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THE SCARLET BANNER

Novels by Felix Dahn

TRANSLATED BY MARY J. SAFFORD

A CAPTIVE OF THE
ROMAN
EAGLES. \$1.50

FELICITAS. \$1.50

THE SCARLET
BANNER. \$1.50

PUBLISHED BY A. C. McCLURG &
Co.

The Scarlet Banner

***By* FELIX DAHN**

Translated from the German by MARY J. SAFFORD

TRANSLATOR OF "A Captive of the Roman Eagles," "Felicitas," etc.

Chicago A. C. McClurg & Co. 1903

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DEDICATED

IN DEEP REVERENCE AND WARM FRIENDSHIP

TO

HIS EXCELLENCY

ACTING PRIVY-COUNCILLOR AND PROFESSOR

HERR DR. KARL HASE

OF JENA

Only through the same virtues by which they were founded will kingdoms be maintained.

SALLUSTIUS, Catilina.

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!

SHAKESPEARE, Hamlet.

PREFACE

This story, published in Germany under the title of *Gelimer* is the third volume in the group of romances to which "Felicitas" and "The Captive of the Roman Eagles" belong, and, like them, deals with the long-continued conflict between the Germans and the Romans.

But in the present novel the scene of the struggle is transferred from the forests of Germania to the arid sands of Africa, and, in wonderfully vivid pen-pictures, the author displays the marvellous magnificence surrounding the descendants of the Vandal Genseric, the superb pageants of their festivals, and the luxury whose enervating influence has gradually sapped the strength and courage of the rude, invincible warriors--once the terror of all the neighboring coasts and islands--till their enfeebled limbs can no longer support the weight of their ancestors' armor, and they cast aside their helmets to crown themselves with the rose-garlands of Roman revellers.

The pages glow with color as the brilliant changeful vision of life in Carthage, under the Vandal rule, rises from the mists of the vanished centuries, and the characters which people this ancient world are no less varied. The noble king, the subtle Roman, Verus, the gallant warrior, Zazo, Hilda, the beautiful, fearless Ostrogoth Princess, the wily Justinian, his unscrupulous Empress, Theodora, and their brave, impetuous general, Belisarius, are clearly portrayed; and, underlying the whole drama, surges the fierce warfare between Roman Catholic and Arian, while the place and the period in which the scenes of the romance are laid, both comparatively little known, lend a peculiar charm and freshness to the gifted author's narrative.

MARY J. SAFFORD.

HIGHFIELD COTTAGE,

DOUGLAS HILL, MAINE,

August 24, 1903.

THE

SCARLET BANNER

BOOK ONE

BEFORE THE WAR

CHAPTER I

TO CORNELIUS CETHEGUS CÆSARIUS, A FRIEND:

I send these notes to you rather than to any other man. Why? First of all, because I know not where you are, so the missive will probably be lost. Doubtless that would be the best thing which could happen, especially for the man who would then be spared reading these pages! But it will also be well for me that these lines should lie--or be lost--in some other place than here. For here in Constantinople they may fall into certain dainty little well-kept hands, which possibly might gracefully wave an order to cut off my head--or some other useful portion of my anatomy to which I have been accustomed since my birth. But if I send these truths hence to the West, they will not be so easily seized by those dangerous little fingers which discover every secret in the capital, whenever they search in earnest. Whether you are living in your house at the foot of the Capitol, or with the Regent at Ravenna, I do not know; but I shall despatch this to Rome, for toward Rome my thoughts fly, seeking Cethegus.

You may ask derisively why I write what is so dangerous. Because I must! I praise--constrained by fear--so many people and things with my lips that I condemn in my heart, that I must at least confess the truth secretly in writing. Well, I might write out my rage, read it, and then throw the pages into the sea, you say. But--and this is the other reason for this missive--I am vain, too. The cleverest man I know must read, must praise what I write, must be aware that I was not so foolish as to believe all I extolled to be praiseworthy. Later perhaps I can use the notes,--if they are not lost,--when at some future day I write the true history of the strange things I have experienced and shortly shall undergo.

So keep these pages if they do reach you. They are not exactly letters; it is a sort of diary that I am sending to you. I shall expect no answer. Cethegus does not need me, at present. Why should Cethegus write to me, now? Yet perhaps I shall soon learn your opinion from your own lips. Do you marvel?

True, we have not met since we studied together at Athens. But possibly I may soon seek you in your Italy. For I believe that the war declared to-day against the Vandals is but the prelude to the conflict with your tyrants, the Ostrogoths. Now I have written the great secret which at present is known to so few.

It is a strange thing to see before one, in clear, sharp letters, a terrible fate, pregnant with blood and tears, which no one else suspects; at such times the statesman feels akin to the god who is forging the thunderbolt that will so soon strike happy human beings. Pitiable, weak, mortal god! Will your bolt hit the mark? Will it not recoil against you? The demi-god Justinian and the goddess Theodora have prepared this thunder-bolt; the eagle Belisarius will carry it; we are starting for Africa to make war upon the Vandals.

Now you know much, O Cethegus. But you do not yet know all,--at least, not all about the Vandals. So learn it from me; I know. During the last few months I have been obliged to deliver lectures to the two gods--and the eagle--about these fair-haired fools. But whoever is compelled to deliver lectures has sense enough bestowed upon him to perform the task. Look at the professors at Athens. Since the reign of Justinian the lecture-rooms have been closed to them. Who still thinks them wise?

So listen: The Vandals are cousins of your dear masters, the Ostrogoths. They came about a hundred years ago--men, women, and children, perhaps fifty thousand in number--from Spain to Africa. Their leader was a terrible king, Gizericus by name (commonly called Genseric); a worthy comrade of Attila, the Hun. He defeated the Romans in hard-fought battles, captured Carthage, plundered Rome. He was never vanquished. The crown passed to his heirs, the Asdings, who were said to be descended from the pagan gods of the Germans. The oldest male scion of the family always ascends the throne.

But Genseric's posterity inherited only his sceptre, not his greatness. The Catholics in their kingdom (the Vandals are heretics, Arians) were most cruelly persecuted, which was more stupid than it was unjust. It really was not so very unjust; they merely applied to the Catholics, the Romans, in their kingdom the selfsame laws which the Emperor in the Roman Empire had previously issued against the Arians. But it was certainly extremely stupid. What harm can the few Arians do in the Roman Empire? But the numerous Catholics in the Vandal kingdom could overthrow it, if they should rebel. True; they will not rise voluntarily. But we are coming to rouse them.

Shall we conquer? There is much probability of it. King Hilderic lived in Constantinople a long time, and is said to have secretly embraced the Catholic faith. He is Justinian's friend: this great-grandson of Genseric abhors war. He has dealt his own kingdom the severest blow by transforming its best prop, the friendship with the Ostrogoths in Italy, into mortal hatred. The wise King Theodoric at Ravenna made a treaty of friendship and brotherhood with Thrasamund, the predecessor of Hilderic, gave him his beautiful, clever sister, Amalafriada, for his wife, and bestowed upon the latter for her dowry, besides much treasure, the headland of Lilybæum in

Sicily, directly opposite Carthage, which was of great importance to the Vandal kingdom. He also sent him as a permanent defence against the Moors--probably against us too--a band of one thousand chosen Gothic warriors, each of whom had five brave men under him. Hilderic was scarcely king when the royal widow Amalafriada was accused of high treason against him and threatened with death.

If Justinian and Theodora did not invent this high treason, I have little knowledge of my adored rulers: I saw the smile with which they received the news from Carthage. It was the triumph of the bird-catcher who draws his snare over the fluttering prey.

Amalafriada's Goths succeeded in rescuing her from imprisonment and accompanying her on her flight. She intended to seek refuge with friendly Moors, but on her way she was overtaken and attacked by the King's two nephews with a superior force. The faithful Goths fought and fell almost to a man; the Queen was captured and murdered in prison. Since that time fierce hate has existed between the two nations; the Goths took Lilybæum back and from it cast vengeful glances at Carthage. This is King Hilderic's sole act of government! Since that time he has seen clearly that it will be best for his people to be subject to us. But he is almost an old man, and his cousin--unfortunately the rightful heir to the throne--is our worst enemy. His name is Gelimer. He must never be permitted to reign in Carthage; for he is considered the stronghold and hero, nay, the soul of the Vandal power. He first defeated the natives, the Moors, those sons of the desert who had always proved superior to the weak descendants of Genseric.

But this Gelimer--it is impossible for me to obtain from the contradictory reports a satisfactory idea of him. Or could a German really possess such contradictions of mind and character? They are all mere children, though six and a half feet tall; giants, with the souls of boys. Nearly all of them have a single trait--the love of carousing. Yet this Gelimer--well, we shall see.

Widely varying opinions of the entire Vandal nation are held here. According to some they are terrible foes in battle, like all Germans, and as Genseric's men undoubtedly were. But, from other reports, in the course of three generations under the burning sun of Africa, and especially from living among our provincials there--the most corrupt rabble who ever disgraced the Roman name--they have become effeminate, degenerate. The hero Belisarius of course despises this foe, like every other whom he knows and does not know.

The gods have intrusted to me the secret correspondence which is to secure success. I am now expecting important news from numerous Moorish chiefs; from the Vandal Governor of Sardinia; from your Ostrogothic Count in Sicily; from the richest, most influential senator in Tripolis; nay, even from one of the highest ecclesiastics--it is hard to believe--of the heretical church itself. The latter was a masterpiece. Of course he is not a Vandal, but a Roman! No matter! An Arian priest in league with us. I attribute it to our rulers. You know how I condemn their government of our empire; but where the highest statecraft is at stake--that is, to win traitors in the closest councils of other sovereigns and thus outwit the most cunning, there I bow the knee admiringly to these gods of intrigue. If only--

A letter from Belisarius summons me to the Golden House: "Bad news from Africa! The war is again extremely doubtful. The apparent traitors there betrayed Justinian, not the Vandals. This comes from such false wiles. Help, counsel me! Belisarius."

How? I thought the secret letters from Carthage were to come, by disguised messengers, only to me? And through me to the Emperor? That was his express order; I read it myself. Yet still more secret ones arrive, whose contents I learn only by chance? This is your work, O Demonodora!

CHAPTER II

The Carthage of the Vandals was still a stately, brilliant city, still the superb "Colonia Julia Carthago" which Augustus had erected according to the great Cæsar's plan in the place of the ancient city destroyed by Scipio. True, it was no longer--as it had been a century before--next to Rome and Constantinople the most populous city in the empire, but it had suffered little in the external appearance and splendor of its buildings; only the walls, by which it had been encircled as a defence against Genseric, were partially destroyed in the assault by the Vandals, and not sufficiently restored--an indication of arrogant security or careless indolence.

The ancient citadel, the Phœnician "Byrsa," now called the Capitol, still overlooked the blue sea and the harbor, doubly protected by towers and iron chains. In the squares and the broad streets of the "upper city," a motley throng surged or lounged upon the steps of Christian basilicas (which were often built out of pagan temples), around the Amphitheatre, the colonnades, the baths with their beds of flowers and groups of palms, kept green and luxuriant by the water brought from long distances over the stately arches of the aqueduct. The "lower city," built along the sea, was inhabited by the poorer people, principally harbor workmen, and was filled with shops and storehouses containing supplies for ships and sailors. The streets were narrow, all running from south to north, from the inner city to the harbor, like the alleys of modern Genoa.

The largest square in the lower city was the forum of St. Cyprian, named, for the magnificent basilica dedicated to this the most famous saint in Africa. The church occupied the whole southern side of the square, from whose northern portion a long flight of marble steps led to the harbor (even at the present day, amid the solitude and desolation of the site of noisy, populous Carthage, the huge ruins of the old sea gate still remain), while a broad street led westward to the suburb of Aklas and the Numidian Gate, and another in the southeast rose somewhat steeply to the upper city and the Capitol.

Into this great square one hot June evening a varied crowd was pouring from the western gate, the Porta Numidia,--Romans and provincials, citizens of Carthage, tradesmen and grocers, with many freedmen and slaves, moved by curiosity and delight in idleness, which attracted them to every brilliant, noisy spectacle. There were Vandals among them, too; men, women, and children, whose yellow or red hair and fair skins were in strong contrast to those of the rest of the population, though the complexions of many were somewhat bronzed by the African sun. In costume they differed from the Romans very slightly; many not at all. Among these lower classes numbers were of mixed blood, children of Vandal fathers who had married Carthaginian women. Here and there in the concourse appeared a Moor, who had come from the border of the desert to the capital to sell ivory or ostrich feathers, lion and tiger skins, or antelope horns. The men and women of noble German blood were better--that is, more eager, wealthy, and lavish--buyers than the numerous impoverished Roman senatorial families, whose once boundless wealth the government had confiscated for real or alleged high treason, or for persistent adherence to the Catholic faith. Not even a single Roman of the better class was to be seen in the noisy, shouting crowd; a priest of the orthodox religion, who on his way to a dying man could not avoid crossing the square, glided timidly into the nearest side street, fear, abhorrence, and indignation all written on his pallid face. For this exulting throng was celebrating a Vandal victory.

In front of the returning troops surged the dense masses of the Carthaginian populace, shouting, looking back, and often halting with loud acclamations. Many pressed around the Vandal warriors, begging for gifts. The latter were all mounted, many on fine, really noble steeds, descendants of the famous breed brought from Spain and crossed with the native horses. The westering sun streamed through the wide-open West Gate along the Numidian Way; the stately squadrons glittered and flashed in the vivid light which was dazzlingly reflected from the white sandy soil and the white houses. Richly, almost too brilliantly, gold and silver glittered on helmets and shields, broad armlets, sword-hilts, and scabbards, even on the mountings which fastened the lance-heads to the shafts, and, in inlaid work, on the shafts themselves. In dress, armor, and ornaments upon rider and steed the most striking hues were evidently the most popular. Scarlet, the Vandal color, prevailed; this vivid light-red was used everywhere,--on the long, fluttering cloaks, the silken kerchiefs on the helmets, which fell over the neck and shoulders to protect them from the African sun, on the gayly painted, richly gilded quivers, and even on the saddles and bridles of the horses. Among the skins which the desert animals furnished in great variety, the favorites were the spotted antelope, the dappled leopard, the striped tiger, while from the helmets nodded and waved the red plumage of the flamingo and the white feathers of the ostrich. The procession closed with several captured camels, laden with foemen's weapons, and about a hundred Moorish prisoners, men and women, who, with hands tied behind their backs, clad only in brown and white striped mantles, marched, bareheaded and barefooted, beside the towering beasts, driven forward, like them, by blows from the spears of their mounted guards.

On the steps of the basilica and the broad top of the wall of the harbor stairs, the throng of spectators was unusually dense; here people could comfortably watch the glittering train without danger from the fiery steeds.

"Who is yonder youth, the fair one?" asked a middle-aged man, with the dress and bearing of a sailor, pointing over the parapet as he turned to a gray-haired old citizen.

"Which do you mean, friend Hegelochus? They are almost all fair."

"Indeed? Well, this is the first time I have been among the Vandals! My ship dropped anchor only a few hours ago. You must show and explain everything. I mean the one yonder on the white stallion; he is carrying the narrow red banner with the golden dragon."

"Oh, that is Gibamund, 'the handsomest of the Vandals,' as the women call him. Do you see how he looks up at the windows of the palace near the Capitol? Among all the crowd gazing down from there he seeks but one."

"But"--the speaker suddenly started--"who is the other at his right,--the one on the dun horse? I almost shrank when I met his eye. He looks like the youth, only he is much older. Who is *he*?"

"That is his brother Gelimer; God bless his noble head!"

"Aha, so he is the hero of the day? I have often heard his name at home in Syracuse. So he is the conqueror of the Moors?"

"Yes, he has defeated them again, the torments. Do you hear how the Carthaginians are cheering him? We citizens, too, must thank him for having driven the robbers away from our villages and fields back to their deserts."

"I suppose he is fifty years old? His hair is very gray."

"He is not yet forty!"

"Just look, Eugenese! He has sprung from his horse. What is he doing?"

"Didn't you see? A child, a Roman boy, fell while trying to run in front of his charger. He lifted him up, and is seeking to find out whether he was hurt."

"The child wasn't harmed; it is smiling at him and seizing his glittering necklet. There--he is unfastening the chain and putting it into the little fellow's hands. He kisses him and gives him back to his mother. Hark, how the crowd is cheering him! Now he has leaped back into the saddle. He knows how to win favor."

"There you wrong him. It is his nature. He would have done the same where no eye beheld him. And he need not win the favor of the people: he has long possessed it."

"Among the Vandals?"

"Among the Romans, too; that is, the middle and lower classes. The senators, it is true, are different! Those who still live in Africa hate all who bear the name of Vandal; they have good reason for it, too. But Gelimer has a heart to feel for us; he helps wherever he can, and often opposes his own people; they are almost all violent, prone to sudden anger, and in their rage savagely cruel. I above all others have cause to thank him."

"You? Why?"

"You saw Eugenia, my daughter, before we left our house?"

"Certainly. Into what a lovely girl the frail child whom you brought from Syracuse a few years ago has blossomed!"

"I owe her life, her honor, to Gelimer. Thrasaric, the giant, the most turbulent of all the nobles, snatched her from my side here in the open street at noonday, and carried the shrieking girl away in his arms. I could not follow as swiftly as he ran. Gelimer, attracted by our screams, rushed up, and, as the savage would not release her, struck him down with a single blow and gave my terrified child back to me."

"And the ravisher?"

"He rose, laughed, shook himself, and said to Gelimer: 'You did right, Asding, and your fist is heavy.' And then since--"

"Well? You hesitate."

"Yes, just think of it; since then the Vandal, as he could not gain her by force, is suing modestly for my daughter's hand. He, the richest noble of his nation, wishes to become my son-in-law."

"Why, that is no bad outlook."

"Princess Hilda, my girl's patroness--she often sends for the child to come to her at the Capitol and pays liberally for her embroideries--Princess Hilda herself speaks in his behalf. But I hesitate; I will not force her on any account."

"Well, what does she say?"

"Oh, the Barbarian is as handsome as a picture. I almost believe--I fear--she likes him. But something holds her back. Who can read a girl's heart? Look, the leaders of the horsemen are dismounting--Gelimer too--in front of the basilica."

"Strange. He is the hero,--the square echoes with his name,--and he looks so grave, so sad."

"Yes, there again! But did you see how kindly his eyes shone as he soothed the frightened child?"

"Certainly I did. And now--"

"Yes, there it is; a black cloud suddenly seems to fall upon him. There are all sorts of rumors about it among the people. Some say he has a demon; others that he is often out of his mind. Our priests whisper that it is pangs of conscience for secret crimes. But I will never believe that of Gelimer."

"Was he always so?"

"It has grown worse within a few years. Satan--Saint Cyprian protect us--is said to have appeared to him in the solitude of the desert. Since that time he has been even more devout than before. See, his most intimate friend is greeting him at the basilica."

"Yonder priest? He is an Arian; I know it by the oblong, narrow tonsure."

"Yes," replied the Carthaginian, wrathfully, "it is Verus, the archdeacon! Curses on the traitor!" He clinched his fists.

"Traitor! Why?"

"Well--renegade. He descends from an ancient Roman senatorial family which has given the Church many a bishop. His great-uncle was Bishop Laetus of Nepte, who died a martyr. But his father, his mother, and seven brothers and sisters died under a former king amid the most cruel tortures, rather than abjure their holy Catholic religion. This man, too--he was then a youth of twenty--was tortured until he fell as if dead. When he recovered consciousness, he abjured his faith and became an Arian, a priest--the wretch!--to buy his life. Soon--for Satan has bestowed great intellectual gifts upon him--he rose from step to step, became the favorite of the Asdings, of the court, suddenly even the friend of the noble Gelimer, who had long kept him coldly and contemptuously at a distance. And the court gave him this basilica, our highest sanctuary, dedicated to the great Cyprian, which, like almost all the churches in Carthage, the heretics have wrested from us."

"But look--what is the hero doing? He is kneeling on the upper step of the church. Now he is taking off his helmet."

"He is scattering the dust of the marble stairs upon his head."

"What is he kissing? The priest's hand?"

"No, the case containing the ashes of the great saint. He is very devout and very humble. Or shall I say he humiliates himself? He shuts himself up for days with the monks to do penance by scourging."

"A strange hero of Barbarian blood!"

"The hero blood shows itself in the heat of battle. He is rising. Do you see how his helmet--now he is putting it on again--is hacked by fresh blows? One of the two black vulture wings on the crest is cut through. The strangest thing is--this warrior is also a bookworm, a delver into mystic lore; he has attended the lectures of Athenian philosophers. He is a theologian and--"

"A player on the lyre, too, apparently! See, a Vandal has handed him a small one."

"That is a harp, as they call it."

"Hark, he is touching the strings! He is singing. I can't understand."

"It is the Vandal tongue."

"He has finished. How his Germans shout! They are striking their spears on their shields. Now he is descending the steps. What? Without entering the church, as the others did?"

"Yes, I remember! He vowed, when he shed blood, to shun the saint's threshold for three days. Now the horsemen are all mounting again."

"But where are the foot soldiers?"

"Yes, that is bad--I mean for the Vandals. They have none, or scarcely any: they have grown not only so proud, but so effeminate and lazy that they disdain to serve on foot. Only the very poorest and lowest of the population will do it. Most of the foot soldiers are Moorish mercenaries, obtained for each campaign from friendly tribes."

"Ah, yes, I see Moors among the soldiers."

"Those are men from the Papua mountain. They plundered our frontiers for a long time. Gelimer attacked their camp and captured their chief Antalla's three daughters, whom he returned unharmed, without ransom. Then Antalla invited the Asding to his tent to thank him; they concluded a friendship of hospitality--the most sacred bond to the Moors--and since then they have rendered faithful service even against other Moors. The parade is over. See, the ranks are breaking. The leaders are going to the Capitol to convey to King Hilderic the report of the campaign and the booty. Look, the crowd is dispersing. Let us go too. Come back to my house; Eugenia is waiting to serve the evening meal. Come, Hegelochus."

"I am ready, most friendly host. I fear I may burden you a long time. Business with the corn-dealers is slow."

"Why are you stopping? What are you looking at?"

"I'm coming. Only I must see this Gelimer's face once more. I shall never forget those features, and all the strange, contradictory things which you have told me about him."

"That is the way with most people. He is mysterious, incomprehensible--'daimonios,' as the

Greeks say. Let us go now! Here! To the left--down the steps."

CHAPTER III

High above, on the Capitolium of the city, towered the Palatium, the royal residence of the Asdings; not a single dwelling, but a whole group of buildings. Originally planned as an acropolis, a fortress to rule the lower city and afford a view over both harbors across the sea, the encircling structures had been but slightly changed by Genseric and his successors; the palace remained a citadel and was well suited to hold the Carthaginians in check. A narrow ascent led up from the quay to a small gateway enclosed between solid walls and surmounted by a tower. This gateway opened into a large square resembling a courtyard, inclosed on all sides by the buildings belonging to the palace; the northern one, facing the sea, was occupied by the King's House, where the ruler himself lived with his family. The cellars extended deep into the rocks; they had often been used as dungeons, especially for state criminals. On the eastern side of the King's House, separated from it only by a narrow space, was the Princes' House, and opposite to this, the arsenal; the southern side, sloping toward the city, was closed by the fortress wall, its gateway and tower.

The handsomest room on the ground-floor of the Princes' House was a splendidly decorated, pillared hall. In the centre, on a table of citrus wood, stood a tall, richly gilded jug with handles, and several goblets of different forms; the dark-red wine exhaled a strong fragrance. A couch, covered with a zebra skin, was beside it, on which, clinging together in the most tender embrace, sat "the handsomest of the Vandals" and a no less beautiful young woman. The youth had laid aside his helmet, adorned with the silvery wing-feathers of the white heron; his long locks fell in waves upon his shoulders and mingled with the light golden hair of his young wife, who was eagerly trying to unclasp the heavy breast-plate; at last she let it fall clanking beside the helmet and sword-belt upon the marble floor. Then, gazing lovingly at his noble face, she stroked back, with both soft hands, the clustering locks that curled around his temples, looking radiantly into his merry, laughing eyes.

"Do I really have you with me once more? Do I hold you in my embrace?" she said in a low, tender tone, putting both arms on his shoulders and clasping her hands on his neck.

"Oh, my sweet one!" cried the warrior, snatching her to his heart and covering eyes, cheeks, and pouting lips with ardent kisses. "Oh, Hilda, my joy, my wife! How I longed for you--night and day--always!"

"It is almost forty days," she sighed.

"Quite forty. Ah, how long they seemed to me!"

"Oh, it was far easier for you! To be ever on the move with your brother, your comrades, to ride swiftly and fight gayly in the land of the foe. While I--I was forced to sit here in the women's rooms; to sit and weave and wait inactive! Oh, if I could only have been there too! To dash onward by your side upon a fiery horse, ride, fight, and at last--fall, with you. After a hero's life--a hero's death!"

She started up; her gray-blue eyes flashed with a wonderful light, and tossing back her waving hair she raised both arms enthusiastically.

Her husband gently drew her down again. "My high-hearted wife, my Hilda," he said, smiling, "with the instinct of a seer your ancestor chose for you the name of the glorious leader of the Valkyries. How much I owe old Hildebrand, the master at arms of the great King of the Goths! With the name the nature came to you. And his training and teaching probably did the rest."

Hilda nodded. "I scarcely knew my parents, they died so young. Ever since I could remember I was under the charge and protection of the white-bearded hero. In the palace at Ravenna he locked me in his apartments, keeping me jealously away from the pious Sisters, the nuns, and from the priests who educated my playmates--among them the beautiful Mataswintha. I grew up with his other foster-child, dark-haired Teja. My friend Teja taught me to play the harp, but also to hurl spears and catch them on the shield. Later, when the king, and still more his daughter, the learned Amalasintha, insisted that I must study with the women and the priests, how sullenly,"--she smiled at the remembrance,"--"how angrily the old great-grandfather questioned me in the evening about what the nuns had taught me during the day! If I had recited the proverbs and Latin hymns, the *Deus pater ingenite* or *Salve sancta parens* by Sedulius--I scarcely knew more than the beginning!"--she laughed merrily"--he shook his massive head, muttered something in his long white beard, and cried: 'Come, Hilda! Let's get out of doors. Come on the sea. There I will tell you about the ancient gods and heroes of our people.' Then he took me far, far from the crowded harbors into the solitude of a desolate, savage island, where the gulls circled and the wild swan built her nest amid the rushes; there we sat down on the sand, and, while the foaming waves rolled close to our feet, he told me tales of the past. And what tales old Hildebrand could tell! My eyes rested intently on his lips as, with my elbows propped on his knee, I gazed into his face. How his sea-gray eyes sparkled! how his white hair fluttered in the evening breeze! His voice trembled with enthusiasm; he no longer knew where he was; he saw everything

he related, or often--in disconnected words--sang. When the tale ended, he waked as if from a dream, started up and laughed, stroking my head: 'There! There! Now I've once more blown those saints, with their dull, mawkish gentleness, out of your soul, as the north wind, sweeping through the church windows, drives out the smoke of the incense.' But they had taken no firm hold," she added, smiling.

"And so you grew up half a pagan, as Gelimer says," replied her husband, raising his finger warningly, "but as a full heroine, who believes in nothing so entirely as the glory of her people."

"And in yours--and in your love," Hilda murmured tenderly, kissing him on the forehead. "Yet it is true," she added, "if you Vandals had not been the nearest kinsfolk of my Goths, I don't know whether I should have loved you--ah, no; I *must* have loved you--when, sent by Gelimer, you came to woo me. But as it is, to see you was to love you. I owe all my happiness to Gelimer! I will always remember it: it shall bind me to him when otherwise," she added slowly and thoughtfully, "many things might repel me."

"My brother desired, by this marriage, to end the hostility, bridge the gulf which had separated the two kingdoms since--since that bloody deed of Hilderic. It did not succeed! He united only us, not our nations. He is full of heavy cares and gloomy thoughts."

"Yes. I often think he must be ill," said Hilda, shaking her head.

"He?--The strongest hero in our army! He alone--not even Brother Zazo--can bend my outstretched sword-arm."

"Not ill in body,--soul-sick! But hush! Here he comes. See how sorrowful, how gloomy he looks. Is that the brow, the face, of a conqueror?"

CHAPTER IV

A tall figure appeared in the colonnade leading from the interior of the dwelling to the open doorway of the hall.

This man without helmet, breastplate, or sword-belt wore a tight-fitting dark-gray robe, destitute of color or ornament. He often paused in his slow advance as if lost in meditation, with hands clasped behind his back; his head drooped forward a little, as though burdened by anxious thought. His lofty brow was deeply furrowed; his light-brown hair and beard were thickly sprinkled with gray, which formed a strange contrast to his otherwise youthful appearance. His eyes were fixed steadily on the floor,--their color and expression were still unrecognizable,--and pausing again under the pillared arch of the entrance, he sighed heavily.

"Hail, Gelimer, victorious hero!" cried the young wife, joyously. "Take what I have had ready for you ever since your return home was announced to-day." Seizing a thick laurel wreath lying on the table before her, she eagerly raised it. A slight but expressive wave of the hand stopped her.

"Wreaths are not suited for the sinner's head," said the new-comer in a low tone, "but ashes, ashes!"

Hilda, hurt and sorrowful, laid down the garland.

"Sinner?" cried her husband, indignantly. "Why, yes; so are we all--in the eyes of the saints. But you less than others. Are we never to rejoice?"

"Let those rejoice who can!"

"Oh, brother, you too can rejoice. When the hero spirit comes, when the whirl of battle surrounds you, with loud shouts (I heard it myself and my heart exulted in your delight), you dashed before us all into the thickest throng of the Moorish riders. And you cried aloud from sheer joy when you tore the banner from the hand of the fallen bearer; you had ridden him down by the mere shock of your charger's rush."

"Ay, that was indeed beautiful!" cried Gelimer, suddenly lifting his head, while a pair of large brown eyes flashed from under long dark lashes. "Isn't the cream stallion superb? He overthrows everything. He bears victory."

"Ay, when he bears Gelimer!" exclaimed a clear voice, and a boy--scarcely beyond childhood, for the first down was appearing on his delicate rosy cheeks--a boy strongly resembling Gibamund and Gelimer glided across the threshold and rushed with outstretched arms toward the hero.

"Oh, brother, how I love you! And how I envy you! But on the next pursuit of the Moors you must take me with you, or I will go against your will." And he threw both arms around his brother's towering figure.

"Ammata, my darling, my heart's treasure," cried Gelimer, tenderly, stroking the lad's long golden locks with a loving touch, "I have brought you from the booty a little milk-white horse as swift as the wind. I thought of you the instant it was led before me. And you, fair sister-in-law, forgive me. I was unkind when I came in; I was foil of heavy cares. For I came--"

"From the King," cried a deep voice from the corridor, and a man in full armor rushed in, whose strong resemblance to the others marked him as the fourth brother. Features of noble mould, a sharp but finely modelled nose, broad brow, and yellow, fiery eyes set almost too deeply beneath arched brows were peculiar to all these royal Asdings, the descendants of the sun-god Frey.

Gelimer's glance alone was usually subdued as if veiled, dreamy as if lost in uncertainty; but when it suddenly flashed with enthusiasm or wrath its mighty glow was startling; and the narrow oval of the face, which in all was far removed from roundness, in Gelimer seemed almost too thin.

The man who had just entered was somewhat shorter than the latter, but much broader-chested and larger-limbed. His head, surrounded with short, close-curling brown hair, rested on a strong neck; the cheeks were reddened by health and robust vitality, and now by fierce anger. Although only a year younger than Gelimer, he seemed still a fiery youth beside his prematurely aged brother. In furious indignation he flung the heavy helmet, from which the crooked horns of the African bull buffalo threatened, upon the table, making the wine splash over the glasses.

"From Hilderic," he repeated, "the most ungrateful of human beings! What was the hero's reward for the new victory? Suspicion! Fear of rousing jealousy in Constantinople! The coward! My beautiful sister-in-law, you have more courage in your little finger than this King of the Vandals in his heart and his sword-hand. Give me a cup of wine to wash down my rage."

Hilda quickly sprang up, filled the goblet, and offered it to him. "Drink, brave Zazo! Hail to you and all heroes, and--"

"To hell with Hilderic!" cried the furious soldier, draining the beaker at a single draught.

"Hush, brother! What sacrilege!" exclaimed Gelimer, with a clouded brow.

"Well, for aught I care, to heaven with him! He'll suit that far better than the throne of the sea-king Genseric."

"There you give him high praise," said Gelimer.

"I don't mean it. As I stood there while he questioned you so ungraciously, I could have--But reviling him is useless. Something must be done. I remained at home this time for a good reason: it was hard enough for me to let you go forth to victory alone! But I secretly kept a sharp watch on this fox in the purple, and have discovered his tricks. Send away this pair of wedded lovers, I think they have much to say to each other alone; the child Ammata, too; and listen to my report, my suspicion, my accusation: not only against the King, but others also."

Gibamund threw his arm tenderly around his slender wife, and the boy ran out of the hall in front of them.

CHAPTER V

Gelimer sat down on the couch; Zazo stood before him, leaning on his long sword, and began,--

"Soon after you went to the field, Pudentius came from Tripolis to Carthage."

"Again?"

"Yes, he is often at the palace and talks for hours, alone with the King. Or with Euages and Hoamer, the King's nephews, our beloved cousins. The latter, arrogant blockhead, can't keep silent after wine. In a drunken revel he told the secret."

"But surely not to you?"

"No! To red-haired Thrasaric."

"The savage!"

"I don't commend his morals," cried the other, laughing. "Yet he has grown much more sedate since he is honestly trying to win the dainty Eugenia. But he never lies. And he would die for the Vandal nation; especially for you, whom he calls his tutor. You begin education with blows. In the grove of Venus--"

"The Holy Virgin, you mean," Gelimer corrected.

"If you prefer?--yes! But it does the Virgin little honor, so long as the old customs remain. So,

at a banquet in the shell grotto of that grove, Thrasaric was praising you, and said you would restore the warlike fame of the Vandals as soon as you were king, when Hoamer shouted angrily: 'Never! That will never be! Constantinople has forbidden it. Gelimer is the Emperor's foe. When my uncle dies, *I* shall be king; or the Emperor will appoint Pudentius Regent of the kingdom. So it has been discussed and settled among us.'

"That was said in a fit of drunkenness."

"Under the influence of wine--and in wine is truth, the Romans say. Just at that moment Pudentius came into the grotto. 'Aha!' called the drunken man, 'your last letter from the Emperor was worth its weight in gold. Just wait till I am King, I will reward you: you shall be the Emperor's exarch in Tripolis.'

"Pudentius was greatly startled and winked at him to keep silence, but he went on: 'No, no! that's your well-earned reward.' All this was told me by Thrasaric in the first outbreak of his wrath after he had rushed away from the banquet. But wait: there is more to come! This Pudentius--do you believe him our friend?"

"Oh, no," sighed Gelimer. "His grandparents and parents were cruelly slain by our kings because they remained true to their religion. How should the son and grandson love us?"

Zazo went close up to his brother, laid his hand heavily on his shoulder, and said slowly: "And *Verus*? Is *he* to love us? Have you forgotten how his whole family--?"

Gelimer shook his head mournfully: "Forget *that*? I?" He shuddered and closed his eyes. Then, rousing himself by a violent effort from the burden of his gloomy thoughts, he went on: "Still your firmly rooted delusion! Always this distrust of the most faithful among all who love me!"

"Oh, brother! But I will not upbraid you; your clear mind is blinded, blinded by this priest! It seems as if there were some miracle at work--"

"It *is* a miracle," interrupted Gelimer, deeply moved, raising his eyes devoutly.

"But what say you to the fact that this Pudentius, whom you, too, do not trust, is admitted to the city secretly at night--by whom? By *Verus*, your bosom friend!"

"That is not true."

"I have seen it. I will swear it to the priest's face. Oh, if only he were here now!"

"He is not far away. He told me--he was the first one of you all to greet me at the parade--that he longed to see me, he must speak to me at once. I appointed this place; as soon as the King dismissed me I would be here. Do you see? He is already coming down the colonnade."

CHAPTER VI

The tall, haggard priest who now came slowly into the hall was several years older than Gelimer. A wide, dark-brown upper garment fell in mantle-like folds from his broad shoulders: his figure, and still more his unusually striking face, produced an impression of the most tenacious will. The features, it is true, were too sharply cut to be handsome; but no one who saw them ever forgot them. Strongly marked thick black brows shaded penetrating black eyes, which, evidently by design, were always cast down; the eagle nose, the firmly closed thin lips, the sunken cheeks, the pallid complexion, whose dull lustre resembled light yellow marble, combined to give the countenance remarkable character. Lips, cheeks, and chin were smoothly shaven, and so, too, was the black hair, more thickly mingled with gray than seemed quite suited to his age,--little more than forty years. Each of his rare gestures was so slow, so measured, that it revealed the rigid self-control practised for decades, by which this impenetrable man ruled himself--and others. His voice sounded expressionless, as if from deep sadness or profound weariness, but one felt that it was repressed; it was a rare thing to meet his eyes, but they often flashed with a sudden fire, and then intense passion glowed in their depths. Nothing that passed in this man's soul was recognizable in his features; only the thin lips, firmly as he closed them, sometimes betrayed by a slight, involuntary quiver that this rigid, corpse-like face was not a death-mask.

Gelimer had started up the instant he saw the priest, and now, hurrying toward him, clasped the motionless figure, which stood with arms hanging loosely before him, ardently to his heart.

"*Verus*, my *Verus*!" he cried, "my guardian angel! And you!--*you*!--they are trying to make me distrust. Really, brother, the stars would sooner change from God's eternal order in the heavens than this man fail in his fidelity to me." He kissed him on the cheek. *Verus* remained perfectly unmoved. Zazo watched the pair wrathfully.

"He has more love, more feeling," he muttered, stroking his thick beard, "for that Roman, that alien, than for--Speak, priest, can you deny that last Sunday, after midnight, Pudentius--ah, your lips quiver--Pudentius of Tripolis was secretly admitted by you through the little door in the

eastern gate and received in your house, beside your basilica? Speak!"

Gelimer's eyes rested lovingly on his friend, and, smiling faintly, he shook his head. Verus was silent.

"Speak," Zazo repeated. "Deny it if you dare. You did not suspect that I was watching in the tower after I had relieved the guard. I had long suspected the gate-keeper; he was once a slave of Pudentius. You bought and freed him. Do you see, brother? He is silent! I will arrest him at once. We will search for secret letters his house, his chest, the altars, the sarcophagi of his church, nay, even his clothes."

Now Verus's black eyes suddenly blazed upon the bold soldier, then after a swift side-glance at Gelimer were again bent calmly on the floor.

"Or do you deny it?"

"No," fell almost inaudibly from the scarcely parted lips.

"Do you hear that, brother?"

Gelimer hastily advanced a step nearer to Verus.

"It was to tell you this that I requested an immediate interview," said the latter, quietly, turning his back on Zazo.

"That's what I call presence of mind!" cried Zazo, laughing loudly. "But how will you prove it?"

"I have brought the proof that Pudentius is a traitor," Verus went on, turning to Gelimer, without paying the slightest attention to his accuser. "Here it is."

He slowly threw back his cloak, passed his hand through the folds of his under garment, and after a short search drew from his breast a small, crumpled strip of papyrus, which he handed to Gelimer, who hurriedly unfolded it, and read,--

"In spite of your warning, we shall persist. Belisarius is perhaps already on the way. Give this to the King."

Both Vandals were startled.

"That letter?" asked Gelimer.

"Was written by Pudentius."

"To whom?"

"To me."

"Do you hear, brother?" exclaimed Zazo.

"He betrays--"

"The betrayers," Verus interrupted. "Yes, Gelimer, I have acted while you were hesitating, pondering, and this brave fool was sleeping, or--blustering. You remember, long ago I warned you that the King and his nephews were negotiating with Constantinople."

"Did he do so really, brother?" asked Zazo, eagerly.

"Long ago. And repeatedly."

Zazo shook his brown locks, angry, wondering, incredulous. But he said firmly,--

"Then forgive me, priest,--if I have really done you injustice."

"Pudentius," Verus continued, without replying, "was, I suspected, the go-between. I gained his confidence."

"That is, you deceived him--as you are perhaps deluding us," muttered Zazo.

"Silence, brother!" Gelimer commanded imperiously.

"It was not difficult to convince him. My family, like his, had by your kings--" he interrupted himself abruptly. "I expressed my anguish; I condemned your cruelty."

"With justice! Woe betide us, with justice!" groaned Gelimer, striking his brow with his clenched fist.

"I said that my friendship for you was not so strong as my resentment for all my kindred. He initiated me into the conspiracy. I was startled; for, in truth, unless God worked a miracle to blind him, the Vandal kingdom was hopelessly lost. I warned him--to gain time until your return--of the

cruel vengeance you would take upon all Romans if the insurrection should be suppressed. He hesitated, promised to consider everything again, to discuss the matter once more with the King. There--this note, brought to me by a stranger to-day in the basilica, contains the decision. Act quickly, or it may be too late."

Gelimer gazed silently into vacancy. But Zazo drew his sword and was rushing from the hall.

"Where are you going?" asked the priest, in a low tone, seizing his arm. The grasp was so firm, so powerful, that the Vandal could not shake it off.

"Where? To the King! To cut down the traitor and his allies! Then assemble the army and--Hail to King Gelimer!"

"Silence, madman!" cried the latter, startled, as if his most secret wish were revealed to him, "you will stay here! Would you add to all the sins which already burden the Vandal race--especially our generation--the crime of dethronement, regicide, the murder of a kinsman? Where is the proof of Hilderic's guilt? Was my long-cherished distrust not merely the fruit, but the pretext,--inspired by my own impatient desire for the throne? Pudentius may lie--exaggerate. Where is the proof that treason is planned?"

