric are free from their oath."

"Perhaps," said Witichis, "it is fortunate that your oath spares us the choice, for we certainly wish for no ruler whom thou canst not acknowledge. Let us then go and pacify the people; and let us bear with this King as long as it is possible."

"But not an hour longer!" cried Teja, and went away in anger.

CHAPTER II.

The very same day Theodahad and Gothelindis were crowned with the ancient crown of the Goths.

A splendid banquet, at which all the Roman and Gothic dignitaries of the court and city were present, enlivened the old palace and the usually quiet gardens, with which we have become acquainted as the scene of Athalaric's and Camilla's loves.

The revel lasted until deep into the night.

The new King, no friend of the cup, or of barbaric revelry, had retired early.

Gothelindis, on the contrary, sunned herself in the glory of her new rank. Proudly she sat upon her high seat, the golden circlet on her dark hair. She seemed all ear for the loud hurrahs with which, again and again, her own and her husband's names were greeted. But most of all she enjoyed the thought that these shouts would penetrate into the royal vault, where Amalasintha, her hated and conquered rival, sat mourning by the sarcophagus of her son.

Among the crowd of such guests as need only a full cup to make them merry, many a grave face was to be seen; many a Roman who would rather have seen the Emperor Justinian upon the throne at the head of the table; many a Goth who, in the present precarious condition of affairs, could not do homage to such a King as Theodahad without anxiety.

To these last belonged Witichis, whose thoughts seemed far absent from the splendid scene around him. The golden cup before him stood untouched, and he scarcely noticed the loud exclamations of Hildebad, who sat opposite him.

At last--the lamps were long since lit, and the stars stood in the sky--he rose and went into the greeny darkness of the garden. He slowly wandered through the taxus-walks, his eyes fixed upon the sparkling luminaries. His heart was with his wife, with his child, whom he had not seen for months.

He wandered on unconsciously, until at last he came to the little Temple of Venus by the quay, with which we are already acquainted.

He looked out over the gleaming sea. All at once something shining at his feet attracted his attention. It was the glittering of the moonlight upon a small Gothic harp, and upon a suit of mail. A man lay before him upon the soft grass, and a pale face was uplifted towards him.

"Thou here, Teja? Thou wert not at the banquet?"

"No; I was with the dead."

"My thoughts, too, were absent; at home with wife and child," said Witichis.

"With wife and child," repeated Teja, sighing.

"Many asked after thee, Teja."

"After me? Should I sit by Cethegus, who has robbed me of my honour, or by Theodahad, who took inheritance?"

"Thine inheritance?"

"At least he possesses it. And over the place where once stood my cradle he now drives his ploughshare."

His head sank upon his breast, and both were silent.

"And thy harp," at last said Witichis, "will it never be heard again? They praise thee as our nation's best minstrel!"

"Like Gelimer, the last King of the Vandals, who was also the best singer of his nation.--But they shall never lead *me* in triumph to Byzantium!"

"Thou singest but seldom now?"

"Seldom or never. But it seems to me time is coming when I shall sing again."

"A time of joy?"

"A time of deep and final sorrow."

Again a long pause ensued.

"My Teja," resumed Witichis, "I have ever found thee, in all trouble of peace or war, as true as steel. And although thou art so much younger than I--and an elder man does not lightly bind himself to a youth--I may call thee my best and bosom-friend. I know that thy heart cleaves to me more than to thy youthful companions."

Teja took the speaker's hand and pressed it. "Yes, even when my ways perplex thee, thou withholdest not thy respect and sympathy. The others---- And yet, *one* of them I love much!"

"Whom?"

"He whom all love."

"Totila?"

"Yes. I love him as the night loves the morning star. But he is so frank, that he cannot understand when others are, and must be, reserved."

"Must be! Why? Thou knowest that curiosity is not my failing. And if, at this earnest moment, I beg thee to lift the veil from thy grief, I ask it only because I would gladly help and comfort thee, and because a friend's eye often sees more clearly than one's own."

"Help? Help me? Canst thou awaken the dead? My pain is irrevocable as the past! Whoever has, like me, seen the unmerciful wheel of Fate roll, crushing everything before it, blind and dumb to all tenderness and nobleness; yea, even crushing what is noble more easily and readily, because it *is* tender; whoever has acknowledged that a dull necessity, which fools call the wise providence of God, rules the universe and the life of mankind, is past all help and comfort! If once he has caught the sound, he hears for ever, with the sharp ear of despair, the monotonous rumble of the cruel, insensible wheel in the centre of the universe, which, at every revolution, indifferently produces or destroys life. Whoever has felt this, and lived through it, renounces all and for ever. For evermore, nothing can make him afraid. But certainly--he has also for ever forgotten the sweetness of a smile."

"Thou makest me shudder! God forbid that I should ever entertain such a delusion! How hast thou acquired, so young, such terrible wisdom?"

"Friend, by thought alone the truth cannot be reached; only the experience of life can teach it. And in order to understand what and how a man thinks, it is necessary to know his life. Therefore, that I may not appear to be an erring dreamer, or an effeminate weakling, who delights in nursing his sorrow--and in honour of thy trust and friendship--thou shalt hear a small

portion of the cause of my grief. The larger part, by far the larger, I will keep to myself," he added, in evident pain, and pressing his hand to his heart. "The time for that will come too. But now thou shalt only hear how the Star of Misfortune, even at my birth, shone over my head. And amidst all the million stars above, this one alone remains faithful. Thou wert present--thou wilt remember--when the false Prefect taunted me before the whole assembly with being a bastard, and refused to fight with me. I was obliged to endure the insult. I am even worse than a bastard. My father, Tagila, was a famous hero, but no noble. Poor, and of low birth. He had loved, ever since his beard sprouted, the daughter of his father's brother, Gisa. She lived far away on the outermost eastern frontier of the realm; on the cold Ister, where continued battles raged with the Gepidæ and the wild Sarmatian hordes, and where a man has little time to think of the Church, or of the changing laws promulgated by her Conclaves. For a long time my father was not able to lead Gisa to his home; he had nought but his helm and spear, and could not pay the tax, nor prepare a home for his wife. At last fortune smiled upon him. In the war against the Sarmatians, he conquered the king's stronghold on the Alutha, and the rich treasures which the Sarmatians had gained by years of plunder, and had there amassed, became his booty. In reward of his valour, Theodoric gave him the rank of earl, and called him to Italy. My father took with him Gisa, now become his wife, and all his treasure, and bought a large and beautiful estate in Tuscany, between Florentia and Luca. But his good fortune did not last long. Shortly after my birth, some miserable fellow, some cowardly rascal, accused my parents of incest before the Bishop of Florentia. They were Catholics, and not Arians--and brothers' children; their marriage was null in the eyes of the Church--and the Church ordered them to part. My father pressed his wife to his heart, and laughed at the order. But the secret accuser did not rest----

"Who was he?"

"Oh, would that I knew it! I would reach him, even if he lived amid all the horrors of Vesuvius! The priests tormented my mother without cessation, and tried to alarm her conscience. In vain; she stood fast by her God and her husband, and defied the bishop and his messengers. And whenever my father met one of the priests upon his estate, he gave him such a welcome that he took care never to come again. But who can strive with those who speak in God's name! A last term was appointed; if, by that time, the disobedient couple had not separated, they were to be excommunicated, and their property forfeited to the Church. My father now hurried in despair to the King, to beg for the abolition of the terrible sentence. But the verdict of the Conclave was too clear, and Theodoric did not dare to offend the rights of the Orthodox Church. When my father returned from Ravenna, he stared in horror at the place where once his house had stood: the time had elapsed, and the threat had been fulfilled. His home was destroyed, his wife and child had disappeared. He madly sought for us all over Italy, and at last, disguised as a peasant, he discovered Gisa in a convent at Ticinum. They had torn her boy from her arms, and taken him to Rome. My father arranged everything for her flight from the convent; at midnight they escaped over the wall of the cloister garden. But the next morning the sisters missed their prisoner at the *hora*--her cell was empty. The convent servants followed the track of the horses--they were overtaken. Fighting desperately, my father fell; my mother was taken back to the convent. The pain of her loss and the severe discipline of the order had such a terrible effect upon her brain, that she went mad and died. Such was the fate of my parents."

"And thou?"

"I was discovered in Rome by old Hildebrand, who had been a brother-at-arms of my grandfather and father. With the King's assistance, he took me from the care of the priests, and brought me up with his own grandchildren in Regium."

"And thy estate, thine inheritance?"

"Was forfeited to the Church, which sold it, almost as a gift, to Theodahad. He was my father's neighbour; he is now my King!"

"My poor friend! But what happened to you later? I have heard only rumours--thou hast been in Greece----

Teja rose.

"Let me keep silence on that subject; perhaps another time. I was once fool enough to believe in happiness and the beneficence of a loving God. I have repented it bitterly. I shall never believe again. Farewell, Witichis, and do not blame Teja, if he be different from other men." He pressed the hand of his friend warmly; and quickly disappeared into the dark avenues of the garden.

Witichis sat for a long time in silent thought. Then he looked up at the sky, seeking in the bright stars a contradiction of the gloomy thoughts which his friend's words had aroused in his mind. He longed for their peaceful and clear light. But during the conversation, clouds had risen rapidly from the lagoons, and covered the sky. All around was dark and dismal. With a sigh, Witichis arose, and filled with sad thoughts, sought his lonely couch.

CHAPTER III.

While Italians and Goths feasted and drank together in the halls on the ground-floor of the palace at Ravenna, they little suspected that above their heads, in the King's apartments, a negotiation was going on which was to determine the fate of the kingdom.

The King had left the banquet early, and had retired to his rooms with the Byzantine ambassador, and, for a long time, the two were occupied in writing and consulting together.

At last they seemed to have come to an agreement, and Petros was about once more to read what he had written, when the King interrupted him:

"Stop," said the little man, who seemed almost lost in his royal robes, "stop--there is yet another thing."

And he rose from his seat, softly crossed the room, and looked behind the curtain at the entrance to see if any were listening.

Having reassured himself, he returned, and gently pulled the sleeve of the Byzantine. The light of the bronze lamp flickered in the draught, and fell upon the withered yellow cheeks of his ugly face, as he cunningly screwed up his already small eyes.

"Yet another thing. If these wholesome changes are to be made, it would be well, indeed it is necessary, that some of the most daring of my barbarian subjects should be rendered incapable of opposition."

"I have already thought of that," answered Petros. "There is that old half heathen, Hildebrand, that coarse Hildebad, and wise Witichis."

"You seem to know men well," said Theodahad, "you have looked sharply about you. But," he added, "there is one whom you have not mentioned, one who must be got rid of more than any other."

"And he?"

"Is Earl Teja, the son of Tagila."

"Is the melancholy dreamer so dangerous?"

"More so than any of the others. Besides, he is my personal enemy, as was his father before him."

"How so?"

"His father was my neighbour at Florentia, I wanted his acres. In vain I pressed him to give them up. Ha, ha!" and Theodahad laughed, "they became mine at last! The holy Church dissolved his criminal marriage, confiscated his property, and let me have it cheap. I had deserved well of the Church during the process--your friend, the Bishop of Florentia; can tell you the particulars."

"I understand," said Petros. "Why did not the barbarian give his acres up with a good will? Does Teja know?"

"He knows nothing. But he hates me merely because I bought his inheritance. He looks black at me, and the gloomy dreamer is just the man to strangle an enemy at the very feet of God Himself."

"Indeed?" said Petros, suddenly becoming very thoughtful. "Well, enough of him! He shall not hurt us. Let me read the treaty once more, point by point; afterwards you can sign it. 'First: King Theodahad resigns the sovereignty of Italy, and the subject islands and provinces of the Gothic kingdom, namely: Dalmatia, Liburnia, Istria, the second Pannonia, Savia, Noricum, Rhætia, and the Gothic provinces in Gaul, in favour of Emperor Justinian, and of his successors. He promises to deliver Ravenna, Rome, Neapolis, and all the fortresses in the kingdom, into the hands of the Emperor.'"

Theodahad nodded.