"Will you wait till it has succeeded?" cried Zazo, defiantly.

"No! But do not punish till it is proved."

"There speaks the Christian," said the priest, approvingly.--"But the proof must be quickly produced: this very day. Listen, I have reason to believe that Pudentius is in the city now."

"We must have him!" cried Zazo. "Where is he? With the King?"

"They do not work so openly. He steals into the palace only by night. But I know his hiding-place. In the grove of the Holy Virgin--the warm baths."

"Send me, brother! Me! I will fly!"

"Go, then," replied Gelimer, waving his hand.

"But do not kill him," the priest called after the hurrying figure.

"No, by my sword! We must have him alive." He vanished down the corridor.

"Oh, Verus!" Gelimer passionately exclaimed, "you faithful friend! Shall I owe you the rescue of my people, as well as the deliverance of my own poor life from the most horrible death?" He eagerly clasped his hand.

The priest withdrew it.

"Thank God for your own and your people's destiny, not me. I am only the tool of His will, from the hour I assumed the garb of this priesthood. But listen: to you alone dare I confide the whole truth; yonder blockhead would ruin everything by his blind impetuosity. Your life is threatened. That does not alarm the hero! Yet you must preserve it for your people. Fall if fall you must, in battle, under the sword of Belisarius" (Gelimer's eyes sparkled, and a noble enthusiasm transfigured his face), "but do not perish miserably by murder."

"Murder? Who would--?"

"The King. No, do not doubt. Pudentius told me. The nephews overruled his opposition. They know that you will baffle their plans so long as you live. You must never be permitted to become King of the Vandals."

Here the black eyes shot a swift glance, then fell again.

"We shall see!" cried Gelimer, wrathfully. "I *will* be King, and woe--"

Here he stopped suddenly. His breath came and went quickly. After a pause, repressing his vehemence, he asked humbly,--

"Is this ambition a sin, my brother?"

"You have a right to the crown," the other answered quietly. "If you should die, then, according to Genseric's law of succession, Hoamer, as the oldest male scion of the race, would follow. So they have persuaded the King to invite you on the day of your return to a secret interview in the palace--entirely alone--and there murder you."

"Impossible, my friend. I have already seen the King. He received me ungraciously, ungratefully; but," he smiled, "as you see, I am still alive."

"You went to see the King, surrounded by all the leaders of your troops fully armed. But beware that he does not summon you again alone."

"That would be strange. We discussed every subject of moment."

At that instant steps echoed in the corridor. A negro slave handed Gelimer a letter. "From the King," he said, and left the hall.

The hero tore the cord that fastened the little wax tablet, glanced at the contents, and turned pale.

It is true. Come at the tenth hour in the evening to my sleeping room, with no companion. I have a secret matter to discuss with you.

HILDERIC.

"You see--"

"No, no! I will not believe it. It may be accident. Hilderic is weak; he hates me; but he is no murderer."

"So much the better if Pudentius lied. But it is the duty of the friend to warn. Do not go there!"

"I must! I fear for myself? Does my Verus know me so little?"

"Then do not go alone. Take Zazo with you, or Gibamund."

"Impossible, against the King's command! And no one is permitted to have a private interview with the King except unarmed."

"Well, then, at least wear *under* your robe the cuirass, which will protect you from a dagger-thrust. And the short-sword? Cannot you conceal it in your sleeve or girdle?"

"Over-anxious friend!" said Gelimer, smiling. "But for your sake I will put on the cuirass."

"That is not enough for me. However, I will consider; there is one way of helping you in case of need. Yes, that will do."

"What do you mean?"

"Hush! I will pray that my thoughts may be fulfilled. You, too, my brother, pray. For you, we all, are to meet great dangers; and God alone sees the--"

Here he stopped suddenly, clasped both hands around his head, and with a hoarse cry sank upon the couch.

"Alas, Verus!" exclaimed Gelimer. "Are you faint?" Hastily seizing the mixing vessel, he sprinkled water on the insensible man's face, and rubbed his hands.

The priest opened his eyes again, and by a great effort, sat erect.

"Never mind; it is over! But the strain of this hour--was probably--too much. I will go--no, I need no support--to the basilica, to pray. Send Zazo there as soon as he returns--before you go to the King; do you hear? God grant my ardent desire!"

CHAPTER VII

TO CETHEGUS, A FRIEND.

The Vandal war has been given up, and for what pitiable reasons! You know that I have thought it far wiser for our rulers to attend to the matters immediately around us than to meddle with the Barbarians. For so long as this unbearable burden of taxation and abuse of official power continues in the Roman Empire, so long every conquest, every increase in the number of our subjects, will merely swell the list of unfortunates. Yet if Africa could be restored to the Empire, we ought not to relinquish the proud thought from sheer cowardice!

There stands the ugly word,--unhappily a true one. From cowardice? Not Theodora's. Indeed, that is not one of the faults of this delicate, otherwise womanly woman. Two years ago, when the terrible insurrection of the Greens and Blues in the Circus swept victoriously over the whole city, when Justinian despaired and wished to fly, Theodora's courage kept him in the palace, and Belisarius's fidelity saved him. But this time the blame does not rest upon the Emperor; it is the cowardice of the Roman army, or especially, the fleet. True, Justinian's zeal has cooled considerably since the failure of the crafty plan to destroy Genseric's kingdom; almost without a battle, principally by "arts,"--treachery, ordinary people term them. Hilderic, at an appointed time, was to send his whole army into the interior for a great campaign against the Moors; our fleet was to run into the unprotected harbors of Carthage, land the army, occupy the city, and make Hilderic, Hoamer, and a Senator the Emperor's three governors of the recovered province

of Africa.

But this time we crafty ones were outwitted by a brain still more subtle. Our friend from Tripolis writes that he was deceived in the Arian priest whom he believed he had won for our cause. This man, at first well disposed, afterwards became wavering, warned, dissuaded--nay, perhaps even betrayed the plan to the Vandals. So an open attack must be made. This pleased Belisarius, but not the Emperor. He hesitated.

Meanwhile--Heaven knows through whom--the rumor of the coming Vandal war spread through the court, into the city, among the soldiers and sailors; and--disgrace and shame on us--nearly all the greatest dignitaries, the generals, and also the army and the fleet were seized with terror. All remembered the last great campaign against this dreaded foe, when, two generations ago--it was under the Emperor Leo--the full strength of the whole empire was employed. The ruler of the Western Empire attacked the Vandals simultaneously in Sardinia and Tripolis. Constantinople accomplished magnificent deeds. One hundred and thirty thousand pounds of gold were used; Basiliscus, the Emperor's brother-in-law, led a hundred thousand warriors to the Carthaginian coast. All were destroyed in a single night. Genseric attacked with firebrands the triremes packed too closely together at the Promontory of Mercury, while his swift horsemen at the same time assailed the camp on the shore; fleet and army were routed in blood and flame. Even to the present day do the Prefect and the Treasurer lament the loss. "It will be just the same now as it was then. The last money in the almost empty coffers will be flung into the sea!" But the generals (except Belisarius and Narses), what heroes they are! Each fears that the Emperor will choose him. And how, even if they overcome the terrors of the ocean, is a landing to be made upon a hostile coast defended by the dreaded Germans? The soldiers, who have just returned from the Persian War, have barely tasted the joys of home. They are talking mutinously in every street; no sooner returned from the extreme East, they must be sent to the farthest West, to the Pillars of Hercules, to fight with Moors and Vandals. They were not used to sea-battles, were not trained for them, were not enlisted for the purpose, and therefore were under no obligations. The Prefect, especially, represented to the Emperor that Carthage was a hundred and fifty days' march by land from Egypt, while the sea was barred by the invincible fleet of the Vandals. "Don't meddle with this African wasp's nest," he warned him. "Or the corsair ships will ravage all our coasts and islands as they did in the days of Genseric." And this argument prevailed. The Emperor has changed his mind. How the hero Belisarius fumes and rages!

Theodora resents--in silence. But she vehemently desired this war! I am really no favorite of hers. I am far too independent, too much the master of my own thoughts, and my conscience pricks me often enough for my insincerity. She certainly has the best--that is, the best trained--conscience: it no longer disturbs her. Doubtless she smoothed down its pricks long ago. But I have repeatedly received the dainty little papyrus rolls whose seal bears a scorpion surrounded by flames,--little notes in which she earnestly urged me to the "war spirit," if I desired to retain her friendship.

CHAPTER VIII

Since I wrote this--a few days ago--new and important tidings have come from Africa. Great changes have taken place there, which perhaps may force the vacillating Emperor to go to war. What our statecraft had striven in the most eager and crafty manner to prevent has already happened in spite of this effort, perhaps in consequence of it. Gelimer is King of the Vandals!

The archdeacon Verus--all names can be mentioned now--had really spun webs against, not for us. He betrayed everything to Gelimer! Pudentius of Tripolis, who was secretly living in Carthage, was to have been seized; Verus had betrayed his hiding-place. It is remarkable, by the way, that Pudentius hastily fled from the city a short time before, on the priest's swiftest horse.

That same day a mysterious event occurred in the palace, of which nothing is known definitely except the result--for Gelimer is King of the Vandals; but the connection, the causes, are very differently told. Some say that Gelimer wanted to murder the King, others that the King tried to kill Gelimer. Others again whisper--so Pudentius writes--of a secret warning which reached the King: a stranger informed him by letter that Gelimer meant to murder him at their next private interview. The sovereign, to convince himself, must instantly summon him to one; the assassin would either refuse to come, from fear awakened by an evil conscience, or he would appear--contrary to the strict prohibition of court laws--secretly armed. Hilderic must provide himself with a coat of mail and a dagger, and have help close at hand. The King obeyed this counsel.

It is certain that he summoned Gelimer on the evening of that very day to an interview in his bedroom on the ground-floor of the palace. Gelimer came. The King embraced him, and in doing so, discovered the armor under his robe and called for help. The ruler's two nephews, Hoamer and Euages, rushed with drawn swords from the next room to kill the assassin. But at the same moment Gelimer's two brothers, whom Verus had concealed amid the shrubbery in the garden, sprang through the low windows of the ground-floor. The King and Euages were disarmed and taken prisoners; Hoamer escaped. Hastening into the courtyard of the Capitol, he called the Vandals to arms to rescue their King, who had been murderously attacked by Gelimer. The Barbarians hesitated: Hilderic was unpopular, Gelimer a great favorite, and the people did not

believe him capable of such a crime. The latter now appeared, gave the lie to his accuser, and charged Hilderic and his nephews with the attempt at assassination. To decide the question he challenged Hoamer to single combat in the presence of the whole populace, and killed him at the first blow.

The Vandals tumultuously applauded him, at once declared Hilderic deposed, and proclaimed Gelimer, who was the legal heir, their King. It was with the utmost difficulty that his intercession saved the lives of the two captives. Verus is said to have been made prothonotary and chancellor, Gelimer's chief councillor, since he saved his life! We know better, we who were betrayed, how this priest earned his reward at our expense.

But I believe that this change of ruler will compel the war. It is now a point of honor with Justinian to save or avenge his dethroned and imprisoned friend. I have already composed a wonderful letter to the "Tyrant" Gelimer which closes thus: "So, contrary to justice and duty, you are keeping your cousin, the rightful King of the Vandals, in chains, and robbing him of the crown. Replace him on the throne, or know that we will march against you, and in so doing (this sentence the Emperor of the Pandects dictated word for word)--in so doing we shall not break the compact of perpetual peace formerly concluded with Genseric, for we shall not be fighting against Genseric's lawful successor, but to avenge him." Note the legal subtlety. The Emperor is more proud of that sentence than Belisarius of his great Persian victory at Dara. If this Gelimer should actually do what we ask, the avengers of justice would be most horribly embarrassed. For we *desire* this war; that is, we wanted Africa long before the occurrence of the crime which we shall march to avenge--unless we prefer, with wise economy and caution, to remain at home.

* * * * *

We have received the Vandal's answer. A right royal reply for a Barbarian and tyrant. "The sovereign Gelimer to the sovereign Justinian "--he uses the same word, "Basileus," for Emperor and for King, the bold soldier.

"I did not seize the sceptre by violence, nor have I committed any crime against my kindred. But the Vandal people deposed Hilderic because he himself was planning evil against the Asding race, against the rightful heir to the throne, against our kingdom. The law of succession summoned me, as the oldest of the Asding family after Hilderic, to the empty throne.

"He is a praiseworthy ruler, O Justinianus, who wisely governs his own kingdom and does not interfere with foreign states. If you break the peace guarded by sacred oaths, and attack us, we shall manfully defend ourselves, and appeal to God, who punishes perjury and wrong."

Good! I like you. King Gelimer! I am glad to have our Emperor of lawyers told that he must not blow what is not burning him: a proverb which to me seems a tolerably fair embodiment of all legal wisdom. True, I have my own thoughts concerning the divine punishment of all earthly injustice.

The Barbarian's letter has highly incensed Justinian, another proof that the Barbarian is right. But I believe we shall put this answer in our pockets just as quietly as we returned to its sheath the sword we had already drawn. The Emperor inveighs loudly against the Tyrant, but the army shouts still more loudly that it will not fight. And the Empress--is silent.

CHAPTER IX

Meanwhile King Gelimer was moving forward with all his power to preparations for the threatening conflict. He found much, very much, to be done. The King, assuming the chief direction, and working wherever he was needed, had given Zazo charge of the fleet and Gibamund that of the army.

One sultry August evening he received their reports. The three brothers had met in the great throne-room and armory of the palace, into which Gelimer had now moved; the open windows afforded a magnificent view of the harbors and the sea beyond them; the north wind brought a refreshing breath from the salt tide.

This portion of the ancient citadel had been rebuilt by the Vandal kings, changed to suit the necessities of life in a German palace. The round column of the Greeks had been replaced, in imitation of the wood used in the construction of the German halls, by huge square pillars of brown and red marble, which Africa produced in the richest variety. The ceiling was wainscoted with gayly painted or burned wood, and, on both stone and timber, besides the house-mark of the Asdings--an A transfixed by an arrow--many another rune, even many a short motto, was inscribed in Gothic characters. Costly crimson silk hangings waved at the open arched windows; the walls were set with slabs of polished marble in the most varied contrast of often vivid colors, for the Barbarian taste loved bright hues. The floor was composed of polished mosaic, but it was rough and not well fitted. Genseric had simply brought whole shiploads of the brightest hues he could drag from the palaces of plundered Rome, with statues and bas-reliefs, which were put

together here with little choice.

Opposite to the side facing the sea, rose, at the summit of five steps, a stately structure, the throne of Genseric. The steps were very broad; they were intended to accommodate the King's enormous train, the Palatines and Gardings, the leaders of the thousands and hundreds, stationed according to their rank and the ruler's favor. In their rich fantastic costumes and armor, a combination of German and Roman taste, they often gathered closely around the sovereign and stood crowding together; the scarlet silk Vandal banners fluttered above them, and a golden dragon swung by a rope from the tent-like canopy of the lofty purple throne. When from this throne, at whose feet, as a symbolical tribute from conquered Moorish princes, lion and tiger skins lay piled a foot high, the mighty sea-king arose, swinging around his head with angry, threatening words the seven-lashed scourge (a gift from his friend Attila), many an envoy of the Emperor forgot the arrogant speech he had prepared.

The wonderful splendor of this hall fairly bewildered the eye; but its richest ornament was the countless number of weapons of every variety, and of every nation, principally German, Roman, and Moorish; but also from all the other coasts and islands which the sea-king's corsair ships could visit. They covered all the pillars and walls; nay, the shields and breastplates were even spread over the entire ceiling.

A strange, dazzling light now poured over all this bronze, silver, and gold, as the slanting rays of the setting sun streamed from the northwest into the hall. A broad white marble table was completely covered with parchment and papyrus rolls, containing lists of the bodies of troops, by thousands and hundreds, drawings of ships, maps of the Vandal kingdom, charts of the Bay of Gades and the Tyrrhenian Sea.

"You have accomplished more than the possible during the weeks I have been in the west, trying to bring the Vandals thence to Carthage," said the King, laying down a wax tablet on which he had been computing figures. "True, we are far, far from possessing the numbers or the strength of the ships which formerly bore 'the terror of the Vandals' to every shore. But these hundred and fifty will be amply sufficient, and more than sufficient, to defend our own coast and to prevent a landing, if behind the fleet there stands a body of foot soldiers on the shore."

"No, do not sigh, my Gibamund," cried Zazo. "Our brother knows it is no fault of yours that the army is not--cannot accomplish what--"

"Oh," exclaimed Gibamund, wrathfully, "it is all in vain! No matter what I do, they will not drill. They want to drink and bathe and carouse and ride and see the games in the Circus, indulge in everything that consumes a man's marrow in that accursed grove of Venus."

"But that abomination ended yesterday," said the King.

"Much you know about it, O Gelimer," said Zazo, shaking his head. "You have accomplished miracles since you wore this heavy crown; but to cleanse the grove of Venus--"

"Not cleanse; close!" replied the King, sternly. "It has been closed since yesterday."

"I must complain, accuse many," Gibamund went on, "especially the nobles. They refuse to fight on foot, to take part in the drill of the foot soldiers. You know how much we need them. They appeal to the privileges bestowed by weak Sovereigns; they say they are no longer obliged to enter the ranks of the foot soldiers! Hilderic permitted every Vandal to buy freedom from it, if he would hire in his place two Moorish or other mercenaries."

"I have abolished these privileges."

"Oh, yes. And during your absence there was open rebellion; blood flowed on that account in the streets of Carthage. But the worst thing is, that these effeminate nobles and the richer citizens *can* no longer fight on foot. They say--and unfortunately it is true--that they can no longer bear the weight of the heavy helmets, breastplates, shields, and spears, no longer hurl the lances which I had brought out again from Genseric's arsenal."

"They are of course required to arm themselves," said Zazo. "So why--"

"Because most have sold the ancient weapons or exchanged them for jewels, wine, dainties, or female slaves; or else for arms that are mere ornaments and toys. I allow no one to enter the army with this rubbish; and before they are properly equipped, the victory and the Empire might be lost. But it is true: they can no longer carry Genseric's armor. They would fall in a short time. They are swearing because we are now in the very hottest months."

"Are we to tell the enemy that the Vandals fight only in the winter?" cried Zazo, laughing.

"Therefore to fill the ranks of our foot soldiers I have already obtained many thousand Moorish mercenaries," the King replied. "Of course these sons of the desert, variable, impetuous, changeful, like the sands of their home, are a poor substitute for German strength. But I have gained twenty chiefs with about ten thousand men."

"Is Cabaon, the graybeard of countless years, among them?" asked Gibamund.

"No, he delays his answer."

"It is a pity. He is the most powerful of them all! And his prophetic renown extends far beyond his tribe," observed Zazo.

"Well, we shall have better assistants than the Moorish robbers," said Gibamund, consolingly. "The brave Visigoths in Spain."

"Have you yet received an answer from their king?"

"Yes and no! King Theudis is shrewd and cautious. I urged upon him earnestly (I wrote the letter myself; I did not leave it to Verus) that Constantinople was not threatening us Vandals solely; that the imperial troops could easily cross the narrow straits from Ceuta, if we were once vanquished. I offered him an alliance. He answered evasively: he must first be sure of what we could accomplish in the war."

"What does he mean by that?" cried Zazo, angrily. "I suppose he wants to wait till the end of the conflict. Whether we conquer or are vanquished, we shall no longer need him!"

"I wrote again, still more urgently. His answer will soon come."

"But the Ostrogoths?" asked Gibamund, eagerly. "What do they reply?"

"Nothing at all."

"That is bad," said Gibamund.

"I wrote to the Regent: I stated that I was innocent of Hilderic's shameful deed. I warned her against Justinian, who was threatening her no less than us; I reminded her of the close kinship of our nations--"

"You have not yet stooped to entreaties?" asked Zazo, indignantly.

"By no means. I besought nothing. I merely requested, as our just right, that the Ostrogoths at least would not aid our foes. As yet I have had no answer. But worse than the lack of allies, the most perilous thing is the utter, foolish undervaluation of the enemy among our own people," added the King.

"Yes! They say, Why should we weary ourselves with drilling and arming? The little Greeks won't dare to attack us! And if they really do come, the grandsons of Genseric will destroy the grandsons of Basiliscus just as Genseric destroyed him."

"But we are no longer Genseric's Vandals!" Gelimer lamented. "Genseric brought with him an army of heroes, brave, trained by twenty years of warfare with other Germans and with the Romans in the mountains of Spain, simple, plain in tastes, rigid in morals. He closed the houses of Roman pleasure in Carthage; he compelled all women of light fame to marry or enter convents."

"But how that suited the husbands and the other nuns is not told," replied Zazo, laughing.

"And now, to-day, our youths are as corrupt as the most profligate Romans. To the cruelty of the fathers"--the King sighed deeply--"is added the dissipation, the intemperance, the effeminate indolence of the sons. How can such a nation endure? It must succumb."

"But we Asdings," said Gibamund, drawing himself up to his full height, while his eyes sparkled and a noble look transfigured his whole face, "we are unsullied by such stains."

"What sins have we--you and we two committed," Zazo added, "that we must perish?"

Again the King sighed heavily, his brow clouded, he lowered his eyes.

"We? Do we not bear the curse which--But hush! Not a word of that! It is the last straw of my hope that I, the King, at least wear this crown without guilt. Were I obliged to accuse myself of that, woe betide me! Oh--whose is this cold hand? You, Verus? You startled me."

"He steals in noiselessly, like a serpent," Zazo muttered in his beard.

The priest--he had retained, even as chancellor, the ecclesiastical robe--had entered unobserved; how long before, no one knew. His eyes were fixed intently upon Gelimer, as he slowly withdrew the hand he had laid upon his friend's bare arm.

"Yes, my sovereign, keep this anxiety of conscience. Guard your soul from guilt. I know your nature; it would crush you."

"You shall not make my brother still more gloomy," cried Zazo, indignantly.

"Gelimer and guilt!" exclaimed Gibamund, throwing his arm around the King's neck.

"He is only too conscientious, too much given to pondering," Zazo went on. "Really, Gelimer,

you, too, are no longer like Genseric's Vandals. You are infected also; not by Roman vices, but by Roman or Greek or Christian brooding over subtle questions. To put it more courteously: gnosticism, theosophy, or mysticism? I know nothing about it, cannot even think of it. How glad I am that our father did not send me to be educated by the priests and philosophers! He soon discovered that Zazo's hard skull was fit only for the helmet, not to carry a reed behind the ear. But you! I always felt as though I were going into a dungeon when I visited you in your gloomy, high-walled monastery, in the solitude of the desert. Many, many years you dreamed away there among the books--lost."

"Not lost!" replied Gibamund. "He found time to become the chief hero of his people. On him rests the hope of the Vandals."

"On the whole House of the Asdings! We are not degenerates," answered the King. "But can a single family--even though it is the reigning one--stay the sinking of a whole nation? Uplift one that has fallen so low?"

"Hardly," said Verus, shaking his head. "For who can say of himself that he is free from sin? And," he added slowly, suddenly raising his eyes and fixing them full upon Gelimer, "the sins of the fathers--"

"Stay," exclaimed the King, groaning aloud, as if in anguish. "Not that thought now--when I must act, create, accomplish. It will paralyze me." He pressed his hand over his eyes and brow.

"Even at the present time," the priest continued, "sin is dominant everywhere among the people. It cries aloud to Heaven for vengeance. Just now I was obliged, to comfort a dying man--"

"Even as Chancellor of the Kingdom, he does not forget the duties of the priest," said Gelimer, turning to his brothers.

"To go near the southern gate. Again, from that grove devoted to every vice, there fell upon my ear the uproar, the infernal jubilee of evil revel. Those shameless songs--"

"What?" cried the King, wrathfully, striking the marble table with his clinched fist. "Do they dare? Did I not order, before my departure for Hippo, that all these games and festivals should cease? Did I not fix yesterday as the final limit, after which the grove must be cleared and all its houses closed? I sent three hundred lancers to see that my commands were obeyed. What are they doing?"

"Those who are no longer dancing and drinking are asleep, weary of carousing, full of wine, which they drank, like all who were there. I saw a little group snoring under the archway of the gate."

"I will give them a terrible awakening," cried the King. "Must sin actually devour us?"

"That grove is beyond cure," said Zazo.

"What the sword cannot do, the flames will," exclaimed the King, threateningly. "I will sweep through them like the wrath of God! Up, follow me, my brothers!" He rushed out of the room.

"Order the hundreds of horsemen to mount, Gibamund," said Zazo, as they crossed the threshold,--"the household troop, under faithful Markomer. For the Vandals no longer obey the King's word unless at the same time they see the glitter of the King's sword."

The archdeacon, muttering softly to himself and shaking his head, slowly followed the three Asdings.

CHAPTER X

The "lower city" of Carthage extended northward to the harbor, westward to the suburb of Aklas, the Numidian, and eastward to the Tripolitan suburb. Directly beyond its southern gate, covering a space more than two leagues long and a league wide, lay the oft-mentioned "Grove of Venus" or "Grove of the Holy Virgin." From the most ancient pagan times this grove was the scene of the sumptuous, sensual revels which were proverbial throughout the Roman Empire. "African" was the word used to express the acme of such orgies.

The whole coast of the bay in this neighborhood, kept moist by the damp sea-air, had originally been covered with dense woods. The larger portion had long since yielded to the growth of the city; but, by the Emperor's order, a considerable part was retained and transformed into a magnificent park, adorned with all the skill and the lavish expenditure which characterized the time of the Cæsars.

The main portion of this grove consisted of date palms. These were introduced by the Phoenicians. The palm, say the Arabs, gladly sets her feet as queen of the desert into damp sand, but lifts her head into the glow of the sun. It thrived magnificently here, and in centuries of growth the slender columns of the trunks attained a height of fifty feet; no sunbeam could

penetrate vertically through the roof of drooping leaves of those thick crowns, which rustled and nodded dreamily in the wind, wooing, inviting to sleep, to unresisting indolence, to drowsy thoughts.

But they stood sufficiently far apart to allow the light and air to enter from the sides and to permit smaller trees (dwarf palms), bushes, and flowers to grow luxuriantly beneath the shelter of the lofty crowns. Besides the palms, other noble trees had been first planted and fostered by human hands, then had increased through the peerless fertility of nature: the plane-tree, with its lustrous light bark; the pine, the cypress, and the laurel; the olive, which loves the salt breath of the sea; the pomegranate, so naturalized here that its fruit was called "the Carthaginian apple"; while figs, citrus-trees, apricots, peaches, almonds, chestnuts, pistachios, terebinths, oleanders, and myrtles,--sometimes as large trees, sometimes as shrubs,--formed, as it were, the undergrowth of the glorious palm forest.

And the skill in gardening of the Roman imperial days, which has scarcely been equalled since, aided by irrigation from the immense aqueducts, had created here, on the edge of the desert, marvels of beauty. "Desert" was a misnomer; the real desert lay much farther in the interior. First there was a thick luxuriant green turf, which, even in the hottest days of the year, had hardly a single sunburnt patch. The wind had borne the flower-seeds from the numerous beds, and now everywhere amid the grass blossoms shone in the vivid, glowing hues with which the African sun loves to paint.

The parterres of flowers which were scattered through the entire grove suffered, it is true, from a certain monotony. The variety that now adorns our gardens was absent: the rose, the narcissus, the violet, and the anemone stood almost alone; but these appeared in countless varieties, in colors artificially produced, and were often made to blossom before or after their regular season.

In this world of trees, bushes, and flowers the lavishness of the emperors (who had formerly often resided here), the munificence of the governors, and still more the endowments of wealthy citizens of Carthage had erected an immense number of buildings of every variety. For centuries patriotism, a certain sense of honor, and often vanity, boastfulness, and a desire to perpetuate a name, had induced wealthy citizens to keep themselves in remembrance by erecting structures for the public benefit, laying out pleasure-grounds, and putting up monuments. This local patriotism of the former citizens, both in its praiseworthy and its petty motives, had by no means died out. Solemn tombs separated by very narrow spaces lined both sides of the broad Street of Legions, which ran straight through the grove from north to south. Besides these there were buildings of every description, and also baths, ponds, little lakes with waterworks, marble quays, and dainty harbors for the light pleasure-boats, circus buildings, amphitheatres, stages, stadia for athletic sports, hippodromes, open colonnades, temples with all their numerous and extensive outbuildings scattered everywhere through the grounds of the whole park.

The grove had originally been dedicated to Aphrodite (Venus), therefore statues of this goddess and of Eros (Cupid) appeared most frequently in the wide grounds, though Christian zeal had shattered the heads, breasts, and noses of many such figures and broken the bow of many a Cupid. Since the reign of Constantine, most of the pagan temples had been converted into Christian oratories and churches, but by no means all; and those that had been withdrawn from the service of the pagan religion and not used for the Christian one had now for two centuries, with their special gardens, arbors, and grottoes, been the scenes of much vice, gambling, drunkenness, and matters even worse. The gods had been driven out; the demons had entered.

Among more than a hundred buildings in the grove, two near the Southern Gate of the city were specially conspicuous: the Old Circus and the Amphitheatre of Theodosius.

The Old Circus had been erected in the period of the greatest prosperity of Carthage, the whole spacious structure, with its eighty thousand seats, was planned to accommodate its great population. Now most of the rows stood empty; many of the Roman families, since the Vandal conquest, had moved away, been driven forth, exiled. The rich bronze ornaments of numerous single seats, rows, and boxes had been broken off. This was done not by the Vandals, who did not concern themselves about such trifles, but by the Roman inhabitants of the city and by the neighboring peasants; they even wrenched off and carried away the marble blocks from the buildings in the grove. The granite lower story, a double row of arches, supported the rows of marble seats, which rose from within like an amphitheatre. Outside, the Circus was surrounded by numerous entrances and outside staircases, besides niches occupied as shops, especially workshops, cookshops, taverns, and fruit booths. Here, by night and day, many evil-minded people were always lounging; from the larger ones, hidden by curtains from the eyes of the passing throng, cymbals and drums clashed, in token that, within, Syrian and Egyptian girls were performing their voluptuous dances for a few copper coins. South of the Circus was a large lake, fed with sea-water from the "Stagnum," whose whole contents could be turned into the amphitheatre directly adjoining it.

CHAPTER XI

The sultry heat of an African summer day still brooded over the whole grove, although the sun had long since sunk into the sea, and the brief twilight had passed into the darkness of night. But the full moon was already rising above the palm-trees, pouring her magical light over trees, bushes, meadows, and water; over the marble statues which gleamed fantastically out of the darkest, blackish-green masses of shrubbery; and over the buildings, which were principally of white or light-colored stone.

In the more distant portions of the grove Diana's soft silvery light ruled alone, and here deep, chaste silence reigned, interrupted only here and there by the note of some night bird. But near the gate, in the two great main buildings, and on the turf and in the gardens surrounding them, the noisy uproar of many thousands filled the air. All the instruments known at the time were playing discordantly, drowning one another. Cries of pleasure, drunkenness, even rage and angry conflict, were heard in the Roman, the Greek, the Moorish, and especially the Vandal tongue; for perhaps the largest and certainly the noisiest "guests of the grove," as the companions in these pleasures called themselves, belonged to the race of conquerors, who here gave vent to all their longing and capacity for pleasure.

Two men, wearing the German costume, were walking down the broad street to the Circus. The dress was conspicuous here, for nearly all the Vandals, except the royal family, had either exchanged the German garb, nay, even the German weapons, for Roman ones, or for convenience, effeminacy, love of finery, adopted one or another article of Roman attire. These two men, however, had German cloaks, helmets, and weapons.

"What frantic shouts! What pushing and crowding!" said the elder, a man of middle height, whose shrewd, keen eyes were closely scanning everything that was passing around him.

"And it is not the Romans who shout and roar most wildly and frenziedly, but our own dear cousins," replied the other.

"Was I not right, friend Theudigesel? Here, among the people themselves, we shall learn more, obtain better information, in a single night, than if we exchanged letters with this book-learned King for many months."

"What we see here with our own eyes is almost incredible!"

Just at that moment loud cries reached their ears from the gate behind them. Two negroes, naked except for an apron of peacock feathers about their loins, were swinging gold staves around their woolly heads, evidently trying to force a passage for a train behind them.

"Make way," they shouted constantly; "make way for the noble, Modigesel."

But they could not succeed in breaking through the crowd; their calls only attracted more curious spectators. So the eight Moors behind, who were clad, or rather *unclad*, in the same way, were compelled to set down their swaying burden, a richly gilded, half open litter. Its back was made of narrow purple cushions, framed and supported by ivory rods; white ostrich feathers and the red plumage of the flamingo nodded from the knobs of the ivory.

"Ho, my friend,"--the younger man addressed the occupant of the litter, a fair-haired Vandal about twenty-seven years old in a gleaming silk robe, richly ornamented with gold and gems,--"are the nights here always so gay?"

The noble was evidently surprised that any one should presume to accost him so unceremoniously. Listlessly opening a pair of sleepy eyes, he turned to his companion; for beside him now appeared a young woman, marvellously beautiful, though almost too fully developed, in a splendid robe, but overloaded with ornament. Her fair skin seemed to gleam with a dull yellow lustre; the expression of the perfect features, as regular as though carved by rule, yet rigid as those of the Sphinx, had absolutely no trace of mind or soul, only somewhat indolent but not yet sated sensuousness: she resembled a marvellously beautiful but very dangerous animal. So her charms exerted a power that was bewildering, oppressive, rather than winning. The Juno-like figure was not ornamented, but rather hung and laden, with gold chains, circlets, rings, and disks.

"O-oh-a-ah! I say, Astarte!" lisped her companion, in an affected whisper. He had heard from a Græco-Roman dandy in Constantinople that it was fashionable to speak too low to be understood. "Scarecrows, those two fellows, eh?" And, sighing over the exertion, he pushed up the thick chaplet of roses which had slipped down over his eyes. "Like the description of Genseric and his graybeards! Just see--ah--one has a wolfskin for a cloak. The other is carrying--in the Grove of Venus--a huge spear!--You ought to show yourselves--over yonder--in the Circus--for money, monsters!"

The younger stranger drew his sword wrathfully. "If you knew to whom you were--"

But the older man motioned him to keep silence.

"You must have come a long distance, if you ask such questions," the Vandal went on, evidently amused by the appearance of the foreigners. "It is the same always in this grove of the goddess of love. Only possibly it may be a trifle gayer to-night. The richest nobleman in Carthage

celebrates his wedding. And he has invited the whole city."

The beauty at his side raised herself a little. "Why do you waste time in talking to these rustics? Look, the lake is already shining with red light. The gondola procession is beginning. I want to see handsome Thrasaric."

And--at this name--the inanimate features brightened, the large, dark, impenetrable eyes darted an eager, searching glance into the distance, then the long lashes fell. She leaned her head back on the purple cushions; the black hair was piled up more than two hands high and clasped by five gold circlets united by light silver chains, yet the magnificent locks, thick as they were, were so stiff and coarse in texture that they resembled the hair of a horse's mane.

"Can't you content yourself for the present, Astarte, with the less handsome Modigisel?" shouted her companion, with a strength of voice that proved the affectation of his former lisping whisper. "You are growing too bold since your manumission." And he nudged her in the side with his elbow. It was probably meant for an expression of tenderness. But the Carthaginian slightly curled her upper lip, revealing only her little white incisors. It was merely a light tremor, but it recalled the huge cats of her native land, especially when at the same time, like an angry tiger, she shut her eyes and threw back her splendid round head a little, as if silently vowing future vengeance.

Modigisel had not noticed it.

"I will obey, divine mistress," he now lisped again in the most affected tone. "Forward!" Then as the poor blacks--he had adopted the fashionable tone so completely--really did not hear him at all, he now roared like a bear: "Forward, you dogs, I tell you!" striking, with a strength no one would have expected from the rose-garlanded dandy, the nearest slave a blow on the back which felled him to the ground. The man rose again without a sound, and with the seven others grasped the heavily gilded poles; the litter soon vanished in the throng.

"Did you see *her*?" asked the wearer of the wolf-skin.

"Yes. She is like a black panther, or like this country: beautiful, passionate, treacherous, and deadly. Come, Theudigisel! Let us go to the lake too. Most of the Vandals are gathering there. We shall have an opportunity to know them thoroughly. Here is a shorter foot-path, leading across the turf."

"Stay! don't stumble, my lord! What is lying there directly across the way?"

"A soldier--in full armor--a Vandal!"

"And sound asleep in the midst of all this uproar."

"He must be very drunk."

The older man pushed the prostrate figure with the handle of his spear.

"Who are you, fellow?"

"I?--I?" The startled warrior propped himself on one elbow; he was evidently trying to think. "I believe I am--Gunthamund, son of Guntharic."

"What are you doing here?"

"You see. I am on guard. What are you laughing at? I am on guard to prevent any carousing in the grove. Where are the others? Have you no wine? I am horribly thirsty." And he sank back in the tall soft grass.

"So these are the guards of the Vandals! Do you still counsel, my brave duke, as you advised,--beyond the sea?"

The other, shaking his head, followed silently. Both vanished in the throng of people who were now pressing from every direction toward the lake.

CHAPTER XII

ON the southern shore of this tree-girdled water, opposite to the little harbor, walled with marble, into which it ran at the northern end, were high board platforms hung with gay costly stuffs, erected for specially distinguished guests, who were numbered by hundreds; a balcony draped with purple silk, extending far out into the sea, was reserved for the most aristocratic spectators.

Now the soft moonlight resting on the mirrorlike surface of the lake was suddenly outshone by a broad red glare, which lasted for several minutes. As it died away, a blue, then a green light blazed up, brilliantly illuminating the groups of spectators on the shore, the white marble

buildings in the distance, the statues among the shrubbery, and especially the surface of the lake itself and the magnificent spectacle it presented.

From the harbor, behind whose walls it had hitherto remained concealed, glided a whole flotilla of boats, skiffs, vessels of every description: ten, twenty, forty vessels, fantastically shaped, sometimes as dolphins, sometimes as sharks, gigantic water birds, often as dragons, the "banner-beast" of the Vandals. Masts, yards, sails, the lofty pointed prow, as well as the broad stern, nay, even the upper part of the oar handles, were wreathed, garlanded, twined with flowers, gay, broad ribbons, even gold and silver fringes; magnificent rugs covered the whole deck, which had been finished with costly woodwork; some of them hung in the water at the stern and floated far, far behind the ships.

On the deck of every vessel, at the mast or at the stern, picturesquely posed on several steps Vandal men and youths. They were dressed in striking costumes, often copied from various nations, and beside them reclined young girls or beautiful boys. The fair or red locks of the Vandals fell on the neck of many a brown-skinned maid, and mingled with many black tresses.

Music echoed from every ship; busy slaves--white, yellow Moors, negroes--poured out unmixed wine from beautifully formed jars with handles. No matter how the vessels rocked, they bore the jars on their heads without spilling the contents, and apparently with no great exertion, often holding them with only one hand. So the dark fleet glided over the redly illumined lake.

But suddenly the centre opened and out shot, apparently moving without oars,--the slaves were concealed under the deck,--the great wedding ship, far outshining all the others in fantastic, lavish splendor. It was drawn seemingly only by eight powerful swans, fastened in pairs with small gold chains attached to collars. These chains passed under the wings of each pair, uniting them to the next. The magnificent birds, which had been carefully trained for this purpose, heeded not the uproar and light around them, but moved in calm majesty straight toward the balcony at the southern end.

On the deck, piled a foot high with crimson roses, an open arbor of natural vines had been arranged around the mast. In it lay the bridegroom, a giant nearly seven feet tall, his shining mane of red locks garlanded with vine leaves and--in violation of good taste--red roses. A panther-skin was around the upper portion of his body, a purple apron about his loins, a thyrsus staff in his huge but loosely hanging right hand. Nestling to his broad, powerful breast reclined an extremely delicate, fragile girl, scarcely beyond childhood, almost too dainty of form. Her face could not be seen; the Roman bridal veil had been fastened on the deserted Ariadne--very unsuitably. Besides, the child seemed frightened by all the uproar, timidly hiding her face under the panther-skin and on the giant's breast; true, she often with a swift, upward glance tried to meet his eyes; but he did not see it.

A nude boy about twelve years old, with golden wings on his shoulders, a bow and quiver fastened by a gold band across his back, was constantly filling an enormous goblet for the bridegroom, who seemed to think that his costume required him to drain it at once,--which diverted his attention more than was desirable from his bride. On a couch, somewhat above the bridal pair, a very beautiful girl about eighteen lay in a picturesque attitude. Her noble head, with its golden hair simply arranged in a Grecian knot, rested on the palm of her left hand. Her Hellenic outlines and Hellenic statuesque repose rendered her infinitely more noble and aristocratic than the Carthaginian Astarte. Two tame doves perched on her right shoulder; she wore a robe of white Coan gauze, which fell below the knee, but seemed intended to adorn rather than to conceal her charms. The thin silken web was held around the hips by an exquisitely wrought golden girdle half a foot wide, from which hung a purple Phœnician apron weighted with gold tassels; on her gold sandals were fastened "sea waves" made of stiff gray and white silk, which extended to the delicate ankles of the "Foam-born," and at the right and left of each one, the gleam of two large pearls was visible at a great distance.

As the ship, drawn by the swans, now came into full view of all the many thousands, the dazzling sight was greeted with deafening shouts. As soon as the vessel emerged from the dim light into the radiant glare, the Aphrodite hastily, desperately, tried to conceal herself; finding a large piece of coarse sail-cloth lying near, she wrapped it around her figure.

"How barbaric the whole thing is!" whispered, but very cautiously, one Roman to another in the harsh throat tones of the African vulgar Latin, as they stood together under the staging on the opposite side of the harbor.

"I suppose that is intended to represent Bacchus, neighbor Laurus?"

"And Ariadne."

"I like the Aphrodite."