"Secondly: King Theodahad will use all the means in his power to the end that the Gothic army shall be disarmed and led away, in small parties, over the Alps. The women and children will follow the army, or be taken as slaves to Byzantium, according to the decision of the imperial generals. The King will take care that any resistance on the part of the Goths shall be without result. Thirdly: in return, the Emperor Justinian leaves the titles and honours of royalty to King Theodahad and his spouse for their lifetime. And fourthly----"

"I will read this paragraph myself," interrupted Theodahad, and held out his hand for the document.

"Fourthly: the Emperor leaves to the King of the Goths not only all the lands and treasures which the latter possesses as private property, but the whole of the royal Gothic treasury, which alone is valued at forty thousand pounds of minted gold. Further, the Emperor assigns to Theodahad, as his property and inheritance, the whole of Tuscany, from Pistoria to Cære, from

Populonia to Clusium; and lastly, he makes over to him for life the half of all the public revenues of the kingdom thus restored to its rightful sovereign.' Tell me, Petros, do not you think that I might demand three-fourths?"

"You might certainly ask it, but I doubt exceedingly that Justinian would grant it. I have already overstepped the utmost limits of my power."

"We will demand it, at all events," said the King, altering the figures, "then Justinian must either bargain for less, or grant additional privileges."

A false smile played over the thin lips of the ambassador.

"You are a clever negotiator, O King," he said. "But in this case you reckon wrongly," he added to himself.

Just at this moment the rustle of trailing garments was heard in the marble corridor, and Amalasintha entered, dressed in a long black mantle and a black veil sowed with silver stars. She was deadly pale, but composed and dignified; a Queen in spite of having lost her crown. Intense sorrow ennobled the expression of her countenance.

"King of the Goths," she began, "forgive if a dark shadow suddenly rises from the realm of the dead to dim your joyous feast. It is for the last time."

Both the men were struck by her appearance.

"Queen," stammered Theodahad.

"'Queen!' oh, would that I had never borne the name. I come, cousin, from the grave of my noble son, where I have acknowledged my infatuation, and repented of all my sins. I come to you, King of the Goths, to warn you against similar infatuation and similar guilt."

Theodahad's unsteady eyes avoided her grave and searching looks.

"It is an evil guest," she continued, "that I find here as your confidant at the hour of midnight. There is no safety for a prince except in his people. Too late I have found this out; too late for myself; not too late, I hope, for my people. Do not trust Byzantium; it is a shield that crushes him whom it should protect."

"You are unjust," said Petros, "and ungrateful."

"I beg you, my royal cousin," continued Amalasintha, unheeding the remark, "not to consent to what this man demands. Do not grant him that which I refused. We were to surrender Sicily, and furnish three thousand warriors to the Emperor for each of his wars. I rejected the shameful proposal. I see," she went on, pointing to the document on the table, "that you have already concluded your business. Retreat before it is too late; they will deceive you always."

Theodahad uneasily drew the document towards him, and cast a suspicious look at Petros. The latter went up to Amalasintha.

"What do you want here, you queen of yesterday? Would you control the ruler of this realm? Your time is past and your power at an end."

"Leave us," said Theodahad, taking courage. "I will do what I think good. You shall not succeed in parting me from my friends at Byzantium. Look here, before your very eyes our treaty shall be concluded," And he signed his name.

"Well," said Petros with a smile, "the Princess comes just at the right moment to sign as a witness."

"No!" cried Amalasintha, "I have come at the right moment to frustrate your plan. I will go straightway to the army, to the National Assembly, which will soon take place at Regeta. There, before all the nation, I will expose your proposals, the plans of the Emperor, and the treachery of this feeble man."

"That will do no good," said Petros quietly, "unless you accuse yourself."

"I *will* accuse myself. I will confess all my folly, all my guilt, and gladly suffer the death I have deserved. But my self-accusation shall warn and alarm the whole nation from Etna to the Alps. A world in arms shall be opposed to you, and I will save my Goths by my death, from the dangers to which my life has exposed them!" And, filled with noble enthusiasm, she hurried out of the room.

Theodahad looked with dismay at the ambassador. For some time he could not find a word to say.

"Advise me, help--" he stammered out at last.

"Advise? At this moment there is but one advice to give. That insane woman will ruin herself and us if we let her alone. She must not be allowed to fulfil her threat. *You* must take care of

that."

"I?" cried Theodahad, alarmed. "I know nothings about such things! Where is Gothelindis? She, and she alone, can help us."

"And the Prefect," added Petros; "send for both of them."

Gothelindis and Cethegus were summoned from the banquet. Petros told them what the Princess had said, but without mentioning the treaty as the cause of her outburst. He had scarcely finished speaking, when Gothelindis cried, "Enough! She must not go. Her every step must be watched. She must speak neither to Goth nor Roman; she must not leave the palace. That least of all!" And she hurried away to place confidential slaves at the doors of Amalasintha's apartments. Presently she returned.

"She is praying aloud in her cabinet," she cried contemptuously. "Rouse yourself, Cethegus, and let us thwart her prayers."

Cethegus, leaning against the wall, had observed all these proceedings, and listened to all that was said in thoughtful silence. He saw how necessary it was that he should once more take the reins into his own hands, and hold them more firmly. He saw Byzantium pressing more and more into the foreground--and that he could not suffer.

"Speak, Cethegus," Gothelindis repeated. "What is most necessary?"

"Clearness of purpose," he answered, standing erect. "In every contract, the particular aim of each of the contracting parties must be plain. If not, they will continually hinder each other by mistrust. You have your aims, I have mine. Yours are evident--I have already told you what they are. You, Petros, wish that Emperor Justinian should rule in Italy in place of the Goths. You, Gothelindis and Theodahad, wish so also, on condition that you receive a rich recompense in revenge, gold, and honours. But I--I too, have my private aim. What is the use of denying it? My sly Petros, you would not long believe that I was only ambitious of serving as your tool, and of being a senator in Byzantium. I, too, have my aim, and all your threefold cunning would never be able to discover it, because it lies too close to your eyes. I must betray it to you myself. My petrified heart still cherishes one ideal: Italy! and I, like you, wish the Goths well out of this country. But I do not, like you, wish that the Emperor should step unconditionally into their shoes. I do not want the deluge instead of the shower. I, the inveterate Republican, would like best--you know, Petros, that we were both Republicans at eighteen years of age, and I have remained so; but you need not tell it to your master, the Emperor; I have told him myself long since--to cast out the barbarians, bag and baggage, but without letting you in. Unfortunately, that is not now possible; we cannot do without your help. But I will limit it to the unavoidable. No Byzantine army shall enter this country, except--at the last extremity--to receive it at the hands of the Italians. Italy must be more a gift from the Italians than a conquest of the Emperor. The blessing of generals and tax-gatherers, which Byzantium would bring upon the land, must be spared us; we want your protection, but not your tyranny."

Over the face of Petros crept a sly smile, which Cethegus seemed not to observe. He continued:

"Hear my conditions. I know that Belisarius lies off Sicily with his fleet. He must not land. He must return home. I cannot do with him in Italy; at least, not until I call him myself. And if you, Petros, do not at once send him the order to return to Byzantium, our ways separate. I know Belisarius and Narses, and their military government, and I know what mild masters these Goths make. I am sorry for Amalasintha; she was a mother to my people. Therefore choose--choose between Belisarius and Cethegus. If Belisarius lands, Cethegus and all Italy will stand by Amalasintha and the Goths, and then we will see whether you can wrest from us a single foot of this soil. If you choose Cethegus, he will break the power of the barbarians, and Italy will subject herself to the Emperor, not as his slave, but as his consort. Choose, Petros."

"You proud man!" cried Gothelindis. "You dare to make conditions to me, your Queen?" And she lifted her hand with a threatening gesture.

But Cethegus caught the hand in his iron grasp, and drew it quietly down.

"Leave such antics, you Queen of a day! Here only Italy and Byzantium negotiate. If you forget your want of power, you must be reminded of it. You reign only so long as we uphold you."

He stood before the angry woman in an attitude of such quiet majesty, that she was silenced, but her eyes flashed with inextinguishable hatred.

"Cethegus," said Petros, who had meanwhile made up his mind, "you are right. For the moment, Byzantium can gain nothing better than your help; for without it she can gain nothing. If Belisarius returns to Byzantium, will you be for us unconditionally?"

"Unconditionally."

"And Amalasintha?"

"I abandon her."

"Well, then," said the Byzantine, "we are agreed."

He wrote upon a waxen tablet a briefly-expressed order for the return of Belisarius to Byzantium, and gave it to the Prefect.

"You may send the message yourself."

Cethegus read it carefully.

"It is well," said he, putting the tablet into the bosom of his dress. "We are Agreed."

"When will Italy proceed against the barbarians?" asked Petros.

"In the first days of the next month. I shall now go to Rome. Farewell."

"You are going? Will you not help us to get rid of Amalasintha? You will take pity on her again?" asked the Queen, in a reproachful voice.

"She is condemned," said Cethegus, turning as he reached the door. "The judge goes; the executioner will perform his duty." And he left them with a proud mien.

Theodahad, who had listened to all that had passed in speechless astonishment, now caught the hand of Petros in great alarm.

"Petros," he cried, "for God's sake, what have you done? Our contract, and everything else, depends upon Belisarius; and you send him away?"

"And allow that insolent man to triumph?" added Gothelindis indignantly.

But Petros laughed; his whole face beamed with the ecstasy of victorious cunning.

"Be quiet," he said. "This time the invincible Cethegus is conquered by Petros, at whom he has always scoffed."

He took Theodahad and Gothelindis each by the hand, drew them close to him, looked round, and then whispered:

"At the commencement of the message to Belisarius I have placed a small spot, which means: 'All that I have written is not meant in earnest, and is null.' Yes, yes; one learns the art of writing at the court of Byzantium!"

CHAPTER IV.

Amalasintha passed the two days following this midnight interview in a sort of real or imagined imprisonment. Whenever she left her chamber, whenever she turned the corner of one of the passages of the palace, she fancied that some one followed or accompanied her, now appearing, now slipping past her, now disappearing, and seemingly as eager to watch all her movements as to avoid her notice. She could not even descend to the tomb of her son unobserved.

In vain she asked for Witichis or Teja; they had left the city the morning after the coronation, by order of the King.

The feeling that she was alone, surrounded by lurking enemies, filled her mind with vague alarms.

Heavily and darkly the autumn rain-clouds hung over Ravenna, as Amalasintha rose from her sleepless couch on the morning of the third day. It affected her disagreeably when, upon going to the window of sparry gypsum, a raven rose cawing from the marble sill, and flew slowly over the garden with hoarse cries, heavily flapping its wings. The Princess felt how much her nerves had been tried by the last few days of pain, fear, and remorse; for she could not resist the dismal impression made upon her by the early autumn mists, which rose from the lagoons of the harbour city.

She looked at the grey and marshy landscape with a deep sigh. Her heart was heavy with care and remorse. Her only hope lay in the thought of saving the kingdom at the cost of her own life, by frankly accusing and humiliating herself before the whole nation. She did not doubt that the relations and blood-avengers of the murdered dukes would strictly fulfil their duty.

Buried in such reflections, she went through the empty halls and corridors of the palace--this time, as she believed, unobserved--to the resting-place of her son, in order to confirm herself, with prayer and penitence, in her pious resolution.

As, after some time had elapsed, she re-ascended from the vault and turned into a gloomy arched passage, a man in the habit of a slave stepped out of a niche--she thought that she had

often seen his face before--and put into her hand a little wax tablet, immediately disappearing into a side passage.

She at once recognised the handwriting of Cassiodorus.

And now she guessed who was the secret messenger. It was Dolios, the letter-carrier of her faithful minister.

Quickly concealing the tablet in her dress, she hastened to her chamber, where she read as follows:

"In pain, but not in anger, I parted from you. I would not that you should be called away from this world in an impenitent state, and lose your immortal soul. Fly from the palace, from the city. You know how bitter is the hatred of Gothelindis. Your life is not safe for an hour. Trust no one except my secretary, and at sunset go to the Temple of Venus in the garden. There you will find my litter, which will bring you safely to my villa at the Lake of Bolsena. Obey and trust."

Much moved, Amalasintha pressed the letter to her heart. Faithful Cassiodorus! He had not, then, quite forsaken her. He still feared and cared for her life. And that charming villa upon the lonely island in the blue Lake of Bolsena! There, many, many years ago, in the full bloom of youth and beauty, as the guest of Cassiodorus, she had been wedded to Eutharic, the noble Amelung, and, surrounded by all the splendour of rank and power, had passed the proudest days of her youth.

She was overcome with an intense longing to see once more the scene of her greatest happiness.

This feeling powerfully induced her to listen to the warning of Cassiodorus. Still more the fear--not for her life, for she longed to die--but that her enemies would make it impossible for her to warn the nation and save the kingdom.

And, finally, she reflected that the way to Regeta, near Rome, where the great National Assembly was shortly--as was usual every autumn--to take place, led past the Lake of Bolsena; and that it was therefore only a furthering of her plan, should she start at once in this direction.

But, in order to make sure in all cases, so that, even if she never arrived at the end of her journey, her warning voice might reach the ears of the nation, she decided to write a letter to Cassiodorus--whom she could not be sure of meeting at his villa--in which she would entrust him with her confession, and expose to him all the plans of the Byzantines and Theodahad.

With closed doors she wrote the painful words. Hot tears of gratitude and remorse fell upon the parchment; she carefully sealed it, and delivered it to the most faithful of her slaves, with the strict injunction to carry it speedily and safely to the monastery at Squillacium in Apulia, the monastical foundation and usual abode of Cassiodorus.

Slowly, slowly passed the dreary hours.

She had grasped the offered hand of her friend with all her heart. Memory and hope vied with each other in painting the island in the lake as a much-loved asylum. There she hoped to find repose and peace.

She kept carefully within her apartment, in order to give no cause for suspicion to her spies, or any excuse to detain her.

At last the sun had set.

With light steps, Amalasintha, forbidding the attendance of her women, and only hiding a few jewels and documents in the folds of her mantle, hurried from her room into the wide colonnade which led to the garden.

She feared to meet here as usual some lurking spy, and to be stopped, and perhaps detained. She frequently looked back, and even glanced carefully into the niches of the statues--all was empty and quiet, no spy followed her footsteps. Thus, unobserved, she reached the platform of the terrace which united the palace and the garden, and afforded an open view of the latter.

Amalasintha examined the nearest path leading to the Temple of Venus. The way was open. Only the faded leaves fell rustling from the tall pines on to the sandy path, where they were whirled about by the wind, which drove the mist and clouds before it in ghostly shapes; it was very dismal in the deserted garden, which looked grey and dim in the twilight.

The Princess shivered. The cold wind tore at her veil and mantle. She cast a shy glance at the heavy, gloomy mass of stone which she had left behind--the building in whose precincts she had ruled so proudly, and from which she was now escaping, lonely and fearfully as a criminal.

She thought of her son, who reposed in the vault of the palace. She thought of her daughter, whom she herself had banished from these walls.

For a moment her pain threatened to overpower the forsaken woman; she tottered, and with difficulty supported herself by the broad balustrade of the steps which she was descending. A feverish shudder shook her frame, as the horror of despair shook her soul.

"But my people," she said to herself, "and my atonement---- I must and will accomplish it."

Strengthened by this thought, she again hurried down the steps, and entered an alley overhung by thick foliage, which led across the garden, and ended at the Temple of Venus.

She walked rapidly forward, trembling whenever the autumn leaves, with a sighing sound, were swept across her path from a side-walk.

Breathless she arrived at the little temple, and looked searchingly around her.

But no litter, no slaves were to be seen; all around was quiet; only the branches of the pines creaked in the wind.

All at once the neighing of a horse struck upon her ear.

She turned; around the corner of a wall a man approached with hasty steps.

It was Dolios. He looked sharply about him, and then beckoned to her to come.

The Princess hastened to follow him round the corner; there stood Cassiodorus's well-known Gallic travelling carriage, the comfortable and elegant *carruca*, closed on all sides with movable latticed shutters of polished wood, and to which were harnessed three swift-footed Flemish horses.

"We must hasten, Princess," whispered Dolios, as he lifted her into the soft cushions. "The litter was too slow for the hatred of your enemies. Quiet and speed; so that no one may notice us."

Amalasintha looked back once more.

Dolios opened the garden-gate and led the horses out. Two men stepped out of the bushes near. One took the driver's seat on the carriage, the other mounted one of two saddle-horses which stood outside the gate. Amalasintha recognised the men as confidential slaves belonging to Cassiodorus. Like Dolios, they were provided with weapons.

The latter carefully closed the garden-gate, and let down the shutters of the carriage. Then he mounted the remaining horse and drew his sword.

"Forward!" he cried.

And the little company galloped away as if Death himself were at their heels.

CHAPTER V.

Amalasintha at first revelled in the feeling of gratitude, freedom, and safety. She made happy plans of reconciliation. She saw her people saved from Byzantium by her warning voice--saved from the treachery of their own King.

She already heard the enthusiastic shouts of the valiant army, announcing death to the enemy, and pardon to herself.

Lost in such dreams, the hours, days, and nights passed rapidly.

The party hurried on without pause. Three or four times a day the horses were changed, so that mile after mile was passed with the utmost velocity.

Dolios carefully watched over the Princess. He stood at the door of the carriage with drawn sword, while his companions fetched meat and drink from the stations which they passed.

The speed at which they went, and the faithful attention of Dolios, freed the Princess from an anxiety which she had not been able for some time to get rid of--it seemed to her that they were pursued.

Twice, at Perugia and Clusium, where the carriage stopped, she had thought she heard the rattle of wheels and the sound of horses' hoofs close behind.

And, at Clusium, she had even fancied, as she looked through the lattices, that she saw a second *carruca*, likewise accompanied by outriders, turn into the gate of that town.

But when she had spoken of this to Dolios, he had at once galloped back to the gate, and shortly returned with the assurance that there was nothing to be seen.

From that time she had noticed nothing more; and the mad haste with which she was being carried to the wished-for island, encouraged the hope that her enemies, even if they had discovered her flight and had followed her for a time, had soon become tired and remained behind.

An accident, insignificant in itself, but fraught with dread because of accompanying circumstances, suddenly darkened the brightening hopes of the fugitive Princess.

A desolate, treeless waste extended on all sides, farther than the eye could reach. Only reeds and tall marsh-plants stood in the damp ditches on both sides of the Roman high-road, nodding and whispering mysteriously in the night wind.

The road was now and then bordered by walls grown over with vines; or, in old Roman style, by monuments, which, however, were often sadly ruined, and the scattered stones of which, fallen across the road, hindered the progress of the horses.

Suddenly the carriage stopped with a violent shock, and Dolios tore open the door.

"What has happened?" cried the Princess; "have we fallen into the hands of our enemies?"

"No," said Dolios, who, though known to her as gloomy and reserved, seemed, during the journey, almost alarmingly silent; "a wheel is broken. You must descend and wait until it is mended."

A violent gust of wind just then extinguished his torch, and chilly drops of rain lashed the face of the terrified Princess.

"Descend? here? whither shall I go? There is no house near, not even a tree which might afford a shelter from the rain and wind. I shall remain in the carriage."

"The wheel must be taken off. That monument will afford some shelter."

Shivering with fright, Amalasintha obeyed, and walked over the scattered stones to the right side of the road, where, across the ditch, she saw a tall monument rise out of the darkness.

Dolios helped her over the ditch. All at once the neighing of a horse was heard on the road behind the carriage. Amalasintha stopped short in alarm.

"It is our rear-guard," said Dolios quickly. "Come!" And he led her through the wet grass up the hill upon which stood the monument.

Arrived at the top, she seated herself upon the broad slab of a sarcophagus. Dolios all at once disappeared into the darkness; in vain she called him back. Presently she saw the light of his torch on the road below; it shone redly through the mist of the marsh, and the stormy wind rapidly bore away the sound of the hammer-strokes of the slaves who were working at the wheel.

Thus sat the daughter of the great Theodoric, lonely and in fear. The cold rain slowly penetrated her clothing. The wind tore at her dress and sighed dismally through the cypresses behind the monument; ragged clouds drove across the sky and at intervals permitted a gleam of moonlight to penetrate their folds, which only intensified the darkness that followed.

Amalasintha's heart was sick with fear. Gradually her eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and, looking about her, she could distinguish the outlines of the nearest objects. There!--her heart stood still with horror--it seemed to her as if, close behind her on the raised corner of the back of the sarcophagus, there sat a second figure--it was not her own shadow--a shorter figure in a wide flowing garment, its arms resting on its knees, its head supported on its hands, and its eyes fixed upon her.

She could scarcely breathe; she thought she heard a whisper; she feverishly tried to see, to hear.

Again there came a whisper.

"No, no; not yet!" this was what she thought she heard.

She raised herself gently, and the figure, too, seemed to move; she distinctly heard the clang of steel upon stone. In mortal fear she screamed out:

"Dolios! lights! help! lights!"

She turned to descend the hill, but her knees trembled too much; she fell and hurt her cheek against the sharp stones.

All at once Dolios stood beside her, and silently lifted her up. He asked no questions.

"Dolios," she said, trying to compose herself, "give me the light! I must see what was there; what is there now."

She took the torch and walked with a firm step round the corner of the sarcophagus. There was nothing to be seen, but by the light of the torch she now perceived that the monument was not old like the others, but newly erected; so unsoiled was the white marble, so fresh the black letters of the inscription.

Irresistibly impelled by the strange curiosity which is inseparable from terror, she held the torch to the socle of the monument, and by its flickering light read these words:

"Eternal honour to the three Balthes, Thulun, Ibba, and Pitza. An eternal curse upon their murderers!"

With a scream Amalasintha staggered back.

Dolios led her, half fainting, to the carriage. She passed the remaining hours of her journey in an almost unconscious state. She felt ill in body and mind. The nearer she came to the island the more the feverish joy with which she had looked forward to reaching it was replaced by a mysterious fear. With apprehension she saw the shrubs and trees at the road-side fly past her faster and faster.

At last the smoking horses stopped. She let down the shutters and looked out. It was that cold and dreary hour in which the first grey of dawn struggles for the mastery with the still pervading night. They had arrived, it seemed, at the shore of the lake, but nothing was to be seen of its waters.

A dismal grey mist lay, impenetrable as the future, before Amalasintha's eyes. Of the villa, even of the island, nothing could be seen.

On the right side of the road stood a low fisher-hut, half-buried in the tall, thick reeds, which bent their heads to the southing of the morning wind. Singular! they seemed to warn and beckon her away from the hidden lake behind them.

Dolios had gone into the hut. He now returned and lifted the Princess out of the carriage. Silently he led her through the damp meadow to the reeds. Among them lay a small boat, which seemed rather to float on the mist than on the water.

At the rudder sat an old man in a grey and ragged mantle; his long white hair hung dishevelled about his face. He seemed to sit dreaming with closed eyes, which he did not even open when the Princess entered the rocking boat and placed herself in the middle upon a camp-stool.

Dolios entered the boat after her, and took the two oars; the slaves remained behind with the carriage.

"Dolios!" cried Amalasintha anxiously, "it is very dark. Can the old man steer in this fog, and no light on either shore?"

"A light would be of no use, Queen. He is blind."

"Blind!" cried the terrified woman. "Let me land! Put back!"

"I have guided the boat for twenty years," said the aged ferryman; "no seeing man knows the way as well as I."

"Were you born blind then?"

"No. Theodoric the Amelung caused me to be blinded, believing that Alaric, the brother of Thulun, had hired me to murder him. I am a servant of the Balthes, and a follower of Alaric, but I was innocent; and so was my master, the banished Alaric. A curse upon the Amelungs!" he cried with an angry pull at the rudder.

"Silence, old man!" said Dolios.

"Why should I not say to-day what I have said at every oar-stroke for twenty years? It is the way I beat time. A curse upon the Amelungs!"

The Princess looked with horror at the old man, who, in fact, steered the boat with complete security, and as straight as an arrow.