"Yes, I believe you, friend Victor. It is the beautiful Ionian, Glauke. She was stolen from Miletus a short time ago by pirates. She is said to be the child of prosperous parents. She was sold in the harbor forum to Thrasabad, the bridegroom's brother. They say she cost as much as two country estates!"

"She is gazing very mournfully, under her drooping lashes, into the lake."

"Yet her buyer and master is said to treat her with the utmost consideration, and fairly worships her."

"I can easily believe it. She is wonderfully beautiful,--solemnly beautiful, I might say."

"But imagine this bear from Thule, this buffalo from the land of Scythia, a Dionysus!"

"With those elephant bones!"

"With that fiery-red beard, two spans wide!"

"He probably wouldn't have that and the shaggy fleece on his head cut off, if thereby he could become a god in reality."

"Yes, a Vandal noble! They think themselves greater than gods or saints."

"Yet they were only cattle-thieves and land and sea robbers."

"Just look, he has buckled his broad German sword-belt over the vine drapery about his loins."

"Perhaps for the sake of propriety," cried the other, laughing; "and actually, Dionysus is wearing a Vandal short-sword."

"The Barbarian seems to be ashamed of being a naked god."

"Then he has not yet lost *all* shame!" exclaimed a man who had also understood the cautious whisper, striding rapidly on. "Come, Theudigisel!"

"Did you understand that? It was the man with the spear. It did not sound like the Vandal tongue."

"Yes, exactly like it. That's the way they speak in Spain! I heard it in Hispalis."

"Hark, what a roaring on the ships!"

"That must be a hymenæus, Victor! The bridegroom's brother composed it. The Barbarians now write Latin and Greek verses. But they are of their stamp."

"Yes, listen, Lauras," cried the other, laughing; "you are prejudiced, as a rival! Since you failed in your leather business, you have lived by writing, O friend! Weddings, baptisms, funerals, it was all the same to you. You have even sung the praises of the Vandal victories over the Moors, and--the Lord have mercy on us!--'the brave sword of King Hilderic.' Yes, you wrote for the Barbarians even more willingly and frequently than for us Romans."

"Of course. The Barbarians know less, require less, and pay better. For the same reason, friend Victor, you too must wish, for the sake of your wine-shop, that the Vandals may remain rulers of Carthage."

"How so?"

"Why, the Barbarians know as little about good wine as they do about good verses."

"Only half hit. They probably have a tolerably fair judgment of it. But they are always so thirsty that they will enjoy and pay for sour wine too--like your sour verses. Woe betide us when we no longer have the stupid Barbarians for customers! We should be obliged, in our old age, to furnish better wine and better poetry."

"The ships will soon be here! We can see everything distinctly now. Look at the bridegroom's enormous goblet; the little Cupid can scarcely hold it; it seems familiar to me."

"Why, of course. That's surely the immense shell from the Fountain of Neptune in the Forum,--larger than a child's head!"

"Yes, it has been missing for several days. Oh, the Germans would drain the ocean if it were full of wine."

"And just see the hundred weight of gold which they have hung on poor Aphrodite."

"All stolen, plundered Roman property. She can hardly move under the weight of her jewels."

"Modesty, Victor, modesty! She has not much clothing except her jewels."

"It's not the poor girl's fault apparently. That insolent Cupid just snatched off the sailcloth and flung it into the sea. See how confused she is, how she tries to find some drapery. She is beseeching the bride, pointing to the large white silk coverlet at her feet."

"Little Ariadne is nodding; she has picked it up; now she is throwing it over Aphrodite's shoulders. How grateful she looks!"

"They are landing. I pity the poor bride. Disgrace and shame! She is the child of a freeborn Roman citizen, though of Greek origin. And the father--"

"Where is Eugenues? I do not see him on the bridal ship."

"He is probably ashamed to show himself at the sacrifice of his child. He went to Utica with his Sicilian guest on business long before the marriage, and after his return he will go with the Syracusan to Sicily. It is really like the ancient sacrifice of the maidens which the Athenians were obliged to offer to the Minotaur. He gives up Eugenia, the daintiest jewel of Carthage."

"But they say she wanted to marry him; she loved the red giant. And he is not ugly; he is really handsome."

"He is a Barbarian. Curses on the Bar--oh, pardon me, my most gracious lord! May Saint Cyprian grant you a long life!"

He had hastily thrown himself on his knees before a half-drunken Vandal, who had nearly fallen over him, and without heeding the Roman's existence had already forced his way far to the front.

"Why, Laurus! The Barbarian surely ran against you, not you against him?" said Victor, helping his countryman to his feet again.

"No matter! Our masters are quick to lay their hands on the short-sword! May Orcus swallow the whole brood!"

CHAPTER XIII

Meanwhile the ships had reached the shore: they were moored in a broad front, side by side, greeted with a loud burst of music from pipes and drums in the balcony. Instantly all flung from their lofty prows step-ladders, covered with rich rugs. Slaves scattered flowers over the stairs, down which the bridal pair and their guests now descended to the land, while, at the same moment, by similar steps the spectators descended from the platforms. The two groups now formed in a festal procession upon the shore, A handsome though somewhat effeminate-looking young Vandal, with a winged hat on his fair locks and winged shoes on his feet, hurried constantly to and fro, waving an ivory staff twined with golden serpents. He seemed to be the manager of the entertainment.

"Who is that?" asked Victor. "Probably the master of the beautiful Aphrodite. He is nodding; and she smiles at him."

"Yes, that is Thrasabad," cried Laurus, angrily, clinching his fist, yet lowering his voice timidly. "May Saint Cyprian send scorpions into his bed! A Vandal writer! He is spoiling my trade. And I am the pupil of the great Luxorius."

"Pupil? I think you were--"

"His slave, then freedman. I have covered whole ass's skins with copies of his verses."

"But not as his pupil?"

"You don't understand. The whole art of composition consists of a dozen little tricks, which are best learned by copying, because they are constantly recurring. And this Barbarian composes gratis! Of course he must be glad to have any one listen to him."

"He is leading the procession--as Mercury."

"Oh, the character just suits him. He understands how to steal. Only in doing so they kill the owners. 'Feud' is what these noble Germans call it."

"Look! he has given the signal; they are going to the Circus. Up! Let us follow."

Mercury held out his hand to Aphrodite to help her to land.

"Do I have you again?" he whispered tenderly. "I have missed you two long hours, fair one. Dearest, I love you fervently."

The girl smiled charmingly, raising her beautiful eyes to his with a grateful, even tender expression.

"That is the only reason I still live," she murmured, instantly lowering her long lashes sorrowfully.

"But so completely muffled, my Aphrodite?"

"I am not your Aphrodite; I am your Glauke."

Hand in hand with her, Thrasabad now led the procession, which, not without occasional pauses, forced its way through the staring multitude.

As soon as the Circus was reached, numerous slaves showed the guests to seats, assigned according to their rank or the regard in which they were held by the giver of the entertainment. The best were in the front row, originally intended for the Senators of Carthage; the structure on the southern side, the pulvinar, the imperial box which had been occupied by many a predecessor of Gelimer, remained empty. On the northern side, not directly opposite to the pulvinar, but considerably nearer the eastern end, the "Porta Pompæ," there were projecting boxes for the bridegroom, his most intimate friends, and his most distinguished guests. Through this gate, in the midst of the stalls and sheds for the horses and chariots,--the "oppidum" and the "carceres,"--the circensian procession passed before the beginning of the races. From this gate the course ran westward in a semi-circle. The victors made their exit through the "Porta Triumphalis." Extending the entire length from east to west, the "spina," a low wall richly adorned with small columns, dark-green marble obelisks, and numerous statuettes of victors in former races, divided the course into two parts like a barrier. At the eastern and western ends a goal "Meta" was erected, the former called the "Meta prima," the latter the "Meta secunda." The chariots drove into the arena from the southern and northern ends of the stables, through two gates in the east. Lastly, on the southern side, midway between the stables and the imperial box, partly concealed from view, was the sorrowful gate, the "Porta Libitinensis," through which the killed and wounded charioteers were borne out. The length of the course was about one hundred and ninety paces, the width one hundred and forty.

After the bustle had subsided, and the guests were all in their seats. Mercury appeared in the principal box, which contained about twelve men and women, among them Modigisel and his beautiful companion. He bowed gracefully before the bridal pair, and began,--

"Allow me, divine brother, son of Semele--"

"Listen, my little man," interrupted the bridegroom. (Mercury measured a few inches less than Bacchus, but was considerably over six feet tall.) "I believe you have had too much wine, and especially the dark red, which I drank from the 'Ocean'; in short, you share my intoxication. Our brave father's name was Thrasamer, not Semele." The poetic Vandal, with a superior smile, exchanged glances with Aphrodite, who was also in the box, and continued,--

"Allow me, before the games begin, to read my epithalamium--"

"No, no, brother," interrupted the giant, hastily. "Better, far better not! The verses are--"

"Perhaps not smooth enough? What do you know about hiatus, and--"

"Nothing at all! But the sense--so far as I understood it--you were good enough to read it aloud to me three times--"

"Five times to me," said Aphrodite, softly, with a charming smile. "I entreated him to burn the verses. They are neither beautiful nor good. So what is their use?"

"The meaning is so exaggerated," Thrasaric went on; "well, we may say shameless."

"They follow the best Roman models," said the poet, resentfully.

"Very probably. Perhaps that is the reason I was ashamed when I listened to them alone; I should not like, in the presence of these ladies--"

A shrill laugh reached his ears.

"You are laughing, Astarte?"

"Yes, handsome Thrasaric, I am laughing! You Germans are incorrigible shamefaced boys, with the limbs of giants."

The bride raised her eyes beseechingly to him. He did not see it.

"Shamefaced? I have seemed to myself very shameless. My part as a half-nude god is most distasteful to me. I shall be glad, Eugenia, when all this uproar is over."

She pressed his hand gratefully, whispering, "And to-morrow you will go with me to Hilda, won't you? She wished to congratulate me on the first day of my happiness."

"Certainly! And *her* congratulations will bring you happiness. She is the most glorious of women. She, her marriage with Gibamund, first taught me to believe once more in women, love, and the happiness of wedded life. It was she who--What do you want, little man? Oh, the games! The guests! I was forgetting everything. Go on! Give the signal! They must begin below."

Mercury stepped forward to the white marble railing of the box and waved his serpent wand twice in the air. The two gates at the right and left of the stables swung open: from the former a man, clad in blue, carrying a tuba, entered the arena; from the latter one dressed entirely in green; and two loud blasts announced the entrance of the circensian procession. In the brief

pause before the appearance of the chariots Modigisel plucked the bridegroom lightly by his panther-skin.

"Listen," he whispered, "my Astarte is fairly devouring you with her eyes. I believe she likes you far better than she does me. I suppose I ought to kill her, out of jealousy. But--ugh!--it's too hot for either jealousy or beating."

"I believe she is no longer your slave," replied Thrasaric.

"I freed her, but retained the obligation of obedience, the obsequium. Pshaw! I would kill her for that very reason, if it weren't so hot. But how would it do if we--I am tired of her, and I've taken a fancy to your slender little Eugenia, perhaps on account of the contrast--how would it do if we should--exchange?"

Thrasaric had no time to answer. The tuba blared again, and the chariots entered in a stately procession. Five of the Blues rolled slowly in from the right gate, five of the Greens from the left; the chariots themselves, the reins and trappings of the horses, and the tunics of the charioteers were respectively leek-green and light-blue. The first three chariots of each party were drawn by four horses, the usual number; but when the fourth appeared with five, and the last on both sides actually had seven steeds, loud shouts of surprise and approval rang from the upper seats, to which, though many better ones stood empty, the Vandal directors had sent the middle and lower classes of the Roman citizens.

"Just look, Victor," Laurus whispered to his neighbor. "Those are the colors of the two parties in Constantinople."

"Certainly. The Barbarians imitate everything."

"But like apes playing the flute!"

"No one should attend the Circus except in a toga."

"As we do," said Victor, complacently. "But these people!--some in coats of mail, the majority in garments as thin as spider-webs."

"Of course they will never be true residents of the south; only degenerate northern Barbarians."

"But just look: the magnificence, the lavishness. The wheels, the very felines, are silvered and then twined with blue or green ribbons."

"And the bodies of the chariots! They glisten like sapphires and emeralds."

"Where did Thrasaric get all this treasure?"

"Stolen, friend, stolen from us all. I've often told you so. But not he himself; this generation has grown almost too lazy even for stealing and robbing. It was his father Thrasamer and especially his grandfather, Thrasafred. He was Genseric's right hand. And what that means in pillaging as well as fighting cannot be imagined."

"Magnificent horses, the five reddish-brown ones! They are not African."

"Yes, but of the Spanish stock, reared in Cyrene. They are the best."

"Yes, if there is a strain of Moorish blood. You know, like the Moorish chief Cabaon's famous stallion. A Vandal is said to have him now."

"Impossible! No Moor sells such a horse."

"The procession is over; they are moving side by side, to the white rope. Now!"

"No, not yet. See, each Green and Blue is approaching the hermulæ on the right and left, to which the rope is fastened. Hark! What is Mercury shouting?"

"The prizes for the victors. Just listen: fifteen thousand sestertii, the second prize for the team of four; twenty-five thousand the first; forty thousand for the victorious five-span; and sixty thousand--that's unprecedented--for the seven."

"Look, how the seven horses harnessed to the green chariot are pawing the sand! That is Hercules, the charioteer. He has five medals already."

"But see! His opponent is the Moor Chalches. He wears seven medals. Look, he is throwing down his whip; he is challenging Hercules to drive without one, too. But he will not dare."

"Yes; he is tossing the whip on the sand. I'll bet on Hercules! I side with the Greens!" shouted Victor, excitedly.

"And I with the Blues. It ought--but stop! We--Roman citizens--betting on the games of our tyrants?"

"Oh, nonsense! you have no courage! Or no money!"

"More than you--of both! How much? Ten sestertii?"

"Twelve!"

"For aught I care. Done!"

"Look, the rope has fallen!"

"Now they are rushing forward!"

"Bravo, Green, at the first meta already--and nearest--past."

"On, Chalches! There, Blue! Forward! Hi! at the second meta Chalches was nearest."

"Faster, Hercules! Faster, you lazy snail! Keep more to the right--the right! or--O, Heaven!"

"Yes, Saint Cyprian! Triumph! There lies the proud Green! Flat on his belly, like a crushed frog! Triumph! The Blue is at the goal. Pay up, friend! Where is my money?"

"That isn't fair. I won't pay. The Blue intentionally struck the horse on the left with his pole. That's cheating!"

"What? Do you insult my color? And won't pay either?"

"Not a pebble."

"Indeed? Well, you rascal, I'll pay *you*."

A blow fell; it sounded like a slap on a fat cheek.

"Keep quiet up there, you dwellers in the clouds," shouted Mercury. "It is nothing, fair bride, except two Roman citizens cuffing each other. Friend Wandalar, go; turn them out. Both! There! Now on with the games. Carry the Green out through the Libitinensis. Is he dead? Yes. Go on. The prizes will be awarded at the end. We are in a hurry. If the King should return from Hippo before the time he named--woe betide us!"

CHAPTER XIV

"Pshaw!" said Modigisel's neighbor, a bold-looking, elderly nobleman with a haughty, aristocratic bearing. "We need not fear. We Gundings are of scarcely less ancient nobility. I do not bow my head to the Asdings. Least of all before this dissembler."

"You are right, Gundomar!" assented a younger man. "Let us defy the tyrant."

The giant Thrasaric turned his head and said very slowly but very impressively: "Listen, Gundomar and Gundobad; you are my guests but speak ill of Gelimer, and you will fare like those two Romans. So much wine has gone to my head; but nothing shall be said against Gelimer. I will not allow it. He, so full of kindness, a tyrant! What does that mean?"

"It means a usurper."

"How can you say that? He is the oldest Asding."

"After King Hilderic! And was he justly imprisoned and deposed?" asked Gundomar, doubtfully.

"Was not the whole affair a clever invention?" added Gundobad.

"Not by Gelimer! You do not mean to say that?" cried Thrasaric, threateningly.

"No! But perhaps by Verus."

"Yes; all sorts of rumors are afloat. There is said to have been a letter of warning."

"No matter. If your saintly devotee should discover this festival--"

"Then woe betide us! He would deal with you as--"

"He did at the time you wanted to wed your little bride without the aid of the priest," cried Modigisel, laughing.

"I shall be grateful to him all my life for having struck me down then! Eugenias are not to be stolen; we must woo them gently." Nodding to the young girl, he covered her little head and veil with his huge right hand and pressed it tenderly to his broad breast; a radiant glance from the

large dark antelope eyes thanked him.

But Modigisel had also discovered the charm which such an expression bestowed upon the innocent, childlike features; his gaze rested admiringly upon Eugenia. The latter raised herself and whispered in her lover's ear.

"Gladly, my violet, my little bird," replied Thrasaric. "If you have promised, you must keep your word. Go with her to the entrance, brother. To keep one's promise is more necessary than to breathe."

The bride, attended by a group of her friends, was led by Thrasabad through one of the numerous cross passages out of the Circus.

"Where is she going?" asked Modigisel, following her with ardent eyes.

"To the Catholic chapel close by, which they have made in the little temple of Vesta. She promised her father to pray there before midnight; she was forced to resign the blessing of her church at her marriage with a heretic." The bride's graceful figure now vanished through the vaulted doorway.

Modigisel began again: "Let me have your little maid, and take my big sweetheart; you will make almost a hundred pounds by the bargain. True, in this climate, one ought to choose a slender sweetheart. Is she a free Roman? Then I, too, will *marry* her. I won't stop for that."

"Keep your plump happiness, and leave me my slender one. I have by no means drunk enough from the ocean to make that exchange."

Suddenly Astarte said loudly, "She's nothing but skin and bones!" Both men started; had she understood their low whispers? Again the full lips curled slightly, revealing her sharp eye-teeth.

"And eyes! those eyes!" replied Modigisel.

"Yes, bigger than her whole face. She looks like a chicken just out of the shell!" sneered Astarte. "What is there so remarkable about her?" The beauty's round eyes glittered with a sinister light.

"A soul, Carthaginian," replied the bridegroom.

"Women have no souls," retorted Astarte, gazing calmly at him. "So one of the Fathers of the Church taught--or a philosopher. Some, instead of the soul, have water, like that pygmy. Others have fire." She paused, her breath coming quickly and heavily. Astarte was indeed beautiful at that moment, diabolically, bewitchingly beautiful; the exquisitely moulded, sphinxlike countenance was glowing with life.

"Fire," replied Thrasaric, averting his eyes from her ardent gaze,--"fire belongs to hell."

Astarte made no answer.

"Eugenia is so beautiful because she is so chaste and pure," sighed Glauke, who had heard a part of the conversation. Gazing sorrowfully after the bride, she lowered her long lashes.

"No wonder that you hold her so firmly," Modigisel now said aloud in a jeering tone. "After your attempt to abduct her failed, you besought the old grain-usurer to give you the dainty doll as honorably as any Roman fuller or baker ever wooed the daughter of his neighbor, the cobbler."

"Yes," assented Gundomar; "but he has celebrated the wedding with as much splendor as though he were wedding the daughter of an emperor."

"The splendor of the wedding is more to him than the bride," cried Gundobad, laughing.

"Certainly not," said Thrasaric, slowly. "But one thing is true: since I have known that she is--that she will be mine--the frantic longing for her--yet no--that is not true either, I love her fondly. I suppose it is the wine! The heat! And so much wine!"

"Nothing but wine can help wine," laughed Modigisel. "Here, slaves, bring Bacchus a second Oceanus."

Thrasaric instantly took a deep draught from the goblet.

"Well?" whispered Modigisel. "I will give you for make-weight to Astarte my whole fishpond full of muraense, besides the royal villa at Grasse, for--"

"I am no glutton," replied Thrasaric, indignantly.

"I will add my villa in Decimum; true, I bequeathed it to Astarte; but she will consent. Won't you?"

Astarte nodded silently. Her nostrils were quivering.

Thrasaric shook his shaggy head.

"I have more villas than I can occupy. Hark, the blast of a tuba. The races ought to begin. Here, little brother! He has gone. Horses, wine, and dice are the three greatest pleasures. I would give the salvation of my soul for the best horse in the world. But--" he took another draught, of wine--"the best horse! It has escaped me. Through my own folly! I would give ten Eugenias in exchange."

Astarte laid an ice-cold finger on Modigisel's bare arm; he looked up; she whispered something, and he nodded in pleased astonishment.

"The best horse? What is its name? And how did it escape you?"

"It is called--the Moorish name cannot be pronounced; it is all *ch!* We called it Styx. It is a three-year-old black stallion of Spanish breed, with a Moorish strain, reared in Cyrene. A short time ago, when the valiant king so eagerly began his preparations for war, the Moors were informed that we nobles needed fine horses. Among many others, Sersaon, the grandson of the old chief Cabaon, came to Carthage; he brought of all the good horses the very best."

"Yes! we know them!" the Vandals assented.

"But among the very best the pearl was Styx, the black stallion! I cannot describe him, or I should weep for rage that he escaped me. The Moor who rode him, scarcely more than a boy, said that he was not for sale. As I eagerly urged him, he asked, grinning in mockery, an impossible price, which no one in his sober senses would pay,--an unreasonable number of pounds of gold; I have forgotten how many. I laughed in his face. Then I looked again at the magnificent animal, and ordered the slave to bring the money. I placed the leather bag at once in the Moor's hand; it was in the open courtyard of my house on the Forum of Constantine. Many other horses were standing there, and several of our mounted lancers were in the saddle, inspecting them as they were led up. Then, after I had closed the bargain, I said to my brother with a sigh: 'It's a pity to pay so much money. The animal is hardly worth it.' 'It is worth more, and you shall see!' cried the insolent Moor, as he leaped on the horse and dashed out of the gate of the courtyard. But he still held the purse in his hand."

"That was too much!" said Modigisel.

"The insolence enraged us all. We followed at once,--at least twenty men,--our best horses and riders, some on the splendid Moorish steeds we had just purchased. At the corner of the street he was so near that Thrasabad hurled his spear at him, but in vain! Though at our cries people flocked from all the cross streets to stop him in the main one, there was no checking him. The guards at the southern gate heard the uproar; they sprang to close the doors, were in the act of shutting them, but the superb creature darted through like an arrow. We pursued for half an hour; by that time he had gained so much on us that we could just see him in the distance like an ostrich disappearing in the sands of the desert.

"Enraged, loudly berating the faithless Moor, we rode slowly home on our exhausted steeds. When we reached the house, there in my courtyard stood the Moor, leaning against the black horse; he had ridden in again at the western gate. Throwing the gold at my feet, he said: 'Now do you know the value of this noble animal? Keep your gold! I will not sell him.' He rode slowly and proudly away. So I lost Styx, the best horse in the world. Ha, is this a delusion? Or is it the heavy wine? Down below--in the arena--beside the other racers--"

"Stands Styx," said Astarte, quietly.

"To whom does the treasure belong?" shrieked Thrasaric, frantically.

"To me," replied Modigisel.

"Did you buy him?"

"No. In the last foray the animal was captured with some camels and several other horses."

"But not by you?" roared Thrasaric. "You were at home as usual, in Astarte's broad shadow."

"But I sent thirty mercenaries in my place; they captured the animal, tied in the Moorish camp; and what the mercenary captures--"

"Is his employer's property," said Thrasabad, who had entered the box again.

"So--this wonder--belongs to--you?" exclaimed Thrasaric, wild with envy.

"Yes, and to you as soon as you wish."

Thrasaric emptied a huge goblet of wine.

"No, no," he said; "at least not so--not by my will. She is a free woman, no slave, whom I could give away, even if I should ever desire it."

"Only resign your right to her. It will be easy--for money--to find a reason for annulling the marriage."

"She is a Catholic, he an Arian," whispered Astarte.

"Of course! That will do! And then merely let me--Gelimor cannot always strike down her abductor."

"No! Silence! Not so! But--we might throw dice! Then the dice, chance, would have decided--not I! Oh, I can, I can--think no longer! If I throw higher, each shall keep what he has; if I throw lower, I will--no, no! I will not! Let me sleep!" And overcome by the wine, in spite of the uproar around him, he dropped his huge rose-garlanded head on both arms, which lay folded on the marble front of the box.

Modigisel and Astarte exchanged significant glances.

"What do you expect to gain by it?" asked Modigisel. "He won't exchange for you; only for the horse."

"But she--that nun-faced girl--shall not have him! And my time will come later!"

"If I release you from my patronage."

"You will."

"I don't know yet."

"Oh, yes, you will," she answered coaxingly.

But even as she spoke, she again threw back her head and closed her eyes.

* * * * *

After a brief slumber the bridegroom was shaken rudely by his brother.

"Up!" cried the latter; "Eugenia has come back. Let her take her place--"

"Eugenia! I did not throw dice for her. I don't want the horse. I made no promise."

He started in terror; for Eugenia was standing before him with the Ionian; her large dark-brown eyes, whose whites had a bluish cast, were gazing searchingly, anxiously, distrustfully, into the very depths of his soul. But she said nothing; only her face was paler than usual. How much had she heard--understood? he asked himself.

Thrasabad's slave humbly made way for her.

"I thank you. Aphrodite."

"Oh, do not call me by that name of mockery and disgrace! Call me as my dear parents did at home before I was stolen,--became booty, a chattel."

"I thank you, Glauke."

"The races cannot take place," lamented Thrasabad, to whom a freedman had just brought a message.

"Why not?"

"Because no one will bet against the stallion which Modigisel entered last of all. It is Styx; you know him."

"Yes, I know him! I made no promise, did I, Modigisel?" he asked in a low, hurried tone.

"Yes, certainly! To throw the dice. Recollect yourself!"

"Impossible!"

"You said: 'If I throw higher, each shall keep what he has; if I throw lower--'"

"Oh, God! Yes! It's nothing, little one! Don't heed me."

He turned again to Modigisel, whispering, "Give me back my promise!"

"Never!"

"You can break it," sneered Astarte.

"Serpent!" he cried, raising his clinched fist, but he controlled himself; then, helpless as a bear

entangled in a net, the giant turned beseechingly to Modigisel: "Spare me!"

But the latter shook his head.

"I will withdraw the stallion from the races," he said aloud to Thrasabad. "I am satisfied with the fact that no one dares to run against him."

"Then the race can take place, but at the end of the entertainment. First, there are two surprises which I have prepared for you in another place. Come, Glauke, your hand; up, rise! Follow me, all you guests of Thrasaric, follow me to the Amphitheatre."

CHAPTER XV

Heralds, with blasts of the tuba, announced the invitation throughout the whole spacious building, and, thanks to the admirable arrangements and the great number of exits, the arena was very quickly emptied. The thousands of spectators, amid the music of flute-players, now moved in a stately procession to the neighboring Amphitheatre.

This was an oval building, the axis of its inner ellipse measuring two hundred and forty feet. The plan resembled that of the Circus, an outer wall in two stories of arches, each story adorned with statues and pillars. Here, too, from the oval arena, the rows of seats ascended in steps divided by vertical walls, separated into triangles by the stairs leading to the exits, or vomitories.

The host and his most distinguished guests were assigned places in the raised gallery on the podium directly adjoining the arena, formerly occupied by the Senators of Carthage.

The Amphitheatre had a subterranean connection with the adjacent lake. From the grated cellars, concealed by curtains, the mingled cries of various animals greeted the entering spectators. Often the snarls and yells partially died away, and a mighty, ominous howl, or rather roar, rose from the farthest cellar, dominating the voices of the smaller beasts, which sank into silence, as if from fear.

"Are you afraid, my little bird?" asked Thrasaric, who was leading his bride by the hand. "You are trembling."

"Not of the tiger," she answered.

When the seats of honor were occupied, Thrasabad again appeared before them, and, bowing, said: "The Roman emperors long ago prohibited contests between gladiators and fights between animals. But we are not Romans. True, our own kings--especially our present sovereign, King Gelimer--repeated the command--"

"If he should hear of this!" interrupted Thrasaric, in a tone of warning.

"Pshaw! He is not expected here until tomorrow morning. Even if he returns sooner--he is now staying in the Capitol; it is two full leagues distant. The noise of the festival will not reach there for a long time; and we shall not tell him to-morrow."

"And the gladiators?"

"Nor they either. Dead men do not gossip. We will keep them fighting until none are left to betray us."

"Brother, that is almost too--Roman!"

"Ah, only the Romans knew how to live; our bear-like ancestors, at the utmost, only how to die. Do you suppose I have studied merely the *verses* of the Romans? No, I boast of vying with them in their customs. Speak, Gundomar; shall we fear King Gelimer?"

"We Vandal nobles will allow ourselves to be denied nothing that gives us pleasure. Let him try to keep us away from here!"

"And at my brother's wedding an exception is permitted, nay, required. So I will feast your eyes with old Roman 'hunts' and old Roman gladiatorial combats."

Roars of applause greeted this announcement. Thrasabad disappeared to give his orders.

"It is easy to say where he obtained the animals," remarked Gundomar. "Africa is their breeding-ground. But the gladiators?"

"He told me the secret," replied Modigisel. "Some are slaves; some are Moors captured in the last expedition. The white sand of the arena will soon be stained crimson."

"How I shall rejoice!" panted Astarte, who rarely spoke. Modigisel looked at her with an expression almost of horror.

"Gladiators!" cried Thrasaric, wrathfully. "Eugenia, do you want to go away?"

"I will shut my eyes--and stay. Only let me remain with you! Do not send me from you--I beseech!"

The roll of drums was heard, and a cry of astonishment from thousands of voices filled the Amphitheatre. The arena suddenly divided, moving to the right and left, in two semi-circles which, drawn sideways, disappeared in the walls. Twenty feet below, a second space, covered with sand, appeared, and over this poured from every direction, foaming and dashing, a flood of seething water. The bottom was swiftly transformed into a lake. Then two wide gateways at the right and left opened, and toward each other swept, fully manned and equipped for battle, two stately war-ships with lofty masts. These vessels, it is true, carried no sails, for there was no wind in the walled enclosure, but they were supplied with archers and slingers.

"Aha! a naumachia! A naval battle! Capital! Glorious!" shouted the spectators.

"Look, a Byzantine trireme!"

"And a Vandal corsair ship! How the scarlet flag glows!"

"And above it, at the mast-head, the golden dragon."

"The Vandal is attacking! Where are the rowers?"

"Out of sight. They are working under the deck. But above--look, in front, on the prow, stand the crew with spears and axes uplifted!"

"See, the Byzantine is going to ram. He is dashing forward with tremendous force."

"Look at the sharp spur close to the water line!"

"But the Vandal is turning swiftly. The ship has escaped the shock. Now the spears are flying."

"There! A Roman falls on the deck. He doesn't stir."

"A second is flung overboard. He is still swimming--"

"He is throwing his arms out of the water--"

"There he sinks."

"The water around him is stained with blood," said Astarte, bending eagerly forward.

"Let me go! oh, let me go, and come with me!" pleaded Eugenia.

"Child, not now; you must stay now. I must see this," replied Thrasaric.

"Now the Vandal is alongside of the Byzantine."

"They are leaping across--our men. How their fair locks fly! Victory, victory to the Vandals!"

"Why, Thrasaric! They are only slaves in disguise."

"No matter! They bear our flag. Victory, victory to the Vandals! But look, there is a terrible hand-to-hand conflict--man to man! How the shields crash! How the axes glitter! Alas! the Vandal leader is falling! Oh, if I were only on that accursed Roman ship!"

"There! Another Vandal falls! More Romans are coming up from the lower deck. Alas! That is treachery!"

"The Romans have the superior force. Two more Vandals have fallen."

"They lured our men on board by stratagem."

"Brother! Thrasabad! Where are you?"

"On a boat over yonder, beside the two ships," cried Glauke, full of terror.

"It is no use! The Vandals are overpowered; they are leaping into the water!"

"The others on the Roman ship are bound."

"The Romans are throwing fire into our ship. It is burning!"

"The mast is blazing brightly."

"The helmsman and rowers are jumping overboard."

"Where is Thrasabad?"

Mercury again appeared in the podium.

"Look you, brother, that is a bad omen," said Thrasaric.

Thrasabad shrugged his shoulders.

"The fortune of war. I did not allow myself to interfere. No agreement was made about the result. Five Romans and twelve Vandals are dead. Away, away with the whole! Vanish, sea!"

He waved the Hermes staff; the water sank rushing into the depths, with the corpses it had swallowed. The Roman ship, amply manned and obeying her helm, succeeded, by rowing powerfully to the right, in passing through the gate by which it had entered. The empty, burning, unguided Vandal vessel was drawn into the seething, whirling funnel; it turned more and more swiftly on its own axis; the water dashed over the deck, extinguishing the flames as far as it reached them; the mast leaned farther and farther to the right, still blazing brightly. Suddenly it fell completely over on the right side and disappeared in the abyss. Gurgling, whirling, and foaming, the rest of the water followed.

"The sea has vanished!" cried Thrasabad. "Let the desert and its monsters, warring with each other, appear in its place!"

And at the height of the former flooring, far above the level of the sea, the two halves of the arena, covered with white sand, were again pushed together from the right and left. Slaves, clad only with aprons--fair-skinned ones, yellow-complexioned Moors, and negroes--appeared in countless numbers and drew back the curtains which covered the gratings of the cages containing the wild animals.

"We will present to you--" Thrasabad cried amid the breathless silence.

But his voice died away; the terrible roar, which had either ceased or been drowned during the tumult of the naval battle, again echoed through the Amphitheatre, and a huge tiger leaped with such force and fury from the back of its tolerably long cage against the grating in front that its bars bent outward, splinters of the wood in which they were imbedded were hurled into the arena.

"Brother," said Thrasaric, in a low tone, "that cage is too long. Take care! The animal has too much space to run. And the wooden floor is rotten. Are you afraid, Eugenia?"

"I am with *you*," the young bride answered quietly. "But I want to know no more about men fighting--dying. I did not look at them."

"Only at the end, little sister-in-law, a captive Moor."

"Where did you get him?" asked Modigisel.

"Hired, like most of the others, from a slave-dealer. But this one is sentenced to death."

"Why?"

"He strangled his master, who was going to have him flogged. He is a handsome, slender fellow, but very obstinate; he will name neither his tribe nor his father. The brother and heir of the murdered man offered him to me cheap for the naumachia, and if he survived--for the tiger. He could not be induced, no matter how many blows he received, to fight in the naval battle. His master was obliged to bind him hand and foot behind the scenes. Well, he will probably be compelled to fight when he stands fully armed in the arena, and we let loose the tiger; it has been kept fasting for two days."

"Oh, Thrasaric, my husband! My first entreaty--"

"I cannot help you, little bird! I promised to let him rule without interference to-day; and one's word must be kept, even though it should lead to folly and crime."

"Yes," whispered Modigisel, bending forward. "One's word must be kept. When shall we throw the dice?"

Thrasaric sprang up in fury.

"I will kill you--"

"That will be useless. Astarte knows it. Keep your word! I advise you to do it. Or to-morrow all the Vandal nobles shall know what your honor and faith are worth."

"Never! I will sooner kill the child with my own hands."

"That would be as dishonorable as if I should slay the horse from envy. Keep your word, Thrasaric; you can do nothing else."

Then a glance from Eugenia rested on Modigisel. She could not have understood anything; but

he was silent.

"But when you have her," Astarte murmured under her breath to her companion, "you will set me wholly free?"

"I don't know yet," he growled. "It doesn't look as if I should win her."

"Set me free!" Astarte repeated earnestly.

It was meant for an entreaty, but the tone conveyed so sinister a threat that the nobleman gazed wonderingly into her black eyes, in whose depths lurked an expression which made him afraid to say no. He evaded an answer by asking rudely: "What is there in the giant that attracts you as a magnet draws iron?"

"Strength," said Astarte, impressively. "He could wrap you around his left arm with his right hand."

"I was strong enough, too," replied the Vandal, gloomily. "Africa and Astarte would suck the marrow out of a Hercules."

The whispering was interrupted by Thrasabad, who now, the tiger being silent, addressed the audience: "We will have brought out to fight before you six African bears from the Atlas, with six buffaloes from the mountain Valley of Aurasia! a hippopotamus from the Nile, and a rhinoceros; an elephant and three leopards, a powerful tiger--do you hear him? Silence, Hasdrubal, till you are summoned--with a man in full armour, who has been condemned to death."

"Aha! Good! That will be splendid!" ran through the Amphitheatre.

"And lastly,--as I hope Hasdrubal will be the victor,--the tiger will fight all the survivors of the other conflicts, and a pack of twelve British dogs."

Loud shouts of delight rang through the building.

"I thank you!" replied the director of the festival. "But we cannot live by gratitude alone. Your Mercury also desires nectar and ambrosia. Before we witness any more battles, let us enjoy a light luncheon, some cool wine, and a graceful dance. What say you, my friends? Come, fair Glauke!"

Without waiting for an answer--he seemed to be tolerably sure of it, and it came in the form of still more vehement applause--he again waved his staff. The heavy stone walls, separating the podium and the higher rows of seats from the arena and the lower rows, sank and were transformed into sloping stone steps that led down to the arena, into which at the same time invisible hands lifted long tables, hung with costly draperies and set with magnificent jugs, vessels, and goblets of gold and silver, and large shallow dishes filled with choice fruit and sweet cakes. In the centre of the arena rose an altar, its three steps thickly garlanded with wreaths of flowers, the top crowned by a figure closely wrapped in white cloths. From the sides of the building a hundred Satyrs and Bacchantes flocked in, who instantly began a pantomimic dance of pursuit and flight, whose rhythm was accompanied by the noisy, stirring music of cymbals and tympani from the open, wing-like sides of the Amphitheatre. Enraged by the uproar, more and more furiously roared the Hyrcanian tiger.

CHAPTER XVI

Many of the guests--all who had been seated in the podium--descended to the arena, helped themselves from the dishes, and ate the fruit and cakes. Gayly dressed slaves carried the refreshments to others, who had remained in the rows of seats.

As soon as the barriers between the arena and the spectators were removed, the guests passed freely to and fro, sometimes down to the arena, sometimes back to their places; nay, they even mingled in the dance of the Satyrs and Bacchantes. Many of the latter were suddenly embraced by the Vandals, who swung with them in the frantic whirl.

The confusion grew more chaotic. Cheeks glowed with a deeper crimson, fair and dark locks fluttered more wildly, and the musicians were constantly obliged to play faster to keep pace with the increasing excitement of the dancers.

Thrasabad now poured the wine most freely, for he was exhausted by his exertions, and his vanity was stirred by the applause bestowed upon his arrangements for the festival. Reclining on a soft panther-skin, in front of a low drinking-table, he drained one goblet after another.

Glauke, whom he clasped with one arm, gazed anxiously at him, but dared not utter a warning.

Thrasaric noticed her expression.

"Listen, brother," he said; "take care. The director of the festival is the only one who must

remain sober. And the wine is heavy, and you know, little brother, you can't stand much because you talk too fast while you are drinking."

"There--is--no--no danger!" replied the other, already stammering the words with difficulty. "Come forth. Iris and ye gods of love!" He waved the staff; it fell from his hand and Glauke laid it by his side.

Suddenly the arched roof of the large silk tent which spanned the arena opened. A rain of flowers--principally roses and lilies--fell upon the altar, the tables, the dancers; a fragrant liquid, scarcely perceptible as a light mist, was sprinkled from invisible pipes over the arena and the seats of the spectators. All at once, breaking through a gray cloud high up at the back of the arena, appeared a sun, shedding a soft golden light.

"Helios is smiling through the shower of rain," cried Thrasabad; "so Iris is probably not far distant."

At these words the seven-striped bow, glowing magnificently in vivid colors, arched above the whole arena. A young girl, supported by golden clouds, and holding a veil of the seven hues draped gracefully about her head, flew from the right to the left high above the stage. As soon as she had vanished, the rainbow and the sun disappeared too, and while shouts of surprise still rang through the Amphitheatre, a band of charming Loves--children from four to nine years old, boys and girls--were seen floating by chains of roses from the opening of the tent to the steps of the altar. Received by slaves, who released them from the flowery fetters, they grouped themselves on the steps around the muffled figure, toward which all eyes were now directed with eager curiosity.

Then Thrasabad, still clasping Glauke, sprang from the drinking table to the altar. The Ionian had just taken a freshly filled goblet from his hand. The roars of applause which now burst forth fairly turned the vain youth's head; he staggered visibly as he stood on the highest step, dragging the struggling girl with him. "Look, brother," he called in an unsteady voice; "this is *my* wedding gift. In the senator's villa at Cirta--what is his name? He was burned because he clung obstinately to the Catholic faith. Never mind. I bought the villa from the fiscus; it stands on the foundations of a very ancient one, adorned with imperial splendor, superb mosaics, hunting scenes, with stags, hounds, noble horses, beautiful women under palm-trees! In repairing the cellar this statue was dug out from beneath broken columns; it is said to be more than five hundred years old--a gem of the best period of Greek art. So my freedman says, who understands such things, an Aphrodite. Show yourself, Queen of Paphos! I give her to you, brother."

He seized a broad-bladed knife which lay on the pedestal, cut a cord, and dropped the knife again. The covers fell; a wonderfully beautiful Aphrodite, nobly modelled in white marble, appeared.

The Loves knelt around the feet of the goddess, and twined garlands of flowers about her knees. At the same moment a dazzling white light fell from above upon the altar and the goddess, brilliantly irradiating the arena, which was usually not too brightly illumined by lamps.

The acclamation of thousands of voices burst forth still more tumultuously, the dancers whirled in swifter circles, the drums and cymbals crashed louder than ever; but the sudden increase of uproar and the vivid, dazzling light also reached the open grating of the tiger's cage. He uttered a terrible roar and sprang with a mighty leap against the bars, one of which fell noiselessly out on the soft sand. No one noticed it, for another scene was taking place around the goddess on the high steps of the altar.

"I thank you, brother," cried Thrasaric. "She is indeed the fairest woman that can be imagined."