His wide mantle and dishevelled hair waved in the wind; all around was fog and silence; only the regular beat of the oars could be heard. Empty air and grey mist enveloped the slight boat.

It seemed to Amalasintha as if Charon was rowing her over the Styx to the grey realm of shades.

Shivering, she drew her mantle closely around her.

A few more strokes of the oar, and they landed.

Dolios lifted the trembling Queen on to the land; but the old man silently turned his boat, and rowed as quickly and unerringly back as he had come. With a sort of dismay Amalasintha watched him disappear into the thick mist.

Suddenly it seemed to her as if she heard the sound of oar-strokes from a second boat, which approached nearer and nearer. She asked Dolios what was the cause of this noise.

"I hear nothing," he answered; "you are over-excited. Come into the house."

Supported by his arm she climbed the steps, hewn in the rock, which led to the tower-like, loftily-situated villa. Of the gardens, which, as she distinctly remembered, extended on both sides of the narrow path, scarcely the outlines of the rows of trees could be distinguished in the mist.

At last they reached the lofty entrance, a bronze door with posts of black marble.

Dolios knocked upon it with the hilt of his sword; the stroke reverberated dully through the vaulted halls--the door sprang open.

Amalasintha remembered how she had once entered this door, then almost choked with wreaths of flowers, at the side of her young husband; she remembered with what friendly warmth they had been welcomed by the door-keeper and his wife, at that time also a newly-married couple.

The dark-looking slave with tangled grey hair, who now stood before her with a lantern and a bunch of keys, was a stranger to her.

"Where is Fuscina, the wife of the late ostiarius? Is she no more in the house?" she asked.

"She was long since drowned in the lake," answered the door-keeper indifferently; and went forward with the light.

The Princess followed shuddering; she could not help thinking of the cold black waves which had so dismally licked the planks of the little boat.

They went on through arched courts and pillared halls; all were empty, as if the inhabitants were dead. Their footsteps echoed loudly in the deserted rooms--the whole villa seemed one vast catacomb.

"The house is uninhabited? I need a female slave."

"My wife will attend you."

"Is no one else in the villa?"

"One other slave--a Greek physician."

"A physician? I will see him----"

But at this moment a violent knocking was heard at the outer door.

Amalasintha started in terror.

"What was that?" she asked, catching Dolios by the sleeve.

She heard the banging of the heavy door as it was closed again.

"It was only some one demanding admittance," said the ostiarius, as he returned and unlocked the door of the room intended for the fugitive Princess.

The close air of a chamber which had not been opened for a long time half suffocated her; but she recognised with emotion the tortoise-shell lining of the walls; it was the same room which she had occupied twenty years ago.

Overpowered by the recollection, she sank upon the small couch, which was covered with dark-coloured cushions.

Dismissing the two men, she drew close the curtains of the couch, and soon sank into an uneasy slumber.

CHAPTER VI.

Thus she lay, she knew not how long, half awake, half dreaming; picture after picture arose in her excited mind.

Eutharic with the expression of constant pain upon his lips--Athalaric as he lay stretched upon his bier, he seemed to sign to her--the reproachful face of Mataswintha--then mist and clouds and leafless trees--then three angry warriors with pale faces and bloody garments--and the blind ferryman in the realm of shades.

At another time it seemed to her as if she lay on the steps of the monument in the desolate waste, and again something rustled behind her, and a shrouded figure bent over her, nearer and nearer, oppressing and suffocating her.

Her heart was contracted by fear; she started up terrified, and looked about her. There!--it was no dream-fancy--something really rustled behind the curtains, and a shrouded shadow glided along the wainscoted walls.

With a scream Amalasintha opened the curtain wide--there was nothing to be seen.

Was it, then, but a dream?

It was impossible to remain alone with her torturing thoughts. She pressed a knob of agate on the wall, which set in motion a hammer outside the room.

Very soon a slave appeared, whose features and costume betrayed a higher education.

He introduced himself as the Greek physician. She told him of the terrible dreams and the feverish tremblings by which she had been tormented during the last few hours. He explained the symptoms as the consequence of excitement, perhaps of cold taken during her flight, recommended a warm bath, and left her to order its preparation.

Amalasintha remembered the splendid baths, which, divided into two stories, occupied the whole right wing of the villa.

The lower story of the large octagonal rotunda, designed for the cold bath, was in immediate connection with the lake. The water was conducted into the bath through sieves, which excluded every impurity.

The upper story, a smaller octagon, was erected over the bath-room of the lower story, the ceiling of which, made of a large circular metal plate, formed the floor of the upper bath, and could be pushed, divided into two semicircles, into the walls; so that both stories then formed an undivided space, which, for the purposes of cleansing or for games of swimming and diving, could be completely filled with the water of the lake.

Generally, however, the upper story was used only for the warm bath, and was provided with hundreds of pipes, and innumerable dolphin, triton, and Medusa-heads of bronze or marble, through which flowed the scented waters, mixed with oils and essences; while from the gallery all round, upon which the bathers undressed, ornamental steps led down into the shell-shaped porphyry basin of the bath.

As the Princess was recalling these rooms to her memory, the wife of the door-keeper appeared to lead her to the bath.

They passed through wide columned halls and libraries--where, however, the Princess missed the capsulas and rolls of Cassiodorus--in the direction of the garden; the slave carrying fine bath-cloths, oil flasks, and the salve for anointment.

At last they arrived at the tower-like octagon of the bath-rooms, which was completely lined and paved with pale grey marble.

They went through the halls and passages, which served for the gymnastics and games of ball usually indulged in before and after the bath, past the heating-rooms, undressing and anointing-rooms, directly to the calidarium, or warm bath.

The slave silently opened the door in the marble wall. Amalasintha went in and stood upon the narrow gallery which ran round the basin. Immediately before her was a flight of easy steps leading into the bath, out of which warm and delicious odours already arose.

The light fell from above through an octagonal dome of artistically-cut glass. Close to the entrance into the room a staircase of cedar-wood, consisting of twelve steps, led on to a spring-board.

On the marble walls of the gallery, as well as of the basin, the openings of the water-works and heating-pipes were concealed by marble bas-reliefs.

Without a word, the attendant laid the various articles for the bath upon the soft cushions and carpets which covered the gallery, and turned to go.

"How is it that I seem to know you?" asked the Princess, looking thoughtfully at her. "How long have you been here?"

"Eight days," answered the slave, turning the handle of the door.

"How long have you served Cassiodorus?"

"I serve, and have always served, the Princess Gothelindis."

At this name Amalasintha started up with a cry and caught at the woman's skirt--too late; she was gone and the door closed, and Amalasintha heard the key taken from the lock outside.

A great and unknown terror overcame her. She felt that she had been fearfully deceived; that some shocking secret lay behind. Her heart was full of unspeakable anxiety; and flight-flight from the rooms was her only thought.

But flight seemed impossible. The door now appeared to be only a thick marble slab like those on the right and left; even a needle could not have penetrated into the junctures. She looked desperately round the walls of the gallery, but met only the marble stare of the tritons and dolphins. At last her eyes rested upon a snake-encircled Medusa's head directly opposite and a scream of horror escaped her lips.

The face of the Medusa was pushed aside, and the oval opening beneath, the snaky hair was filled with a living countenance! Was it a human face?

The trembling woman clung to the marble balustrade of the gallery, and bent, over it, staring at the apparition. Yes, it was the distorted features of Gothelindis! A hell of hate and mockery flashed from the eyes.

Amalasintha fell upon her knees and hid her face in her hands.

"*You--you here?*"

A hoarse laugh was the reply.

"Yes, child of the Amelungs, I am here; to your ruin! Mine is this island; mine the house--it will become your grave--mine is Dolios, and all the slaves of Cassiodorus; bought by me eight days ago. I have decoyed you here; I have followed you like your shadow. I have endured the torture of my hatred for long days and nights, in order to enjoy full revenge at last. I will revel for hours in your death-agony. I will see your tender frame shaken as with fever-frost, and your haughty features convulsed with terror. Oh, I will drink a sea of revenge!"

Amalasintha rose from her knees wringing her hands.

"Revenge? For what? Why this deadly hatred?"

"Ah! can you ask? Certainly years have passed, and the happy easily forget. But hate has a faithful memory. Have you forgotten how two young girls once played under the shade of the plantains in the meadow at Ravenna? They were the fairest among their play-fellows; both young, beautiful, and amiable. A royal child the one, the other a daughter of the Balthes. The girls were about to choose a queen of the games. They chose Gothelindis, for she was still more handsome than you, and not so tyrannical. And they chose her twice in succession. But the King's daughter stood near, devoured by ungovernable pride and envy, and when they chose me for the third time she took up a pair of sharp-pointed gardener's scissors----"

"Stop! Oh! be silent, Gothelindis!"

"And hurled it at me. It hit me. Screaming' with pain and bleeding, I fell to the ground, my whole cheek one yawning wound, and my eye, my eye pierced through! Ah! how it still pains, even to-day!"

"Forgive, pardon me, Gothelindis!" cried Amalasintha. "You have pardoned me long ago."

"Forgive? I forgive you? Shall I forgive you when you have robbed me of my eye, and of all my beauty? You conquered for life! Gothelindis was no more dangerous as a rival. She lamented in secret; the disfigured girl hid from the eyes of mankind. And years passed. Then there came to the court of Ravenna a noble Amelung from Spain; Eutharic with his dark eyes and tender soul. And he, himself sick, took pity upon the sick and half-blind girl. He spoke to her with affection and kindness; spoke to the ugly, disfigured creature whom all the others avoided. And it was decided--in order to eradicate the ancient enmity between our families, and to expiate old and new guilt--for Duke Alaric had been condemned in consequence of a secret and unproved accusation--that the poor ill-used daughter of the Balthes should become the wife of the noblest of the Amelungs. But when you heard this, you, who had so terribly disfigured me, were resolved to deprive me also of my lover! Not out of jealousy, no; not because you loved him, no; but from mere pride. Because you were determined to keep the first man in the kingdom and the heir to the crown to yourself. And you succeeded; for your father could deny you nothing, and Eutharic soon forgot his compassion for the one-eyed girl, when the hand of the beautiful Amalasintha was offered to him. In recompense--or was it only in mockery?--they gave me, too, to an Amelung; to Theodahad, that miserable coward?"

"Gothelindis, I swear to you, I never suspected that you loved Eutharic. How could I----"

"To be sure! how could you believe that the disfigured girl could place her heart so high? Oh,

you cursed woman, if you had really loved him, and had made him happy--I could have forgiven all! But you never loved him; you are only capable of ambition! His lot with you was misery. For years I saw him wasting by your side, oppressed, unloved, chilled to the very soul by your coldness. Grief soon killed him. You! you have robbed me of my lover and brought him to the grave with sorrow--revenge! revenge for him!"

And the lofty dome echoed with the cry: "Revenge! Revenge!"

"Help!" cried Amalasintha, and ran despairingly round the circle of the gallery, beating the smooth walls with her hands.

"Aye! call! call! here no one can hear you but the God of Revenge! Do you think I have bridled my hate for months in vain? How often, how easily could I have reached you, with dagger or poison, at Ravenna! But no; I have decoyed you here. At the monument of my murdered cousins; an hour ago at your bedside; I with difficulty restrained my uplifted hand--but slowly, inch by inch, shall you die. I will watch for hours the growing agony of your death."

"Terrible! Oh, terrible!"

"What are hours compared with the long years during which I was martyred by the thought of my disfigurement, of your beauty and your possession of my lover! But you shall repent it!"

"What will you do?" cried the terrified woman, again and again seeking some outlet in the walls.

"I will drown you, slowly and surely, in the waterworks of this bath, which your friend Cassiodorus built. You do not know what tortures of jealousy and impotent rage I endured in this house when your wedding with Eutharic was celebrated, and I was compelled to serve in your train. In this room, you proud woman, I unloosed your sandals, and dried your fair limbs--in this room you shall die?"

She touched a spring in the wall.

The floor of the basin, the round metal plate, divided into two halves, which slid slowly into the walls on the right and left.

With horror the imprisoned woman looked down from the narrow gallery into the chasm thus opened at her feet.

"Remember that day in the meadow!" cried Gothelindis; and in the lower story the sluices were suddenly opened, and the waters of the lake rushed in, roaring and hissing, and rose higher and higher with fearful rapidity.

Amalasintha saw certain death before her. She saw the impossibility of escape, or of softening her fiendish enemy by prayers. At this crisis, the hereditary courage of the Amelungs returned to her; she composed herself, and was reconciled to her fate.

She descried, amid the numerous reliefs of mythological subjects near her, a representation of the death of Christ on the right of the entrance. The sight strengthened her mind; she threw herself upon her knees before the marble cross, clasped it with both hands, and prayed quietly with closed eyes, while the water rose and rose; it already splashed upon the steps of the gallery.

"You pray, murderess? Away from the cross!" cried Gothelindis, enraged; "think of the three dukes!"

Suddenly all the dolphin and triton heads on the right side of the octagon began to spout streams of hot water; white steam rushed out of the pipes.

Amalasintha sprang up and ran to the left side of the gallery.

"Gothelindis, I forgive you! Kill me, but forgive me also!"

And the water rose and rose; it already covered the topmost step of the bath, and slowly wetted the floor of the gallery.

And now the streaming water-pipes spouted upon Amalasintha from the left also. She took refuge in the middle of the gallery, directly opposite the Medusa, the only place where no steam from the hot-water pipe could reach her.

If she mounted the spring-board, which was placed here, she could respite her life for some time longer. Gothelindis seemed to expect that she would do so, and to revel in the prospect of the lengthened torture of the agonised woman.

The water already rushed over the marble flooring of the gallery and laved the feet of Amalasintha. She ran quickly up the brown and shining wooden steps, and leaned over the railing of the bridge.

"Hear me, Gothelindis! my last prayer! not for myself, but for my people, for *our* people.

Petros will destroy them, and Theodahad----

"Yes, I know that the kingdom is your last anxiety! Despair. It is lost! These foolish Goths, who have always preferred the Amelungs to the Balthes, are sold and betrayed by the Amelungs. Belisarius approaches, and there is no one to warn them."

"You err, satanic woman; they *are* warned! I, their Queen, have warned them! Hail to my people! Destruction to their enemies! and may God have mercy on my soul!" and she suddenly leapt from the spring-board into the water, which closed whirling over her head.

Gothelindis looked at the place which her victim had occupied a moment before.

"She has disappeared," she said. Then she looked at the water--on the surface floated Amalasintha's kerchief.

"Even in death this woman conquers me," said Gothelindis slowly. "How long was my hate, and how short my revenge!"

CHAPTER VII.

A few days after these occurrences, there were assembled in the apartments of the Byzantine ambassador at Ravenna a number of distinguished Romans of worldly and ecclesiastical rank. The Bishops Hypatius and Demetrius from the Eastern Empire were also present.

Great excitement, mixed with alarm and anger, was visible on all faces, as Petros, the rhetorician, concluded his address in these words:

"It is for this reason, reverend bishops of the East and West, and you, noble Romans, that I have assembled you here. I protest loudly and solemnly, in the name of the Emperor, against all secret acts of cunning or force which may have been practised against the noble lady. Nine days ago she disappeared from Ravenna; most likely taken by force from your midst; she, who has ever been the friend and protector of the Italians! On the same day, the Queen, her bitter enemy, also disappeared. I have sent out expresses in all directions, but, until now, am without news. But alas! if----

He could not complete the sentence.

A confused tumult arose from the Forum of Hercules, and very soon hasty footsteps were heard in the vestibule; the curtain was parted, and one of the Byzantine slaves of the ambassador hurried into the room, covered with dust.

"Sir," he cried, "she is dead! she is murdered!"

"Murdered!" repeated many voices.

"By whom?" asked Petros.

"By Gothelindis; at the villa in the Lake of Bolsena!"

"Where is the corpse? Where the murderess?"

"Gothelindis pretends that the Princess was drowned in the bath while playing with the water-works, with which she was unacquainted. But it is known that the Queen had followed her victim, step by step, ever since she left the city. Romans and Goths have crowded by hundreds to the villa to bring the corpse here in solemn procession. The Queen escaped the fury of the people and fled to the fortress of Feretri."

"Enough," cried Petros indignantly. "I go to the King, and call upon you all to follow me. I shall refer to your testimony of what passes in my report to Emperor Justinian." And he at once hurried out at the head of the assembly to the palace.

In the streets they found a throng of people rushing hither and thither, full of rage and indignation. The news had arrived in the city, and spread from house to house. On recognising the imperial ambassador and the dignitaries of the city, the crowd gave way before them, but immediately closed again behind them pressed after them to the palace, and was with difficulty kept from entering the gates.

Every moment increased the number and excitement of the people. The Roman citizens crowded together in the Forum of Honorius, and to their grief for the fate of their protectress was added the hope that this occurrence might cause the downfall of the barbarians. The appearance of the ambassador encouraged this hope, and the feelings of the mass took a direction which was by no means inimical alone to Theodahad and Gothelindis.

Meanwhile Petros, with his companions, hastened to the apartments of the helpless King, who, in the absence of his wife, had lost all strength of resistance. He trembled at the excitement of

the crowd before the palace, and had already sent for Petros, to ask from him help and counsel; for it was Petros himself who had decided upon the murder of the Princess, and arranged with Gothelindis the manner of its accomplishment. The King, therefore, now expected him to help to bear the consequences.

When, then, the Byzantine appeared upon the threshold, Theodahad hurried to him with open arms; but he suddenly stood still in amazement, astonished to see what companions Petros had brought with him, and still more astonished at his threatening aspect.

"I call you to account, King of the Goths!" cried Petros, even before he had crossed the threshold. "In the name of Byzantium, I call you to account for the disappearance of the daughter of Theodoric. You know that Emperor Justinian had assured her of his particular protection; every hair of her head is therefore sacred, and sacred every drop of her blood. Where is Amalasintha?"

The King stared at him in speechless astonishment. He admired this power of dissimulation; but he did not understand its cause. He made no answer.

"Where is Amalasintha?" repeated Petros, advancing threateningly: and his companions also came a step forward.

"She is dead," said Theodahad, who began to feel extremely anxious.

"She is murdered!" cried Petros. "So says all Italy. Murdered by you and your wife. Justinian, my illustrious Emperor, was the protector of this woman, and he will be her avenger. In his name I declare war against you--war against you and all your race!"

"War against you and all your race!" repeated the Italians, carried away by the excitement of the moment, and giving vent to their long-cherished hatred; and they pressed upon the trembling King.

"Petros," he stammered in terror, "you will remember our treaty, and you will----"

But the ambassador took a roll of papyrus out of his mantle, and tore it in two.

"Thus I tear all bonds between my Emperor and this bloodthirsty house! You yourselves by this cruel deed have forfeited all our former forbearance, No treaties--war!"

"For God's sake!" cried Theodahad; "no fighting! What do you demand, Petros?"

"Complete subjection. The evacuation of Italy. Yourself and Gothelindis I summon to Byzantium, before the throne of Justinian. There----"

But his speech was interrupted by the sounding clang of the Gothic alarum, and into the room hurried a strong troop of Gothic warriors, led by Earl Witichis.

On hearing of Amalasintha's death, the Gothic leaders had at once summoned the most valiant men of the nation in Ravenna to meet before the Porta Romana, and there they had agreed upon the best means of security. They had appeared in the Forum of Honorius just at the right moment--when the excitement was becoming dangerous. Here and there a dagger flashed, and the cry arose, "Woe to the barbarians!"

These signs and voices ceased at once, as the hated Goths advanced in close ranks from the Forum of Hercules through the Via Palatina. Without resistance, they marched through the murmuring groups; and while Earl Teja and Hildebad guarded the gates and terraces of the palace, Witichis and Hildebrand arrived in the King's rooms just in time to hear the last words of the ambassador.

Wheeling to the right, they placed their followers near the throne, to which the King had just retreated; and Witichis, leaning on his long sword, went close up to Petros, and looked keenly into his eyes.

A pause of expectation ensued.

"Who dares," asked Witichis quietly, "to play the master here in the royal palace of the Goths?"

Recovering from his surprise, Petros answered,

"It does not become you, Earl Witichis, to interfere for the protection of a murderer. I have summoned the King before the court at Byzantium."

"And for this insult thou hast no reply, Amelung?" cried old Hildebrand angrily.

But his bad conscience tied the King's tongue.

"Then we must speak for him," said Witichis "Know, Greek, and understand it well, you false and ungrateful Ravennites, the nation of the Goths is free and acknowledges no foreign master or judge or earth."

"Not even for murder?"

"If evil deeds occur amongst us, we ourselves will judge and punish them. It does not concern strangers; least of all our enemy, the Emperor of Byzantium."

"My Emperor will revenge this woman, whom he could not save. Deliver up the murderers to Byzantium."

"We would not deliver up a Gothic hind, much less our King!"

"Then you share his guilt and his punishment, and I declare war against you in the name of my master. Tremble before Justinian and Belisarius!"

A movement of joy amongst the Gothic warriors was the only answer.

Old Hildebrand went to the window, and cried to the Goths, who crowded below:

"News! joyful news! War with Byzantium!"

At this a tumult broke loose below, as if the sea had burst its dams; weapons clashed, and a thousand voices shouted:

"War! war with Byzantium!"

This repetition of his words was not without effect upon Petros or the Italians. The fierceness of this enthusiasm alarmed them; they were silent, and cast down their eyes.

While the Goths, shaking hands, congratulated each other, Witichis went up to Petros with an earnest mien, and said solemnly:

"Then it is war! We do not shun it; that you have heard. Better open war than this lurking, undermining enmity. War is good; but woe to him who kindles it without reason and without a just cause! I see beforehand years of blood and murder and conflagration; I see trampled corn-fields, smoking towns, and numberless corpses swimming down the rivers! Listen to our words. Upon your heads be this blood, this misery! You have irritated and excited us for years; we bore it quietly. And now you have declared war against us, judging where you had no right to judge, and mixing yourselves in the affairs of a nation which is as free as your own. On your heads be the responsibility! This is our answer to Byzantium."

Silently Petros listened to these words; silently he turned and went out, followed by his companions.

Some of them accompanied him to his residence, amongst them the Bishop of Florentia.

"Reverend friend," Petros said to the latter at parting, "the letters of Theodahad about the matter you know of, which you entrusted to me for perusal, you must leave entirely at my disposal. I need them, and they are no longer necessary to you."

"The process is long since decided," answered the Bishop, "and the property irrevocably acquired. The documents are yours."

The ambassador then dismissed his friends, who hoped soon to see him again in Ravenna with the imperial army, and went to his chamber, where he at once despatched a messenger to Belisarius, ordering him to invade the country. Then he wrote a detailed report to the Emperor, which concluded in the following words:

"And so, my Emperor, you seem to have just reason to be contented with the services of your most faithful messenger, and the situation of affairs. The barbarian nation split into parties; a hated Prince, incapable and faithless, upon the throne; the enemy surprised, unprepared and unarmed; the Italian population everywhere in your favour. We cannot fail! If no miracle occur, the barbarians must succumb almost without resistance; and, as often before, my great Emperor appears as the protector of the weak and the avenger of wrongs. It is a witty coincidence that the trireme which brought me here bears the name of *Nemesis*. Only one thing afflicts me much, that, with all my efforts, I have not succeeded in saving the unhappy daughter of Theodoric. I beg you, at least, to assure my mistress, the Empress, who was never very graciously disposed to me, that I tried most faithfully to obey all her injunctions concerning the Princess, whose fate she entrusted to me as her principal anxiety during our last interview. As to the question about Theodahad and Gothelindis, by whose assistance the Gothic Kingdom has been delivered into our hands, I will venture to recall to the Empress's memory the first rule of prudence: it is too dangerous to have the sharers of our profoundest secrets at court."

This letter Petros sent on in advance with the two bishops, Hypatius and Demetrius, who were to go immediately to Brundisium, and thence through Epidamnos by land to Byzantium.