"Yes," replied Modigisel. "What do you mean, Astarte? Are you sneering? What fault can you find there?"

"That is no woman," said the Carthaginian, icily, scarcely parting her lips; "that is only a stone. Go there, kiss it, if it seems to you more beautiful than--"

"Astarte is right," shouted Thrasabad, madly. "She is right! What use is a stone Aphrodite? A lifeless, marble-cold goddess of love! She clasps her arms forever across her bosom; she cannot open them for a blissful embrace. And what a stern dignity of expression, as though love were the most serious, deadly-earnest, sacred thing. No, marble statue, you are *not* the fairest woman! The fairest woman--far more beautiful than you--is my Aphrodite here. The fairest woman in the world is mine. You shall acknowledge it with envy! I will, I will be envied for her! You shall all confess it!"

And with surprising strength he dragged the Greek, who resisted with all her power, up beside him, swung her upon the broad pedestal of the statue, and tore wildly at the white silk coverlet which, while on the ship, Glauke had thrown over her shoulders, and the transparent Coan robe.

"Stop! Stop, beloved! Do not dishonor me before all eyes!" pleaded the girl, struggling in despair. "Stop--or by the Most High--"

But the Vandal, who had lost all self-control, laughed loudly. "Away with the envious veil!"

Once more he pulled down the coverlet and the robe. Steel flashed in the light (the Ionian had snatched the knife from the pedestal), a warm red stream sprinkled Thrasabad's face, and the slight figure, already crimsoned with blood, sank at the feet of the marble statue.

"Glauke!" cried the Vandal, suddenly sobered by the shock.

But at the same moment, outside the Amphitheatre rose in a note of menace a brazen, warlike blare, dominating the loudest swell of the music,--for the dance of Satyrs and Bacchantes was still continuing,--the blast of the Vandal horns. And from the doors, as well as from the highest seats, which afforded a view of the grove, a cry of terror from thousands of voices filled the spacious building: "The *King!* King Gelimer!"

The spectators, seized with fear, poured out of all the exits.

Thrasaric drew himself up to his full height, lifted the trembling Eugenia on his strong arm, and forced his way through the throng. The voice of the director of the festival was no longer heard. Thrasabad lay prostrate at the feet of the silent marble goddess, clasping in his arms the beautiful Glauke--lifeless.

Soon he was alone with her in the vast deserted building.

Outside--far away--rose the uproar of voices in dispute, but the silence of death reigned in the Amphitheatre; even the tiger made no sound, as if bewildered by the sudden stillness and emptiness.

It was past midnight.

A light breeze rose, stirring the silk roof of the tent, and sweeping together the roses which lay scattered over the arena.

CHAPTER XVII

Thrasaric's guests were standing in the large open square of the grove, directly in front of the Amphitheatre they had just left, most of them with the expression and bearing of children caught by their master in some forbidden act.

Thrasaric had shaken off the last vestige of intoxication.

"The King?" he murmured in a low tone. "The hero? I am ashamed of myself." He pulled at the rose-wreath on his shaggy locks.

Gundomar, sword in hand, approached him with a defiant air.

"Fear was ever a stranger to you, son of Thrasamer. Now we must defy the tyrant. Face him as we do."

But Thrasaric made no answer; he only shook his huge head, and repeated to Eugenia, whom he had placed carefully on the ground by his side: "I am ashamed in the King's presence. And my brother! My poor brother!"

"Poor Glauke!" sighed Eugenia. "But perhaps she is to be envied."

Now the Vandal horns blared again, and nearer. The King, whose approach along the straight Street of the Legions was distinctly seen from a long distance, dashed into the square, far in advance of his soldiers. Only a few slaves bearing torches had succeeded in following him; his brothers, who had summoned a troop of horsemen, were behind with them. The King checked his snorting cream-colored charger directly in front of Thrasaric and the nobles so suddenly that it reared.

"Insubordinate men! Disobedient people of the Vandals!" he shouted reproachfully. "Is this the way you obey your sovereign's command? Do you seek to draw upon your heads the wrath of Heaven? Who gave this festival? Who directed it?"

"I gave it, my King," said Thrasaric, moving a step forward. "I deeply repent it. Punish me. But spare him who at my request directed it, my brother. He has--"

"Vanished with the dead girl," interrupted Gundobad. "I wanted to appeal to him also to support with us Gundings the cause of the nobles against the King--"

"For this hour," added Gundomar, "will decide whether we shall be serfs of the Asdings or free nobles."

"Yes, I am weary of being commanded," said Modigisel.

"We are of no meaner blood than his," cried Gundobad, with a threatening glance at the King. Already a large band of kinsmen, friends, and followers, many of whom were armed, was gathering round the Gundings.

Thrasaric was stepping into their midst to try to avert the impending conflict, but he was now surrounded by throngs of his own and his brother's slaves.

"My Lord," they cried, "Thrasabad has disappeared. What shall be done? The festival--"

"Is over. Alas that it ever began!"

"But the races in the Circus opposite?"

"Will not take place! Lead the horses out! Return them to their owners."

"I will not take the stallion until after we have thrown the dice," cried Modigisel. "Ay, tremble with rage. I hold you to your word."

"And the wild beasts?" urged a freedman. "They are roaring for food."

"Leave them where they are! Feed them!"

"And the Moorish prisoner?"

He could not answer; for while the racehorses, the stallion among them, were being led from the Circus into the square between it and the Amphitheatre, loud shouts rang from the exits of the latter.

"The Moor! The captive! He has escaped! He is running away! Stop him!"

Thrasaric turned, and saw the figure of the young Moor coming toward him. He had been bound hand and foot, and though successful in breaking the rope around his ankles, he had been unable to sever the one firmly fastened about his wrists, and was greatly impeded in forcing a way through the crowd by his inability to use his hands.

"Let him go! Let him run!" ordered Thrasaric.

"No," shouted the pursuers. "He has just knocked his master down by a blow of his fist. His master commanded it! He must die! A thousand sestertii to the man who captures him."

Stones flew, and here and there a spear whizzed by.

"A thousand sestertii?" cried one Roman to another. "Friend Victor, let us forget our quarrel and earn them together."

"Done. Halves, O Laurus!"

The fugitive now darted like an arrow straight toward Thrasaric. His lithe, noble figure came nearer and nearer. Lofty wrath glowed on the finely moulded young face. Then, close beside Thrasaric, Laurus grasped at the rope hanging from the Moor's wrists. A violent jerk, the youth fell. Victor grasped his arm.

"The thousand sestertii are ours," cried Laurus, drawing the rope toward him.

"No," exclaimed Thrasaric, snatching his short-sword from its sheath. The weapon flashed through the cord. "Fly, Moor!"

The youth was instantly on his feet again; one grateful glance at the Vandal, and he was in the midst of the race-horses.

"Oh, the stallion! My stallion!" shouted Modigisel. But the Moor was already on the back of the magnificent animal. A word in its ear, the horse sprang forward, the crowd scattered shrieking, and already Styx and his rider were flying over the road to Numidia in the sheltering darkness of the night.

"The stallion," muttered Modigisel. "That will cost me the casting of the dice for the young wife."

Thrasaric gazed after the horse in amazement. "O God, I thank Thee! I will deserve it; I will atone. Come, little one. To the King! He seems to need me."

Meanwhile the nobles and their followers had pressed forward threateningly against the King, who did not yield a step.

"We will not be ruled by you," cried Gundomar.

"We will not be forbidden to enjoy the pleasures of life!" exclaimed Modigisel. "To-morrow, whether you are willing or not, I will invite my friends. We will meet again in this arena."

"No, you will not," said the King, quietly, and taking the torch from the hand of the nearest slave he rose in his stirrups, and, with a sure aim, hurled it high over the heads of the crowd into the silk tent, which instantly caught fire and blazed up brightly. Loud roars came from the cages of the wild beasts.

"Do you dare?" shrieked Gundobad. "This house is not yours. It belongs to the Vandal nation! How dare you destroy their pleasures, merely because you do not share them?"

"And why do you not share them?" added Gundomar. "Because you are no true man, no real Vandal."

"An enthusiast--no king of a race of heroes!"

"Why do you so often tremble?"

"Who knows whether some secret sin does not burden you?"

"Who knows whether your courage will not fail when danger--"

Just at that moment, drowning every other sound, a shrill shriek of horror, of mortal fear, rang from many hundred throats; a short, exulting roar could scarcely be heard through the tumult. "The tiger! The tiger is free!" rose from the arena.

And rushing thence in a dense crowd, frantic with terror, came men, women, and children, all struggling together. Everywhere they met other throngs, and, unable to go farther, jostled, pushed, stumbled, fell, and were trampled under foot.

Above them, on the first story of the Amphitheatre, directly opposite to the King, the broken chain trailing from its collar, crouched the huge tiger, lashing his flanks with his tail, his jaws wide open, hesitating between the spur of his fierce hunger and the fear of the torches and human beings. At last hunger conquered. The beast's eyes had rested upon one of the race-horses in front of the Amphitheatre, and lingered on it as though spellbound. A throng of people surged between the animal and its prey. The leap was almost beyond its powers; but greed urged on the monster and, with a low cry, it sprang over the heads of the multitude upon its chosen victim.

All the shrieking people pressed in the same direction. The horses shied; the tiger's leap fell short; he reached the ground scarcely two feet from the racer, which broke its halter and dashed away. The tiger never repeats a spring it has missed. Hasdrubal was shrinking back, as if ashamed; but as he stretched out his right fore-paw, it fell upon warm, soft, living flesh. A child, a little girl about four years old, in the gay, spangled dress of a Love, had been torn from the side of her mother and thrown down by the fugitives. There she was, lying on her face in the soft grass, the delicate rosy flesh between her head and shoulders rising above her little white dress. The tiger thrust his paw forward and held the child down by the neck--but only for an instant. Suddenly he drew back the length of his body, uttering a roar whose fury far exceeded any previous one, for an enemy advancing on foot dared to dispute possession of his prey. The great cat gathered himself to leap, the terrible leap which must overthrow any man. But before the beast could straighten himself for the bound, his adversary thrust a Vandal sword between the yawning jaws to the very hilt, and pierced the spine.

Carried down by the impetus of the blow, the man fell for a moment on the dead tiger; but he instantly sprang up, stepped back, and lifted the stupefied child from the ground.

"Gelimer! Hail to King Gelimer! Hail to the hero!" shouted the crowd. Even the Romans joined in the acclamation. "Are you unharmed, O King?" asked Thrasaric.

"As the child," said the latter, calmly, placing the little one in the arms of its weeping, trembling mother, who kissed the hem of the white royal mantle, stained with the wild beast's blood.

Gelimer wiped his sword-blade on the tiger's soft skin and thrust it into the sheath. Then he went back to his horse and stood drawn up to his full height, leaning against its shoulder, his helmeted head held proudly erect. He had retained as king the old helmet with the wings of the black vulture (they seemed now to stir in menace), and merely added Genseric's pointed crown. A look of sorrowful contempt rested on the throng; Deep silence reigned for the moment; speech failed even the boldest of the nobles.

CHAPTER XVIII

The King's brothers, at the head of their horsemen, now entered the square; they had witnessed the horrible incident from their saddles. Springing to the ground, they passionately clasped Gelimer's hands.

"What troubles you, brother?" asked Gibamund. "That is not the glance of the rescuer."

"O my brother," sighed Gelimer, "pity me! I feel a loathing for my people; and that is hard."

"Yes, for it is the best thing we possess," replied Zazo, gravely.

"On earth," answered the King, thoughtfully. "Yet is it not a sin to love even this earthly thing so ardently? All earthly possessions are but vanity. Is it not true of our people and our native land?--" He sank into a deep reverie.

"Wake, King Gelimer!" called a voice from the throng in friendly warning.

It was Thrasaric. The sudden change had roused his wonder. He, too, had turned to meet the tiger, but the King, who, from his seat on horseback, had seen the animal crouching to spring, anticipated him. Him--and another.

The older of the two foreigners had stood still, his spear poised to hurl.

"That was a good thrust, Theudigisel," he whispered. "But let us see how it will end. This King is losing the best moment."

And so it seemed. For meanwhile the nobles had somewhat recovered from their confusion, and, though no longer quite so insolently as before, but still defiantly enough, Gundomar stepped forward, saying: "You are a hero, O King! It was ungrateful to doubt it, but you are not easy to understand, yet we neither will nor can serve and obey even a hero as our ancestors, Genseric's bears, served him."

"It is neither necessary nor possible," Modigisel added. He attempted to lisp and drawl according to the Roman fashion, but, carried away by genuine emotion, soon forgot the affectation. "We are no longer Barbarians, like the comrades of the bloody sea-king. We have learned from the Romans to live and to enjoy. Spare us the heavy weapons. Ours, indisputably, securely ours, is this glorious country, where men can only revel, not toil. Pleasure, pleasure, and again pleasure is alone worth living for. When death comes, all will be over. So, as long as I live, I will kiss and drink, will not fight, and will--"

"Become a slave of Justinian," the King angrily interrupted.

"Pshaw, those little Greeks! They will not dare to attack us."

"Let them come! We will drive them pell-mell into the sea."

"Ah, if the kingdom were in peril--the Gundings know that honor calls them to the head of the wedge in every Vandal battle."

"But no war is threatening."

"No one is trying to quarrel with us."

"Only it pleases the Asdings to make it a pretext for ordering the noblest of the Vandals hither and thither like Moorish mercenaries or ready slaves."

"But we will no longer--We--"

Modigisel could not finish; the loud blast of a horn and the noise of galloping horses drowned his voice; a white figure on a dark charger was dashing forward at the head of several mounted men. Two torch-bearers were on the right and left, but could barely keep up with her; long golden locks were fluttering in the wind, and a large white mantle enveloped both horse and rider.

"That is Hilda," cried Gibamund.

"Yes, Hilda and war!" exclaimed the Princess, exultingly, instantly checking her snorting steed. Her eyes were blazing, and in her right hand she waved a parchment, crying: "War! King of the Vandals. And I--I was permitted to be the first to announce to you the fateful word which, like the brazen voices of the battle horns, summons you, all you Asdings, to victory and honor."

"She is glorious," said Thrasaric to Eugenia.

The bride nodded.

"A cloak," he went on. "She--Hilda--must not see me in this absurd, disgraceful guise. Lend me your cloak, friend Markomer."

Stripping off the panther-skin, and throwing down the thyrsus, he flung the brown cloak of the leader of the horsemen over his bare shoulders.

"How do you, a woman, come with such a message?" asked Gelimer, taking the parchment from her hand.

Hilda now sprang from the saddle into her husband's open arms. "Verus sends me. The swift-sailing ships which he expected have just run into the harbor. He intended to bring you this

letter--the first one he received--himself. But several other important ones were immediately delivered,--some from the King of the Visigoths,--which he was obliged to translate in part from cipher. So he ordered that I should be waked. 'To wake Hilda means to wake battle,' my ancestor Hildebrand taught me," she added, laughing, with sparkling eyes.

"And in truth she came dashing among us like the leader of the Valkyries," said Thrasaric, rather to himself than to Eugenia.

"Verus of course knows nothing of that," Hilda went on. "Yet he smiled strangely as he said: 'You are the right bearer of this message and my errand to the King.' I did not linger. I bring you war, and--I feel it, O King of the Vandals--certain victory; read."

Gelimer unrolled the parchment, whose seal had been broken, and motioning to a torch-bearer, read aloud:

"To Gelimer, who calls himself the King of the Vandals--"

"Who is the insolent knave?" interrupted Zazo.

"Goda, formerly Governor, now King of Sardinia."

"Goda? The scoundrel! I never trusted him," cried Zazo.

"Since, by a false accusation, you have dethroned and imprisoned King Hilderic, I refuse you allegiance, usurper. You credulous fools forgot that I am an Ostrogoth; but I never did. Almost the only one left alive in the massacre of my people, I have since thought only of vengeance. In blind confidence you gave me this governorship; but I have won the Sardinians, and shall henceforth rule this island as its sovereign. If you dare to attack me, I shall appeal, and I have received the promise of the great Emperor Justinian's protection. I would far rather serve a powerful Imperator than a Vandal tyrant.'

"Ay, this is war!" said Gelimer, gravely. "Certainly with Sardinia. Perhaps also with Constantinople, though the last letters from there spoke only of peace. Did you hear it?"--he now turned with royal dignity to the nobles. "Did you hear, you nobles and people of the Vandal race? Shall I tell the rebel, shall I write to the Emperor: 'Take and keep whatever you desire! Genseric's descendants shrink from the weight of their weapons'? Will you now continue to hold festivals in the Circus, or will you--"

"We will have war!" loudly shouted the giant Thrasaric, forcing his way swiftly through the group of nobles. "O King Gelimer, your deed, your words, the sight of this glorious woman, and that bold traitor's insolent letter have again waked in me--surely, in us all--what, alas! has slumbered far, far too long. And like the effeminate ornament of these roses,"--he snatched the wreath from his head and hurled it on the ground,--"I cast from me all the enervating, corrupting pleasures and luxuries of life. Forgive me, my King, great King and hero. I will atone. Believe me, I will make amends in battle for the wrongs I have done."

Stretching out both hands, he was bending the knee. But the King drew him to his breast:

"I thank you, my Thrasaric. This will rejoice your ancestor, the hero Thrasafrid, who now looks down upon you from heaven."

But Thrasaric, breaking from the embrace and turning to the nobles, cried: "Not I alone; I must win back all, all of you around me, to duty, to heroic deeds! Oh, if my brother were only here! Comrades, kinsmen, hear me! Will you, like me, aid the valiant King? Will you obey him? Follow him in battle loyally unto death?"

"We will! We will! To battle and death!" shouted the nobles. Modigisel's voice was louder than any of the rest. Gundomar alone hesitated a moment; then, drawing himself up to his full height, he stepped forward, saying, "I did not believe that war was threatening. I really thought it only a pretext of the over-strict King to force us from our life of pleasure to the pursuit of arms. But this Goda's insolence and the treacherous Emperor's promised aid to him are not to be borne. Now it is in truth a conflict for our kingdom. There the Gundings will stand on the shield side of the Asdings, now, as in former days and forever. King Gelimer, you are right. I was a fool. Forgive me!"

"Forgive us all," cried the nobles, surging in passionate excitement toward the King. Gelimer, deeply moved, held out both hands, which they eagerly clasped.

"Oh, Hilda," said Thrasaric, "you were waked at the right time. This is, in great measure, your work."

Before the Princess could answer, he drew Eugenia from the clump of myrtles, into which she had shyly retreated.

"Do you remember this little maid, my King? You nod? Well--I have won her for my wife. Not by force! She will say so herself; she loves me. It is hard to believe, isn't it? But she will say so herself. The priest has blessed our union in the presence of all the people. Marry us according to

your ancient royal right."

The King smiled down upon the bride. "Well, then! Let this marriage be the symbol of reconciliation, the uniting of the two nations. I will--"

But a woman's haughty figure had forced a way through the crowd to Eugenia's side; a purple mantle gleamed in the red glare of the torches. Bending to the delicate, slender girl, she whispered something in her ear. Eugenia turned pale. The woman's low, hissing tones ceased, and she pointed with outstretched arm to the Numidian road, down which the stallion had vanished.

"Oh, can it be?" moaned the bride, interrupting the King's words; she tried to move away from Thrasaric's side, but her feet faltered. She sank forward fainting.

Soft arms received her. It was Hilda, the Valkyria who had just exulted so eagerly in the thought of battle. Holding the light figure to her bosom with her left arm, she extended her right hand as if to protect her against Thrasaric, who in bewilderment wished to seize her.

"Back," she said sternly. "Back! Whatever it may be that has bowed this lily's head, she shall first lift it again upon my breast and under my protection. It was a wrong not easy to forgive to celebrate a wedding with a Eugenia here in the Grove of Venus." A withering glance wandered over Astarte, without resting upon her. "Thrasaric, decide for yourself. Are you worthy to lead this bride home now, from this place?"

The giant's powerful figure trembled; his broad chest heaved; he panted for breath, then, sighing deeply, he shook his head and buried it in the folds of his cloak.

"Eugenia shall stay with me," said Hilda, gravely, pressing a kiss on the pale brow of the reviving girl. Thrasaric cast one more glance at her, then vanished in the throng.

Modigisel rushed angrily toward Astarte.

"Serpent!" he cried with no trace of lispings. "Fiend! What did you whisper in the poor girl's ear?"

"The truth."

"No! He never really, seriously meant it. And the stallion has gone to the devil; my game is over."

"Mine is not."

"But you shall not. I am ashamed of the base trick."

"I am not," she answered with a short laugh, gazing after Thrasaric.

"Obey, slave, or--"

He raised his arm for a blow. Again she threw back her beautiful head, but now so violently that the magnificent black hair burst from the gold fillets and fell over her rounded, dazzling shoulders; she closed her eyes and this time actually gnashed her beautiful little white teeth.

The Vandal dared not strike this threatening creature.

"Just wait till we reach home. There--"

"There we will make friends again," she answered, smiling, flashing a side glance at him from her black eyes. It was open mockery. But a feeling of horror stole over him, and he shuddered as if from fear.

"But grant me, my brother and my King, the joy of punishing this Goda," cried Zazo, who had long been struggling with his impatience, and could no longer control himself. "The fleet is ready to sail; let me go. Give me only five thousand picked men--"

"We Gundings will join you," cried Gundomar.

"And I will promise to force Sardinia back to allegiance in a single battle and to bring you the traitor's head."

Gelimer hesitated. "Now? Send away the whole fleet and the flower of the foot-soldiers? Now? When the Emperor may threaten us here on the mainland at any moment? This must be considered. I must consult Verus--"

"Verus?" cried Hilda, eagerly. "I forgot to tell you. Verus bade me say to you that he advised trampling out these first sparks without delay. 'I send you, Hilda,' he said with a peculiar smile, 'because I know that you will urge and fan the flame of a swift warlike expedition.' You, O King, ought at once, before you return to the Capitol, to prepare the fleet in the harbor for departure and send it to Sardinia under Zazo."

"It is prepared," cried the latter, joyously. "For three days it has been ready to meet the Byzantines. But the nearest foe is the best one. Oh, give the command, my King."

"Did Verus counsel it?" said the latter, gravely. "Then it is advisable, is for my welfare. Then, Zazo, your wish shall be fulfilled."

"Up! to the ships! to the sea! to battle!" shouted the latter, exultingly. "Up, follow me. Vandals! Tread the decks of the fame-crowned vessels again! The sea, the ocean, was ever the heaving blue battlefield of your greatest victories. Do you feel the breath of the morning wind, the strong south-southeast? It is the fair one for Sardinia."

"The god of wishes himself, who breathes in and rules the wind, is sending it to you, descendants of Genseric. Follow it; it is the breath of victory that fills your sails. To battle! To battle! On to the sea! On to the sea! On to Sardinia!" a thousand voices shouted tumultuously. Full of passionate excitement, overflowing with warlike enthusiasm, the Vandals poured out of the Grove of Venus toward Carthage and the harbor.

The Romans gazed after them in amazement; the whole living generation had never witnessed any trace of this spirit in their luxurious, effeminate rulers.

"What do you say now, my Lord?" asked the younger stranger. "Have you not changed your opinion?"

"No."

"What? Yet you saw--" he pointed to the dead tiger.

"I saw it. I heard the war-cry of the crowd too. I am sorry for the brave King and his family. Let us go to our ship. They will all be lost together."

CHAPTER XIX

During the day following the nocturnal festival the fleet sailed out of the harbor of Carthage; it was only necessary to choose the troops intended for the campaign and to send them on board.

On the evening of this day Gibamund, Hilda, and Verus had gathered around Gelimer in the great hall of the palace, whose lofty arched windows afforded a wide view of the sea. Beside the marble table, heaped with papers, stood Gelimer, his head bowed as if by deep anxiety; his noble features expressed the gravest care.

"You sent for me, friend Verus, to listen with Gibamund to important tidings which had arrived within the few hours since Zazo left us. They must be matters of serious moment, from the expression of your face. Begin; I am prepared for everything. I have strength to bear the news."

"You will need it," replied the priest, in a hollow tone.

"But shall Hilda also?"

"Oh, let me stay, my King," pleaded the young wife, pressing closer to her husband. "I am a woman; but I can keep silence. And I wish to know and share your dangers."

Gelimer held out his hand to her. "Then brave sister-in-law! And bear with us whatever may be allotted by the stern Judge in heaven."

"Yes," Verus began, "it seems as if the wrath of Heaven indeed rested on you, King Gelimer." Gelimer shuddered.

"Chancellor," cried Gibamund, indignantly, "cease such words, such unhallowed thoughts. You are always thrusting the dagger of such sayings into the soul of the best of men. It seems as if you tortured him intentionally, fostered this delusion."

"Silence, Gibamund!" said the King, with a deep groan. "It is no delusion. It is the most terrible truth which religion, conscience, the history of the world teach; sin will be punished. And when Verus became my Chancellor, he remained my confessor. Who but he has the right and the duty to bruise my conscience and, by warning me of the wrath of God, break the defiant pride of my spirit?"

"But you need strength. King of the Vandals," cried Hilda, her eyes sparkling wrathfully, "not contrition."

Gelimer waved his hand, and Verus began:

"It is almost crushing, blow upon blow. As soon as the fleet had left the roadstead (the last sail had barely vanished from our sight), the messages of evil came. First, from the Visigoths. Simultaneously with the news from Sardinia a long, long letter from King Theudis arrived. It

contained merely the repetition in many words it came from Hispalis--that he must consider everything maturely, must test what we could do in war."

"Test from Hispalis!" muttered Gibamund.

But Verus went on: "A stranger delivered this letter at the palace soon after our fleet went out to sea. It ran as follows:--

"To King Gelimer King Theudis.

"I am writing this in the harbor of Carthage--"

"What? Impossible!" cried the three listeners.

"--which I am just leaving. I wished to see the condition of affairs with my own eyes. For three days I remained among you unrecognized. Only my brave General, Theudigisel, accompanied me in the fishing boat which bore me across the narrow arm of the sea from Calpe, and will be carrying me home again when you read this, Gelimer. You are a true king, a true hero. I saw you slay the tiger to-night; but you cannot kill the serpent of degeneration which has coiled around your people. Your guards sleep at their posts; your nobles go naked, or in women's garb. I saw them flame up at last, but it is a fire of straw. Even if they really desired to improve, they could not change in a few weeks what the slothfulness of two generations has accomplished. The punishment, the recompense, for our sins does not fail." The King sighed heavily. "Woe betide him who sought to unite his destiny to your sinking race! I offer you not alliance, but refuge. If after the battle is lost, you can escape to Spain,--and I will gladly aid you to do so,--no Justinian, no Belisarius shall reach you with us. Farewell!"

"The subterfuge of cowardice," said Gibamund, resentfully.

"This man is no coward," replied Gelimer, sadly. "He is wise. Well, then, we will fight alone."

"And invite this wise King Theudis to be our guest at our banquet to celebrate the victory!" exclaimed Hilda.

"Do not challenge Heaven by idle boasting," warned Gelimer. "But be it so. The aid of the Visigoths in the war is of less value to us than to have the Ostrogoths at least remain neutral; to have Sicily--"

"Sicily," interrupted Verus, "if war should be declared, will be the bridge over which the enemy will march into Africa."

The King's eyes opened wider in astonishment; Gibamund started up, but Hilda, turning pale, exclaimed,--

"What? My own people? The daughter of the Amalungi?"

"This letter from the Regent has just arrived; Cassiodorus composed it. I should know by the scholarly style if he had not affixed his signature. She writes that, too weak to avenge, by her own power, the blood of her father's sister and many thousand Goths, she will joyfully see the vengeance of Heaven executed by her imperial friend in Constantinople."

"The vengeance of Heaven,--retribution," Gelimer repeated in a hollow tone. "All, all, unite in that!"

"What?" cried Gibamund, in an outburst of rage. "Has the learned Cassiodorus grown childish? Justinian, the wily intriguer, an avenging angel of God! And especially that she-devil, whose name I will not utter in my pure wife's presence! That pair the avengers of God!"

"That proves nothing," Gelimer murmured, talking to himself as if lost in reverie. "The Fathers of the Church teach that God often uses evil, sinful men for His deeds of vengeance."

"A wise utterance," said the priest, nodding his head gravely.

"I cannot believe it," cried Gibamund. "Where is the sentence?" Snatching the letter from Verus's hand, he rapidly glanced through it. "Sicily shall stand open to the Byzantines,--Justinian her only real friend, her protector and gracious defender."

"Ah," cried Hilda, sorrowfully, "does the daughter of the great Theodoric write that?"

"But," Gibamund went on in astonishment, "the sentence about the vengeance of Heaven--it is not here at all--not one word of it."

"Not in the mere wording, but the meaning is there," said the priest, taking the letter again and concealing it in the folds of his robe.

The King had not noticed the incident. He was pacing up and down the spacious hall with slow, hesitating steps, talking to himself. Now he again approached the table, saying wearily: "Go on. I suppose this is not all? But the end is coming," he added, unheard by the others.

"Your messenger. King Gelimer, sent to Tripolis to bring Pudentius here to be tried before your tribunal, has returned."

"When did he arrive?"

"Within an hour."

"Without Pudentius?"

"He refuses to obey."

"What? I gave the messenger a hundred horsemen to bring the traitor by force if necessary."

"They were received with a discharge of arrows from the walls. Pudentius had locked the gates, armed the citizens; the city has forsworn its allegiance to you. The whole province of Tripolitana has also risen, probably relying upon aid from Constantinople. Pudentius called from the battlements to your messenger, 'Now Nemesis is overtaking the bloody Vandals.'"

The King made a gesture as if to ward off invisible powers assailing him.

"Nemesis?" cried Gibamund. "Yes, she will overtake--the traitor. And while such peril threatens us close at hand in Africa itself, we send our best weapon--the fleet--the flower of our army, and the hero Zazo to distant Sardinia! How could you counsel that, Verus?"

"Am I omniscient?" replied the priest, shrugging his shoulders. "I told you that the messenger returned from Tripolis only an hour ago."

"Oh, brother, brother," urged Gibamund, "give me two thousand men--no, only one thousand. I will fly to Tripolis on the wings of the wind and show the faithless wretch Nemesis as she looks in the Vandal dragon helmet."

"Not until Zazo returns," replied the King, who had drawn himself up to his full height. "We will not divide our strength still more. Zazo must come back at once! It was a grave error to send him. I wonder that I did not perceive it. But your counsel, Verus--Hush! That is not meant for a reproach. But a swift sailing ship must follow the fleet instantly to summon it back."

"Too late, my King," cried Gibamund, who had hurried to the arched window. "See how high the sea is running, and from the north! The wind has veered since we came in here, shifted from the southeast to the north. No ship can overtake the fleet which, borne by a strong south wind, has a start of many hours."

"O God," sighed Gelimer, "even Thy storms are against us. Only--" and again he drew himself up--"who knows whether we may not err in believing the peril so close at hand? Constantinople may send a small body of troops to aid Sardinia, but whether Justinian will really dare to attack us on our own soil here in Africa--"

"Oh, if he would but dare!" cried Gibamund.

Just at that moment a priest--he was a deacon from Verus's basilica--hastened in, and, bowing humbly, handed to his superior a sealed letter, saying: "This has just been brought by a swift-sailing ship from Constantinople." He bowed again and left the hall.

At the first sight of the cord fastening the papyrus Verus started so violently that neither of the three could fail to notice it as extraordinary in the man who, usually possessing almost superhuman self-control, never betrayed his emotion by a glance or even a vehement gesture.

"What fresh misfortune has happened?" cried even the brave Hilda.

"It is the sign agreed upon," said Verus, now gazing at the letter again with such icy calmness that the very transition from such agitation to such composure could not fail to perplex the witnesses afresh. But the little group were not overwhelmed with astonishment long, and waited impatiently while Verus, with a sharp dagger which he drew from the breast of his cloak, severed the brownish-red cord. The pieces, with the dainty little wax-seal fastening them, fell on the floor. Casting a single glance at the letter, the priest instantly handed it, without a word, to Gelimer. The King read--

"You will receive a visit in Africa; the grain ship has sailed. The Persian merchant is in command."

"This was the agreement between me and my spy in Constantinople: the brownish-red cord means that war is certain; 'visit' is landing; 'grain ship' is the fleet; 'the Persian merchant' is Belisarius."

"Ah, that sounds like a war-song," cried Hilda.

"Welcome, Belisarius," cried Gibamund, grasping his sword.

The King threw the letter on the table. His expression was grave but calm: "Had this paper

been in my hand only a day, only a few hours earlier, all would have been different. I thank you, Verus, that you obtained the news today, at least."

An almost imperceptible smile--did it mean pride? or was it flattered vanity?--flickered over the priest's pallid, bloodless lips. "I have old connections in Constantinople; since this danger threatened I have eagerly fostered them."

"Well, then," said the King, "let them come! The decision, the certainty, exerts a soothing, beneficial influence after the long period of suspense. Now there will be work, military work, which always does me good; it prevents pondering, thinking."

"Yes, let them come," cried Gibamund; "they break into our country like robbers, and we will resist them as if they were robbers. What right has the Emperor to interfere with the succession to the Vandal throne? Right is on our side; God and victory will also be with us."

"Yes, right is on our side," said the King. "That is my best, my sole support. God defends the right. He punishes wrong; so He will. He must, be with us."

This praise of justice, and this joyous confidence in their own cause seemed by no means to please the priest. With a gloomy frown on his brow he raised his sharp, penetrating voice, fixing his eyes threateningly on Gelimer,--

"Justice? Who is just in the eyes of God? The Lord finds sin where we see none. And He punishes not only present--"

At these words the King relapsed into his former mood; his eyes lost the bright sparkle of resolution. But Verus could not finish. A loud noise of voices in angry dispute rose in the corridor leading to the hall.

CHAPTER XX

"I know those tones," said Gelimer, anxiously, turning toward the entrance.

"Yes; it is our boy," cried Gibamund. "He seems very angry."

Even as he spoke young Ammata rushed in, dragging with him by his short hair and the open neck of his robe a lad considerably larger, clad in a richly ornamented tunic, who struggled vainly as the other jerked him with both hands through the entrance, which was closed only by a curtain. The dark eyes, clear-cut features, and round, short head of Ammata's foe indicated his Roman lineage.

"What is it, Ammata?"

"What has happened, Publius Pudentius?"

"No, no! I won't let you go," shouted the Vandal prince. "You shall repeat it in the presence of the King! And the King shall give you the lie! Listen, brother! We were playing in the vestibule; we were wrestling together. I threw him. He rose angrily, and, grinding his teeth, said, 'That doesn't count. The devil, the demon of your race, helped you.'"

"'Who?' I asked.

"'Why, that Genseric, the son of Orcus. You Asdings boast of your descent from pagan gods; but these, so the priest taught us, were demons. That is the reason of his luck, his victories.'"

"I laughed, but he went on: 'He said so himself. Once, when Genseric left the harbor of Carthage on his corsair ship and the helmsman asked where he should turn the prow, the wicked tyrant answered: "Let us drift with the wind and waves toward whomsoever God's anger is directed against."' Is that true, brother?"

"Yes, it is true!" retorted the young Roman. "And it is also true that Genseric was as cruel as a demon to the defenceless and the prisoners. From rage because he was defeated in an attack upon Taenarus he landed at Zacynthus, dragged away as captives five hundred noble men and women, and, when out at sea, ordered them the whole five hundred--to be hacked into pieces from the feet upward, and flung into the waves."

"Brother, surely this is not true?" cried Ammata, pushing back his waving locks from his flushed face. "What? You are silent? You turn away? You cannot--"

"No, he cannot deny it," cried Pudentius, defiantly. "Do you see how pale he turns? Genseric was a demon. You have all sprung from hell. He and his successors have committed horrible deeds of cruelty upon us Romans, us Catholics! But wait! It will not remain unpunished. As surely as there is a God in Heaven! This curse of sin rests upon you. What do the Scriptures say? 'I will visit the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.'"

A hollow groan escaped the lips of the King. He tottered, sank upon the couch, and covered his face with the folds of his purple mantle. Ammata gazed at him in terror. Hilda hastily pushed him and the young Roman away.

"Go!" she whispered. "Make friends with each other; you must stop quarrelling. What have you boys to do with such things? Make friends, I say." Ammata held out his right hand pleasantly; the Roman clasped it slowly, angrily.

"Look," said Ammata, stooping, "how lucky!" He lifted from the floor the bit of brownish-red cord, to which the little wax seal hung.

"Yes, indeed," exclaimed Pudentius, in surprise; "the same seal that Verus would not give us for our collection of seals and impressions."

"It is very odd,--a scorpion surrounded by flames."

"Last week, when I saw the open letter lying on his table with the seal and cord, how I begged him for it!"

"He struck my fingers when I seized it."

"I wondered why it should be so valuable."

"And to-day we find it thrown away, on the floor."

"He might have given it to us, then, after the letter was opened."

"He do a kind act? He looks as though he came straight from the nether world."

"Come, let us go."

The two lads left the hall together, apparently friends again. But for how long a time? No one had heard their whispered conversation.

Gibamund bent over his brother.

"Gelimer," he cried sorrowfully, "rouse yourself! Calm yourself! How can the words of a child--"

"Oh, it is true, all too true! It is the torture of my life. It is the worm boring into my brain. Even the children perceive it, utter it! God, the terrible God of vengeance, will visit the sins of our fathers upon us all,--on our whole nation, especially on Genseric's race. We are cursed for the guilt of our ancestors. And on the Day of Judgment, even from the depths of the sea, accusers will rise against us. When the Son of Man returns in the clouds of Heaven, when the summons is heard: 'Earth, open thy heights! mighty ocean, give up thy dead!' those mutilated forms will bear witness against us."

"No, no, thrice no!" cried Gibamund. "Verus, do not stand there with folded arms, so cold, so silent. You see how your friend, your priestly charge, is suffering. You, the shepherd of his soul, help him! Take his delusion from him. Tell him God is a God of Mercy, and every man suffers for his own sins only."

But the priest answered gloomily: "I cannot tell the King that he is wrong. You, Prince, talk like a youth, like a layman, like a German, almost like a pagan. King Gelimer, a mature man, has acquired the ecclesiastical wisdom of the Fathers of the Church and the secular knowledge of the philosophers. And he is a devout Christian. God is a terrible avenger of sin. Gelimer is right, and you are wrong."

"Then I will praise the folly of my youth."

"And I my paganism!" said Hilda. "They make me happy."

"The King's (or your) Sacred Wisdom makes him miserable."

"It might paralyze his strength!"

"Had he not inherited such unusual vigor from his much-despised ancestors."

"And with it the curse of their sins," said Gelimer to himself.

"We might consider," said Verus, slowly, "whether it would not be wise to cast into prison, with the other captives, this Publius Pudentius, the son of Pudentius the rebel, whom he could not take with him in his hasty flight."

"The lad? Why?" asked Hilda, reproachfully.

"With shrewd caution, your former kings reared the sons of aristocratic Romans at their courts, in the palace," Verus went on quietly, "apparently to do honor to their fathers; really as hostages for their fidelity."

"Shall Gelimer the Good visit the father's guilt on the innocent son, like your terrible God?" cried Gibamund.

"That I would never do," said Gelimer.

"The traitor knew it," replied Verus. "He calculated on your mildness; that is why he dares to rebel while his son is in your hands."

"Let all these boys go in peace to their families."

"That will not do. They are old enough, and have seen enough of our preparations and our weak points to do us serious injury if they should talk of them to our foes. They must remain in the city, in the palace. I will leave you now; my work summons me."

"One thing more, my Verus. It grieves me that I could not extort from Zazo before his departure a consent which I have long striven to win from him."

"What do you mean?" asked Hilda.

"I can guess," said Gibamund.

"It concerns the prisoners in the dungeons of the citadel. When, against the entreaties of the whole nation and Zazo's urgency especially, Gelimer protected the lives of Hilderic and Euages, changing the sentence of death pronounced by the Council of the Nation to imprisonment, he was obliged to promise Zazo that at least he would never liberate the prisoners without his consent."

"I wished to release them now. But Zazo has my promise, and he could not be softened."

"He is right,--a rare instance," said Verus.

"What? You, the priest, counsel against pity and pardon?" asked Hilda, in astonishment.

"I am also chancellor of this kingdom. The former King would be far too dangerous if he were set at liberty. Romans, Catholics,--he is said secretly to have joined this church,--might gather round him, and 'the rightful King of the Vandals' would be a much-desired weapon against the 'Tyrant' Gelimer. The prisoners will be better off where they are. Their lives are safe--"

"They have repeatedly requested an audience; they wish to justify themselves. These petitions--"

"Were always granted. I have heard them myself."

"What resulted from them?"

"Nothing that I did not already know. Did you not feel the armor under Hilderic's robe, wrest the dagger from his hand yourself?"

"Alas, yes! Yet I so easily distrust myself. Ambition, desire for this crown (one of my heaviest sins), made me only too ready to believe in Hilderic's guilt. And now the captive King, protesting his innocence, appealing to a warning letter received by him on that day, which would explain and prove everything, requests another trial. Yet you have fulfilled the prisoner's wish and searched for it in the place he named?"

"Certainly," said Verus, quietly, his lifeless features growing even more rigid, more sternly controlled. "That letter is an invention. As Hilderic repeatedly asserted that he had concealed it in a secret drawer of 'Genseric's Golden Chest,'--you know the coffer, Gibamund?--I searched the whole chest with my own hands and alone. I even found the secret drawer and opened it; nothing of the kind was there. Nay, at the prisoner's earnest entreaties, I had the coffer carried to his dungeon and examined by himself in the presence of witnesses. He, too, found nothing."

"And no one could have previously removed the letter?" asked Gelimer.

"You and I alone have the keys to the chest which contains the most important documents. But I must leave you now," said the priest. "I have many letters to write to-night. Farewell!"