He himself intended to follow in a few days, sailing slowly along the Gothic coasts of the Ionian Gulf, in order to prove the temper and excite the rebellion of the inhabitants of the harbour towns.

He would afterwards sail round the Peloponnesus and Eubœa to Byzantium, for the Empress had ordered him to travel by sea, and had given him commissions for Athens and Lampsacus.

Before his departure from Ravenna, he already calculated the rewards he expected to receive at Byzantium for his successful operations in Italy.

He would return twice as rich as he had come, for he had never confessed to the Queen, Gothelindis, that he had come into the country with the order to overthrow Amalasintha.

He had rather, for some time, met her with representations of the anger of the Empress and Emperor, and had, with great show of repugnance, allowed himself to be bribed with large sums to connive at her plans, when, actually, he but used her as his tool.

He looked forward with certainty to the proud rank of patrician in Byzantium, and already rejoiced that he would be able to meet his haughty cousin, Narses--who had never used his influence to advance him--on equal terms.

"So everything has succeeded better than I could wish," he said to himself with great complacency, as he set his papers in order before leaving Ravenna, "and this time, my proud friend Cethegus, cunning has proved truly excellent. The little rhetorician from Thessalonica, with his small and stealthy steps, has advanced farther than you with your proud strides. Of one thing I must be careful: that Theodahad and Gothelindis do not escape to Byzantium; it would be too dangerous. Perhaps the question of the astute Empress was intended as a warning. This royal couple must be put out of our way."

Having completed his arrangements, Petros sent for the friend with whom he lodged, and took leave of him. At the same time he delivered to him a dark-coloured narrow vase, such as those which were used for the preservation of documents; he sealed the cover with his ring, which was finely engraved with a scorpion, and wrote a name upon the wax-tablet appended to it.

"Seek this man," he said to his host, "at the next assembly of the Goths at Regeta, and give him the vase; the contents are his. Farewell. You shall soon see me again in Ravenna."

He left the house with his slaves, and was soon on board the ambassador's ship; filled with proud expectations, he was borne away by the *Nemesis*.

As his ship, many weeks after, neared the harbour of Byzantium--he had, at the Empress's wish, announced his speedy arrival at Lampsacus, by means of an imperial swift-sailer which was just leaving--Petros looked at the handsome country houses on the shore, which shone whitely from out of the evergreen shade of the surrounding gardens.

"Here you will live in future, amongst the senators of the Empire," he thought with great contentment.

Before they ran into the harbour, the *Thetis*, the splendid pleasure-boat of the Empress, flew towards them, and, as soon as she recognised the galley of the ambassador, hoisted the purple standard, as a sign to lay to.

Very soon a messenger from the Empress came on board the galley. It was Alexandros, the former ambassador to the court of Ravenna. He showed to the captain of the galley a writing from the Emperor, at which the captain appeared to be much startled; then he turned to Petros.

"In the name of the Emperor Justinian! You are condemned for life, convicted of long-practised forgery and embezzlement of the taxes, to the metal-works in the mines of Cherson, with the Ultra-Ziagirian Huns. You have delivered the daughter of Theodoric into the hands of her enemies. The Emperor thought you excused when he read your letter; but the Empress, inconsolable for the death of her royal sister, revealed your former guilt to the Emperor, and a letter from the Prefect of Rome proved that you had secretly planned the murder of the Princess with Gothelindis. Your fortune is confiscated, and the Empress wishes you to recollect--" here he whispered into the ear of Petros, who was completely stunned and broken by this terrible blow--"that you yourself, in your letter, advised her to get rid of all the sharers of her secrets."

With this, Alexandros returned to the *Thetis*, but the *Nemesis* turned her stern to Byzantium, and bore the criminal away for ever from all civilised community with mankind.

CHAPTER VIII.

We have lost sight of Cethegus ever since his departure for Rome.

During the events which we have described, he had been extremely active in that city, for he saw that things were coming to a crisis, and looked forward with confidence to a favourable result.

All Italy was united in hatred against the barbarians, and who could so well direct this hatred as the head of the conspiracy of the Catacombs, and the master of Rome?

For now he was so in fact. The legions were fully formed and equipped, and the fortifications of the city--the works of which had been carried on for the last few months night and day--were almost completed.

And, as he thought, he had finally succeeded preventing an immediate incursion of the Byzantine army into Italy, the greatest calamity which threatened his ambitious plans. He had learned, through trustworthy spies, that the Byzantine fleet--which, till now had been anchored off Sicily--had really left that island, and sailed towards the African coast, where seemed occupied in suppressing piracy.

Cethegus certainly foresaw that it would yet come to a landing of the Greeks in Italy; he could not do without their help. But it was material to his plans that the Emperor's assistance should be of secondary importance, and, to insure this, he must take care that, before a single Byzantine had set foot in Italy, a rebellion of the Italians should have taken place spontaneously, and have been already carried to such a point, that the later co-operation of the Greeks would appear to be a mere incident, and could be easily repaid by the acknowledgment of a light supremacy of the Emperor.

To this end he had prepared his plans with great nicety.

As soon as the last tower on the Roman walls was under roof, the Goths were to be attacked on one and the same day all over Italy, and, at one stroke, all the fortresses, castles, and towns--Rome, Ravenna, and Neapolis foremost--were to be overpowered and taken.

If the barbarians were once driven into the open country, there was no fear--considering their complete ignorance of the art of siege, and the number and strength of the Italian fortresses--that they would be able to take these last, and thereby again become masters of the peninsula.

Then an allied army from Byzantium might aid in finally driving the Goths over the Alps; and Cethegus was resolved to prevent these allies from entering the most important fortresses, so that, later, they also might be got rid of without difficulty.

To ensure the success of this plan, it was necessary that the Goths should be taken by surprise. If war with Byzantium were in prospect, or, still worse, already broken out, it naturally followed that the barbarians would not allow their fortified places to be wrested from them by a mere stroke of the hand.

Now as Cethegus--since he had penetrated the motives of the embassy of Petros--fully expected that Justinian would come forward at the first opportunity, and as he had barely succeeded in preventing the landing of Belisarius, he was resolved not to lose a moment's time.

He had arranged that a general meeting of the conspirators should take place in the Catacombs on the day of the completion of the Roman fortifications, when their successful termination should be celebrated, the moment of the attack on the Goths decided, and Cethegus himself designated as the leader of this purely Italian movement.

He hoped to overcome the opposition of the timorous or the bribed--who were inclined to act only for and with the assistance of Byzantium--by the enthusiasm of the Roman youth, whom he would promise to lead at once to battle.

Before the day of meeting arrived, he had heard the news of Amalasintha's murder, and of the confusion and division of the Goths, and he impatiently longed for the crisis.

At length the last tower of the Aurelian Gate was completed. Cethegus himself gave the finishing stroke, and as he did so it seemed to him that he heard the sound of the blow which would liberate Rome and Italy.

At the banquet which he afterwards gave to thousands of labourers in the theatre of Pompey, most of the conspirators were present, and the Prefect made use of the opportunity to show them how unlimited was his popularity. Upon the younger members the impression which he wished and expected to make was produced, but a small party, headed by Silverius, retired from the tables with discontented and gloomy looks.

The priest had lately seen that Cethegus would not consent to be a mere tool, but that he contrived to carry out his own plans, which might prove extremely dangerous to the Church and to his (the priest's) personal influence. He was decided to overthrow his colleague as soon as he could be spared, and it had not been difficult for him to excite the jealousy of many Romans against Cethegus.

The wily archbishop had taken advantage of the presence of the two bishops from the Eastern Empire, Hypatius of Ephesus and Demetrius of Philippi--who secretly treated with the Pope in matters of faith, and with King Theodahad in affairs of policy--to enter into a close and secret alliance with Theodahad and Byzantium.

"You are right, Silverius," grumbled Scævola, as they issued from the doors of the theatre, "the Prefect unites Marius and Cæsar in one person."

"He does not throw away such immense sums for nothing," said the avaricious Albinus warningly; "we must not trust him too far."

"Beloved brethren," said the priest, "see that you do not lightly condemn a member of our community. Who should do this would be worthy of hell-fire! Certainly Cethegus commands the fists of the workmen as well as the hearts of his young 'knights;' and it is well, for he can therewith break the tyranny----"

"But at the same time he could replace it by new despotism," interrupted Calpurnius.

"That he shall not, if daggers can still kill, as in the time of Brutus!" cried Scævola.

"Bloodshed is not necessary. Consider; the nearer the tyrant, the more oppressive the tyranny; the farther the ruler, the more bearable his government. The power of the Prefect must be balanced by the power of the Emperor."

"Yes," affirmed Albinus, who had received large sums from Byzantium, "the Emperor must become master of Italy."

"That is," said Silverius, restraining Scævola, who would have interrupted indignantly, "we must keep down the Prefect by means of the Emperor, and the Emperor by means of the Prefect. See, we have arrived at the door of my house. Let us enter. I must tell you in confidence what will be made known to the assembly to-night. It will surprise you; but other people still more."

Meanwhile the Prefect had also hurried home from the banquet, to prepare for his important work by lonely meditation.

He did not think over his speech; he knew long ago what he had to say; and, a splendid orator, to whom words came as readily as thoughts, he willingly left the mode of expression to the impulse of the moment, knowing well that words which issue spontaneously from the heart, have the liveliest effect.

But he sought for inward composure; for his passions were vividly excited.

He thought over the steps which he had taken in order to reach his goal, since first he had been drawn towards it with demoniac force. He measured the short space which he had still to tread; he counted the difficulties and hindrances which lay upon his path, and measured the strength of mind with which he could overcome them; and the result of all this examination awakened in him a certainty of victory which filled him with youthful enthusiasm.

He measured his room with rapid strides; the muscles of his arms swelled as if in the hour of battle; he girded himself with the broad and victorious sword of his former campaigns, and convulsively grasped the hilt as if he were about to fight for his Rome against two worlds: against Byzantium and the barbarians.

He paused before the statue of Cæsar, and looked long at the silent marble face.

"Farewell!" he cried, "give me thy good fortune upon my way. More I do not need."

He turned quickly, and hurried out of the room and through the atrium into the street, where the first stars were already shining. The conspirators had assembled in the Catacombs on this evening in greater numbers than ever, for urgent invitations had been sent through all Italy.

According to the wish of the Prefect, all strategically important places were represented at this meeting. Deputies had been sent from the strong warders of the frontiers, Tridentum, Tarvisium, and Verona, which behold the ice of the Alps; from Otorantum and Consentia, which are laved by the tepid waves of the Ausonian Sea; from all the celebrated towns of Sicily and Italy, with the proud, beautiful, and historic names: Syracuse and Catana, Panormus and Messina, Regium, Neapolis and Cumæ, Capua and Beneventum, Antium and Ostia, Reate and Narnia, Volsinii, Urbsvetus and Spoletum, Clusium and Perugia, Auximum and Ancona, Florentia and Fæsulæ, Pisa, Luca, Luna and Genua; Ariminum, Casena, Faventia, and Ravenna; Parma, Dertona and Placentia; Mantua, Cremona, and Ticinum (Pavia); Mediolanum, Comum, and Bergamum; Asta and Pollentia; and from the northern and eastern coasts of the Ionian Gulf: Concordia, Aquileja, Iadera, Scardona, and Salona.

There were grave senators and judges, who had grown grey in the councils of their towns, where their ancestors had been leaders for centuries; wise merchants, broad-shouldered proprietors, disputing jurists, mocking rhetoricians, and in particular a great number of clergy of all ranks and all ages: the only firmly organised party, and which was implicitly obedient to Silverius.

As Cethegus, still concealed behind the corner of the narrow entrance, overlooked the groups assembled in the rotunda of the grotto, he could not restrain a contemptuous smile, which, however, ended in a sigh.

Excepting the general dislike to the barbarians--which, however, was by no means strong enough to support the sacrifices and self-denial necessary to the accomplishment of difficult

political plans--what different and often what small motives had led these men together!

Cethegus knew exactly the motives of each individual: had he not been able to influence them by taking advantage of their foibles? And, after all, he could not but rejoice at this, for he could never have brought true Romans so completely under his influence as he had done these conspirators.