"I thank you, my Verus. May the angel of the Lord watch over me in Heaven as faithfully as you watch and care for me on earth."

The priest closed his eyes a moment, then smiling faintly, nodded, saying: "That is my prayer also."

He glided noiselessly across the threshold.

CHAPTER XXI

Hilda followed Verus's retreating figure with a long, long look; at last, with a slight shake of her

beautiful head, she went up to Gelimer and said: "Do not be angry, my King, if I ask a question which nothing gives me the right to utter, except my anxiety for your welfare, and that of all our people."

"And my love for you, brave sister-in-law," replied Gelimer, gently stroking her flowing golden hair, and seating himself on the couch again. "For," he added, smiling, "though you are a wicked pagan and often cherish--as I well know--secret resentment, nay, animosity, against me, I love you, foolish, impetuous young heart."

She sank down at his feet, on a high, soft cushion covered with leopard skins, while Gibamund paced slowly up and down the spacious hall, often gazing out through the lofty arched window over the wide sea. No light was burning in the apartment; but the full moon, which meanwhile had risen above the dark flood and the harbor wall, poured in the full splendor of her rays, which, falling on the features of the three noble human beings, illumined them with a spectral light.

"I will not," Hilda began, "as Zazo and my Gibamund have repeatedly done, until you wrathfully forbade it, warn you against this priest, who--"

With neither impatience nor anger, Gelimer interrupted: "Who first discovered the wiles of Pudentius; who revealed to us the treachery of Hilderic; to whom alone I am indebted for my escape from assassination that night; who has saved the kingdom of the Vandals from the snare."

Gibamund paused in his walk.

"Yes, it is true. I had almost said, *unfortunately* true. For I would rather have owed it to any other man."

"It is so strikingly true that even our Zazo, who at first accused him harshly to me, could scarcely find any objection to mutter, when I took the brilliant man among my councillors and intrusted to him (for he is an expert in letter-writing) the care of the correspondence. And how unweariedly he has toiled since, priest and chancellor at the same time! I marvel at the number of papers he lays before me every morning; I do not believe he sleeps three hours."

"Men who neither sleep nor fight, drink nor kiss, are unnatural to me," cried Gibamund, laughing.

"I do not warn," said Hilda, "but I ask"--she laid her hand lightly on the King's arm--"how does it happen, how is it possible, that you, the warlike Prince of the Vandals, loved this gloomy Roman, this renegade, better than all who stood nearest to you?"

"There you are mistaken, fair Hilda," smiled the King, stroking her hand.

"Yes," she answered, correcting herself; "doubtless you love Ammata better; he is the apple of your eye."

"My father, on his death-bed, confided this brother (he was then only a prattling boy) to my care. I cherished him in my inmost heart, and reared him as though he were my own child," said Gelimer, tenderly. "It is not love," he went on, "that binds me to Verus. What constrains me to revere in him my guardian spirit on earth, to look up to him with ardent gratitude, with blind, credulous trust, is the confidence, nay, the superhuman certainty: yes," here he shuddered slightly, "it is a revelation of God, a miracle."

"A miracle?" Hilda repeated.

"A revelation?" Gibamund asked incredulously, stopping before them.

"Both," replied the King. "Only, to understand it, you must know more, you must know all, you must learn how my mind, my soul, was tossed to and fro by conflicting powers; you must live through with me once more my wanderings, my perils, and my deliverance. Yes, and you shall, you who are my nearest and dearest, now and here; who knows when the impending war will grant us another hour of leisure?"

"Even in my earliest childhood, my father told me, I was not like ordinary children; I dreamed, I asked questions beyond my years. Then, it is true, came the happy days of boyhood: arms, arms, and again arms, my only sport, my only labor, my only study. At that time I grew to the power and the pleasure in the use of weapons--" his eyes flashed in the moonlight.

"Which made you the hero of your people," cried Gibamund.

"But suddenly an end came. By chance the leader of the hundred who was commanded to execute the order fell sick, and I was next in the list: I, a lad of sixteen, was sent with my troop to witness the terrible tortures of Romans, Catholics, who would not abjure their faith, in the courtyard of this citadel. The shrieks of agony which pierced through the thick walls had repeatedly roused the Carthaginians to insurrection; it was absolutely necessary to guard the dungeons. I had heard that such things were done; I was told that they were needful; that the Catholics were all traitors to the kingdom, and the rack was used only to compel them to reveal the secrets of their disloyal plans. But I had never witnessed the scene. Now suddenly I beheld it.

The boy of sixteen was himself the commander of the executioners. Horrible! horrible! About a hundred persons, among them women, old men, boys and girls scarcely as old as I. I commanded a halt. 'By order of the King!' replied the Arian priest. I wanted to rush to the aid of the tortured prisoners. Alas! Verus's whole family were among the victims. I wanted to tear his gray-haired mother from the stake, from the ascending flames, amid which, in spite of her iron chains, she writhed, shrieking in unutterable agony. My own soldiers held me! 'By order of the King!' they shouted. I struck about me, I foamed, I raged. In vain! I shut my eyes that I might see the terrible scene no longer! But ah--"

The King hesitated and passed his hand across his brow. Then he went on,--

"My name, in a shrill scream, reached my ear. I involuntarily opened my eyes again and saw, stretched toward me, the naked, fettered, arm of the gray-haired woman. 'Curses on you, Gelimer!' she shrieked. 'Curses on you upon earth and in hell! Curses on all you Asdings! Curses on the Vandal people and kingdom! God's vengeance for your own and your fathers' sins shall pursue you from childhood to old age. Curses, curses on you, murderer Gelimer!' And I saw her eyes, horribly disfigured by suffering and hate, piercing mine. Then I sank down in the convulsions which, later, often attacked me, and lay gasping under the burden of the thought: even though I myself am free from sin, the despairing woman cursed me as she died; she bore the curse to the throne of God. I must bear the burden of guilt of all our family." He trembled, beads of perspiration stood on his brow.

"For God's sake, brother, stop! Your illness might return."

But Gelimer continued: "When I came to my senses, I was no longer a youth; I was an old man; or crushed, half mad, as you will call it. I threw off my sword-belt, helmet, shield, and all my weapons, and--oh, never shall I forget it--that one terrible word alone pressed through my poor brain, deadening all else: 'Sin--the curse of sin rests upon me, my family, my people!'

"I sought comfort. I seized the Bible. I had been taught that God speaks to us through the oracles of the Sacred Book. With a sharp dagger in my hand I unrolled the passages of Holy Writ. I appealed to God. 'O Lord, wilt Thou really punish me for the sins of my ancestors?' I struck haphazard with my dagger at the open page; it pierced the verse: 'For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.'

"I almost died of terror. Once more I controlled myself. From the street below rose the blast of the Vandal horns; glittering in brilliant armor, our horsemen were going out to battle with the Moors. That was my joy, my pride. Twice already I myself had mingled in the victorious conflict. My heart, my courage, my joy in life, revived. I said to myself: 'Even though all pleasure is forever dead to me, my people, the Vandal kingdom, the hero's duty to live, to fight, to die for his country, summon me. Is this, too, nothing? Is sin, too, an idle nothing?' Again, in another place, I questioned the word of God. I closed the roll, opened it again, and my dagger's point touched the words: All is vanity!

"Then I sank down in despair. So people and country and heroism, which our ancestors had fostered and praised as at once the highest duty and the greatest pleasure,--this, too, is vanity, is sin before the eyes of the Lord."

"It is a cruel chance," said Gibamund, wrathfully.

"And it is folly to believe it," cried Hilda. "O Gelimer, thou hero, grandson of Genseric, does not every pulsation of your heart give the lie to this gloomy delusion." She sprang up, throwing back her flowing hair and fixing a fiery glance upon him.

"Sometimes, doubtless, fair leader of the Valkyrie," replied Gelimer, smiling. "And especially since--since God saved me by a miracle. And fear not, granddaughter of Hildebrand, you will have no cause to be ashamed of your brother-in-law, the Vandal King, when the tuba of Belisarius summons us to battle." He raised his noble head, clenching his fist.

"Oh, joy to us, my husband," cried Hilda, "that is still the inmost care of his being--the hero!" And she eagerly pressed her husband's hand.

"Who knows the inmost care of his own being?" Gelimer went on. "At that time--and for years after--all joy in the pomp and glitter of arms was over for me. I was so ill! At that second oracle the convulsions returned; and later they came very frequently, so that my father was compelled to yield to my earnest desire, for I was not yet fit for military service. I was permitted to enter a monastery of the monks of our religion as a pupil, and to remain there in the solitude of the desert. I spent many years within those walls, and during that time I burned all the war songs which I had written in our language to sing to the accompaniment of the harp."

"Oh, what a shame!" exclaimed Hilda.

"But a few were preserved by the lips of our soldiers," said Gibamund, consolingly; "for instance,--

"Grandsons most noble
Of ancestors noblest,
Ancient blood of the Asdings,
Gold-panoplied race
Of mighty Genseric,
To ye hath descended
The Sea-Kings' power."

"And the fatal harvest of his sins!" said Gelimer, bowing his head gloomily. He was silent for a time, then he began again,--

"Instead of the Vandal verse, I now composed Latin penitential hymns. My brothers thought that the tortures of the condemned groaned, the flames of hell darted through these trochees. Doubtless there were flames--those which I had seen consume living human beings. There was no mortification, no asceticism, which I did not practise to excess. I raged against my flesh; I hated myself, my sinful soul, my body, which dragged with it the curse of mortal sin. I fasted, I scourged myself, I wore the nail-studded belt till it pierced deep wounds. I secretly invented fresh tortures, when the abbot forbade the undue infliction of the old ones. At the same time I devoured all the books in the monastery and the libraries of Carthage. I persuaded my father to let me go to Alexandria, to Athens, to Constantinople, to hear the teachers there. I had become more learned, not wiser, when I returned from those schools to the monastery in the desert. At last my father summoned me from this monastery to his deathbed; he committed to me, as a sacred legacy, the care of my youngest brother, the child Ammata. I could not selfishly hasten from my father's grave to the desert, as I desired; the care of the child was a human, healthy duty which restored me to the world. I lived for the darling boy."

"No father could watch over him more tenderly," cried Gibamund.

"At that time I was urged to marry. The King, the whole nation wished it. The lady belonged to the royal race of the Visigoths, and came to visit Carthage. A beautiful, noble, brilliant Princess, she charmed my heart and ray eyes. I ruled both, and said, No."

"To live solely for Ammata?" asked Hilda.

"Not that alone. The thought entered my mind," his brow clouded again, "the curse which the old woman had called down upon my head should not, according to those terrible words of Scripture, be transmitted by me from generation to generation. I should tremble to see in my children's faces the features of their accursed father. So I remained unwedded."

"What a gloomy idea!" Gibamund whispered in the ear of his beautiful wife, as, drawing her tenderly toward him, he kissed her cheek.

"I suppose it was at that time," said Hilda, "that you composed that denunciation which condemns all love as sin?"

"Maledictus amor sextus,
Maledicta oscula,
Sint amplexus maledicti
Inferi ligamina."

"It is all untrue," she added smiling, warmly returning her husband's embrace.

But Gelimer went on: "The result will teach us the truth--on the Day of Judgment. The care of the boy cured me. I again turned to the practice of arms; it would soon be necessary to teach my pupil their use. But a still greater aid was the duty--"

"You owed your people and your native land," interrupted Hilda.

"Yes," added Gibamund. "At that time the Moors had proved greatly superior to our effeminate troops, and especially our unwarlike King. We were defeated in every battle, and could no longer hold our own in the open field against the camel-riders. Our frontier was harried year after year. Nay, the robbers of the desert grew bold enough to penetrate deep into the heart of the proconsular province, till they made forays to the very gates of Carthage. Then I was summoned to become the shield of my people; I did so gladly. The old love of arms waked anew, and I said to myself: 'No vain, sinful greed for fame urges you on.'"

"What? Is heroism called a sin?" cried Hilda. "You were fighting only to defend your people."

"Ah, but he found much pleasure in it," replied Gibamund, smiling at his wife. "And he often pursued the Moors farther into the desert, and in following them killed many more with his own hand than the protection of Carthage would have required."

"May Heaven pardon all that I did beyond what was necessary," said Gelimer, in a troubled tone. "The thought, 'It is a sin,' often paralyzed my arm, even in the midst of battle. Often, too, I was overwhelmed by the old melancholy, the torturing fear of sin, the consciousness of guilt, the

burden of the curse of the burning woman, the words piercing to the quick: 'All is sin, all is vanity!'

"Then came the day which brought to me the most terrible ordeal,--tortures little less than those suffered by the Catholics, the parents and relatives of Verus, and at the same time the decision, rescue, deliverance, through Verus. Yes, as Jesus Christ is my Redeemer in Heaven, this priest became my savior, my redeemer on earth."

"Do not blaspheme," warned Gibamund. "I, unfortunately, am not so devout a Christian as you; but the Saviour is only like unto, not equal with, God--"

"You have learned your Arian creed by heart, my dear one," cried Hilda, laughing. "But old Hildebrand said he was neither like nor equal to the gods of our ancestors."

"No, for they are demons," said Gelimer, wrathfully, making the sign of the cross.

"Yet I should not like to compare the gloomy Verus with Christ," replied Gibamund.

"I had felt toward him as you, as Zazo, as almost all did; he did not attract, he rather repelled me. That he--he alone of all his kindred, whose death for their faith he had witnessed, should have adopted the religion of their executioners! Was it from fear, or really from conviction? I distrusted him! It displeased me, too, that King Hilderic, the friend of the Byzantines, whose plots against my own succession to the throne I already suspected, so greatly favored him. How greatly I wronged Verus there he has now proved; he--he alone saved me and the Vandal kingdom. Thus he has done visibly what God's sign announced to me in the most terrible moment of my life. Now listen to what only our Zazo yet knows; I told him, as an answer to his warning. Hear, marvel, and recognize the signs and wonders of God."

CHAPTER XXII

It was three years ago. We had again marched against the Moors, this time to the southwest to meet the tribes which pitch their tents at the foot of the Auras Mountains. We passed through the Proconsularis, then Numidia, and from Tipasa forced the foe out of the level country up the steep mountains, where, amid inaccessible rocks, they sought refuge. We encamped on the plain, keeping them surrounded until hunger should force them to yield. Days, weeks elapsed. The time grew too long for me, and often, riding along the mountain chain, I sought some spot where lower cliffs might render it possible to scale or storm them.

"On one of these lonely rides (I needed no companion, for the enemy did not venture down into the valley) I had gone a long, long distance from our camp. Riding in a wide circuit around a projecting cliff, I lost the right direction in the vast, monotonous desert. I had never examined this side of the mountains, they seemed less difficult to scale; I felt no anxiety about returning, though my panting horse had covered many a mile,--the prints of his hoofs would guide me back. Already the rays of the ardent sun were falling more aslant, and brown mists were gathering around the glowing disk. I wished to see what lay beyond the nearest cliff, and, guiding my horse close to the rocky base, I turned the corner. Instantly a terrible sound deafened my ears,--a roar that made every nerve quiver. My horse reared in terror; I saw, only a few paces in front of me, a huge lion, a monster in size, crouching to spring. I hurled my spear with all my force; but at the same moment my horse, frantic with fear, reared still higher, overbalanced himself, and fell backward, burying me under his weight. A sharp pain in the thigh was the last thing I felt. Then my senses failed."

He paused, deeply agitated by the remembrance of the scene.

Hilda, her lips half parted, gazed at him in breathless suspense. "A lion?" she faltered. "They usually shun the desert."

"Yes," said Gibamund. "But they like to prowl among the mountains close to the border. I know that you were brought back to Carthage with a broken thigh," he added. "Many, many weeks passed before you were cured; but I was not aware--"

"When I recovered consciousness the sun was setting. It was burning hot--everything--the air, the dry sand on which the back of my head rested (for the helmet had slipped off in my fall), the heavy horse which lay motionless on my right leg and thigh. He had broken his neck. I tried to drag myself from beneath the heavy burden. Impossible; I could not move the broken limb. By bracing my right hand and arm on the sand, I attempted to raise the upper part of my body above the carcass of the horse. I succeeded. Directly in front of me was the lion! The animal lay motionless on his belly a few feet away; the handle of my spear protruded from his breast just beside his right fore-paw. My heart exulted at his death. But alas, no! Now that I had stirred, a low angry growl came from his half-open jaws. The mane bristled; he tried to rise, but could not, and remained lying where he had fallen. Then the claws clenched the sand deeper, evidently in the attempt to drag the body nearer, while the monster's glittering eyes were fixed full on mine. And I?--I could not draw back a single inch. Then--I will not deny it--fear, base, abject, trembling terror seized me. I let myself fall back upon the sand; I could not bear the horrible sight. Through

my brain darted the thought: 'Woe betide you, what will be your fate?' And in my despair, my mortal terror, I shrieked as loud as I could, 'Help, help!' But I repented horribly; my voice must have roused the fury of the wounded animal; a roar answered me,--a roar so frightful in its rage and menace that my breath failed. When silence followed, my blood rushed, seething, through my veins. What threatened me? What end awaited me? No cries for aid would be heard by our troops; many, many miles of untrodden desert sands separated me from our farthest outposts. I had not seen during my whole ride a single trace of the foe among the mountains; how gladly would I have surrendered myself into their hands as a captive! But to languish here, under the scorching sun, on the burning sands--to perish slowly, for already thirst was torturing me with its terrible pangs! Ah, and I had heard that this agonizing death by thirst might drag along for days in the lonely wilderness.

"Then, looking up to the pitiless, leaden sky, I asked in a whisper,--I confess that I was afraid to wake the lion's voice again,--'God, God of Justice, why? What sin have I committed to be forced to suffer thus?'

"Then through my brain darted the terrible answer of Holy Writ: 'I will visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.' You are atoning, I groaned, for the sins of your ancestors; the curse of those who were burned at the stake is burning you here. You are condemned upon earth and in hell. Is this already hell that compasses me with such scorching heat, that sears my eyes, my throat, my chest, nay, my very soul? And hark! More terrible, louder still, it seemed to me, nearer, rose the roar of the monster. My senses failed again.

"I lay unconscious all night, probably passing from the fainting fit into a dream. In my half-doze I again saw everything that had happened. 'Ah,' I murmured, smiling, 'it is only a dream; it can be nothing but a dream. Such things do not belong to the world of reality. You are lying in your tent, with your sword by your side.' Rousing, I grasped at the hilt. Oh, horrible! I clutched the desert sand. It was no dream.

"Day had already dawned, and the sun again shone pitilessly with its scorching rays upon my unprotected face. Now the thought came, 'My sword! A weapon!' Bear the same torture, the same mortal anguish, for long hours? No! God forgive the heavy sin, but I would end my life; I was already condemned to hell! I grasped my sword-belt; an empty sheath hung from it. The blade had dropped out in the fall. I glanced around and saw the trusty weapon lying very near. Never had I loved it as I did at that moment; it was just at my left; I tried to seize it--in vain. Far as I could stretch my arm, my fingers, the faithful blade lay--perhaps barely six inches away--but beyond my reach. Then a low growl reminded me of the lion, and by a great effort (my strength was failing) I raised myself high enough to see the animal.

"Alas! Was it an illusion, indicative of approaching madness? For my thoughts were darting through my brain like clouds whirling before the blast of the coming storm. No! It was true. The monster had moved nearer, much nearer than the day before. It was no illusion. I could estimate clearly. Yesterday, no matter how far he stretched his paw, he could not reach the large black stone which had fallen from the cliff directly in front of my horse; now it lay almost by the wild beast's hind leg. During these hours, urged by increasing hunger, the lion had pushed himself forward almost the entire length of his body, and now lay only a foot and a half or two feet from me. If he should advance still farther--if he should reach me? Helpless, defenceless, I must allow myself to be devoured alive! Then terror darted through my heart. In mortal anguish I prayed aloud to God, struggled with Him in appeal: 'No, no, my God, Thou must not abandon me! Thou must save me, God of Mercy!' At this moment I suddenly remembered the belief of our whole people concerning the guardian spirits whom God has allotted to us in the form of helpful human beings. Do you remember? The attendant spirits."

"Yes," said Gibamund. "And by fervent prayer we can, in the hour of supreme peril, constrain God to show us the guardian spirit sent by Him to our rescue."

"My ancestor, too," said Hilda, "believed in them firmly. He said that our forefathers imagined the guardian spirits in the form of women who invisibly followed the chosen heroes everywhere to protect them. But since the Christian religion came--"

"These demon women have left us," said Gelimer, crossing himself, "and God has assigned to us *men*, who are our keepers, counsellors, saviors, and guardian spirits here on earth. 'Send me, O God,' I cried, in an agony of entreaty, 'send me in this hour of utmost need the man whom Thou hast appointed to be my guardian spirit here on earth. Let him save me! And so long as I breathe, I will trust him as I would Thyself, will revere in him Thy wondrous power.'

"When I had ended this fervent prayer, my heart suddenly grew lighter. True, great weakness, almost faintness, stole over me; but there blended with it something infinitely sweet, inexpressedly happy and full of relief. And now, in my feverish illusion, I suddenly beheld alluring visions of deliverance; the terrible thirst which tortured me painted a spring of delicious water gushing from the rocks close beside me. The rescuers, too, were already coming! Not Zazo, not Gibamund; I knew that they had marched against other Moors, far, far westward of my camp. No, it was some one else, whose features I could not see distinctly. He dashed forward on a neighing horse; he slew the lion; he dragged the constantly-increasing weight of my dead horse from my body. Then I heard only a rushing, ringing noise in my ears, which said: 'Your deliverer is here!'

Your guardian spirit.' Suddenly the ringing died away, and--it was no fevered dream--I heard in reality behind me, from the direction of our camp, the neighing of a horse. With my last strength I turned my head and saw a few paces behind me a man who had just sprung from his horse. He was standing in a hesitating, doubting attitude, as if reflecting, with his hand clenched on his sword-hilt, gazing at me and the lion."

"He hesitated?" cried Hilda. "He reflected; A Vandal warrior?"

"He was no Vandal."

"A Moor? A foe?"

"It was Verus, the priest."

"My guardian spirit,' I cried, 'my preserver! God has sent you. Take my whole life!' Then my senses failed again.

"Verus told me afterwards that he cautiously approached the lion, and, seeing how deeply the weapon had penetrated, he hastily tore the spear from the wound; a tremendous rush of blood followed, and the monster died. Then he dragged me from under the dead horse, lifted me with difficulty on his own, bound me firmly on its back, and carried me slowly to the camp. My soldiers had sought me solely in the path along which they saw me ride out; Verus, who accompanied our army, was the only one who noticed that, after leaving the encampment that morning, I turned eastward. And when I was missed, he searched until he found me."

"Alone?"

"Entirely alone."

"How strange!" said Hilda; "how easily, alone, he might have failed in his purpose!"

"God enlightened and sent him."

"And did you--did he never tell others?"

Gelimer shook his noble head gravely. "The miracles of God are not to be the subject of idle talk. I earnestly besought his forgiveness that, formerly, I had almost distrusted him. He generously pardoned me. 'True, I felt it,' he said. 'It grieved me. Now atone by trusting me fully. For in truth you are right. God really did send me to you; I *am* your fate, I am the tool in God's hand that watches over your life and guides it to its predestined goal. I saw you--as if in a dream, though I was awake--lying helpless in the desert, and a secret voice urged me on, saying: "Seek him. Thou shalt become his fate!" And I could not rest until I had found you.'

"Now I have confided this to you that you may no longer wound me by your doubts. No, Hilda, do not shake your head. No objection; I will suffer none. How your distrust angers me! Has he not saved me a second time? Do you want a third sign from God, unbeliever? I would not wish to be incensed against you, so I will leave you. It is late. Believe, trust, and keep silence." With a bearing of lofty dignity, he left the room.

Hilda gazed after him thoughtfully. Then she shrugged her shoulders. "Mere chance," she said, "and superstition! How can delusion ensnare such a mind?"

"Such danger threatens just such minds. I rejoice that mine is less exalted."

"And that your soul is healthy!" cried Hilda, starting from her reverie with a gesture of relief, and throwing both arms around her beloved husband.

CHAPTER XXIII

Early on the morning of the third day after the meeting in the great hall of the palace, Hilda and her young charge, Eugenia, were sitting together in one of the women's apartments, talking eagerly over the work at which they were industriously toiling.

The narrow but lofty arched window afforded a view of the large square courtyard of the palace. In which there was an active stir of military preparation. In one portion of the wide space newly arrived Vandal recruits were being divided into bands of tens and hundreds; in another they were discharging arrows and hurling spears at targets made of planks which, in height, width, and general appearance, resembled as closely as possible Byzantine warriors in full defensive armor. A special oval enclosure was reserved for the inspection of horses and camels offered for sale by Moorish traders. The King, Gibamund, and the Gundings went from group to group. Hilda was sitting on a pile of cushions, from which, whenever she looked up, she could see the whole courtyard without the least difficulty. She was working industriously upon a large piece of scarlet woollen cloth which lay spread over the laps of both women. Often the needle fell from her hand, while a radiant glance flashed down at the noble figure of her slender husband. If he met it and waved his hand to her,--few of her glances escaped his notice,--a lovely flush of shy,

sweet happiness glowed on the young wife's cheeks.

Hilda saw that Eugenia stretched her delicate neck forward several times to obtain a glimpse of the courtyard. But she did not succeed; her seat was too far back from the window; and when at another attempt she perceived that her effort had been noticed, she crimsoned with alarm and shame far more deeply than Hilda had just done from pleasure.

"You have finished the lower hem," said Hilda, kindly. "Push another cushion on the stool. You must sit higher now, on account of the work." The young Greek eagerly obeyed, and a stolen glance flew swiftly down into the courtyard. But her lashes drooped sorrowfully, and she drew her gold-threaded needle still faster through the red cloth.

"New hundreds will soon arrive," remarked Hilda, "and then other commanders will come into the courtyard."

Eugenia made no reply, but her face brightened.

"You have been so diligent that we shall soon finish," Hilda went on. "The setting sun will see Genseric's old banner floating again in restored beauty from the palace roof."

"The golden dragon is nearly mended, only one wing and the claws--"

"They probably grew dull during the long years of peace, when the banner lay idle in the arsenal."

"There were frequent battles with the Moors."

"Yes, but Genseric's old battle-standard was not shaken from its proud dreams on account of those little skirmishes. Only small bodies of mounted troops rode forth, and the majestic signal of war was not unfurled on the palace. But now that the kingdom is threatened, Gelimer has commanded that, according to ancient custom, the great banner should be unfurled on the roof. My Gibamund brought it to me to replace the worn embroidery with fresh gold."

"We should have finished it before, if you had not placed those strange little signs half hidden along the hem--"

"Hush," whispered Hilda, smiling, "he must not know it."

"Who?"

"Why, the pious King. Alas, we shall never understand and agree with each other!"

"Why must he know nothing about it?"

"They are the ancient runes of victory of our people. My ancestor Hildebrand taught them to me. And who can tell whether they may not help?"

As she spoke, she passed her hand over her work with a tender, caressing motion, humming softly,--

"Revered and ancient
Runes so glorious,
Magical symbols
Of victory's bliss,
Float ye and sway
With the fluttering banner
High o'er our heads!
Summon the swift,
Lovely, and gracious
Maids, brave and bold,
Hovering swan-like
Our heads far above!
Givers of victory,
Radiant sisterhood,
Fetter the foe,
Stay their proud columns,
Weaken their sword-strokes,
Shiver their spears,
Break their firm shields,
Shatter their breastplates,
Hew off their helmets!--
Unto ourwarriors
Victory send ye;
Joyous pursuit,
Speeding on swift steeds,
Shouting in glee,

After the flying
Ranks of the vanquished!"

"There! The ancient rune has often helped the Amalungi; why should it not aid the Asdings? Aha! Now let the dragon fly again. He has moulted," she added, laughing merrily; "now his wings have grown new."

Springing to her feet, she raised the long heavy shaft, terminating in a sharp point, to which the square scarlet cloth was fastened with gold-headed nails, and with both hands she waved the banner joyously around her head. It was a beautiful picture: Gibamund and many of the warriors below saw the floating banner and the lovely woman's head surrounded by her flowing golden hair.

"Hail, Hilda, hail!" rose in an echoing shout.

Startled, the young wife sank on her knees to escape their eyes. Yet she had heard *his* voice, so she smiled, happy in her embarrassment, and charming in her confusion.

Eugenia, doubtless, felt the winsome spell, for, suddenly slipping down beside the Princess, she covered her hands and beautiful round white arms with ardent kisses. "Oh, lady, why are you so glorious? I often look up to you with fear. When your eyes flash so, when, like Pallas Athene, you talk so enthusiastically of battle and heroic deeds, fear or awe steals over me and holds me away from you. Then again, when--as has so often happened during these last few days--I have seen your shy, sweet happiness, your love, your devotion to your husband, then, oh, then--pardon my presumption--I feel as near, as closely akin to you, as--as--"

"As a sister, my Eugenia," said Hilda, clasping the charming creature warmly to her heart. "Believe me, brave, fearless heroism does not exclude the most loyal, the most devoted wifely love. I have often argued that question with the most beautiful woman in the whole world."

"Who is that?" asked Eugenia, doubtfully; for how could any one be fairer than Hilda?

"Mataswintha, granddaughter of the great Theodoric, in the laurel-grown garden at Ravenna. She would have become my friend; but she desired to hear only of love, nothing of heroism and duty to people and kingdom. She knows only one right, one duty--love. This separated us sharply and rigidly. Yet how touchingly both may be united, a beautiful old legend celebrates. My noble friend, Teja, once sang it for my grandfather and me to the accompaniment of his harp, in measures so sorrowful and yet so proud--ah, as only Teja can sing. I will translate it into your language. Come, let us mend this corner of the golden hem; meanwhile, I will tell you."

Both took their seats by the open window again. Once more Eugenia's glance, still in vain, often flitted over the courtyard, and while the two were industriously embroidering, the Princess began:

"It was in ancient times: when eagles shrieked, holy waters flowed from heavenly mountains. Far, far away from here, in the Land of Thule in Scandinavia, a noble hero was born of the Wölsung race. His name was Helgi, and he had no peer on earth. When, after great victories over the Hundings, the hereditary foes of his family, he sat resting on a rock in the fir-woods, light suddenly burst from the sky, from whose radiance beams darted like shining lances, and from the clouds rode the Valkyries, who--according to the beautiful religion of our ancestors--are hero-maidens who decide the destinies of battle, and bear the fallen heroes up to the shield-wainscoted halls of the god of victory. They rode in helmets and breastplates; flames blazed at the points of their spears. One of them, Sigrun, came to the lonely warrior, clasped his hand, greeted him, and kissed his lips beneath his helmet, and they loved each other deeply.

"But Sigrun's father had betrothed her to another, and Helgi was compelled to wage a hard battle for his love. He killed her lover, her father, and all her brothers except one. Sigrun herself, hovering in the clouds, had given him the victory, and she became his wife, though he had slain her father and her brothers. But soon Helgi, the beloved hero, was murdered by the one brother whom he had spared. True, the assassin tried to make amends to the widow; but she cursed him, saying: 'May the ship that carries you never move forward, though a fair wind is blowing! May the steed that bears you stop running, when you are fleeing from your foes! May the sword you wield cease to cut, and may it whirl around your own head! May you live in the world without peace, as the hunted wolf wanders through the forest!' Disdaining all comfort, she tore her hair, saying: 'Woe betide the widow who accepts consolation! She never knew love, for love is eternal. Woe to the wife who has lost her husband! Her heart is desolate; why should she live on?'"

Eugenia softly repeated the words: "Woe betide the widow who accepts consolation! She never knew love, for love is eternal. Woe to the wife who has lost her husband! Her heart is desolate; why should she live on?"

"Helgi towered above all other heroes, as the ash towers above thorns and thistles. For the widow there remains but one spot on earth--her husband's grave. Sigrun will no longer find pleasure in this world, unless perchance a light should burst from the doors of his tomb, and I might again embrace him.'

"And so mighty, so all-constraining is the longing of the true widow, that it will even break the power of death. In the evening a maid-servant came running to Sigrun, saying: 'Hasten forth, if you wish to have your husband again. Look! the mound has opened; a light is streaming from it; your longing has brought the hero from the heaven of the god of victory; he is sitting in the mound and beseeches you to stanch his bleeding wounds.'"

Eugenia, in a low, trembling voice, repeated: "The longing of the true widow will even break the power of death."

"Sigrun went in to Helgi, kissed him, stanchd his wounds, and said: 'Your locks are drenched with moisture; you are covered with blood; your hands are cold--how shall I keep you?' 'You are the sole cause,' he replied. 'You shed so many tears, and each fell a blood-stain upon Helgi's breast.' 'Then I will weep no more,' she cried; 'but will rest upon your heart, as I did in life.' 'You will remain in the mound with me, in the arms of the dead, though you still live,' cried Helgi, exultingly.

"You will remain in the mound, in the arms of the dead, though you still live," Eugenia repeated.

"But the legend relates that when Sigrun also died, both were born again: he a victorious hero, but she a Valkyrie. This is the ballad of how a woman's true love, a widow's true anguish, conquers death, and, in omnipotent yearning, even forces a passage into the grave to the beloved one."

"And in omnipotent yearning forces a passage into the grave to the beloved one."

Hilda looked up suddenly. "Child, what is the matter?" The Princess had spoken with such enthusiasm that at last she paid no heed to her listener. But now she heard a low sob, and, in bewilderment, saw the Greek kneeling on the floor, bending forward over the stool, hiding her lovely face in both hands; tears were streaming between the slender fingers.

"Eugenia!"

"O Hilda, it is so beautiful. It must be so blissful to be loved! And it is also happiness to love unto death. Oh, happy Gibamund's Hilda! Oh, happy Helgi's Sigrun! How this song makes the heart ache and yet rejoice! How beautiful and, alas, how true it is, that love conquers all things, and draws the loving woman to her beloved, even to his grave! They are united in death, if no longer in life. That thought possesses stronger power than spell or magnet."

"O sister, does this little heart love so strongly, so fervently, so genuinely? Speak freely at last. Not a single word during all these days have you--"

"I could not! I was so ashamed for myself, and, alas! for him. And I dare not speak of my love! It is a disgrace and shame. For he, my bridegroom,--no, my husband,--does not love me!"

"Indeed he does love you, or why should the reckless noble have wooed you so humbly?"

"Alas, I do not know. Hundreds of times during the last few days have I asked myself that question. I do not know. True, I believed--until the day before yesterday--it was from love. And often this foolish heart believes it still. But, no, it was not love. Caprice weariness--perhaps," and now she trembled wrathfully, "a wager,--a game that he desired to win and which lost its charm as soon as he succeeded."

"No, my little dove! Thrasaric is incapable of that."

"Oh, yes, oh, yes!" Eugenia sobbed despairingly. "He is capable of it."

"I do not believe it," said the Princess, and, sitting down beside her, she lifted the forsaken little bride into her arms as if she were a child, dried her wet cheeks with the folds of her own white mantle, stroked her burning lids, smoothed her tangled hair, pressed the little head to her soft bosom, and rocked gently to and fro, saying soothingly: "Everything will be well again, little one, and soon; for he does love you. That is certain."

A suppressed sob and a slight shake of the head said, No!

"Certain! I do not know, nor do I wish to know, what that woman hissed into your ear. But I saw how it wounded you, like a poisoned arrow. Whatever it may be--"

"I will never, never, never tell!" the girl fairly shrieked.

"I do not wish to know, I told you. Whatever his guilt may be, the Christians have a beautiful saying: 'Love beareth all things.'"

"Love beareth all things," murmured Eugenia. "But, of course, love only. Tell me, little sister, do you really love him?"

The weeping girl, springing from the Princess's clasping arms, stood erect, and stretching both arms wide exclaimed, in a low tone, "Alas! Unspeakably!" and threw herself again on her

friend's breast. Her large soft eyes sparkled through her tears as she went on in a low whisper, as though fearing that strangers might hear in the secluded chamber: "That is my sweet secret,--the secret of my shame." She smiled radiantly. "I loved him long ago, I believe even as a child. When he came to my father to buy grain for his villas, he lifted me in his strong arms like a feather, until I--gradually--forbade it. The older I grew, the more ardently I loved, and therefore the more timidly I avoided him. Oh, do not betray it as long as you live--when he seized me, bore me away in the public street--fiercely as my wrath, my honor rebelled, deeply as I suffered from pity for my father--yet yet--yet! While struggling desperately in his iron arms, screaming for help--yet!--in the midst of all the mortal fright and anger, there blazed here in my heart, secretly, a warm, happy, blissful emotion: 'He loves me; he tortures me from love!' And, amid all the keen suffering, I was happy, nay, proud, that he dared so bold a deed for love of me! Can you understand, can you forgive that?"

Hilda smiled bewitchingly: "Forgive? No! I am utterly bewildered with sheer pleasure. Forgive *me*, little one. I had not expected from you so much genuine, ardent woman's love! But, you obstinate little creature, you hypocrite,--why did you so long conceal and deny your feelings toward him from your father and your friend?"

"Why? That is perfectly plain," exclaimed the girl, indignantly. "From embarrassment and shame. It is terrible, it is a frightful disgrace, for a young girl, instead of hating the man who seized her in the public market-place, and even kissed her at the same time, to love him. It is utterly abominable."

Half weeping, half smiling, she hid her face on her friend's breast, tenderly kissing a little gold cross that she wore round her neck attached to a thin silver chain, and lovingly pressing to her bosom a bronze semi-circle, inscribed with runes, that she wore on her arm.

"His betrothal and, alas, his marriage gift," she sighed.

"Yes, you love him deeply," said Hilda, smiling. "And he? He sent my Gibamund to me with frequent messages of the anguish he was suffering, and he was as grateful as a blind man who has been restored to sight when I told him that he was indeed wholly unworthy of you; but if he really desired to win you for his wife, he must ask you if you would wed him, and then beg your father for your hand. This simple bit of wisdom made him as happy as a child. He followed the counsel, and now--"

"Now?" Eugenia interrupted, in almost comical indignation. "Now he has not been seen at all for nearly three days. Who knows how far away he may be?"

"Not very far," cried Hilda, laughing; "he is just riding into the courtyard below."

Eugenia's little head was at the window like a flash of lightning. A half-stifled cry of joy escaped her lips, then she instantly stooped again.

"Oh, oh, how magnificent he looks!" cried Hilda, clasping her hands with the most joyful surprise. "In full, heavy armor, a huge bear-head with gaping jaws on his helmet--"

"Oh, yes! He killed it himself on the Auras Mountain," murmured the little bride.

"And how the skin floats around his mighty shoulders! He carries a spear as thick as a sapling, and on his shield--What is the emblem? A stone-hammer?"

"Yes, yes," cried Eugenia, eagerly, lifting her head cautiously to the window-sill, "that is his house-mark. His family descends, according to ancient tradition, from a red-bearded demon with a hammer--I don't remember the name."

"What demon?" exclaimed Hilda. "The god Donar is his ancestor, and Thrasaric does him honor. He is talking with Gibamund. They are looking up; he is saluting me. Oh dear, how pale and sad the poor giant looks!"

"Is that true?" The little brown head flew up again.

"Stoop, little one! He must not see that we are far less able to bear the yearning than he. My husband is waving his hand to me. He is coming upstairs; Thrasaric seems to be following him."

Eugenia had already vanished in the next room.

CHAPTER XXIV

Hilda flew to the threshold to meet her husband, and the young couple tenderly embraced.

"Are you alone?" asked Gibamund, glancing around him. "I thought I saw your little antelope at the window."

Hilda pointed silently to the curtains at the door of the adjoining room; her husband nodded.

"You will have a visitor presently," he said, raising his voice. "Thrasaric wishes to speak to you. He has all sorts of important things to say."

"He will be welcome."

"Have you finished the banner?"

"Oh, yes."

Seizing the pole, she raised the heavy standard aloft; the scarlet cloth, more than five feet long and two and a half feet wide, flowed in long heavy folds around the two slender figures. It was a beautiful, solemn sight.

Gibamund took the banner from her. "I will place it on the battlements of the loftiest tower, that it may wave a bloody welcome to our foes. Oh, thou choicest jewel, shield of the Vandal fame, Genseric's victorious standard, never shalt thou fall into the hands of the foe so long as I draw breath!" he cried enthusiastically. "I swear it by the head of the beloved wife over which thy folds are floating."

"Neither your eyes nor mine shall ever witness that. I, too, swear it," said Hilda, with deep earnestness, and a slight shiver ran through her limbs as a gust of wind blew the scarlet cloth closely around her shoulders and breast.

Gibamund kissed the fair brow and the beautiful eyes which were lifted with a radiant light to his own, and hurried out of the room with the banner. On the threshold he met Thrasaric. Hilda sat down again beside the window.

"Welcome, Thrasaric!" she said loudly, as the curtain in the doorway of the adjoining room waved to and fro. "I commend you. In full armor! It suits you better than--other costumes. I hear that you have been made commander of many thousand men. You are to fill Zazo's place until his return. What brings you to me?"

These friendly words evidently soothed the embarrassment of the giant, whose face had crimsoned when he entered the apartment. He cast a searching glance around the room, hoping to discover some trace--some article of clothing; but he did not find it. His whole soul was burning with the desire to speak of Eugenia, to ask about her, to learn her feelings. Yet he so feared to approach the subject. He did not know whether his bride had told her friend of his heavy, heavy sin. He feared it. Surely it was probable that the Princess had asked the girl the cause of her terror; and why should Eugenia keep silence? Why should she spare him? Had he deserved it? Had not the indignant girl, with the utmost justice, cast him off forever? All these questions, over which he had been pondering, now pressed at once on his bewildered brain. He was so bitterly ashamed of himself, he would rather have marched alone to meet Belisarius's entire army than talk now with this noble woman; yet he had boldly encountered harder things. As he made no reply, but merely stood with laboring breath, Hilda repeated the question,--

"What brings you to me, Thrasaric?"

He must answer--he saw that. So he replied, but Hilda was almost startled when he cried loudly, "A horse."

"A horse?" asked the Princess, slowly. "What am I to do with it?"

Thrasaric was glad to be able to speak, and at some length, of subjects not connected with Eugenia. So he now answered, quickly and easily: "To ride it."

"Yes," laughed Hilda, "I suppose so! But to whom does the horse belong?"

"To you. I give it to you. Gibamund has permitted it. He commands you to accept it from me. Do you hear? He commands."

"Well, well! I haven't refused yet. So I thank you cordially. What kind of horse is it?"

"The best one on earth."

The answers now came with the speed of lightning.

"Gibamund and my brother-in-law said that of Cabaon's stallion."

"It is the very horse."

"That belongs to Modigisel."

"Not now."

"Why?"

"Oh, for many reasons. In the first place, it is now yours. Secondly, the animal lately ran away from Modigisel at night, was carried off. Thirdly, Modigisel is dead. And, fourthly, the stallion

belongs to me."

These replies had come almost too rapidly. Hilda gazed at him without understanding.

"Modigisel dead? Incredible!"

"But it is true. And really--except for himself--no great misfortune. A short time ago, at night, I helped a young Moorish prisoner to escape. I could not foresee that he would use the horse in doing so. But afterwards I rejoiced over it, very, very deeply. Early this morning, a Moor, not the fugitive, brought the stallion into my courtyard. The lad I had saved was Sersaon, Cabaon's famous grandson. Cabaon, in his gratitude, sent me the magnificent horse."

"But must not you return him to Modigisel?"

"Perhaps so. On no account--never, never--would I have kept the animal. I would rather have the devil in my stable; I would rather ride the steed of hell!"

"Why?"

"Why? Why? You ask why?" cried Thrasaric, joyously. "Then you do not know?"

"If I knew, I would not ask," said Hilda, calmly.

But she was startled by the effect of these words; the gigantic man threw himself on his knees before her, pressing her hands till she could almost have screamed with pain, as he cried: "That is glorious, that is divine!" But the next instant he sprang up again, saying mournfully, "Alas! This is even worse. Now I must tell her myself. Forgive me. No, I am not mad. Just wait. It is coming.-- So I ordered the horse to be led at once to Modigisel. The slave returned immediately with the message that Modigisel was dead."

"Then it is true? The day before yesterday in perfect health! How is it possible?"

"Astarte, of course. You know nothing about such creatures. His freedwoman and friend; she lived in the next house. It is very strange. The slaves say that after--after returning from the Grove of the Holy Virgin," he stammered the words with downcast eyes, "Modigisel and Astarte had a violent quarrel. That is, she did not make an outcry--she said very little; but she demanded for the thousandth time her complete freedom. Modigisel had reserved numerous rights. He refused, shouted, and raged; he is said to have beaten her. But yesterday they made friends again. Astarte and the Gundings dined with him. After the banquet they strolled about the garden. Before their eyes Astarte broke four peaches from a tree. She and the two Gundings ate three of them; Modigisel the fourth. And, after eating it, he dropped dead at Astarte's feet."

"Horrible! Poison?"

"Who dares to say so? The peach grew on the same tree with the others. The Gundings bear witness to it; they do not lie. And the Carthaginian is impenetrably calm, even now."

"You have seen her, have talked with her?"

The powerful warrior flushed crimson: "She came to my house at once, from the dead man. But I--well--she went away again very soon. She was hastening to take possession of the villa at Decimum, which Modigisel bequeathed to her long ago."

"What a woman!"

"Nay, no woman,--a monster, but a beautiful one. So the horse remained in my possession. But I--will not keep the animal. Then I thought that of all the women of our nation you are the most glorious--I mean, the best rider. And I believe war will soon break out, and, from what I know of you, I believe that nothing will prevent you from going with Gibamund to the field."

"There you are right," laughed Hilda, with sparkling eyes.

"Then I begged Gibamund--and so the stallion is yours, do you see? He is just being led into the courtyard."

"A magnificent creature indeed! I thank you."

"So that is the story of the horse."

He spoke very sorrowfully, for he did not know what to say next.

Hilda came to his assistance.

"And your brother?" she asked.

"Unhappily he has disappeared. I have searched for him everywhere--in his own villas and mine. There was not a trace. The body of the beautiful Ionian who--died that night, could not be found either. There was no sign of it in the city or country. It is possible that he left Carthage by ship. So many have gone out of the harbor during these last few days, even--" he suddenly turned

pale--"even bound for Sicily."

"Yes," said Hilda, carelessly, glancing out of the window. "The horse is a splendid animal."

"She is changing the subject," thought Thrasaric. "Then it is so."

"Several sailed also for Syracuse," he went on, watching her intently.

The Princess leaned from the casement. "Only one, so far as I know," she replied indifferently.

"Then it is true," cried the Vandal, suddenly, in despair. "She has gone. She has gone to her father in Syracuse. She has deserted me forever! O Eugenia! Eugenia!" Pressing his arm against the window-frame in bitter anguish, he laid his face on it.

So he did not see how violently the curtains at the door of the next room swayed to and fro.

"O Princess," he cried, controlling himself, "it is only just. I ought not to blame you, I must praise you for having snatched her from my arms on that wild night. Nor can I condemn her for casting me off. No, do not try to comfort me. I know I am not worthy of her. It is my own fault. Yet not mine alone; the women--that is, the maidens of our nation--are also to blame. Do you look at me in wonder? Well, then, Hilda, have you taken a single Vandal girl to your heart as a friend? Eugenia, the Greek, the child of a plain citizen, is far more to you than the wives and daughters of our nobles. I will not say--far be it from me--that the Vandal women are as corrupt and degenerate as, alas, most of us men. Certainly not! But under this sky, in three generations, they, too, have deteriorated. Gold, finery, luxury, and again gold, fill their souls. They long for wealth, for boundless pleasure, almost like the Romans. Their souls have grown feeble. No one understands or shares Hilda's enthusiasm."

"Yes, they are vain and shallow," said the Princess, sadly.

"Is it any wonder, then, that we men do not seek to wed these pretentious dolls? Because I am rich, fathers and, still more, eager, anxious mothers, and even--well, I will not say it! In short, I might have married many dozen Vandal girls, had I desired to do so. But I said, no. I loved no one of them. I cared only for this child, this little Greek. Her I love ardently, from the very depths of my soul, and faithfully too. For my whole life!"

Hilda's glance darted over him from her high seat to the swaying curtains.

"And now--now, I love even more than ever the pearl I have lost. She honors the love she once felt for me by sparing the unworthy man. She has not told you the wrong I did her, the crime I committed. But--" he straightened himself to his full height, his manly, handsome countenance illumined by the loftiest feeling--"I have imposed it upon myself as a penance, if she said nothing, to confess it to you with my own lips. Write and tell her so; perhaps then she will think of me more kindly. It is the heaviest punishment to tell you; for, Princess Hilda, I revere you as I would a goddess, aye, the protecting goddess of our people. The thought that you will now despise me is like death. But you shall know! I have--so I am told; I do not know, but it is doubtless true--I have Eugenia--I did it while intoxicated, after drinking an ocean of wine--but I did it! And I am not worthy ever to see her again. I have--"

"Not you, my beloved, it was the wine," cried an exultant voice, and a slender figure clung passionately yet shyly to his broad breast, and, while ardently embracing him with her right arm, she laid the little fingers of her left hand upon his mouth to stay his words.

"Eugenia!" exclaimed the giant, flushing crimson. "You heard me? You can forgive? You still love me?"

"Unto death! Unto the grave! No, beyond death. I would seek you in the grave if I lost you! With you, in life and in death! For I love you!"

"And that is eternal," said Hilda, passing her hand lightly over the young wife's hair. Then she floated out of the room, leaving the happy lovers alone with their joy.

BOOK TWO

IN THE WAR

CHAPTER I

PROCOPIUS OF CÆSAREA TO CORNELIUS CETHEGUS CÆSARIUS:

There is no longer either sense or reason in concealing my name; the bird would still be recognized by its song. And now I am almost certain that these sheets will not be seized in

Constantinople; for we shall soon be swimming on the blue waves.

So it is war with the Vandals! The Empress has accomplished her design. She treated her husband, after he hesitated, very coldly, even insolently. That is always effectual. What motive urged and still impels her to this war, Hell knows certainly, Heaven vaguely, and I not at all.

Perhaps the blood of the heretics must again wash away a few spores of her sins. Or she expects to gain the treasures brought to the capitol in Carthage from every land by Genseric's corsair ships--the riches of the temple of Jerusalem are among them. In short, she wanted war, and we have it.

A devout bishop from an Asiatic frontier city--his name is Agathos--came to Constantinople. The Empress summoned him to a private audience. I heard it from Antonina, the wife of Belisarius, who was the only person present. Theodora showed him a letter which he had written to the Persian King. The Bishop fell prostrate on the floor with fright. She pushed him with the tip of her golden slipper. "Rise, O Agathos, man of God," she said, "and dream to-night of what I now say to you. If you do not tell this dream to the Emperor, before tomorrow noon I will give him this letter to-morrow afternoon, and before to-morrow evening, O most holy man, you will be beheaded."

The Bishop went out and dreamed as he had been commanded--probably without sleeping. Before the early bath on the following day he sought Justinian, and, in the utmost excitement,--which was not feigned,--told him that Christ had appeared to him the night before in a dream and said: "Go to the Emperor, O Agathos, and rebuke him for having faint-heartedly given up the plan of avenging me upon these heretics. Tell him: Thus saith Christ the Lord: 'March forth, Justinian, and fear not. For I, the Lord, will aid thee in battle, and will force Africa and its treasures beneath thy rule.'"

Then Justinian was no longer to be restrained. War was determined. The opposing Prefect was thrown into prison. Belisarius was made commander-in-chief. The priests proclaimed the pious Bishop's dream from the pulpits of all the basilicas. The soldiers were ordered by hundreds to the churches, where courage was preached to them. Court officials told the dream in the streets, in the harbor, and on the ships. By the command of the Empress, Megas, her handsomest court poet, put it into Greek and Latin verses. They are astonishingly bad, worse than even our Megas usually writes; but they are easy to learn, so by day and night soldiers and sailors sing them in the streets and the wine-shops, as children sing in the dark to keep their courage up; for our heroes really do not yet feel very anxious to make the holy voyage to Carthage. So we shout incessantly,--

"Christus came to the holy Bishop; Christus warned Justinian:
'Avenge Christus, Justinianus, on the wicked Arian.
Christus himself will slay the Vandals, Africa give to thy hand!'"

The poem has two merits: first, it can be repeated as often as you please; secondly, it makes no difference with which verse you begin. The Empress says--and of course she must know--that the Holy Ghost inspired Megas.

We are working night and day. The shaggy little nags of the Huns are neighing in the streets of Constantinople. Among these troops are six hundred excellent mounted archers, commanded by the Hunnish chiefs, Aigan and Bleda, Ellak and Bala. There are also six hundred Herulians, led by Fara, a Prince of that people. They are Germans in Justinian's pay; for "Only diamond cuts diamond," Narses says: "always Germans against Germans is our favorite old game."

Strong bands of other Barbarians march also through our streets: Isaurians, Armenians, and others, under their own leaders. We call them our allies; that is, we "give" them money or grain, for which they pay with the blood of their sons. Among the nations of our own empire, the Thracians and Illyrians are the best soldiers. In the harbor the ships are rocking, impatiently tugging at their anchors in the east wind, their eager prows turned toward the west.

The army is gradually being placed on board of the fleet: eleven thousand foot, five thousand horse, upon five hundred keels, with twenty thousand sailors. Among them, as the best war-ships, are one hundred and two swift-sailing galleys manned by two thousand rowers from Constantinople; the other sailors are Egyptians, Ionians, and Cilicians. The whole array presents a beautiful warlike spectacle which I would rather gaze at than describe; but the most glorious part of it is the hero Belisarius, surrounded by his bodyguard, the shield and lance bearers, battle-trying men, selected from all the nations of the earth.

* * * * *

Already half the voyage lies behind us. I am writing these lines to you in the harbor of Syracuse.

Hitherto everything has been wonderfully successful; the goddess Tyche, whom you Latins call Fortuna, is certainly blowing our sails. The embarkation was completed by the end of June. Then the General's ship, which was to convey Belisarius, was summoned to the shore in front of the

imperial palace. Archbishop Epiphanius of Constantinople appeared on board; an Arian whom he had just baptized into the Catholic faith was brought on deck as the last man; then he blessed the ship, Belisarius, and all the rest of us, including the Pagan Huns, went down into his boat again, and, amid the exulting shouts of thousands, led the way, in advance of the General's vessel, for the whole fleet. We are very pious people, all of us whom the Empress and the dutifully dreaming Bishop and Justinian send forth to extirpate the heretics. It is a holy war--we are fighting for the Christ. We have said it so often that we now believe it ourselves.

Our course led past Perinthus--it is now called Heraclea--to Abydos. There some drunken Huns began to fight among themselves, and two of them killed a third. Belisarius instantly ordered both to be hung on a hill above the city. The Huns, especially the kinsmen of the two who were executed, made a great outcry: according to their law murder is not punished with death. I suppose the justice of the Huns permits the heirs of the murdered man to carouse with the murderers at their expense till they all lie senseless on the ground together. And when they wake, they kiss each other, and all is forgotten; for the Huns are worse drinkers than the Germans--and that is saying a great deal. Their pay contract only requires them to fight for the Emperor; he is not permitted to deal with them according to the Roman law. Belisarius assembled the Huns under the gallows from which the two were dangling, surrounded them with his most loyal men, and roared at them like a lion. I don't believe they understood his Latin, or rather mine, for I taught him the speech; but he pointed often enough to the men on the gallows: they understood that. And now they obey like lambs.

The voyage continued past Sigeum, Tænarum, Metone, where many of our men died, for the commissary at Constantinople, instead of baking the soldiers' bread twice, had lowered it, as raw dough, into the public baths (how appetizing! but, to be sure, it cost nothing); and when it was completely saturated with water, had it browned quickly on the outside upon red-hot plates. So it weighed much heavier (the Emperor pays for it by weight), and he gained several ounces in every pound. But it gently melted into most evil-smelling mush, and five hundred of our men died from it. The Emperor was informed; but Theodora interceded for the poor commissary (he is said to have paid one-tenth of his profits for her Christian mediation), and the man received only a reprimand, so we heard later. From Metone we went past Zacynthos to Sicily, where, at the end of sixteen days, we dropped anchor in an old roadstead, now unused--the place is called Caucana--opposite Mount Ætna.

Now heavy thoughts assailed the hero Belisarius. He so thirsts for battle that he dashes blindly wherever a foe is pointed out. Yet anxiety is increasing. Not one of the numerous spies who were sent from Constantinople to Carthage long before our departure has returned--neither to Constantinople, nor to any of the stopping-places on our route that were assigned to them. So the General knows as much about the Vandals as he does of the people in the moon.

What kind of people they are, their method of warfare, how he is to reach them--he has no idea. Besides the soldiers have fallen back into their old fear of Genseric's fleet, and there is no Empress on board who might order some one to dream again. The limping trochees of the court poet are rarely sung; the men have grown disgusted with the verses; if any one strikes up the air half unwillingly, two others instantly drown his voice. Only the Huns and the Herulians--to the disgrace of the Romans, be it said--refrain from open lamentations; they remain sullenly silent. But our warriors, the Romans, do not shrink from loudly exclaiming that they would fight bravely enough on land, they are used to it; but if the enemy should assail them on the open sea, they would force the sailors to make off with sails and oars as fast as possible. They could not fight Germans, waves, and wind, all at the same time, upon rocking ships, and it was not in their contract for military service. Belisarius, however, feels most disturbed by his uncertainty concerning the plans of the enemy. Where is this universally dreaded fleet hiding? It is becoming mysterious now that we see and hear nothing of it. Is it lying concealed behind one of the neighboring islands? Or is it lurking, on the watch for us, upon the coast of Africa? Where and when shall we land?

I said yesterday that he ought to have considered this somewhat earlier. But he muttered something in his beard, and begged me to atone for his errors to the best of my ability. I must go to Syracuse and, on the pretext of buying provisions from your Ostrogoth Counts, inquire everything about these Vandals, of whom he is ignorant and yet ought to know. So I have been here in Syracuse since yesterday, asking everybody about the Vandals, and they all laugh at me, saying: "Why, if Belisarius does not know, how should we? We are not at war with them." It seems to me that the insolent fellows are right.

CHAPTER II

Triumph, O Cethegus! Belisarius's former good fortune is fluttering over the pennons at our mast-heads: the gods themselves are blinding the Vandals; they are depriving them of their reason, consequently they must desire their destruction. Hermes is breaking the path for us, removing danger and obstacles from our way.

The Vandal fleet, the bugbear of our valiant warriors, is floating harmless away from Carthage toward the north; while we, with all sails set--the east wind is filling them merrily--are flying from

Sicily over the blue flood westward to Carthage. We cut the rippling waves as if on a festal excursion. No foe, no spy, far or near, to oppose us or give warning of our approach to the threatened Vandals, on whom we shall fall like a meteor crashing from a clear sky.

That all this has come to the General's knowledge, and that he can make instant use of it, is due to Procopius, or--to speak more honestly--to blind chance, the capricious goddess Tyche. It seems to me, though I am no philosopher, that she rather than Nemesis guides the destinies of nations.

I wrote last that I was running about the streets of Syracuse, somewhat helplessly, not without being laughed at by the mockers, asking all the people whether no Vandals had been seen. One--this time it was a Gothic count named Totila, as handsome as he was insolent--had just answered, laughing and shrugging his shoulders: "Seek your enemies yourselves. I would far rather go with the Vandals to find and sink you." I was thinking how correctly this young Barbarian had perceived the advantage of his people and the folly of his Regent, when, vexed with the Goths, with myself, and most of all with Belisarius, I turned a street corner and almost ran against some one coming from the opposite direction. It was Hegelochus, my schoolmate from Cæsarea, who, I knew, had settled as a merchant, a speculator in grain, somewhere in Sicily, but I was ignorant in which city.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, after the first exchange of greetings.

"I?--I am only looking for a trifle," I answered rather irritably, for I already heard in imagination his jeering laugh. "I am searching everywhere for a hundred and fifty to two hundred Vandal war-ships. Do you happen to know where they are?"

"Certainly I do," he replied, without laughing. "They are lying in the harbor of Caralis in Sardinia."

"Omniscient grain-dealer," I cried, rigid with amazement, "where did you learn that?"

"In Carthage, which I left only three days ago," he said quietly.

Then the questioning began. And often as I squeezed the shrewd, sensible man like a sponge, a stream of news most important for us flowed out.

So we have nothing to fear for our fleet from the Vandal war vessels. The Barbarians as yet have no suspicion that we are advancing upon them. The flower of their army has gone on the dreaded galleys to Sardinia. Gelimer feels no anxiety for Carthage, or any other city on the coast. He is in Hermione, in the province of Byzacena, four days' journey from the sea. What can he be doing there, on the edge of the desert? We are, therefore, safe from every peril, and can land in Africa wherever wind, waves, and our own will may guide us.

During this conversation, and while I was constantly questioning him, I had wound my arm around my friend's neck, and now asked him to come to the harbor with me and look at my ship, which lay at anchor there. It was a very swift sailer of a new model. The merchant agreed. As soon as I had him safely on board, I drew my sword, cut the rope which moored us to the metal ring of the harbor mole, and ordered my sailors to take us swiftly to Caucana.

Hegelochus was startled; he scolded and threatened. But I soothed him, saying: "Forgive this abduction, my friend; it is absolutely necessary that Belisarius himself, not merely his legal adviser, should talk with and question you. He alone knows everything that is at stake. And I will not undertake the responsibility of having failed to inquire about some important point or of having misunderstood some answer. Some god who is angered against the Vandals has sent you to me; woe betide me if I do not profit by it. You must tell the General everything you have learned; you must accompany our ships, nay, guide them to Africa. This one involuntary voyage to Carthage will bring you richer profits from the royal treasures of the Vandals than sailing to and fro with wheat many hundred times. And the reward awaiting you in Heaven for your participation in the destruction of the heretics--I will not estimate."

He grinned, calmed down, then laughed. But the hero Belisarius smiled far more joyously when he saw before him the man "just from Carthage," and could question him to his heart's content. How he praised me for the accident of this meeting! The command to sail was given with the blast of the tuba. How the sails flew aloft! How proudly our galleys swept forward! Woe to thee, Vandalia! Woe to the lofty towers of Genseric's citadel!

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The swift voyage continued past the islands of Gaulos and Melita, which divide the Adriatic from the Tyrrhenian Sea. At Melita the wind, as if ordered by Belisarius, grew still fresher,--a strong east-southeast gale which, on the following day, drove us upon the African coast at Caput Vada, five days' march from Carthage. That is, for a swift walker without baggage; we shall probably require a much longer time. Belisarius ordered the sails to be lowered, the anchors dropped, and summoned all the leaders of the troops to a council of war on his own ship. It was now to be decided whether we should disembark the troops and march against Carthage by land,

or keep them on the fleet and conquer the capital from the sea. Opinions were very conflicting.

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The decision has been reached; we shall march against Carthage by land. True, Archelaus, the Quæstor, protested, saying that we had no harbor for the ships without men, no fortress for the men without ships. Every storm might scatter them upon the open sea, or hurl them against the cliffs along the shore. He also called attention to the lack of water along the coast region, and the want of means to supply food. "Only let no one ask me, as quæstor, for anything to eat," he cried angrily. "A quæstor who has only the office, but no bread, cannot satisfy you with his position." He advised hastening by sea to Carthage, to occupy the harbor of Stagnum, which could hold the entire fleet, and was at that time entirely undefended; thence to rush from the ships upon the city, which could be taken at the first attack, if the King and his army were really four days' march from the coast.

But Belisarius said: "God has fulfilled our most ardent desire; He has permitted us to reach Africa without encountering the hostile fleet. Shall we now remain at sea, and perhaps yet meet those ships before which our men threaten to fly? As for the danger of tempests, it would be better to have the galleys lost when they are empty, than while filled with our troops. We have still the advantage of surprising the unprepared foe; every delay will enable them to make ready to meet us. Here we can land without fighting; elsewhere and later we must perhaps battle against the wind and the enemy. So I say, we will land here. Walls and ditches around the camp will supply the place of a fortress. And have no anxiety about stores: if we defeat the foe, we shall also capture his provisions." Thus spoke Belisarius. I thought that, as usual, his reasoning was weak, but his courage strong. The truth is, he always chooses the shortest way to the battle.

The council of war closed. Belisarius's will was carried out.

We brought the horses, weapons, baggage, and implements of war to land. About fourteen thousand soldiers and nineteen thousand sailors began to shovel, to dig, to drive stakes into the hot, dry sand; the General not only threw out the first spadeful, but, working uninterruptedly, the last. His perspiration abundantly bedewed the soil of Africa, and the men were so spurred by his example that they vied with each other valiantly. Before night closed in, the ditch, the wall, and the palisade were completed around the entire camp. Only one-fifth of the archers spent the night on the ships.

So far all was well. Our galleys still contained an ample store of provisions, thanks to the hospitality of the Ostrogoths in Sicily. These simpletons, by the learned Regent's command, almost gave us everything an army needs for man and horse (the troublesome Totila, who is no well-wisher of ours, was instantly recalled). In reply to our amazed questions, they answered, by the learned Cassiodorus's instructions: "You will pay us by avenging us upon the Vandals." Well, Justinian will reward them. I wonder if the scholar knows the fable of how the horse, because he hated the stag, carried the man upon his back and hunted the stag to death? The free animal had taken the man on his back for this ride only, but never again was he rid of his captor. But the water is giving out. What we have with us is scanty, foul, and putrid; and to march for days under the African sun with no water for men and beasts--how will it end?

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I shall really soon believe that we are God's chosen favorites--we, the chaste-hearted warriors of Justinian the truthful and Theodora! Or have the Vandals and their King called down upon themselves the wrath of Heaven so heavily that miracles continually happen against these Barbarians and in our favor?

Yesterday evening we all, from the General to the camel, were in sore anxiety about water. To-day the slave Agnellus--he is a countryman of yours, O Cethegus, and the son of a fisherman from Stabiæ--brought to my tent whole amphoræ of the most delicious spring water, not only for drinking, but amply sufficient for bathing. With the last strokes of the spade our Herulians opened a large bubbling spring on the eastern edge of the camp--an unprecedented thing in the Byzacena province, between the sea and the "desert,"--so the people here call all the country southwest of the great road along which we are marching, and surely quite unjustly, for some of it is very fertile; yet it is old desert ground and often merges imperceptibly into the real wilderness. At any rate, this spring gushed forth for us from the surrounding dry sand. The stream of water is so abundant that men and animals can drink, boil, and bathe, pour out the foul water from the ships, and replace it with the best. I hastened to Belisarius and congratulated him, not only because of the actual usefulness of this discovery, but because it is an omen of victory. "Water gushes out of the wilderness for you, General," I exclaimed. "That means an effortless victory. You are the favorite of Heaven." He smiled. We always like to hear such things.

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Belisarius commissioned me to compose an order to be read aloud at the departure of each body of troops.

A few dozen of our precious Huns dashed out into the country and seized some of the harvests just ripening in the fields, over which they became involved in a discussion with the Roman colonists. As the Huns, unfortunately, speak their Latin only with leather whips and lance-thrusts, there were several dead men after the conference,—of course only on the side of the wicked peasants, who would not let the horses of the Huns eat their fill of their best grain. Our beloved Huns cut off the heads of the men whom they had thus happily liberated from the Vandal yoke, hung them to their saddles, and brought them to the General for a dessert. Belisarius foamed with rage. He often foams; and when Belisarius lightens, Procopius must usually thunder.

So it was now. So I wrote a proclamation that we were the saviors, liberators, and benefactors of the provincials, and therefore would neither consider their best grain-fields as litter for our horses nor play ball with their heads. "In this case," I wrote convincingly, "such conduct is not only criminal, but extremely stupid. Our little body of troops could venture to land only because we expect that the inhabitants of the provinces will be hostile to the Vandals and helpful to us." But I appealed to our heroes still more impressively, addressing not their honor or their conscience, but their stomachs! "If ye die of hunger, O admirable men," I wrote, "the peasants will bring us nothing to eat. If ye kill them, the dead will sell you nothing more and the living almost less. You will drive the provincials to be the allies of the Vandals—to say nothing of God and His opinion of you, which is already somewhat clouded. So spare the people, at least for the present, or they will discover too early that Belisarius's Huns are worse than Gelimer's Vandals. When the Emperor's tax-officers once rule the land, then, dear descendants of Attila, you will no longer need to impose any constraint upon yourselves; then the 'liberated' will have already learned to estimate their freedom. You cannot go as far as Justinian's tax-collectors, beloved Huns and robbers." The proclamation was of that purport, only dressed in somewhat fairer words. We are marching forward. No sign of the Barbarians. Where are they hiding? Where is this King of the Vandals dreaming? If he does not wake soon, he will find himself without a kingdom.

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We were still marching on. One piece of good fortune follows another.

A day's march westward from our landing place at Caput Vada on the road to Carthage near the sea, is the city of Syllektum. The ancient walls, it is true, had been torn down since the reign of Genseric, but the inhabitants, to repel the attacks of the Moors, had again put nearly the whole city in a state of defence. Belisarius sent Borais, one of his bodyguard, with several shield-bearers, to venture a reconnoissance. It was entirely successful. After nightfall the men stole to the entrances (they could not be called gates, only openings of streets), but found them barricaded and guarded. They spent the night quietly in the ditch of the old fortifications, for there might still be Vandals in the city. In the morning peasants from the surrounding country came driving up in carts with racks: it was market day. Our men threatened the terrified rustics with death if they uttered a word, and forced the drivers to conceal them under the tilts. The watchmen of Syllektum removed the barricades to admit the wagons. Then our soldiers jumped down, took possession of the city without a sword-stroke. There was not a Vandal in it. We occupied the Curia and the Forum; we summoned the Catholic Bishop and the noblest inhabitants of Syllektum,—they are remarkably stupid people,—and told them that they were now free; happy also, for they were the subjects of Justinian. At the same time, with swords drawn, our men asked for breakfast. The Senators of Syllektum gave Borais the keys of their city, but unfortunately the gates for them were missing; the Vandals or Moors had burned them long ago. The Bishop entertained them in the porch of the basilica. Borais said the wine was very good. At the end of the repast, the Bishop blessed Borais, and asked him to restore the true, pure faith quickly. The warrior, a Hun, is unfortunately a pagan; so he had little comprehension of what was expected of him. But he repeated to me several times that the wine was excellent. So we have already saved one city in Africa. In the evening we all marched through. Belisarius enjoined the most rigid discipline. Unfortunately, a large number of houses burst into flames.

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Beyond Syllektum we again made a lucky capture. The chief official of the whole Vandal mail service, a Roman, had been sent out from Carthage by the King several days before with all his horses, numerous wagons, and many slaves, to carry the sovereign's commands in all directions through his empire. On his way to the east he had heard of our landing, and he sought us out with everything he still had in his possession. All the letters, all the secret messages of the Vandals, are in the hands of Belisarius—a whole basket of them, which I must read.

It really seems as if an angel of the Lord had led us into the writing-room and the council hall of the Asdings. Verus, the Archdeacon of the Arians, dictated most of the letters. But we were thoroughly deceived in this priest. Theodora believed him to be her tool, yet he has become Gelimer's chancellor. Strange that these secrets were intrusted to a Roman for conveyance and

protection, not to a Vandal. Besides, must not Verus have known how near we were, when he sent the papers, unguarded, directly to us.

True, the most important thing for us to know,--namely, where the King and his army are at present,--does not appear in these letters, which were written a week ago. Yet we learn from them at last what induced him to remain so far from Carthage and the coast, on the edge of the desert and within it. He has made contracts with many Moorish tribes, and been promised thousands of foot-soldiers--almost equal in number to our whole army. These Moorish auxiliaries are gathering in Numidia, in the plain of Bulla. That is far, far west of Carthage, near the border of the wilderness. Could the Vandal intend to abandon his capital and all the tract of country for such a distance, without striking a single blow, and await us there, at Bulla?

Belisarius--what a trick of chance!--is now sending to Gelimer by the Vandal mail system Justinian's declaration of war, and despatching in every direction to the Vandal nobles, army leaders, and officials an invitation to abandon Gelimer. The summons is well worded (I composed it myself): "I am not waging war with the Vandals, nor do I break the compact of perpetual peace concluded with Genseric. We desire only to overthrow your Tyrant, who has broken the law and imprisoned your rightful King. Therefore help us! Shake off the yoke of such shameless despotism, that you may enjoy liberty and the prosperity we are bringing you. We call upon God to witness our sincerity."

Postscript, added after the close of the war: "Strange, yet it is certainly noble. This appeal did not win a single Vandal to our side during the entire campaign. These Germans have become enfeebled. But there was not even *one* traitor among them!"

CHAPTER III

Many days' march westward from the road which the Byzantines were following toward Carthage, and a considerable distance south of Mount Auras, the extreme limit of the Vandal kingdom in Africa, lay a small oasis. It was within the sandy desert which extended southward into the unknown interior of the hot portion of the globe. A spring of drinkable water, a few date-palms in the circle around it, and, beneath their shade, a patch of turf of salt grass, affording sufficient fodder for the camels--that was all. The ground in the neighborhood was flat, except that here and there rose waves of the yellow, loose, hot sand swept together by the wind. Nowhere appeared shrub, bush, or hillock; as far as the eye could rove in the brightest light of day, it found no resting-place till, wearied by the quest, it sought some point close at hand.

But it was night now, and wonderfully, indescribably magnificent was the silent solitude. Over the whole expanse of the heavens the stars were glittering in countless multitudes with a brilliancy which they show only to the sons of the desert. It is easy to understand that deity first appeared to the Moors in the form of the stars. In them they worshipped the radiant, beneficent forces which contrasted benignly with the desert's scorching heat, the desert's storms. From the course, position, and shining of the stars, they augured the will of the gods and their own future.

Around the spring were pitched the low goatskin tents of the nomad Moors, only half a dozen of them, for the whole tribe had not gathered. The faithful camels, carefully tethered by the feet among the tent ropes, and covered with blankets to protect them from the stings of the flies, were lying in the deep sand with their long necks outstretched. In the centre of the little encampment were the noble racers, the battle stallions, and the brood mares, confined in a circle made with ropes and lances thrust into the sand. On the round top of one of the tents towered a long spear, from whose point hung a lion's skin; for this was the shelter of the chief.

The night wind, which blew refreshingly from the distant sea in the northeast, played with the mane of the dead king of the wilderness, sometimes tossing the skin of the huge paw, sometimes the tuft of hair at the end of the tail. Fantastic shadows fell on the light sandy soil; for though the moon was not in the sky, the stars shone bright. A deep, solemn stillness reigned. Every living creature seemed buried in sleep. Four huge fires, one at each of the four points of the compass, were blazing, a bow-shot from the tents, to frighten the wild beasts from the flocks; from them arose at long intervals the only sound that broke the stillness; namely, the cry of some shepherd who thus kept himself awake and warned his companions to be watchful. This solemn silence continued for a long, long time.

At last a couple of stallions neighed, a weapon clanked outside from the direction of the fires, and directly thereafter a light, almost inaudible footstep came toward the centre of the camp,--toward the "Lion Tent." Suddenly it paused; a slender young man stooped to the ground before the entrance.

"What? Are you lying in front of the tent, grandfather?" he asked in astonishment. "Are you asleep?"

"I was watching," a low voice answered.

"I should have ventured to rouse you. There is a fateful star in the heavens. I saw it appear when I was keeping the eastern fire-watch. As soon as I was relieved, I hastened to you. The gods

are sending a warning! But youth does not understand their signs; you do, wise ancestor. Look yonder, to the right--the right of the last palm. Don't you see it?"

"I saw it long ago. I have expected the sign for many nights, ay, for years."

Awe and a slight sense of fear thrilled the youth. "For years? You knew what would happen in the heavens? You are very wise, O Cabaon."

"Not I. My grandfather told my father, and he repeated the marvel to me. It was more than a hundred years ago. The fair-faced strangers came from the North across the sea in many ships, led by that King of terrors with whose name our women still silence unruly children."

"Genseric!" said the youth, softly; his tone expressed both hate and horror.

"At that time, from the same direction as the ships, a terrible star mounted into the heavens--blood-red, like a flaming scourge with many hundred thongs; it swung menacingly over our country and people. And my grandfather, after he had seen the terrible war-king in the harbor of Tsocium, said to my father and to our tribe: 'Unfasten the camels! Bridle the noble racers, and set forth. Go southward, into the scorching bosom of the protecting Mother! This King of Battles and his war-loving nation are what the terrible star announced. For many, many years, and tens of years, all who oppose them will be lost; the armies of Rome and the galleys of Constantinople will be swept away by these giants from the North, like the clouds which seek to oppose the star.' And so it came to pass. The sons of our tribe, though they would far rather have discharged their long arrows at the fair-haired giants, obeyed the old man's counsel, and we escaped into the sheltering desert. Bonifacius, the Roman General, fell. Our ancestor had foretold it in the prophetic saying: 'G will destroy B. But,' he added, 'some day, after more than a hundred years, a star will rise in the east, and then B will overthrow G. Other tribes of our race who, with the imperial troops, tried to resist the invaders, were mowed down like them by Genseric, the son of darkness. And when they came howling to our tents, raising the death-wail, and summoned us to a war of vengeance, my grandfather and afterwards my father refused, saying: 'Not yet! They cannot yet be conquered. More than two or three generations of men will pass, and no one will be able to stand before the giants from the North, neither the Romans by sea, nor we sons of the desert. But the children of the North cannot remain permanently in the land of the sun! Many of those who came to our native country to conquer and rule us, mightier warriors than we, have vanquished us, but not this land, this sun, these deserts. Sand and sun and luxurious idleness have lessened the strength of the strangers' arms, the might of their will. So will also fare these tall, blue-eyed giants. The vigor will leave their bodies, and the lust for battle their souls. And then--then we will again wrest from them the heritage of our ancestors.' So it was predicted, so it has been.

"For tens of years our archers, our spearmen could not withstand the fierce foes; then their strength decayed, and we often drove them back when they entered the sacred desert. When, some day, a star like this returns, my ancestor declared, the reign of the strangers will be over. Take heed whence a scourge-like star comes again; for from that direction will come the foe that will hew down the yellow-haired men. The star to-night came from the east; and from the east will come the conquerors of Genseric's people!

"We have news that the Emperor has made war upon the Vandals, that his army has landed in the far East! But it does not agree--the other sign! G doubtless means Gelimer, the fair-haired King. But the Emperor of the Romans is J, Justinian. Speak, have you chanced to hear the name of the Roman. General?"

"Belisarius."

The old man started up. "And B will overthrow G,--Belisarius will vanquish Gelimer! Look, how blood-red the scourge-like star is shining! That means bloody battles. But we, son of my son, we will not interpose when Roman sword and Vandal spear are clashing against each other. The conflict may easily extend as far as the Auras Mountain; we will plunge deeper into the wilderness. Let the aliens fight and destroy one another. The Roman eagle, too, will not long have its eyrie here. The star of misfortune will rise for them as well as for these tall sea-kings. The intruders come--and pass away; we, the sons of the country, will remain. Like the sand of our deserts we wander before the wind, but we shall not pass away; we always return. The land of the sun belongs to the sons of the sun. And, as the sand of the desert covers and buries the proud stone buildings of the Romans, so shall we, ever returning, bury the alien life which forces itself into our country, where it can never thrive. We retire--but we return."

"Yet the fair King has obtained ten thousand of our men for the war. What must they do?"

"Give back the money; leave the Vandal army, which the gods have abandoned! Order my messengers to-morrow to dash with this command to every tribe where I rule--with this advice, where I can counsel."

"Your counsel is a command wherever the desert sand extends. Only I grieve for the man with the mournful eyes. He has shown favor to many of our people, granted hospitality to many of our tribes; what return shall they make to their friend?"

"Hospitality unto death! Not fight his battles, not share his booty; but if he comes to them

seeking shelter and protection, divide the last date with him, shed the last drop of blood in his defence. Up, strike the basin! We will depart ere the sun wakes. Untether the camels!"

The old man rose hastily.

The youth dealt the copper kettle that hung beside the tent a blow with his curved scimeter. The brown-skinned men, women, and children were astir like a swarm of ants. When the sun rose above the horizon, the oasis was empty, desolate, silent as death.

Far in the south whirled upward a cloud of dust and sand which the north wind seemed to be driving farther and farther inland.

CHAPTER IV

PROCOPIUS TO CETHEGUS:

We are still marching forward, and certainly as if we were in a friendly country. Our heroes, even the Huns, have understood, thanks less to my marching orders than to actual experience, that they cannot steal as many provisions as the people will voluntarily bring if they are to be paid instead of being robbed. Belisarius is winning all the provincials by kindness. So the colonists flock from all directions to our camp and sell us everything we need, at low prices. When we are obliged to spend the night in the open fields we carefully fortify the camp.

When it can be done we remain at night in cities, as, for instance, in Leptis and Hadrumentum. The Bishop, with the Catholic clergy, comes forth to meet us, as soon as our Huns appear. The Senators and the most aristocratic citizens soon follow. The latter willingly allow themselves to be "forced "; that is, they wait till we are in the forum, so, in case we should all be thrown by our undiscoverable foes into the sea before we reach Carthage, they can attribute their friendliness to us to our cruel violence. With the exception of a few Catholic priests I have not seen a Roman in Africa for whom I felt the slightest respect. I almost think that they, the liberated, are even less worthy than we, the liberators.

We march on an average about ten miles daily. To-day we came from Hadrumentum past Horrea to Grasse, about forty-four Roman miles from Carthage,--a magnificent place for a camp. Our astonishment increases day by day, the more we learn of the riches of this African province. In truth, it may well be beyond human power to maintain one's native vigor beneath this sky, in this region. And Grasse! Here is a country villa--to speak more accurately, a proud pillared palace of the Vandal King--gleaming with marble, surrounded by pleasure-gardens, whose like I have never seen in Europe or Asia. About it bubble delicious springs brought through pipes from a distance, or up through the sand by some magical discoverer of water. And what a multitude of trees! and not one among them whose boughs are not fairly bending under the burden of delicious fruit. Our whole army is encamped in this fruit grove, beneath these trees; every soldier has eaten his fill and stuffed his leather pouch, for we shall march on early to-morrow morning; yet one can scarcely see a difference in the quantity. Everywhere, too, are vines loaded with bunches of grapes. Many, many centuries before a Scipio entered this country, industrious Phoenicians cultivated vines here, between the sea and the desert, training them on rows of stakes a few feet high. Here grows the best wine in all Africa; they say the Vandals drink it unmixed, from their helmets. I only sipped the almost purple liquor, to which Agnellus added half the quantity of water, yet I feel drowsy. I can write no more. Good-night, Cethegus, far away in Rome! Good-night, fellow-soldier! Just half a cup more; it tastes so good. Pleasant dreams! Wine makes us good-natured, so pleasant dreams to you, too. Barbarians! It is so comfortable here. The room assigned to me (the slaves, all Romans and Catholics, have not fled, and they serve us with the utmost zeal) is beautifully decorated with wall paintings. The bed is so soft and easy! A cool breeze from the sea is blowing through the open window. I will venture to take a quarter of a cup more; and to-night, dear Barbarians, if possible, no attack. May you sleep well. Vandals, so that I, too, can sleep sweetly! I almost believe the African sickness--dread of every exertion--has already seized upon me.

* * * * *

Four days' march from the wonder-land of Grasse. We are spending the night in the open country. To-morrow we shall reach Decimum, less than nine Roman miles from Carthage, and not one Vandal have we seen yet.