But as he now looked at the assembled patriots, and reflected how one had been induced to join the discontented, in the hope of a title from Byzantium; another by bribery; another from revenge or on account of some personal offence, or even from tedium, or debts, or some foolish dilemma; and when he told himself that with *such* colleagues he must meet the warriors of the Gothic army--he almost shrank from the temerity of his plan.

It was some relief to him, when the clear voice of Lucius Licinius attracted his looks to the troop of young "knights," whose truly martial courage and national enthusiasm were expressed on their features; there at least he had a few trustworthy weapons.

"Welcome! Lucius Licinius," he said, as he stepped out of the darkness of the passage, "Ha, ha! you are mailed and armed as if we were going straight from hence to meet the barbarians!"

"I can scarcely contain myself for joy and hate!" cried the handsome youth. "Look here, all these I have won for you, for the cause of the fatherland."

Cethegus looked round and greeted the others.

"You here also, Kallistratos? you merry son of peace!"

"Hellas will not desert her sister Italia in the hour of danger," said the Greek, and laid his white hand upon his elegant, ivory-hilted sword.

Cethegus nodded to him and turned to the rest; Marcus Licinius, Piso, Massurius, Balbus, who, completely won for the Prefect since the feast of the Floralia, had brought with them their brothers, cousins, and friends.

Cethegus looked searchingly through the groups; he seemed to miss some one.

Lucius Licinius guessed his thoughts.

"You seek the dark Corsican, Furius Ahalla? You must not reckon upon him. I sounded him thoroughly, but he said: 'I am a Corsican--no Roman. My trade flourishes under Gothic protection. Leave me out your game.' And when I pressed him further--for I would gladly win his brave sword and the many thousands of hands which he commands--he said abruptly: 'I will not fight against Totila.'"

"The Gods alone know what binds the wild tiger to that milksop," said Piso.

Cethegus smiled, but frowned as well.

"I think we Romans will suffice," he said in a loud voice; and the youths looked at him with beating hearts.

"Open the assembly," said Scævola impatiently to Silverius. "You see how he talks over the young people; he will win them all. Interrupt him; speak!"

"Immediately. Are you sure that Albinus will come?"

"He will; he waits for the messengers at the Appian gate."

"Well," said the priest, "God be with us!"

And he stepped into the middle of the rotunda, raised the black cross which he held, and began:

"In the name of the Triune God! We have again assembled in the gloom of night for the works of light. Perhaps for the last time; for the Son of God, to whom the heretics refuse all honour, has wonderfully blessed our endeavours. Next to God, our warmest thanks are due to the noble Emperor Justinian and his pious spouse, who listen to the sighs of the suffering Church with active sympathy; and, lastly, to our friend and leader here, the Prefect, who zealously works for the cause of our master the Emperor----"

"Stop, priest!" cried Lucius Licinius. "Who calls the Emperor of Byzantium our *master*? We will not have the Greeks instead of the Goths! We will be free!"

"We will be free!" echoed the chorus of his friends.

"We shall *become* free!" continued Silverius. "Certainly! But that is not possible unaided. The Emperor must help us. And do not think, beloved youths, that the man whom you honour as your leader, Cethegus, is of a different opinion. Justinian has sent him a costly ring--his portrait in

carneol--as a sign that he is contented with the Prefect's services, and the Prefect has accepted the ring. Behold, he wears it on his finger."

Startled and indignant, the youths looked at Cethegus, who silently advanced into the middle of the room.

A painful pause ensued.

"Speak, General!" cried Lucius; "contradict him! It is not as he says with the ring!"

But Cethegus nodded and drew off the ring.

"It is as he says. The ring is from the Emperor, and I have accepted it."

Lucius Licinius fell back a step.

"As a sign?" asked Silverius.

"As a sign," cried Cethegus, in a threatening voice, "that I am not the ambitious egoist for which many take me. As a sign that I love Italy more than my ambition. Yes, I built upon Byzantium, and would have given up the leadership to the mighty Emperor; therefore I took this ring. I build no more upon Byzantium, for she hesitates everlastingly: therefore I have brought the ring with me to-day, in order to return it to the Emperor. You, Silverius, have proved yourself the representative of Byzantium; here, return his pledge to your master; he delays too long. Tell him Italy will help herself!"

"Italy will help herself!" shouted the young Romans.

"Reflect what you do!" cried the priest with restrained anger. "I understand the hot courage of youth--but that my friend, the ripe and experienced man, stretches forth his hand for what is unattainable--*that* surprises me! Remember the strength and ferocity of the barbarians! Reflect that the Italians are unused to arms, that all the fortresses of the country are in the hands----"

"Be silent, priest," thundered Cethegus. "You do not understand such matters! Speak where the psalms have to be explained or souls led to heaven, for that is your office; but where war and fighting are concerned, let those speak who understand! We will leave you all heaven--leave the earth to us. Roman youths, you have the choice. Will you wait until this cautious Byzantium vouchsafes to take pity upon Italy?--you may become weary old men before then!--or will you in old Roman fashion, win freedom with your own swords? You will; I see it by your sparkling eyes. How? They tell us we are too weak to liberate Italy! Ha! were not your fathers Romans, who conquered the world? If I call upon you, man by man, there is not a name which does not ring with the fame of a hero. Decius, Corvinus, Cornelius, Valerius, Licinius--will you free the fatherland with me?"

"We will! Lead us, Cethegus!" cried the youth with enthusiasm.

After a pause Scævola began:

"My name is Scævola. When the names of Roman heroes are cited, the race which inherits the heroism of the Celts might have been remembered. I ask you, Cethegus, have you more than dreams and wishes, like these young fools? have you a plan?"

"More than that, Scævola, I have, and will keep, the victory! Here is a list of all the fortresses in Italy. At the next Ides, that is in thirty days, they will fall, at one blow, into my hands."

"What? must we still wait thirty days?" asked Lucius.

"Only till the deputies assembled here have again reached their towns. Only till my expresses have flown through Italy. You have *had* to wait forty years!"

But the impatience of the youths, which he himself had excited, was not to be subdued; they looked gloomy at the postponement--they murmured.

The priest was quick to take advantage of this change of humour.

"No, Cethegus," he cried; "we cannot delay so long! Tyranny is unbearable to the noble-minded; shame upon him who endures it longer than he must! I know of better comfort, youths! In a few days the spears of Belisarius may flash in Italian sunshine."

"Or shall we, perhaps," asked Scævola, "refuse to follow Belisarius because he is not Cethegus?"

"You speak of wishes," cried Cethegus, "not of realities. If Belisarius land, I shall be the first to join him. But he will not land. It is this which has disgusted me; the Emperor does not keep his word."

Cethegus played a very bold game. But he could not do otherwise.

"You may err," said Silverius, "and the Emperor may fulfil his promise sooner than you think. Belisarius lies off Sicily."

"Not now. He has gone towards Africa, towards home. Hope nothing from Belisarius."

Just then hasty steps were heard in the passage, and Albinus rushed in.

"Triumph!" he cried. "Freedom! freedom!"

"What news?" asked the priest.

"War! deliverance! Byzantium has declared war against the Goths!"

"Freedom! war!" shouted the Romans.

"It is impossible!" said Cethegus.

"It is certain!" cried another voice from the entrance--it was Calpurnius, who had followed close upon Albinus. "And, more than this, the war has commenced. Belisarius has landed in Sicily, at Catana; Syracuse and Messina have surrendered; Panormus he has taken with the fleet. He has crossed to Italy, from Messina to Regium; he is upon Italian soil!"

"Freedom!" cried Marcus Licinius.

"Everywhere the population joins him. The Goths, taken by surprise, fly from Apulia and Calabria. Belisarius presses on without pause, through Bruttia and Lucania, to Neapolis."

"It is all lies--lies!" cried Cethegus, more to himself than to the others.

"You do not seem pleased at the success of the good cause! But the messenger rode three horses to death. Belisarius has landed with thirty thousand men."

"Who still doubts is a traitor!" cried Scævola.

"Now let us see," said Silverius to Cethegus sarcastically, "if you will keep your word. Will you be the first to join Belisarius?"

At this bitter moment a whole world--*his* world--sank before the eyes of Cethegus. So, then, all had been in vain; worse than that--what he had done, had been done for a hated enemy. Belisarius in Italy with a strong army, and he deceived, powerless, conquered! Any other man would have given up all further effort.

But not a shadow of discouragement crossed the mind of the Prefect. His gigantic edifice was shattered; the noise of its fall still deafened him, and yet at the same moment he had already resolved to begin again.

His world was destroyed, and he had no time even to sigh, for the eyes of all were fixed upon him.

"Well, what will you do?" repeated Scævola.

Cethegus disdained to look at him.

He turned to the assembly, and spoke in a quiet voice:

"Belisarius has landed," he said; "he is now our leader. I shall at once go to his camp."

With this he walked, with measured steps and a composed countenance, past Silverius and his friends towards the exit.

Silverius would have whispered a word of sarcasm, but he was startled at the glance which the Prefect cast upon him.

"Do not rejoice too soon, priest," it seemed to say; "you will repent this hour!" And Silverius, the victor, was dumb.

CHAPTER IX.

The landing of the Byzantines had taken both Goths and Italians by surprise; for the last move of Belisarius to the east had misled both parties.

Of all our Gothic friends, Totila alone was in South Italy. He had, in his office as commodore and Count of the Harbour of Neapolis, in vain warned the Government of Ravenna of the impending danger, and begged for the power and means of defending Sicily.

We shall see how he had been deprived of all possibility of preventing the catastrophe which

threatened to overwhelm his nation, and which was to throw the first shadow upon the brilliant path of his own life, and tear the web of good fortune which a happy fate had, until now, woven about this favourite of the gods.

Valerius, who, though stern, had a noble and kindly nature, had soon been won by Totila's irresistible amiability. We have seen how strongly the prayers of his daughter, the memory of his wife's last words, and Totila's frankness, had influenced the worthy man, even when he was irritated at the discovery of the lovers' secret meetings.

Totila remained at the villa as a guest. Julius, with his winning affection, was called upon to help the lovers, and to their united influence the father gradually yielded.

But this was only possible because Totila assimilated to the Romans more nearly in manners, education, and inclinations than any other Goth: so that Valerius soon saw that he could not call a youth a "barbarian" who knew and appreciated the language, wisdom, and beauty of Hellenic and Roman literature better than most Italians, and admired the culture of the ancient world no less than he loved his fellow-countrymen.

And, in addition to all this, a common hatred of Byzantium united the old Roman and the young German.

The Valerians had always belonged to the aristocratic Republican opposition against the Cæsars, and, since the time of Tiberius, many a member of this family had sealed with his blood his fidelity to the cause of Old Republicanism.

The family had never really acknowledged the removal of the Empire of the World from the city on the Tiber to that on the Bosphorus. In the Byzantine imperial dignity Valerius beheld the acme of all tyranny, and, at any cost, would gladly have saved his Latium from the avarice, religious intolerance, and Oriental despotism of the Byzantine Emperors.

Added to this, the father and brother of Valerius had been arrested at Byzantium by an avaricious predecessor of Justinian, while passing through that city, and, on pretence of participation in a conspiracy, had been executed, and all their eastern possessions had been confiscated; so that private loss considerably strengthened the political hatred of the patriot. When Cethegus introduced him to the conspiracy of the Catacombs, he had eagerly taken up the idea of an Italian rebellion; but had repulsed all advances of the imperial party with the words, "Rather death than Byzantium!"

So the two, Valerius and Totila, were unanimous in the resolution to tolerate no Byzantine in their beloved country, which was scarcely less dear to the Goth than to the Roman.

The lovers took care not to press the old man, at present, to make any formal promise; they contented themselves with the freedom of intercourse allowed by Valerius, and waited quietly until the influence of habit should gradually accustom him to the thought of their ultimate union.

Our young friends thus passed many happy days, and, added to the bliss of their mutual love, they had the delight of witnessing the growing affection of Valerius for Totila.