It is late in the evening. Our camp-fires are blazing for a long distance, a beautiful scene! There is something ominous in the soft, dark air. Night is falling swiftly under the distant trees in the west. There is the blast of the shrill horns of our Huns. I see their white sheepskin cloaks disappearing. They are mounting guard on all three sides. At the right, on the northeast, the sea and our ships protect us; that is, for to-day. To-morrow the galleys will not be able to accompany our march as they have done hitherto, on account of the cliffs of the Promontory of Mercury, which here extend far out from the shore. So Belisarius ordered the Quæstor Archelaus, who commands the fleet, not to venture as far as Carthage itself, but, after rounding the promontory,

to cast anchor and wait further orders. So to-morrow we shall be obliged, for the first time, to advance without the protection of our faithful companions, the ships; and as the road to Decimum is said to lead through dangerous defiles, Belisarius has carefully planned the order of marching and sent it in writing this evening to all the leaders, to save time in the departure early in the morning.

* * * * *

The warlike notes of the tuba are rousing the sleepers. We are about to start. An eagle from the desert in the west is flying over our camp.

It is reported that the first meeting with the enemy--only a few mounted men--took place during the night at our farthest western outpost. One of our Huns fell, and the commander of one of their squadrons, Bleda, is missing. Probably it is merely one of the camp rumors which the impatience of expectation has already conjured up several times. To-night we shall reach Decimum; to-morrow night the gates of Carthage. But where are the Vandals?

CHAPTER V

When Procopius wrote the last lines, those whom he was seeking were far nearer than he imagined.

The first rays of the morning sun darted above the sea, glittered on the waves, and shone over the yellowish-brown sand of the edge of the desert, as a dozen Vandal horsemen dashed into the King's camp a few leagues southwest of Decimum.

Gibamund, the leader, and the boy Ammata sprang from their horses. "What do ye bring?" shouted the guards.

"Victory," answered Ammata.

"And a captive," added Gibamund.

They hastened to rouse the King. But Gelimer came in full armor out of his tent to meet them.

"You are stained with blood--both. You, too, Ammata; are you wounded?" His voice was tremulous with anxiety.

"No," laughed the handsome boy, his eyes sparkling brightly. "It is the blood of the enemy."

"The first that has been shed in this war," replied the King, gravely, "sullies your pure hand. Oh, if I had not consented--"

"It would have been unfortunate," Gibamund interrupted. "Our child has done well. Go to the tent for Hilda, my lad, while I deliver the report. So, chafing with impatience, we long endured your keeping us so far away from the foe; we have followed their march at a great distance, unsuspected even by their farthest outposts. When to-night you finally permitted us to ride nearer to their flank than usual, in order to discover whether they really intended to go to Decimum to-day unprotected by the fleet, and to pass at noon through the Narrow Way, you said that if we could obtain a captive without causing much disturbance, it would be desirable. Well, we have not only a prisoner, but more; we found an important strip of parchment on him. And it is fortunate; for the man refuses to give any information. See, they are bringing him yonder. There come Thrasaric and Eugenia; and Ammata is already drawing Hilda here by the hand."

"Welcome," cried the young wife, hastening toward her beloved husband, but she shrank in embarrassment from his embrace, for the captive was already standing before the King. With hands bound behind his back, he darted savage glances from beneath his bushy brows at the Vandals, especially at Ammata. Blood trickled from his left cheek upon the white sheepskin that covered his shoulders; his lower garment also--it reached only to the knee--was of untanned leather; his feet were bare; a huge spur was buckled with a thong on his right heel, and four gold disks, bestowed by the Emperor and his generals in honor of brave deeds (like our orders), were fastened on his heavy leather breastplate.

"So," continued Gibamund, "toward midnight, with only ten Vandals and two Moors behind us, we rode out of camp toward the distant light of the hostile campfires, cautiously concealing ourselves behind the long mounds of sand, stretching for half a league, which the desert wind is constantly heaping up and blowing away again, especially just on the edge of the wilderness. Under the protection of this cover, we advanced unseen so far eastward that we saw by the glare of a watchfire--probably lighted to drive away the wild beasts--four horsemen. Two sat crouching on their little nags, with their bows bent, gazing intently toward the southwest, whence we had come; the other two had dismounted and were leaning against the shoulders of their horses. The points of their lances glittered in the flickering light of the fire.

"I motioned to the two Moors, whom I had taken with us for this clever trick. Slipping noiselessly from their steeds, they threw themselves flat on the ground and were scarcely distinguishable in the darkness from the surrounding sand. They crept on all fours in a wide circle, one to the left, the other to the right, around the fire and the sentinels, until they stood northeast and northwest of them. They had soon vanished from our sight, for they glided as swiftly as lizards.

"Soon we heard, on the other side of the watchfire, toward the north, the hoarse, menacing cry of the leopardess going out with her cubs on the nocturnal quest of prey. The mother was instantly answered by the beseeching cry of her young. The four horses of the sentinels shied, their manes bristled; the scream of the leopardess came nearer, and all four of the strangers--they had probably never heard such a sound--turned in the direction of the noise. One of the horses reared violently, the rider swayed, clinging to its mane; another, trying to help him, snatched at the bridle, his bow falling from his hand. Profiting by the confusion of the moment, we glided forward in perfect silence from behind the sand-hill. We had wrapped cloth around the horses' hoofs, and almost reached them unseen; not until we were close by the fire did one of the mounted men discover us. 'Foes!' he shouted, darting away. The other rider followed. The third did not reach the saddle; I struck him down as he was mounting. But the fourth--this man here, the leader--was on his horse's back in an instant; he ran down the two Moors who tried to stop him, and would have escaped, but Ammata--our child"--he pointed to the boy; the captive gnashed his teeth furiously--"shot after him like an arrow on his little white steed--"

"Pegasus!" Ammata interrupted. "You know, brother, you brought him to me from the last Moorish war. He really goes as though he had wings."

--reached him, and before any one of us could lend assistance, with a swift double thrust--"

"You taught me, Gelimer!" cried Ammata, with sparkling eyes, for he could no longer restrain himself.

--of the short-sword, he thrust the enemy's long spear aside and dealt him a heavy blow on the cheek. But the brave fellow, heedless of the pain, dropped the spear and gripped the battle-axe in his belt. Then our child threw the noose around his neck--"

"You know--the antelope cast!" Ammata exclaimed to Gelimer.

"And with a jerk dragged him from his horse."

Gibamund spoke in the Vandal tongue, but the captive understood everything from the accompanying gestures, and now shrieked in the Latin of the camp, "May my father's soul pass into a dog if that be not avenged! I, the great-grandson of Attila--I--dragged from my horse by a boy--with a noose! Beasts are caught thus, not warriors!"

"Calm yourself, my little friend," replied Thrasaric, approaching him. "There is a good old motto among all the Gothic nations: 'Spare the wolf rather than the Hun.' Besides, that royal bird, the ostrich, is captured in the same way when he is overtaken. So it's no disgrace to you." Laughing heartily, he straightened the heavy helmet with the bear's head.

"We reached the two at once," Gibamund continued, "bound the man, who fought like a wild boar, and snatched from his teeth this strip of parchment which he was trying to swallow."

The prisoner groaned.

"What is your name?" asked the King, glancing hastily at the parchment.

"Bleda."

"How strong is your army in horsemen?"

"Go and count them."

"Friend Hun," said Thrasaric, in a threatening tone, "a king is speaking to you. Behave civilly, little wolf. Answer politely the questions you are asked, or--"

The prisoner glanced defiantly toward Gelimer, saying, "This gold disk was given to me by the great General with his own hands after our third victory over the Persians. Do you think I would betray Belisarius?"

"Lead him away," said Gelimer, waving his hand. "Bind up his wound. Treat him kindly."

The Hun cast another glance of mortal hate at Ammata, then he followed his guards.

Gelimer again looked at the parchment. "I thank you, my boy," he said, "I thank you. You have indeed brought us no trivial thing, the order of the enemy's march to-day. Follow me to my tent, my generals; there you shall hear my plan of attack. We need not wait for the arrival of the Moors. I think, if the Lord is not wrathful with us--but let us have no sinful arrogance--Oh, Ammata, how I rejoice to have you again alive! After your departure I had a terrible dream about you. God has restored you to me once--I will not tempt Him a second time." Going close to the

boy and laying his hand on his shoulder, he said in his sternest tone: "Listen; I forbid you to fight in the battle to-day."

"What?" cried Ammata, furiously, turning deadly pale. "That is impossible! Gelimer, I beseech--"

"Silence," said the King, frowning, "and obey."

"Why," cried Gibamund; "I should think you might let him go. He has shown--"

"Oh, brother, brother," exclaimed Ammata, tears streaming from his eyes, "how have I deserved this punishment?"

"Is this his reward for to-night's deed?" warned Thrasaric.

"Silence, all of you," Gelimer commanded sternly. "It is decided. He shall *not* fight with us. He is still a boy."

Ammata stamped his foot angrily.

"And oh, my darling," Gelimer added, clasping the vehemently resisting lad in his arms, "let me confess it. I love you so tenderly, with such undue affection, that anxiety for you would not leave me for a single instant during the battle, and I need all my thoughts for the foe."

"Then let me fight by your side; protect me yourself!"

"I dare not. I dare not think of you. I must think of Belisarius."

"Indeed, I pity him from my inmost soul," cried Hilda, in passionate excitement. "I am a woman, and it is hard enough for me not to go with you: but a boy of fifteen!"

Eugenia timidly pulled her back by the robe, stroking and kissing her hand; but Hilda, smoothing the boy's golden locks, went on: "It is a duty, it is a patriotic duty, that every man who can--especially a son of the royal house--should fight for his people. This lad can fight; he has proved it. So do not refuse him to his people. My ancestor taught me that only he who is to fall will fall."

"Sinful paganism!" exclaimed the King, wrathfully.

"Well, then, let me address you as a Christian. Is this your trust in God, Gelimer? Who in the two armies is as guiltless as this child? O King, I am less devout than you, but I have confidence enough in the God of Heaven to believe that he will protect this boy in our just cause. Ay, should this purest, fairest scion of the Asding race fall, it would be like a judgment of God, proclaiming that we are indeed corrupt in His eyes!"

"Hold!" cried the King, in anguish. "Do not probe the deepest wounds of my breast. If he *should* fall now? If a judgment of God, as you called it, should so terribly overtake us? Doubtless he is free from guilt as far as human beings can be. But have you forgotten the terrible words of menace--about the iniquity of the fathers? If I experienced *that*, I should see in it the curse of vengeance fulfilled, and I believe I should despair."

He began to pace swiftly up and down.

Then Gibamund whispered to his wife, who shook her proud head silently but wrathfully, "Let him go. Such anxiety in the brain of the commander-in-chief will do more harm than the spears of twenty boys can render service."

"But arrows fly far," cried Ammata, defiantly. "If, like a miserable coward, I remain behind your backs, I can fall here in the camp if the foes conquer. I certainly will not be taken captive," he added fiercely, seizing his dagger, and throwing back his head till his fair locks floated over his light-blue armor. "Better put me in a church at once--but a Catholic one; that would be a safe sanctuary, devout King."

"Yes, I *will* lock you up, unruly boy," Gelimer now said sharply. "For that insolent jeer, you will give up your weapons at once--at once. Take them from him, Thrasaric. You, Thrasaric, will assail the foe in the front, from Decimum. In Decimum stands a Catholic church; it will be inviolable to the Byzantines. There you will keep imprisoned during the battle the boy who desires to be a soldier and has not yet learned to obey his King. In case of retreat, you will take him with you. And listen, Thrasaric: that night--in the grove--you promised to atone for the past--"

"I think he has done so," cried Hilda, indignantly.

"Whose troops are the best drilled?" added Gibamund. "Who has lavished gold, weapons, horses, like him?"

"My King," replied Thrasaric, "hitherto I have done nothing. Give me to-day an opportunity."

"You must find it. I rely upon you. Above all, that you will not impetuously attack too soon and

spoil my whole plan. And this rebellious boy," he added tenderly, "I commend to your care. Keep him out of the battle; bring him to me safe and unhurt after the victory, on which I confidently rely. I also commit to your charge all the prisoners, among them the hostages from Carthage; for, in case of retreat, you will be at its goal--you will learn it at once, the first man; therefore the captives will be most securely guarded with you. I intrust to you Ammata, the apple of my eye, because, well--because you are my brave, faithful Thrasaric." He laid both hands on the giant's broad shoulders.

"My King," replied the Vandal, looking him steadfastly in the eyes, "you will see the Prince again, living and unhurt, or you will never see Thrasaric more."

Eugenia shuddered.

"I thank you. Now to my tent. Vandal generals, to hear the plan of battle!"

CHAPTER VI

PROCOPIUS TO CETHEGUS:

We are actually still alive, and we are spending the night in Decimum, but we have had a narrow escape from passing it with the sharks at the bottom of the sea; never before, Belisarius says, was annihilation so near him. This mysterious King brought us into the greatest peril by his admirable plan of attack. And when it had already succeeded, he alone, the King himself, cast away his own victory, and saved us from certain destruction. I will tell you briefly the course of recent events, partly from our own experiences, partly from what we have learned through the citizens of Decimum and the Vandal prisoners.

The King, undiscovered by us, had accompanied our march from the time of our landing. The place where he suddenly attacked us had been wisely chosen long before. Belisarius says that not even his great rival, Narses, could have made a better plan of battle. As soon as we left our last camp outside of Decimum, we lost, as I wrote in my former letter, the protection of our fleet. If a superior force assailed us here from the west, it would hurl us, not--as along the whole previous march--upon our sheltering galleys, but directly into the sea from the road running along the steep hills close to the coast. Just before Decimum this road narrows greatly; for lofty mountains tower at the southwest along the narrow highway. Over the loose sand, heaped on the mountains by the desert winds, neither man nor horse can pass without sinking a foot deep. Here, attacked from all three sides at the same moment, we were to be driven eastward into the sea at our right.

A brother of the King, Gibamund, was to rush with two thousand men from the west upon our left flank; a Vandal noble with a still stronger force was to attack us from Decimum in the front; the King, with the main body, was to fall upon us in the rear from the South.

Belisarius had carefully planned the order of our march through this dangerous portion of the way. He sent Fara with his brave Herulians and three hundred picked men of the bodyguard two and a half Roman miles in advance. They were to pass through the Narrow Way first alone, and instantly report any danger back to the main body led by Belisarius. On our left flank the Hun horsemen and five thousand of the excellent Thracian infantry under Althias were thrown out to guard us from any peril threatening in that quarter and report it to Belisarius, to prevent a surprise of the main body during the march.

Then, to our great good fortune, it happened that the attack from the north, from Decimum, came far too early. Prisoners say that a younger brother of the King, scarcely beyond boyhood, taking part in the battle against Gelimer's orders, dashed out of Decimum with a few horsemen upon our ranks as soon as he saw us. The noble wished to save him at any cost, so he also attacked with the small force at his disposal--four hours too soon--only sending messengers back to Carthage to hasten the march of his main body. The youth and the noble made the most desperate resistance to the superior force. Twelve of Belisarius's bravest bodyguard, battle-trying men of former wars, were slain. At last both fell, and now, deprived of their leader, the Vandals turned their horses, and, in a mad flight, ran down and overthrew those who were advancing from Carthage to their support--true, in little bands of thirty and forty men. Fara with his swift Herulians dashed after them in savage pursuit to the very gates of Carthage, cutting down all whom he overtook. The Vandals, who had fought bravely so long as they saw the Asdings and the nobles in their van, now threw down their weapons and allowed themselves to be slaughtered. We found many thousand dead bodies on the road and in the fields to the left.

After this first onset of the Vandals had resulted in defeat, Gibamund, knowing nothing of it, attacked with his troops the greatly superior force of the Huns and Thracians. This happened at the Salt Field--a treeless, shrubless waste on the edge of the desert five thousand paces west of Decimum. With no aid from Carthage and Decimum, he was completely routed; nearly all his men were slain; their leader was seen to fall, whether dead or living, no one knows.

Meanwhile, entirely ignorant of what had happened, we were marching with the main body along the road to Decimum. As Belisarius found an excellent camping-ground about four thousand paces from this place, he halted. That the enemy must be in the neighborhood he

suspected; the disappearance of the two Huns during the night had perplexed him. He established a well-fortified camp, and said to the troops, "The enemy must be close at hand. If he attacks us here, where we lack the support of the fleet, our escape will lie solely in victory. Should we be defeated, there is no stronghold, no fortified city, to receive us; the sea, roaring below, will swallow us. The intrenched camp is our only protection, the camp and the long-tested swords in our hands. Fight bravely! Life, as well as fame, is at stake."

He now ordered the infantry to remain in camp with the luggage as the last reserve, and led the whole force of cavalry out toward Decimum. He would not risk everything at once, but intended first to discover the strength and plans of the Barbarians by skirmishing. Sending the auxiliary cavalry in the van, he followed with the other squadrons and his mounted bodyguard. When the advance body reached Decimum, it found the Byzantines and Vandals who had fallen there. A few of the citizens who had hidden in the houses told our troops what had happened; most of them had fled to Carthage on learning that their village had been chosen for the battleground.

A wonderfully beautiful woman,--she looks like the Sphinx at Memphis,--the owner of the largest villa in Decimum, voluntarily received our men. It was she who told us of the noble's death. He fell before her eyes, just in front of her house.

The leaders now consulted, undecided whether to advance, halt, or return to Belisarius. At last the whole body of cavalry rode about two thousand paces west of Decimum, where they could obtain from the high sand-hills a wider view in every direction. There they saw rising in the south-southwest--that is, in the rear and on the left flank of Belisarius--a huge cloud of dust, from which sometimes flashed the arms and banners of an immense body of horsemen. They instantly sent a message to Belisarius that he must hasten; the enemy was at hand.

Meanwhile the Barbarians, led by Gelimer, approached. They were marching along a road between Belisarius's main body in the east and the Huns and Thracians, our left wing, who had defeated Gibamund and pursued him far to the west. But the high hills along the road obstructed Gelimer's view, so that he could not see Gibamund's battlefield. Byzantines and Vandals, as soon as they saw each other, struggled to be first to reach and occupy the summit of the highest hill in the chain which dominated the whole region. The Barbarians gained the top, and from it King Gelimer rushed down with such power upon our men, the auxiliary cavalry, that they were seized with panic, and fled in wild confusion eastward, toward Decimum.

About nine hundred paces west of the village the fugitives met their strong support, a body of eight hundred mounted shield-bearers, led by Velox, Belisarius's bodyguard. The General and all of us who had tremblingly witnessed the flight of the cavalry consoled ourselves with the hope that Velox would check their flight and march back with them to the enemy. But--oh, shame and horror--the weight of the Vandal onslaught was so tremendous that the fugitives and the shield-bearers did not even wait for it; the whole body, mingled together, swept back in disorder to Belisarius.

The General said that at this moment he gave us all up for lost: "Gelimer," he said at the banquet that night, "had the victory in his hands. Why he voluntarily let it escape is incomprehensible. Had he followed the fugitives, he would have pursued me and my whole army into the sea, so great was the alarm of our troops and so tremendous the force of the Vandal assault. Then the camp and the infantry would both have been destroyed. Or if he had even gone from Decimum back to Carthage, he could have destroyed without resistance Fara and his men, for expecting no attack from the rear, they were scattered singly or in couples along the streets and in the fields, pillaging the slain. And once in possession of Carthage he could easily have taken our ships, anchored near the city,--without crews,--and thus cut off from us every hope of victory or retreat."

But King Gelimer did neither. A sudden paralysis attacked the power which had just overthrown everything in its way.

Prisoners told us that, as he dashed down the hillside, spurring his cream-colored charger far in advance of all his men, he saw in the narrow pass at the southern entrance of Decimum the corpse of his young brother lying first of all the bodies in the road. With a loud cry of anguish, he sprung from his horse, threw himself upon the lifeless boy, and thus checked the advance of his troops. Their foremost horses, held back with difficulty by the riders that they might not trample on the King and the lad, reared, plunged, and kicked, throwing those behind into confusion, and stopped the whole chase. The King raised in his arms the mangled and bloody body (for our horsemen had dashed over it); then breaking again into cries of agony, he placed it on his charger and ordered it to be buried by the roadside with royal honors. The whole did not probably occupy fifteen minutes, but that quarter of an hour wrested from the Barbarians the victory they had already won.

Meanwhile Belisarius rushed to meet our fugitives, thundered at them in his resonant leonine voice his omnipotent "Halt," showed them, lifting his helmet, his face flaming with a wrath which his warriors dreaded more than the spears of all the Barbarians, brought the deeply shamed men to a stand, arranged them, amid terrible reproaches, in the best order possible in the haste, and, after learning all he could concerning the position and strength of the Vandals, led them to the attack upon Gelimer and his army.

The Vandals did not withstand it. The sudden, mysterious check of their advance had bewildered, perplexed, discouraged them; besides, their best strength had been exhausted in the furious ride. The sun of Africa, burning fiercely down, had wearied us also, but at the first onset we broke through their ranks. They turned and fled. The King, who tried to check them, was swept away by the rush, not to Carthage, not even southwest to Byzacena, whence they had come, but towards the northwest along the road leading to Numidia, to the plain of Bulla.

Whether they took that course by the King's command or without it and against it, we do not yet know.

We wrought great slaughter among the fugitives; the chase did not end until nightfall. When, as the darkness closed in, the torches and watchfires were lighted, Fara and the Herulians came from the north, Althias with the Huns and Thracians from the west, and we all spent the night in Decimum celebrating three victories in a single day: over the nobleman, over Prince Gibamund, and over the King.

CHAPTER VII

The flying Vandals, leaving Carthage far on the right, had struck into the road which at Decimum turns toward the northwest, leading to Numidia.

In this direction also the numerous women and children, who had left Carthage many days before with the army, had gone from the camp on the morning of the day before, under safe escort, to the little village of *Castra Vetera*, half a day's march from the battlefield. Here, about two hours before midnight, they met the fugitives from Decimum; the pursuit had ceased with the closing in of darkness. The main body of troops lay around the hamlet in the open air; the few tents brought by the women from the other camp, and the huts in the village, were used to shelter the many wounded and the principal leaders of the army. In one of these tents, stretched on coverlets and pillows, was Gibamund; Hilda knelt beside him, putting a fresh bandage on his foot. As soon as she had finished, she turned to Gundomar, who was sitting on the other side of the narrow space with his head propped on his hand. Blood was trickling through his yellow locks. The Princess carefully examined the wound, "It is not mortal," she said. "Is the pain severe?"

"Only slight," replied the Gunding, clenching his teeth. "Where is the King?"

"In the little chapel with Verus. He is praying."

The words fell harshly from her lips.

"And my brother?" asked Gundomar. "How is his shoulder?"

"I cut the arrow-head out. He is doing well; he is in command of the guards. But the King, too, is wounded."

"What?" asked both the men, in startled tones. "He said nothing of it."

"He is ashamed--for his people. No foe; flying Vandals whom he stopped and tried to turn hacked his arm with their daggers."

"Dogs," cried Gundomar, grinding his teeth; but Gibamund sighed.

"Gundobad, who witnessed it, told me; I examined the arm; there is no danger."

"And Eugenia?" he asked after a pause.

"She is lying in the next house as if stupefied. When she heard of her husband's death, she cried: 'To him! Into his grave! Sigrun--' (I once told her the legend of Helgi) and tried to rush madly away. But she sank fainting in my arms. Even after she had recovered her senses, she lay on the couch as if utterly crushed. 'To him! Sigrun--into his grave!--I am coming, Thrasaric!' was all that she would answer to my questions. She tried to rise to obtain more news, but could not, and I sternly forbade her to attempt it again. I will tell her cautiously all that it is well for her to know--no more. But speak, Gundomar, if you can; I know all the rest--except how Ammata, how Thrasaric--"

"Presently," said the Gunding. "Another drink of water. And your wound, Gibamund?"

"It is nothing," replied the Prince, bitterly; "I did not reach the enemy at all. I sent messenger after messenger to Thrasaric, as I did not receive the promised report that he was leaving Decimum. Not one returned; all fell into the hands of the foe. No message came from Thrasaric. The time appointed by the King when I was to make the attack had arrived; in obedience to the order I set forth, though perfectly aware of the superior strength of the enemy, and though the main body of the troops under Thrasaric had not come. When we were within an arrow-shot, the horsemen, the Huns, dashed to the right and left, and we saw behind them the Thracian infantry, seven ranks deep, who received us with a hail of arrows. They aimed at the horses; mine, the

foremost, and all in the front rank instantly fell. Your brave brother in the second rank, himself wounded by a shaft, lifted me with great difficulty on his own charger--I could not stand--and rescued me. The Huns now bore down upon us from both flanks; the Thracians pressed forward from the front with levelled spears. Not a hundred of my two thousand men are still alive." He groaned in anguish.

"But tell me how came Ammata,--against Gelimer's command, in spite of Thrasaric's guard--?" asked Hilda.

"It happened in this way," said the Gunding, pressing his hand to the aching wound in his head. "We had put the boy, unarmed, in the little Catholic basilica at Decimum, with the hostages from Carthage, among them young Publius Pudentius."

"Hilderic and Euages too?"

"No. Verus had them taken to the second camp near Bulla. Bleda, the captured Hun, had been tied with a rope outside to the bronze rings of the church doors; he lay on the upper step. On the square, in front of the little church, were about twenty of our horsemen. Many, by Thrasaric's command,--he rode repeatedly across the square, gazing watchfully in every direction,--had dismounted. Thrusting their spears into the sand beside their horses, they lay flat on the low roofs of the surrounding houses looking toward the southwest to see the advancing foe. I sat on horseback by the open window of the basilica. From the corner one can see straight to the entrance of the main road from Decimum, where Astarte's--formerly Modigisel's--villa stands. So I heard every word that was spoken in the basilica. Two boyish voices were disputing vehemently.

"'What?' cried one. 'Is this the loudly vaunted heroism of the Vandals? You are placed here, Ammata, in the asylum of the church of the much-tortured Catholics? Do you seek shelter here?' 'The order of the King,' replied Ammata, choking with rage. 'Ah,' sneered the other; it was Pudentius--I now recognized the tones--'I would not be commanded to do that by king or emperor. I am chained hand and foot, or I would have been outside long ago, fighting with the Romans.' 'The order of the King, I tell you.' 'Order of cowardice. Ha, if I were a member of the royal house for whose throne men were fighting, nothing would keep me in a church, while--Hark! that is the tuba. It is proclaiming a Roman victory.'

"I heard no more; the Roman trumpets were blaring outside of Decimum."

Just at that moment the folds of the tent were pushed softly apart. A pale face, two large dark eyes, gazed in, unseen by any one.

"At the same instant," continued the Gunding, "a figure sprang from the very high window of the basilica,--I don't yet understand how the boy climbed up to it,--ran past me, swung himself on the horse of one of our troopers, tore the spear from the ground beside it, and with the exulting shout, 'Vandals! Vandals!' dashed down the street to meet the Byzantines.

"'Ammata! Ammata! Halt!' Thrasaric called after him. But he was already far away. 'Follow him! Gundomar! Follow him! Save the boy!' cried Thrasaric, rushing past me.

"I followed; our men--a slender little band--did the same. 'Too soon! Much too soon!' I exclaimed, as I overtook Thrasaric.

"'The King commanded me to protect the lad!'

"It was impossible to stop him; I followed. We had already reached the narrow southern entrance of Decimum. On the right was Astarte's villa, on the left the high stone wall of a granary. Ammata, without helmet, breastplate, or shield, with only the spear in his hand, was facing a whole troop of mounted lancers, who stared in amazement at the mad boy.

"'Back, Ammata! Fly, I will cover the entrance here,' shouted Thrasaric.

"'I will not fly! I am a grandson of Genseric,' was the lad's answer.

"'Then we will die here together. Here is my shield.'

"It was high time. Already the lances of the Byzantines were hurtling at us. Our three horses fell. We all sprang up unhurt. A spear struck the shield which Thrasaric had forced upon the boy, penetrating the hammer on it. A dozen of our men had now reached us. Six sprang from their horses, levelling their lances. We were enough to block the narrow entrance. The Byzantines dashed upon us; only three horses could come abreast. We three killed two horses and one man. Our foes were obliged to remove the dead animals, our three and the fourth, to gain space. While doing this Ammata sprang forward and struck down another Byzantine. As he leaped back an arrow grazed his neck; the blood burst forth; the boy laughed. Again the foes dashed forward. Again two fell. But Ammata was obliged to drop the hammer shield, there were now so many spears sticking in it, and Thrasaric received a lance-thrust in his shieldless left arm. Behind the Byzantines we now heard German horns; the sound was like the blast announcing the approach of our Vandal horsemen. 'Gibamund, or the King!' our men shouted. 'We are saved.'

"But we were lost. They were Herulians in the Emperor's pay. Their leader, a tall figure with

eagle wings on his helmet, instantly assumed command of all the forces. He ordered several men to dismount and climb the wall of the granary at his right; others trotted toward the left, to ride around the villa, and at the same time they overwhelmed us with a shower of spears. The boar's helm flew from my head, two lances had struck it at the same moment; a third now hit my skull and stretched me on the ground. At that moment, when our eyes were all fixed upon the enemy in front, a man on foot forced his way through our horsemen from the basilica behind. I heard a hoarse cry: 'Wait, boy!' and saw the flash of a sword. Ammata fell forward on his knees.

"It was Bleda, the captive Hun. The torn rope still dragged from his ankle. He had wrenched himself free and seized a weapon; before he could draw the sword from the boy's back Thrasaric's spear pierced him through and through. But the noble had forgotten the foes in front, and no longer struck the flying lances aside. Two spears pierced him at once; he received a deep wound in the thigh and staggered against the wall of the villa.

"A narrow door close beside him opened, and on the threshold stood Astarte. 'Come, my beloved, I will save you,' she said, seizing his arm. 'A secret passage from my cellar--'

"But Thrasaric silently shook her off and threw himself before the kneeling boy. For now Herulians and Byzantines, on foot and on horseback, were pressing forward in dense throngs. The door closed.

"I tried to rise, but could not; so, unable to aid, helpless myself, but covered by a dead horse behind which I had fallen, I saw the end. I will make the story brief. So long as he could move an arm, the faithful giant protected the boy with sword and spear; finally, when the spear-head was hacked off, the sword broken, he sheltered the boy with his own body. I saw how he spread the huge bearskin over him as a shield, and clasped both arms around the child's breast.

"'Surrender, brave warrior,' cried the leader of the Herulians. But Thrasaric--hark! What was that?"

"A groan? Yonder! Does your foot ache, my Gibamund?"

"I made no sound. It was probably a night-bird--outside--before the tent."

"But Thrasaric shook his huge head and hurled his sword-hilt into the face of the nearest Byzantine, who fell, shrieking. Then so many lances flew at the same instant that Ammata sank lifeless on the ground. Thrasaric did not fall, but stood bending forward, his arms hanging loosely. The Herulian leader went close to him. 'In truth,' he said, 'never have I seen anything like this. The man is dead; but he cannot fall, so many spears, with handles resting on the ground, are fixed in his breast.' He gently drew out several; the strong noble slid down beside Ammata.

"Our men had fled as soon as they saw us both fall. Past me--I lay as though lifeless swept the foe in pursuit. Not until after a long time, when everything was still, did I succeed in raising myself a little. So I was found beside Ammata by the King, to whom I told the fate of both. The rest--how he lost the moment of victory, nay, threw away the victory already won, you know."

"We know it," said Hilda, in a hollow tone.

"And where is Ammata--where is Thrasaric buried?" questioned Gibamund.

"Close beside Decimum, in two mounds. The land belongs to a colonist. According to the custom of our ancestors, our men placed three spears upright upon each hillock. The King's horsemen then carried me back, and placed me on a charger, which bore me through this pitiable flight. Shame on this Vandal people! They let their princes and nobles fight and bleed--alone! The masses have accomplished nothing but a speedy flight."

CHAPTER VIII

The intense darkness of the night was already yielding in the eastern sky to a faint gray glimmer of twilight, but the stars were still shining in the heavens, when a slender little figure glided noiselessly, but very swiftly, through the streets of the camp.

The shaggy dogs watching their masters' tents growled, but did not bark; they were afraid of the creature slipping by so softly. A Vandal, mounting guard at a street-corner, superstitiously made the sign of the cross and avoided the wraith floating past. But the white form approached him.

"Where is Decimum? I mean, in which direction?" it asked in low, hurried tones.

"In the east, yonder." He pointed with his spear.

"How far is it?"

"How far? Very distant. We rode as fast as the horses could run; for fear pursued us,--I really do not know of what,--and we did not draw rein till we reached here. We dashed along six or

eight hours before we arrived."

"No matter."

The hurrying figure soon reached the exit of the camp. The guards stationed there let her pass unmolested. One called after her:

"Where are you going? Not that way! The enemy is there."

"Don't stay long!" a Moor shouted after her; "the evil wind is rising."

But she was already gone. Directly behind the camp she turned from the path marked by many footprints, also by weapons lost or thrown away,—if that name could be given to this track through the desert. Running several hundred paces south of the line extending from west to east, she plunged into the wilderness, crossing, meanwhile, several high, dome-like sand-hills. These mounds are piled up by the changing winds blowing through the desert in every direction, but most frequently from the south to north; and the narrow sand ravines beside them often, for the distance of a quarter of a league, obstruct the view of the person passing through them over the nearest sand-wave.

Not until she believed herself too far from the road to be seen, did she again turn in her original direction, eastward, or what she thought was east. Meantime, it is true, the fiery, glowing rising sun had extinguished the light of the stars and marked the east; but soon thereafter the crimson disk vanished behind vaporous clouds, the exhalations of the desert. She ran on and on and on. She was now entirely within the domain of the desert. There was no longer any distinguishing object,—no tree, no bush, nothing but sky above and sand below. True, there were sometimes sand valleys, sometimes sand heights, but these, too, were perfectly uniform. On, on she ran. "Only to reach his grave!" she thought. "Only his grave. Always straight on!" It was so still, so strangely still.

Once only she fancied that she saw, far, far away on her left, corresponding with the "path," hurrying cloud-shadows; perhaps they were ostriches or antelopes. No, she thought she heard human voices calling, but very, very distant. Yet it sounded like "Eugenia!"

Startled, she stooped down close to the sand-hill at her left; it would prevent her being seen from that direction. Even if the valley in which she was now cowering could be overlooked from a hillock, the back of the mound would protect her. "Eugenia!" Now the name seemed to come again more distinctly; the tones were like Hilda's voice. The low, distant sound died tremulously away, sorrowful, hopeless. All was still again. She started up, and ran on breathlessly.

But the fugitive now grew uneasy, because she had lost her direction. What if she was not keeping a perfectly straight course? Then she thought of looking back. The print of every one of her light footsteps was firmly impressed upon the sand. The line was perfectly straight; she rejoiced over her wisdom. Then she often glanced behind—at almost every hundred steps—to test. Only forward, forward! She was growing anxious. Drops of perspiration had long been falling from her forehead and her bare arms. It was growing hot, very hot, and so strangely sultry—the sky so leaden gray. A light, whistling wind sprang up, blowing from south to north.

Eugenia glanced back again. Oh, horror! She saw no sign of her footsteps. The whole expanse lay behind her as smooth as though she were just starting on her way. As if dazed by astonishment, she stamped on the sand; directly after, before her eyes, the impression was filled up, completely effaced by the finest sand, which was driven by the light breeze.

Startled, she pressed her hand upon her beating heart—and grasped sand; a fine but thick layer had incusted her garments, her hair, her face. Through her bewildered thoughts darted the remembrance of having heard how human beings, animals, whole caravans, had been covered by such sand-storms, how, heaped by the wind, the sand often rose like huge waves, burying all life beneath it. She fancied that on her right, on the south, a hill of sand was towering; it seemed moving swiftly onward, and threatened to bar her way. So she must run yet faster to escape it. Her path was still open. Just at that moment, from the south, a gust of wind suddenly blew with great force. Snatching the braided hat from her head, it whirled it swiftly northward. In an instant it was almost out of sight. To overtake it was impossible. Besides, she must go toward the east. Forward!

The wind grew stronger and stronger. The sun, rising higher, darted scorching rays upon her unprotected head; her dark-brown hair fluttered wildly around. Incrusted with salt, it struck her eyes or lashed her cheeks and stung her keenly. She could scarcely keep her eyes open; the fine sand forced its way through their long lashes. On. The sand entered her shoes; the band across the instep of the left one broke. She lifted her foot; the wind tore off the shoe and whirled it away. It was certainly no misfortune, yet she wept—wept over her helplessness. She sank to her knees; the malicious sand rose slowly higher and higher. A shrill, harsh, disagreeable cry fell on her ear,—the first sound in the tremendous silence for many hours; a dark figure, flying from north to south, flitted for a moment along the horizon. It was an ostrich, fleeing in mortal terror before the simoom. With head and long white neck far outstretched, aiding the swift movement of its long legs by flapping its curved dark wings like sails, it glided on like an arrow. Already it was out of sight.

"That bird is hurrying with such might to save its life. Shall my strength fail when I am hastening to the man I love? 'For shame, little one!' he would say." Smiling through her tears, she ran forward. So an hour passed--many hours.

Often she thought that she must have lost the right direction, or she would have reached the battlefield long ago. The wind had risen to a tempest. Her heart beat with suffocating strength. Giddiness seized her; she tottered; she must rest. Now, here, no Vandal could overtake her to keep her by force from her sacred goal.

Just at that moment something white appeared above the sand close beside her. It was the first break for hours in the monotonous yellow surface. The object was no stone. Seizing it, Eugenia dragged it from the sand. Oh, despair and horror! She shrieked aloud in desperation, in terror, in the sense of cheerless, hopeless helplessness. It was her own shoe, which she had lost hours before. She had been wandering in a circle. Or had the wind borne it far away from the place where she lost it? Yet, no! The shoe, which she now flung down, weeping, was swiftly covered with sand, instead of being carried away by the wind. After exhausting the last remnant of her strength, she was in the same spot.

To die--now--to give up all effort--to rest--to sleep--now sweet was the temptation to the wearied limbs.

But, no! To him! What were the words? "And it *constrained* the faithful one and drew her to the grave of the dead hero." To him!

Eugenia raised herself with great difficulty, she was already so weak. And when she had barely gained her feet, the storm blew her down once more. Again she rose, trying to see if some human being, some house, if not the path, was visible. Just then she perceived before her in the north a sand-hill, higher than any of the others. It was probably more than a hundred feet. If she could succeed in climbing it, she would be able from the top to get a wide view. With inexpressible difficulty, sinking knee-deep at nearly every step in the looser sand, until her foot reached the older, firmer soil, she pressed upward, often falling back several paces when she stumbled. While she did so the strangest, most alarming thing happened,--at every slip the whole sand-hill creaked, trembled, and began to slide down in every direction. At first Eugenia stopped in terror; she thought the whole mountain would sink with her. But she conquered her fear, and at last climbed upward on her knees, for she could no longer stand; she thrust her hands into the sand and dragged herself up. The wind--no, it was now a hurricane--assisted her; it blew from south to north. At last--the climb seemed to her longer than the whole previous way--at last she reached the top. Opening her eyes, which she had kept half closed, she saw--oh, bliss! she saw deliverance. Before her, at a long distance, it is true, yet plainly visible, glittered a steel-blue line. It was the sea! And at the side, eastward, she fancied she saw houses, trees. Surely that was Decimum; and a little farther inland rose a dark hill-- the end of the desert. She imagined,--yet surely it was impossible to see so far,--she believed or dreamed that, on the summit of the hill, she beheld three slender black lines relieved against the clear horizon. Surely those were the three spears on the grave. "Beloved One! My hero!" she cried, "I am coming."

With outstretched arms she tried to hurry down the sand-hill on the northeastern: side, but, at the first step, she sank in to the knee,--deeper still, to the waist. She could still see the blue sky above her. Once more, with her last strength, she flung both arms high above her head, thrusting her hands into the sand to the wrists to drag herself up; once more the large beautiful antelope eyes gazed beseechingly--ah, so despairingly--up to the silent sky; another wild, desperate pull--a hollow sound as of a heavy fall. The whole sand-mountain, shaken by her struggles and swept by the hurricane from the south, fell over her northward, burying her nearly a hundred feet deep, stifling her in a moment. Above her lofty grave the desert storm raved exultingly.

* * * * *

For decades the beautiful corpse lay undisturbed, unprofaned, until that ever-changing architect, the wind, gradually removed the sand-hill and, one stormy night, at last blew it away entirely.

Just at that time a pious hermit, one of the desert monks who begged his scanty fare in Decimum and carried it to his sand cave, passed along. Often and often he had come that way; the hurricane had bared the skeleton only the day before. The old man stood before it, thoughtful. The little dazzlingly white bones were so dainty, so delicate, as if fashioned by an artist's hand; the garments, like the flesh, had long been completely consumed by the trickling moisture; but the lofty sand ridge had faithfully kept its beautiful secret, not a bone was missing. For a human generation the dry sand of the desert, though garments and flesh had gone to decay, had preserved uninjured the outlines of the figure as it had been pressed into the sand under the heavy weight. One could see that the buried girl had tried to protect eyes and mouth with her right hand; the left lay in a graceful attitude across her breast; her face was turned toward the ground.

"Who were you, dainty child, that found a solitary death here?" said the holy man, deeply touched. "For there is no trace of a companion near. A child, or a girl just entering maidenhood?"

But, at any rate, a Christian--no Moor; here on her neck, fastened by a silver chain, is a gold cross. And beside it a strange ornament,--a bronze half-circle with characters inscribed on it, not Latin, Greek, nor Hebrew. No matter. The girl's bones shall not remain scattered in the desert. The Christian shall sleep in consecrated ground. The peasants must help me to bury her here or in the neighborhood."