Julius was filled with the noble exaltation which lies in the sacrifice of one's own passion for the sake of another's happiness. His soul, unsatisfied by the wisdom of old philosophy, turned more and more to the doctrine which teaches that peace is only to be found in self-denial.

Valeria was of a very different nature. She was the true expression of the Roman ideal of her father, who had conducted her education in place of her early-lost mother, and had imbued her with the spirit of the antique Pagans. Christianity--to which she had been dedicated by an outward form at the very commencement of her life, and from which she had afterwards been wrested by an equally external formality--seemed to her a fearful power, by no means loved or understood, but which, nevertheless, she could not exclude from the circle of her thoughts and feelings.

Like a true Roman, she noticed with joy and pride, not with dismay, the martial enthusiasm with which Totila spoke to her father in their conversations concerning Byzantium. She felt that he was born to be a hero, and so, when duty suddenly called him away from love and friendship, she bore the parting with noble self-control.

For as soon as the Byzantine fleet was known to be cruising off Syracuse, the young Goth was inflamed with an insatiable thirst for war. It was his duty, as commodore of the South Italian squadron, to watch the movements of the enemy and protect the coast. He promptly set sail to meet the Grecian fleet, and demanded the reason of its appearance in those waters. Belisarius, who had orders to avoid all inimical proceedings until called upon to commence hostilities by Petros, gave a peaceful and plausible answer, alleging as his pretext the disturbances in Africa and the piracies of Mauritanian ships. Totila was obliged to content himself with this reply, but in his heart he was sure that the war would soon break out; perhaps only because he so ardently desired it.

He therefore took all precautions: sent messengers with warnings to Ravenna, and, above all, essayed to protect the city of Neapolis at least towards the sea, for the inland fortifications had

fallen into decay during the long peace, and old Uliaris, the commander of the city, was not to be shaken out of his proud security and contempt of the Greeks.

The Goths in general cherished the dangerous delusion that the Byzantines would never dare to attack them; and their treacherous King did all in his power to strengthen this belief.

The warnings of Totila, therefore, were disregarded, and the zealous commodore was even deprived of his whole fleet, which was ordered to the Harbour of Ravenna, on the pretext of an exchange; but the ships which should have replaced those which had sailed away never arrived.

So Totila had nothing left but a few small guardships, with which, as he declared to his friends, he could not even sufficiently watch the movements of the enemy, much less prevent their advance.

When apprised of all this, the merchant determined to leave his villa at Neapolis, and to go to his rich estates and mercantile establishments at Regium, on the south point of the peninsula, in order to remove all his most valuable property from that neighbourhood--where Totila feared the first attack of the enemy--and bring it to Neapolis; and also to make his preparations in case of a prolonged war.

Julius was to accompany him on this journey; and Valeria was not to be persuaded to remain behind in the empty villa; so, as Totila assured them that no danger was to be feared for the next few days, the three, accompanied by a few slaves, journeyed to the villa on the estate near the Pass of Jugum, to the north of Regium, which, situated close to the sea, was partly, with all the luxury already so severely blamed by Horace, "daringly built out" into the very sea itself.

Valerius found things in a bad condition. His stewards, taking advantage of the prolonged absence of their master, had made sad work, and Valerius saw with indignation that, in order to repair the mischief, his presence would be necessary, not for days, but for weeks.

Meanwhile the threatening symptoms increased. Totila sent many warning messages; but Valeria decided that she could not leave her father while in danger, and the latter scorned to fly before the "degenerate Greeks," whom he still more despised than hated.

One day they were surprised by the arrival of two boats, which ran into the little harbour of the villa at Regium almost at the same moment. One brought Totila; the other the Corsican, Furius Ahalla.

The two greeted each other with surprise, but, as old acquaintances, were well pleased to meet, and walked together through the taxus-hedges and laurel walks to the villa. There they parted, Totila saying that he wished to pay a visit to his friend Julius, while the Corsican had business with the merchant, with whom he had for years been connected in a commerce which was equally advantageous to both parties.

Valerius was therefore much pleased to see the clever, bold, and handsome sailor enter his room, and after a hearty welcome, the two business-friends turned to their books and accounts.

After some short discussion, the Corsican rose from his examination of the books, and said:

"So you see, Valerius, that Mercurius has again blessed our connection. My ships have brought you purple and costly woollen stuffs from Phœnicia and Spain; and taken your exquisite manufactures of last year to Byzantium and Alexandria, to Massilia and Antiochia. A centenarius of gold more profit than last year! And so it will go on rising from year to year, so long as the brave Goths uphold peace and justice in the West."

He ceased, as if in expectation.

"So long as they *can* uphold it!" sighed Valerius. "So long as these Greeks keep the peace! Who can guarantee that to-night the sea-breeze may not drive the ships of Belisarius towards these coasts!"

"So you, too, expect war? In confidence: it is more than probable, it is certain."

"Furius!" cried the Roman, "how do you know that?"

"I come from Africa--from Sicily. I have seen the fleet of the Emperor. One does not arm against pirates in such a manner. I have spoken to the captains of Belisarius; they dream night and day of the treasures of Italy. Sicily is ripe for defection, as soon as the Greeks land."

Valerius grew pale with excitement.

Furius remarked it, and continued.

"For this reason I have come here to warn you. The enemy will land in this vicinity, and I know--that your daughter is with you."

"Valeria is a Roman."

"Yes, but these enemies are the most ferocious barbarians. For it is Huns, Massagetæ, Scythians, Avari, Sclavonians, and Saracens which this Emperor of the Romans lets loose upon Italy! Woe to your lovely child should she fall into their hands."

"That she shall not!" cried Valerius, his hand upon his dagger. "But you are right--she must go--she must be placed in safety."

"Where is safety in Italy? Soon the billows of the conflict will roll over Neapolis--over Rome--and will scarcely break against the walls of Ravenna!"

"Do you think so highly of these Greeks? Yet Greece has never sent anything to Italy but mimes, pirates, and pickpockets!"

"But Belisarius is the favourite of fortune. At all events, a war will be kindled, the end of which many of you will not outlive!"

"Of *us*, you say? Will not *you* fight with us?"

"No, Valerius! You know that pure Corsican blood flows in my veins, in spite of my adopted Roman name. I am no Roman, no Greek, and no Goth. I wish the Goths the victory, because they keep order on land and sea, and my trade flourishes under their sway; but were I to fight openly on their side, the exchequer of Byzantium would swallow up all that I possess in ships and goods in the harbours of the East: three-fourths of my whole fortune. No, I intend so to fortify my island--you know that half Corsica is mine--that neither of the disputants can molest me. My island shall be an asylum of peace, while round about land and water echo with the noise of battle. I shall defend this asylum as a king defends his crown, or a bridegroom his bride; and therefore"--his eyes sparkled, and his voice trembled with excitement--"therefore I wish--now--to speak a word which for years I have carried hidden in my heart----"

He hesitated.

Valerius saw beforehand what was coming, and saw it with deep regret. For years he had pleased himself with the thought of entrusting his daughter's happiness to this powerful merchant, the adopted son of an old friend, of whose affection to Valeria he had long been aware. Although he had learned to love Totila, he would far rather have had his old friend for a son-in-law.

And he knew the ungovernable pride and irritable temper of the Corsican; he feared, in case of refusal, that the old love and friendship would be speedily changed to burning hate. Dark stories were told of the wild rage of this man, and Valerius would gladly have spared both him and himself the pain of a rejection.

But the other continued:

"I think we are both men who do business in a business-like manner. And, according to old custom, I speak at once to the father, and not first to the daughter. Give me your child to wife, Valerius! In part you know my fortune--only in part--for it is far larger than you think. I will match her dowry, be it never so splendid, with the double----"

"Furius!" interrupted the father.

"I think I am a man who can make his wife happy. At least, I can protect her better than any one else in these dangerous times. I will take her in my ships, should Corsica be threatened, to Asia or to Africa. On every coast there awaits her, not a house, but a palace. No queen could envy her. I will cherish, her more dearly--more dearly than my life!"

He paused in extreme agitation, as if expecting a prompt reply.

Valerius was silent, he sought for an excuse--it was but a moment, but the bare appearance of hesitation on the father's part revolted the Corsican. The blood rushed to his handsome face, which, just before almost soft and mild, suddenly assumed an aspect of ferocity; a vivid red flush spread over his brown cheeks.

"Furius Ahalla," he said hastily, "is not accustomed to offer a thing twice. Usually my wares, at the first offer, are snatched at with both hands. I now offer myself--by God! I am not worse than my purple----"

"My friend," began the old man, "we no longer live in ancient times. The new belief has almost deprived a father of the right to dispose of his daughter. My *will* would give her to you and to no other, but her heart----"

"She loves another!" cried the Corsican, "whom?"

And his hand caught at his dagger, as if he would gladly have killed his rival on the instant.

There was something of the tiger in this movement, and in the glare of his rolling eyes.

Valerius felt how deadly would be his hatred, and would not mention the name.

"Who can it be?" asked Furius, in an under tone. "A Roman? Montanus? No! Oh, only--only not *he*--say no, old man! not *he*----" and he caught Valerius by the sleeve.

"Who? Whom do you mean?"

"He, who landed with me--the Goth! But yes it must be *he*--every one loves him--Totila!"

"It is *he*," said Valerius, and kindly tried to take his friend's hand. But he released it again in terror; a fearful convulsion shook the iron frame of the strong Corsican. He stretched forth his hand stiffly, as if he would strangle the pain which tortured him. Then he tossed back his head, and, laughing wildly, struck his forehead repeatedly.

Valerius observed this mad fit with horror. At last the arms of the enraged man slowly dropped, and revealed an ashy-pale face.

"It is over," said Furius in a trembling voice. "It is a curse that lies upon me. I am never to be happy in a wife. Once before--just before accomplishment! And now! I know that Valeria's influence and quiet composure would have brought peace into my wild life--I should have become different, better. And if this could not have been"--his eyes again sparkled--"it would have been almost equally sweet to murder the destroyer of my happiness. Yes, I would have wallowed in his blood, and torn his bride away from his corpse! And now it is *he*! He, the only being to whom Ahalla owes gratitude--and what gratitude!----"

He was silent, nodding his head as if lost in recollection.

"Valerius," he then said, suddenly rousing himself, "I would yield to no man on earth--I could not have borne to give place to another--but Totila! I will forgive her for not loving me, because she has chosen Totila. Farewell, Valerius, old friend. I go to sea; to Persia, to India--I know not whither--ah! everywhere I shall carry with me the bitter pain of this hour!"

He went quickly out, and immediately afterwards his arrow-swift boat bore him away from the little harbour of the villa.

Valerius left the room sighing, and went in search of his daughter.

In the atrium he met Totila, who was obliged to take leave at once. He had only come to try to persuade them to return to Neapolis. For Belisarius had left the African coast and was cruising near Panormus, and any day a descent might be effected in Sicily or even Italy; and, in spite of Totila's insistence, the King had sent no ships. He himself was shortly going to Sicily to convince himself of the truth. His friends, therefore, were here totally unprotected, and he begged Valerius to return forthwith to Neapolis by land.

But it revolted the old soldier to fly before the Greeks; he could not and would not leave his affairs before three days; and Totila could scarcely persuade him to accept a small troop of twenty Goths as a poor protection.

With a heavy heart Totila entered his boat and was taken back to his guardship. It was almost dark when he arrived on board; a veil of mist shrouded the nearest objects.

All at once the sound of oars was heard to the west, and a ship, recognisable by the red light on the tall mast, turned the point of a small promontory.

Totila listened, and asked his look-out:

"A sail to the left! what ship? what master?"

"It is already signalled from the mast-head," was the reply, "merchant-ship--Furius Ahalla--lay at anchor here."

"Where bound?"

"For the East--for India!"

FOOTNOTES:

[Footnote 1](#): A place for wrestling and other exercises.

[Footnote 2](#): The most valued wood--not the modern citron-tree.

[Footnote 3](#): Pine-wood.

[Footnote 4](#): A Grecian rider's upper garment, worn by the Romans of that time.

[Footnote 5](#): An epocha of the Roman calendar instituted by Constantine the Great.

END OF VOL. I.

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