He went to Decimum. The traces of the Vandal battle had long since vanished. The village children who had then fled were now grown men, the owners of the houses and fields. The peasant to whom the hermit related his touching discovery listened attentively. But when the latter spoke of the bronze half-circle with the singular characters, he interrupted him, exclaiming:

"Strange! In the hill-tomb, the great stone vault outside of our village,--I own the hill, and vines grow on the southern slope,--there lies, according to trustworthy tradition, a Vandal boy-prince who fell here, and beside him a mighty warrior, a terrible giant, who is said to have remained faithfully by his side. The priests say he was a monster, a god of thunder, one of the old pagan gods of the Barbarians, with whose fall fortune deserted them. Well, the giant has hanging on his arm a half-circle exactly like the one you describe. Perhaps the two belonged together? Who knows? We cannot dig a grave in the desert; even if we try, the wind will blow it away. Come, I'll harness the horses to my wagon; we will go out to the dead woman and lay her beside the giant; his grave has already been consecrated by the priests."

This was done. But when they had placed the delicate form beside the mighty one, and the monk had muttered a prayer, he asked: "Tell me, friend,--I saw with joyful surprise that you had left all the ornaments upon the dead; and that you should receive nothing for your trouble with the poor girl's skeleton is not exactly--"

"Peasant custom, do you mean? You are right, holy father. But you see. King Gelimer, who once reigned here, enjoined upon my father after the battle to take faithful care of the graves; he was to keep them as if they were a sanctuary until Gelimer should return and carry the bodies to Carthage. King Gelimer never returned to Decimum. But my father, on his deathbed, committed the care of this tomb to me; and so shall I, before I die, to the curly-headed boy who helped us to carry the little skeleton. For King Gelimer was kind to every one,--to us Romans, too,--and had done my father many a favor in the days of the Vandals. Already many say he was no man, but a demon,--a wicked one, according to some, a good one, most declare. But, man or demon, good he certainly was; for my father has often praised him."

So little Eugenia at last reached her hero's side.

CHAPTER IX

PROCOPIUS TO CETHEGUS:

I am writing this--really and truly, though it is not yet three months since we left Constantinople--in Carthage, at the capitol, in the royal palace of the Asdings, in the hall of Genseric the Terrible. I often doubt the fact myself--but it is so! On the day after the battle at Decimum the infantry, coming from the camp, joined us, and the whole army marched to Carthage, which we reached in the evening. We chose a place to encamp outside of the city, though no one opposed our entrance. Nay, the Carthaginians had opened all their gates and lighted torches and lanterns everywhere in the streets and squares. All night long the bonfires shone from the city into our camp, while the few Vandals who had not fled sought shelter in the Catholic churches.

But Belisarius most strictly prohibited entering the city during the night. He feared an ambush, a stratagem of war. He could not believe that Genseric's capital had actually fallen into his hands with so little trouble.

On the following day, borne by a favoring breeze, our ships rounded the promontory. As soon as the Carthaginians recognized our flag, they broke the iron chains of their outer harbor, Mandracium, and beckoned to our sailors to enter. But the commanders, mindful of Belisarius's warning, anchored in the harbor of Stagnum, five thousand paces from the city, waiting further orders. Yet that the worthy citizens of Carthage might make the acquaintance of their liberators on the very first day, a ship's captain, Kalonymos, with several sailors, entered Mandracium, against the orders of Belisarius and the Quæstor, and plundered all the merchants--Carthaginians as well as strangers--who had their homes and storehouses on the harbor. He took all their money, many of their goods, and even the beautiful candlesticks and lanterns which they had brought out in honor of our arrival.

We had hoped--Belisarius gave orders for a diligent search--to liberate the captive King Hilderic and his nephew. But this, it appears, was not accomplished. In the royal citadel, high up on the hill crowned by the capitol, is the gloomy dungeon where the usurper held the Asdings prisoners, as he barred all his foes here. The executioner supplied the place of a jailer to his predecessors. He also held captive many merchants of our empire, fearing (and my Hegelochus showed with what good reason; the General sent him to-day with rich gifts to Syracuse) that, if

allowed to sail thither, they might bring us all sorts of valuable information. When the jailer, a Roman, heard of our victory at Decimum, and saw our galleys rounding the promontory, he released all these captives. He wanted to set the King and Euages free also, but their dungeon was empty. No one knows what has become of them.

At noon Belisarius ordered the ships' crews to land, all the troops to clean their weapons and armor, to present the best appearance, and now the whole army marched in full battle-array--for we still feared an ambush of the Vandals--through the "Grove of the Empress Theodora" (so I hear the grateful Carthaginians have rebaptized it); then through the southern Byzacenan gate, and finally through the lower city. Belisarius and the principal leaders, with some picked troops, went up to the capitol, and our General formally took his seat upon Genseric's gold and purple throne. Belisarius ordered the noonday meal to be served in the dining-hall where Gelimer entertained the Vandal nobles. It is called "Delphica," because its principal ornament is a beautiful tripod. Here the General feasted the leaders of his army. A banquet had been prepared in it the day before for Gelimer, but we now ate the dishes made to celebrate his victory; spiced by this thought, their flavor was excellent. And Gelimer's servants brought in the platters, filled the drinking vessels with fragrant wine, waited upon us in every way. This is another instance of the goddess Tyche's pleasure in playing with the changing destinies of mortals. You, O Cethegus, I am well aware, have a different opinion of the final causes of events; you see the fixed action of a law in the deeds of human beings, as well as in storms and sunshine. This may be magnificent, heroic, but it is terrible. I have a narrow mind, and am precisely the opposite of a hero; I cannot endure it. I waver skeptically to and fro. Sometimes I see only the whimsical ruling of a blind chance, which delights in alternately lifting up and casting down; sometimes I think an inscrutable God directs everything to mysterious ends. I have renounced all philosophizing, and enjoy the motley current of events, not without scorn and derision for the follies of other people, but no less for those of Procopius.

And yet I do not wish to break off entirely all relations with the Christian's God. We do not know whether, after all, the Son of Man may not yet return in the clouds of heaven. In that case, I would far rather be with the sheep than with the goats.

The people, the liberated Romans, the Catholics, in their delight over their rescue, see signs and wonders everywhere. They regard our Huns as angels of the Lord. They will yet learn to know these angels, especially if they have pretty wives or daughters, or even only full money-chests. The comical part of it is that (except Belisarius's body-guard), our soldiers, with all due respect to the Emperor, are principally a miserable lot of rascals from all the provinces of the empire, and all the Barbarian peoples in the neighborhood; they are always as ready to steal, pillage, and murder as they are to fight. Yet we ourselves, in consequence of the amazing good fortune which has accompanied us throughout this whole enterprise, are beginning to consider ourselves the chosen favorites of the Lord, His sacred instrument--thieves and cut-throats though we are! So the entire army, pagans as well as Christians, believe that that spring gushed out for us in the desert only by a miracle of God. So both the army and the Carthaginians believe in a lantern miracle in the following singular incident.

The Carthaginians' principal saint is Saint Cyprian, who has more than a dozen basilicas and chapels, in which all his festivals, "the great Cypriani," are magnificently celebrated. But the Vandals took nearly all the churches from the Catholics, and dedicated them to the Arian worship. This was the case with the great basilica of Saint Cyprian down by the harbor, from which they drove the Catholic priests. The loss of this cathedral caused them special sorrow, and they said that Saint Cyprian had repeatedly appeared to devout souls in a dream, comforted them, and announced that he would some day avenge the wrong committed by the Vandals. This seems to me rather *unsaintly* in the great saint; we poor sinners on earth are daily exhorted to forgive our enemies, and the wrathful saint ought to let his vengeful feelings cool, and thus remain the holy Cyprian. The pious Catholics, thus pleasantly strengthened and justified in their thirst for revenge by their patron saint, had long waited, in mingled curiosity and anxiety, for the blow Saint Cyprian was to deal the heretics. On this day it became evident. The festival of the great Cyprian was just at hand; it fell on the day following the battle of Decimum. On the evening before, the Arian priests themselves had decorated the entire church magnificently, and especially arranged thousands of little lamps, in order to have a brilliant illumination at night to celebrate the victory; for they did not doubt the success of their own army. By the written order of the Archdeacon Verus,--he had accompanied the King to the field,--all the church vessels and church treasures of every description were brought out of the hidden thesauri and placed upon the seven altars of the basilica. Never would these unsuspected riches have been found in the secret vaults of the church, had not Verus given these directions and sent the keys.

But we, not the Vandals, won the battle of Decimum. At this news the Arian priests fled headlong from the city. The Catholics poured into the basilica, discovered the secret treasures of the heretics, and lighted their lamps to celebrate the victory of the champions of the true faith. "This is the vengeance of Saint Cyprian!" "This is the miracle of the lamps!" Through the city they went, roaring these words and cuffing and pounding every doubter until he believed and shouted with them: "Yes, this is Saint Cyprian's vengeance and the miracle of the lamps!"

Now I have not the least objection to an occasional miracle. On the contrary, I am glad when something often happens that the all-explaining philosophers who have so long tormented me cannot understand. But then it must be a genuine, thorough-going miracle. If a miracle cannot present itself as something entirely beyond the limits of reason, it would better not attempt to be

a miracle at all; it isn't worth while. And this miracle appears to me far too natural. Belisarius reproved my incredulous derision. But I replied that Saint Cyprian seems to me the patron saint of the lamplighters; I don't belong to that society.

* * * * *

Fara, the Herulian, captured the fairest booty at Decimum. True, he received from the noble a sharp lance-thrust in the arm through his brazen shield. But the shield had done its duty; the point did not penetrate too deeply into the flesh. And when he entered the nearest villa,--he was just breaking in,--the door opened, and a wonderfully beautiful woman, with superb jewels and scarlet flowers in her black hair, came to meet him. Except the flowers and gems, she was not burdened with too much clothing.

The vision held out a wreath of laurel and pomegranate blossoms.

"Whom did you expect?" asked the Herulian, in amazement.

"The victor," replied the beautiful woman.

A somewhat oracular reply! This Sphinx--she looks, I have already told you, exactly like one--would undoubtedly have given her wreath and herself just as willingly to the victorious Vandals. After all, what does the Carthaginian care for either Vandals or Byzantines? She is the prize of the stronger, the conqueror--perhaps to his destruction. But I think the Sphinx has now found her *Cedipus*. If one of this strange pair of lovers must perish, it will hardly be my friend Fara. He took me to her; he has some regard for me, because I can read and write. He had evidently praised me. In vain. She scanned me from head to foot, and from foot to head, it did not consume much time; I am not very tall,--then, with a contemptuous curl of her full red lips, she moved far away from me. I will not assert that I am handsome, while Fara, next to Belisarius, is certainly the stateliest of all our six and thirty thousand men. But I was indignant that my mortal part at once so repelled her that she did not even desire to know the immortal side. I am angered against her, I wish her no evil; but it would neither greatly surprise, nor deeply grieve me, if she should come to a bad end.

CHAPTER X

Belisarius is pushing the work on the walls day and night. Besides the whole army and the crews of the ships, he has employed the citizens. They grumble, saying that we came to liberate them, and now compel them to harder labor than Gelimer ever imposed. The vast extent of the city wall shows many gaps and holes; we think that may be the reason the King did not retreat into his capital after the lost battle. Verus, who, even in secular matters, holds a high place in the esteem of the "Tyrant" (this, according to Justinian's command, is the name we must give the champion of his people's liberty), is said, according to the statements of the prisoners, to have advised the King from the first to shut himself up in Carthage and let us besiege him there. If that is true, the priest knows more about lamps than he does of war, but that is natural. The very first night, our General says, we could have slipped in through some gap, especially as many thousand Carthaginians were ready to show us such holes. And we should have captured the whole Vandal grandeur at one blow, as if in a mouse-trap; while now we must seek the enemy in the desert. The King instantly rejected the counsel.

* * * * *

The goddess Tyche is the one woman in whom I often really feel tempted to believe. And also in Ate,--Discord. To you, Ate and Tyche, mighty sisters, not to Saint Cyprian, we must light lanterns to show our gratitude. The goddess of Fortune is not weary of playing ball with the destinies of the Vandals, but she could not do it, if Ate had not placed this ball in her hands.

Yesterday a little sail-boat ran into the harbor from the north. It bore the scarlet Vandal flag. Captured by our guard-ships, which were lurking unseen behind the high wall of the harbor, the Barbarians on board were frightened nearly to death; they had had no idea of the capture of their capital. They had come directly from Sardinia! To send the flower of their fleet and army there, while we were already lying off Sicily, was surely prompted by Ate. On the captain was found a letter with the following contents:

"Hail, and victory to you, O King of the Vandals! Where now are your gloomy forebodings? I announce victory. We landed at Caralis, the capital of Sardinia. We took harbor, city, and capitol. Goda, the traitor, fell by my spear; his men are dispersed or prisoners; the whole island is again yours. Celebrate a feast of victory. It is the omen of a greater day, when you will crush the insolent foes who, as we have just heard here, are really sailing against our coasts. Not one must return from our Africa! This writes Zazo, your faithful General and brother."

That was yesterday; and to-day one of our cruisers brought into the harbor a Vandal galley

captured on its way to Sardinia. It bore a messenger from Gelimer with the following letter:

"It was not Goda who lured us to Sardinia, but a demon of hell in Goda's form, whom God has permitted to destroy us. You did not set forth that we might vanquish Sardinia, but that our foes might conquer Africa. It was the will of Heaven, since God ordained your voyage. You had scarcely sailed, when Belisarius landed. His army is small, but fortune as well as heroism abandoned our people. The nation has no good-luck, and its King no discernment; even wise plans are ruined by the impetuosity of one or the kind heart of another. Ammata, our darling, has fallen; Thrasaric the faithful has fallen; Gibamund is wounded; our army was defeated at Decimum. Our ship-wharves, our harbors, our armory, our horses, Carthage itself are in the hands of the enemy. But the Vandals whom I still hold together seem to have been stupefied by the first blow; they cannot be roused, though everything is at stake. The short-lived outburst of energy has vanished from nearly all. It is shameful to say, but there is far more capacity for war in the twelve thousand Moorish mercenaries, whom I hired with heavy gold and have assembled in a strong camp at Bulla, than in our whole intimidated army. Should these men also fail me, the end would soon come. Our sole hope is on you and your return. Let Sardinia and the punishment of the rebellion go; fly hither with the whole fleet. Do not land at Carthage, however, but far to the left, on the boundary between Mauritania and Numidia. Let us avert or bear together the threatening destruction.

GELIMER."

The letters of the brothers cross each other, and both fall into our hands! And now the King will vainly await his fleet in the west. Come, Goddess Tyche, puff out your cheeks, blow upon the sails of the Vandal galleys, and bring them all in safety with the victorious army, Gelimer's last hope, into the harbor of Carthage--to captivity.

* * * * *

The Goddess Tyche, too, is just a woman, like the rest. Suddenly she turns her back upon us--at least a little--and coquets with the fair-haired warriors. I might be inclined to turn again to the holy lamplighter. The "Tyrant" is making progress. How? By his kind heart and friendliness, people say. He is winning the country population,--not the Moors, no,--the Romans, the Catholics. Hear and help, O Saint Cyprian! He is drawing them from us to his side. He maintains strict discipline; but the only time our Huns do not rob, plunder, and steal is when they are standing in rank and file before Belisarius--or when they are asleep; but then they at least dream of pillaging. So the peasants whom we have liberated flee in throngs from their deliverers to the camp of the Barbarian King. They prefer the Vandals to the Huns. They collect together, fall upon our plundering heroes (true, they are largely camp-followers), cut off their pagan, nay, even their Christian heads, and receive in exchange from the "Tyrant" a heretical gold-piece. That alone would not be so bad, but the peasants serve the Vandal as spies, and tell him everything he desires to know, so far as they know it themselves. This kindness of heart is undoubtedly hypocrisy, but it helps,--perhaps more than if it were genuine.

* * * * *

I am really almost sorry for the Sphinx. She was so wonderfully beautiful! Only it is a pity that she did not become an animal instead of a woman. Fara discovered that she also allowed Althias the Thracian and Aigan the Hun to divine the mystery of her nature. At first the three heroes intended to fight to the death for the marvel. But this time the Hun was wiser than either the German or the Thracian. By his suggestion, they fraternally divided the woman into equal portions by strapping her on a board, and, with two blows of an axe, separating her into three parts. Fara received the head, as was fair; he had the best right to it. For when she noticed his distrust, she tried to soothe him by the offer of some fruit which she broke fresh from the tree. But she made a mistake there; Fara, the Herulian and pagan, likes horse-flesh far better than he does peaches. He gave it to her ape. The animal bit it, shook itself, and lay dead. This disturbed the German, and he did not rest until he had solved all the riddles of the many-sided Sphinx, even her natural faithlessness. Then, as I said, they divided the beautiful body into three parts. I advised them to bury the corpse very deep, or at night scorching red flames would burst from her grave.

* * * * *

A little defeat.

Belisarius was complaining he knew too little of the enemy. So he sent one of the best men of his body-guard, Diogenes, towards the southwest to obtain news. He and his men spent the night in a village. The peasants swore that there was not a Vandal within two days' march. Our heroes slept in the best house,--it belonged to the villicus,--in the second story; of course they had first been a long time under the lower story, that is, in the cellar. They posted no sentinels, certainly not; they are the liberators of the peasants. The fact that they had just drunk all the wine contained in all the amphoræ in the village, killed the people's cattle, embraced their wives, had nothing to do with the matter. Peasants must expect such things.

Soon they were all snoring, Diogenes in the lead. Night fell. The peasants quickly brought the

Vandals,--from the immediate neighborhood,--who surrounded the house. But Saint Cyprian is stronger than the heaviest drunken sleep. He caused a sword to drop on a metal shield below; it waked--this is a miracle in which I believe, for no mortal could accomplish it--it waked one of the sleepers. Under cover of the darkness most of the men succeeded in escaping; Diogenes came back, too--with three wounds in his face and neck, minus the little finger of his sword-hand, and without a single piece of useful information.

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The Goddess Tyche is blowing badly. The Vandal fleet has not yet run into Carthage to its destruction.

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The Tyrant seems to have roused his army from its stupor. Our outposts, horsemen whom we send forth around the city, report: "Vast clouds of dust are rising in the southwest, which can be caused only by an approaching army."

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No Zazo. Has he, in spite of the capture of that letter, received warning and chosen another landing-place? The Vandals were undoubtedly hidden in that cloud of dust. Our Herulians have captured a few peasants; we have already perceived in this almost liberated Africa that the peasants must be captured by their deliverers, if we wish to get sight of them. They seek refuge with the Barbarians from liberty. The prisoners say that the King himself is marching against us. He ordered a Vandal noble who had stolen a colonist's wife to be hanged on the high door of the colonist's house. And this nobleman's shieldbearer, who had taken two of the colonist's geese, to be hanged on the low stable door, beside his master. Strange, is it not? But it pleases the peasants. "Equalizing justice," Aristoteles calls it. This wonderful Vandal hero must surely have studied philosophy, as well as the art of throwing spears.

Belisarius has sent an urgent warning to Constantinople concerning the long-delayed pay of the Huns. They are growing troublesome. It is now six months since we left the city; December has come. Desert storms sweep over Carthage to the leaden-hued sea, which long since lost its beautiful blue. The Huns are threatening to leave the service. They excuse their pillaging on the ground that the citizens of Carthage and the peasants will trust neither them nor the Emperor (in which they are not wrong). We cannot pay with money lying in Constantinople, they say. To-day a ship arrived from there, but did not bring a single solidus in money. There were, however, thirty tax-collectors, and a command to send the first taxes from the conquered province.

* * * * *

If King Gelimer hangs, we hang too. But we hang Romans, not Vandals. The resentment against us is no longer confined to the peasants. It is seething in Carthage, under our own eyes. The common people, the tradesmen and the smaller merchants especially, who did not feel the oppression of the Barbarians as heavily as the wealthy Senators, are growing rebellious. A conspiracy has been discovered. Gelimer's army is not far from the western, the Numidian gate. His horsemen range at night as far as the walls of the suburb of Aklas. The Vandals were to be admitted under cover of the darkness through the gaps still remaining in the walls of the lower city. Belisarius ordered two Carthaginian citizens convicted of this agreement, Laurus and Victor, to be hanged on the hill outside of the Numidian gate. Belisarius likes hills for his gallows. Then the General's administration of justice can be seen for a long distance swaying in the wind. But Belisarius does not dare to leave the city with the army while the Carthaginians are in such a mood. At least the walls must first be repaired. The citizens are now compelled to work on them at night too; it is making them very discontented.

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No Zazo! and the Huns are on the brink of open mutiny. They declare that they will not fight in the next battle; that they have had no pay yet, and that they have been lured here across the sea, contrary to the agreement for military service. They are afraid that, after the defeat of the Vandals, they will be left here to do garrison duty, and never be taken home. Belisarius has already looked for a more spacious hill, but has not found one that would be large enough. There are too many of them. And the rest of us are, on the whole, too few. Besides, they are among our best troops. So the General invited their leaders (the order to hang them was written yesterday) to dine with him to-day. This is the greatest honor and pleasure to them; unfortunately it is much less pleasant to the regular guests of Belisarius. He praised them, and offered them wine. Soon all were drunk and perfectly content.

They have slept off their carouse, and now are more dissatisfied than ever,--thirstier too. We have an ample supply of wine, but, during the last three hours, no water. The Vandals have cut the magnificent aqueduct outside the Numidian gate. The Huns can do without it, easily; but not we, the horses, the camels, and the Carthaginians. So the King will thus force a decisive battle in the field. He cannot surround the city, as we control the sea. He cannot storm it, since at last the fortifications are completed according to Belisarius's plan. He desires, he seeks a battle in the open field. His confidence, or that of his "stupefied army," must have returned mightily since that sorrowful letter.

Belisarius has no choice; he will lead us out early to-morrow morning to meet the foe. He is anxious lest the Huns may secretly harbor some evil design, and has charged Fara to keep a sharp watch upon them. If the battle should waver, the Huns will waver too. Then we shall see in the van a conflict between Byzantines and Vandals, and in the rear a struggle between Herulians and Huns. That may become exciting. But this very suspense, this charm of danger, attracted me to Belisarius's service, drew me to his camp. Better a Vandal arrow in my brain than the philosophy over which I had studied myself ill.--To-morrow!

CHAPTER XI

The following day, after again inspecting the restored fortifications of Carthage, and finding them sufficiently strong to receive, in case of necessity, his defeated army and defy a siege, Belisarius sent all the cavalry, except five hundred picked Illyrians, out of the gates to meet the foe. To Althias the Thracian he assigned the chosen body of shield-bearers with the imperial banner. They were not to shun, but rather invite a skirmish with the outposts. He himself was to follow the next day with the main body of the infantry and the five hundred Illyrian horsemen. Only the few soldiers absolutely required to guard the gates, towers, and walls remained in the city.

At Trikameron, about seventeen Roman miles--seventeen thousand paces--west of Carthage, Althias met the foe.

The front ranks of both troops exchanged a few arrow-shots, and returned to their armies with the report. The Byzantines pitched their camp where they stood. Not far from them blazed the numerous watch-fires of the Vandals. A narrow brook ran between the two positions. The whole region was flat and treeless, with the exception of one hill of moderate size that rose from the sandy soil very near the stream on the left wing of the Romans.

Without waiting for Althias's command or permission, Aigan, the principal leader of the Huns, dashed up the hill as soon as he heard that the men were to encamp here to-day and fight on the morrow. The other leaders and their bands darted after him with the speed of an arrow. He sent a message to Althias that the Huns would spend the night on the hill, and take their position the next day. Althias avoided forbidding what he could not prevent without bloodshed. But the hill dominated the surrounding neighborhood.

At a late hour of the night, the chieftains of the Huns met on the top of the hill.

"Is there no spy near?" asked Aigan. "This Herulian Prince never leaves us."

"My lord, I obeyed your commands. Seventy Huns are lying on guard in a circle around our station; not a bird can fly over them unnoticed."

"What shall we do to-morrow?" asked a third, leaning against his horse's shoulder and patting its shaggy mane. "I no longer trust the word of Belisarius. He is deceiving us."

"Belisarius is not deceiving us. His master is deluding *him*."

"I saw a strange sign," the second leader began anxiously. "Just as darkness closed in, little blue flames danced upon the points of the Romans' spears. What does that mean?"

"It means victory," cried the third, greatly excited. "There is a tradition in our tribe, my great-grandfather saw it himself, and it was transmitted from generation to generation, before the terrible day in Gaul when the scourge of the great Attila broke."

"Atta in the clouds, great Atta, be gracious to us," murmured all three, bowing low toward the east.

"My ancestor was on guard duty one dark night beside a rushing stream. On the opposite shore two men, with spears on their shoulders, were riding to examine the neighborhood. My great-grandfather and his companions slipped among the tall rushes and bent their bows, which never failed. They took aim. 'Look, Ætius,' cried one, 'your spear is shining.' 'And yours too, King of the Visigoths,' replied the other. Our ancestors looked up, and, in truth, blue flames were dancing around the spears of the enemy. Our people fled in terror, not daring to shoot those

whom the gods protected. And the day after Atta--"

"Atta, Atta, be not angry with us!" they again whispered, gazing in terror up at the clouds.

"What then meant victory to the Germans and misfortune to their foes," replied Aigan, distrustfully, "may have the same meaning now. We will wait. Wherever victory turns, we will turn too; that is why I chose this hill for our station. From here we can see clearly the whole course of the battle. Either straight across the brook on the Vandals' left flank--"

"Or to the right on the Romans' centre--like a whirlwind!"

"I would rather plunder the Vandals' camp. It is said to be very rich in yellow gold."

"And in white-bosomed women."

"But all Carthage has more gold than the Vandal Prince in his tent."

"But the best part is, the decision will probably come before the Lion of the Romans arrives."

"You are right: I would not willingly spur my horse against the wrathful lightning of his eyes."

"Patience. Wait quietly. Wherever I send an arrow, we will rush; and Atta will hover, high in the air, above his children."

Removing his helmet of thick black sheepskin, he threw it upward, singing softly:

"Atta, Atta, booty grant us,
Booty to thy much-loved children,
Yellow gold and shining silver,
And the red blood of the vineyard,
And the foeman's fairest women."

All, with bared heads, repeated the words in the deepest, most fervent reverence. Then Aigan replaced his helmet:

"Silence! Let us separate."

CHAPTER XII

In the Vandal camp on the left bank of the stream, Genseric's great banner floated from the royal tent, its folds often lifted by the night wind, rustling softly in the warm, dark air. In a somewhat lower tent, close beside the King's, Gibamund and Hilda sat silent, hand in hand, upon a couch. The table before them was covered with Gibamund's weapons; the lamp hanging from the roof cast a dim light upon them, which was reflected by the polished metal. Beside these bright arms lay a dark dagger with a beautiful hilt in a black leather sheath, all of very artistic work.

"It was hard for me," said Gibamund, starting up impatiently, "to obey the King's order and take command in the camp to-day until his return,--the suspense, the expectation is so great."

"Yes, if the Moors should fail us! How many are there, did you say?"

"Twelve thousand. They ought to have arrived the day before yesterday, if they had hastened here from the camp at Bulla, according to the agreement. The King sent messenger after messenger, urging haste, in vain. At last, full of impatience, he himself rode along the Numidian road to meet them. For if twelve thousand infantry fail us to-morrow,--they were to form our whole left wing,--our position will be--hark! that is the horn of the camp-guard. The King must have returned. Let me ask."

But already footsteps and the clank of weapons were heard close at hand; the husband and wife, springing up, hurried to the entrance of the tent. The curtains were drawn back from the outside, and before them, the helmet on his lofty head, stood Zazo.

"You, brother?"

"You back again, Zazo! Oh, now all is well!"

Graver, quieter than usual, but resolute and calm, the strong warrior stood between the two who clung to him, pressing his hands. It was a joy, a consolation, to look at the erect, steadfast man.

"All is not well, my sweet sister-in-law," he answered sadly though firmly. "Alas for Ammata, and the whole day of Decimum! I do not understand it," he added, shaking his head, "but much may yet be retrieved."

"Whence came you so suddenly? Have you seen Gelimer?"

"He will be here soon. He promised me. He is still praying in his tent, with Verus."

"You are from--?"

"Sardinia, direct. A letter from the King, sent by Verus, urging me to a speedy return and warning me not to enter the harbor of Carthage, did not reach me. But a second, despatched by my brother himself, brought the whole tale of disaster. I landed at the point named, and marched to Bulla to meet the Moorish mercenaries and lead them here. I reached Bulla and found--" He stamped his foot.

"Well, what?"

"The empty camp."

"Had the Moors started to come here?"

"They have scattered, the whole twelve thousand, into the desert."

"For God's sake--"

"The traitors!"

"Not traitors. They sent the money back to the King. Cabaon, their prophet and chief, warned them, forbade them to take part in this battle. All obeyed. Only a few hundred men from the Pappua Mountains--"

"They are bound by the ties of hospitality to Gelimer, to the whole Asding race."

"--accompanied us, led by Sersaon, their chief."

"This destroys the King's whole plan for to-morrow's battle."

"Well," said Zazo, quietly, "to make amends he has unexpectedly received my troops. Not quite five thousand, but--"

"But you are their leader," cried Gibamund.

"He met on the Numidian road, first, the messengers I had sent in advance, then me and my little army. What a sorrowful hour! How I had rejoiced over my victory! But now Gelimer's tears flowed fast as he lay on my breast, and I myself--Oh, Ammata! Yet, no, we must remain firm, calm, and manly, ay, hard; for this King is far too soft-hearted."

"Yet he has recovered himself since the battle of Decimum," said Gibamund. "At that time he was utterly crushed."

"Yes," cried Hilda, resentfully, "more than a man should permit himself to be."

"I loved Ammata scarcely less than he," replied Zazo, and his lips quivered. "But to let certain victory escape him merely to mourn for, to bury the boy--"

"You would not have done so, my Zazo," said a gentle voice.

Gelimer had entered. He uttered the words very quietly; the others turned, startled.

"Your censure is just," he added. "But I saw in this dispensation--he was the first Vandal who fell in the war--a judgment of God. If the most innocent of us all must die, God's punishment for the iniquity of the fathers rests upon us all."

Zazo shook his head angrily and set his buffalo helmet on the table so heavily that it rattled. "Brother, brother! This gloomy, brooding delusion may destroy you and your whole people. I am not learned enough to argue with you. But I, too, am a Christian, a devout one,--no pagan like beautiful Hilda yonder, and I tell you--No, let me finish. How that terrible verse concerning God's vengeance is to be interpreted I do not know. It troubles me very little. But this I do know: if our kingdom fall, it will fall not on account of the sins of our ancestors, but of our own. The iniquity of the fathers--of course it, too, will be avenged. Vices and disease are also hereditary. Enfeebled themselves, they have begotten a feeble generation. They have bequeathed to their children their love of pleasure and fostered it in them. And the iniquity of the fathers is also avenged upon us in other ways, but without any miracle of the saints. That the Catholics, tortured for years, turned to the Emperor against us; that the Ostrogoths aid our foes, are certainly punishments for the iniquity of our fathers. But God needs to work no miracle for that; indeed, he would be compelled to work a miracle to prevent it. And Ammata--is he innocent? Against your command he dashed recklessly into the battle. And Thrasaric? Instead of leaving the disobedient boy to his fate, according to his duty as General, and not attacking until Gibamund was at hand, he followed only the ardent desire of his heart to save your darling. And--"

He hesitated.

"And the King?" Gelimer went on. "Instead of doing his duty, he succumbs at the sight of the dead. But that is the curse, the vengeance of the Lord."

"No," replied Zazo. "This, too, is no miracle. This is because you, also, O brother, are no longer a true Vandal; I have said so before. You are absorbed,--not like the people, in luxury and pleasure,--but in brooding. And again it is a consequence of the misdeed of the father; if you had not when a boy witnessed that horrible scene of torture--But it is useless to ask how the past is to blame for the present; the aim should be to do our duty to-day, to-morrow, every day, firmly, faithfully, and without brooding. Then we shall conquer, and that will be well; or we shall fall like men, and that, too, is no evil thing. We can do no more than our duty. And the dear Lord in Heaven will deal with our souls according to His mercy. I am not anxious about mine, if I fall in battle for my people."

"Oh," cried Hilda, joyously, "that does one good. It is like the fresh north wind scattering the sultry mists."

Sorrowfully but with no reproach in his tone, Gelimer answered: "Yes, the sound man cannot understand why the sick man does not sing and leap. I *must* 'brood,' as you call it; I cannot do otherwise. Yet often I think my way through. Often I, too, in my way, break through the mists. So now, by fervent prayer, I have again won my way to the old strong consolation. Verus, my confessor, knows these conflicts and the cause of my victory: right is on my side. I am not a usurper, as the Emperor falsely calls me. Hilderic, the assassin, was justly deposed. No guilt cleaves to me; I have done Hilderic no wrong; the Emperor has no injustice to avenge on me. This is my stay, my support, and my staff.--Ah, Verus, we never hear you enter."

Zazo measured the priest with a hostile glance.

"I came to summon you, O King. There are still some written orders to prepare. Besides, I was to remind you of the prisoners."

"Oh, yes. Listen, Zazo; give the consent I have so long asked. Let me release Hilderic and Euages."

"By no means," cried Zazo, striding up and down the narrow tent. "On no account. Least of all on the eve of a decisive battle. Shall Belisarius replace him on the throne of Carthage after we have fallen? Or shall he, after we have conquered, be kept continually at the court of Constantinople as a living pretext for attacking us again? Off with the murderers' heads! Where are they?"

"Here in the camp, in safe keeping."

"And the hostages?"

"They were--Pudentius's son among them--confined in Decimum," Verus answered. "After the lost battle, they were freed by the victors."

"That might be repeated to-morrow," cried Zazo, angrily. "Amid the tumult of conflict, the foe might easily, for a short time, enter this open camp. I entreat, my King--"

"So be it," interrupted the latter, and turning to Verus he ordered: "Have Hilderic and Euages taken away."

"Where?"

"To some safe place where no Byzantine can liberate them."

Verus bowed and hurriedly left the tent.

"I will follow you," the King called after him. "Do not judge me too sternly in your hearts, you thoroughly healthy people," he now added in a gentle voice, turning to the others. "I am a tree blasted by the lightning. But to-morrow," he went on, drawing himself up to his full height, "to-morrow, I hope, you shall be satisfied with me. Even you, Hilda! Send me your little harp; I believe you will not regret it."

Hilda brought the instrument from a corner of the tent. "Here! But you know," she said, smiling, "its strings will break if any one tries to play on them an accompaniment to Latin verses of penitential hymns."

"They will not break. Good-night."

The King left the tent.

"I think I have seen that harp of plain black wood in some other hand. Where was it?" asked Zazo. "In Ravenna, was it not?"

Hilda nodded. "My friend Teja, my teacher on the harp and in the use of arms, bestowed it on me as a wedding gift. And his noble, faithful heart has not forgotten me. In my happiness he made no sign. But now--"

"Well?" asked Zazo.

"As soon as the first news of our defeat at Decimum reached Ravenna," said Gibamund, "brave Ostrogoths, the old instructor in the use of arms, Teja, and several others, wished to come to our assistance with a body of volunteers; for it was rumored that I had fallen. Probably the mistake arose through the death of Ammata. The Regent strictly forbade it. Then Teja sent to my widow, as he supposed, this magnificent dagger of dark metal."

"The workmanship is exquisite," said Zazo, drawing out the blade and examining it. "What a superb weapon!"

"And he forged it himself," cried Hilda, eagerly. "Look here; his housemark on the hilt."

"And on the blade a motto inscribed in runes," added Zazo, stepping under the lamp: "'The dead are free.' H'm, a stern consolation. But not too stern for Hilda. Keep this carefully."

"Yes," replied Hilda, quietly. "The dagger in my girdle, and the consolation in my thoughts."

"But not too soon, Hilda," said Zazo, in a tone of warning, as he left the tent.

"Have no fear," she answered, throwing both arms around her husband; "it is the consolation and weapon of the *widow*."

CHAPTER XIII

At sunrise the next morning the long-drawn notes of the horns aroused the sleeping camp of the Vandals.

Concealed from the eyes of the Romans by the first row of tents, the Barbarians' army was formed in order for battle within its own camp. The leaders had received written orders the evening before concerning their positions, and now executed them without confusion. A breakfast of bread and wine was served to the men wherever they stood or lay. The camp was a large one, narrow but very long, following the course of the little stream. Besides the soldiers, it had been compelled to shelter many women, children, and old men who had fled from Carthage and other districts occupied or threatened by the foe.

Now the blare of trumpets summoned the subordinate officers and the leaders of the thousands to the centre of the camp, where the King and his two brothers, mounted on their chargers, were in the midst of a large open space. With them, leaning against the shoulder of her splendid stallion, stood Hilda, a muffled spear-shaft in her hand; beside her, in full priestly insignia, Verus sat on horseback. Outside the leaders were massed the men with whom Zazo had reconquered Sardinia.

Again the blare of the trumpets echoed through the streets of tents, then Zazo rode a few paces forward. Thundering cheers greeted him. In loud, clear tones he began: "Listen, army of the Vandals. We shall fight to-day, not for victory alone; we are struggling for all we are and have,—the kingdom of Genseric and its renown, the wives and children in yonder tents, who will become slaves if we yield. To-day we must look death and the enemy closely in the eye. The King has commanded that this battle is to be fought by the Vandals with the sword only, not with bow and arrow, not with lance and spear. Look, I cast my own spear from me; you will do the same; with sword in hand, press close to the body of the foe." He dropped his lance; all the soldiers followed his example. "One spear alone," he added, "will tower aloft to-day in the Vandal army,—this."

Hilda stepped forward. Taking the shaft from her hand, he tore off the cover and waved high aloft a floating scarlet banner.

"Genseric's flag! Genseric's conquering dragon!" shouted thousands of voices.

"Follow this standard wherever it calls you. Do not let it fall into the hands of the enemy. Swear to follow it unto death."

"Unto death!" came the answer in solemn tones.

"That is well. I believe you. Vandals. Now listen to your King. You know that he has the gift of song and harp-playing. He has planned the order of battle wisely, skilfully; he has also composed the battle-song which is to sweep you into the conflict."

Then Gelimer, throwing back his long purple mantle, raised Hilda's--Teja's--dark triangular harp, and, to the accompaniment of its clear notes, sang:--

"On, on, Vandals brave,
Forward to battle!
Follow the standard,

The fame-heralded
Consort of Victory.

"Dash on the foemen!
Strive with and strike them,
Breast 'gainst breast pressing,
In close combat down!

"Guard ye, O Vandals,
The heritage noble
Of ancestors stainless,
Our kingdom and fame!

"Vengeance is preparing
High in the heavens
The avenger of right:
God crown with victory
The cause that is just."

"God crown with victory the cause that is just!" repeated the warriors, in an exulting shout, and dispersed through the streets of the camp.

The King and his brothers now dismounted from their horses, to hold another short council and to drink the wine which Hilda herself offered to them. Just at that moment, as Gelimer gave back the harp to Hilda, a strange figure pressed through the dispersing ranks; the King and the Princes gazed at it in astonishment. A tall man clad from head to ankles in a gown of camel's hair, fastened around the loins, not by a rope, but by a girdle of thick braided strands of a woman's light-brown tresses; no sandals protected the bare feet, no covering the closely shaven head. The cheeks were sunken; glowing eyes sparkled from deep sockets. Throwing himself before the King, he raised both hands imploringly.

"By Heaven! I know you, man," said Gelimer.

"Yes," cried Gibamund, "it is--"

"Thrasabad, Thrasaric's brother," added Zazo.

"The vanished nobleman whom we have long believed dead," said Hilda, with a timid glance at him, drawing nearer.

"Yes, Thrasabad," replied a hollow voice, "the miserable Thrasabad. I am a murderer, her murderer. King, judge me!"

Gelimer bent forward, took his right hand, and raised him.

"Not the Greek girl's murderer. I have heard the whole story from your brother."

"No matter; her blood rests on my soul. I felt that as I saw it flow. Lifting the beautiful body on a horse that very night, I dashed away with it from the eyes of men. Away, always deeper into the desert, till the horse fell. Then, with these hands, I buried her in a sand ravine not far from here. Her wonderfully beautiful hair I cut off; how often I have stroked and caressed it! And I prayed and did penance ceaselessly beside her grave. Pious desert monks found me there, watching and fasting, almost dead. And I confessed to them my heavy sin. They promised God's forgiveness if, as one of their brotherhood, I would do penance beside that grave forever. I took the vows. They gave me the dress of their order; I wound Glauke's hair around it to remind me always of my sin; and they brought me food in the lonely ravine. But since I heard of the day of Decimum and my brother's death; since the decisive conflict drew nearer and nearer; since you and the enemy pitched your camp close beside my hiding-place; since, two days ago, I heard the war horns of my people,--I have had no peace in my idle praying! Once I wielded the sword not badly. My whole heart yearned to follow once more, for the last time, the call of the battle trumpets. Alas! I dared not; I knew I was not worthy. But last night, in a dream, *she* appeared to me,--her human beauty transfigured into an angel's radiant loveliness, no longer any trace of earth about her; and she said: 'Go to your brothers-in-arms, ask for a sword, and fight and fall for your people. That will be the best atonement.' Oh, believe me, my King! I do not lie with the name of that saint on my lips. If you can forgive me for her sake--oh, let me--"

Zazo stepped forward, drew the sword from the sheath of one of his own warriors, and gave it to the monk. "Here, Thrasabad, son of Thrasamer! I will answer for it to the King. Do you see? He, too, is nodding to you. Take this sword and go with my men. You will probably need no scabbard. Now, King Gelimer, let the horns bray. Forward! at the foe!"

CHAPTER XIV

The King, with a keen eye of a general, had seen that the crisis of the battle would be decided in the centre of the two armies, where on the southwest at the left, and on the northeast at the right of the little stream, rose a succession of low hills. Besides, deserters from the Huns had reported that in the next encounter these troops would either not fight at all, or take a very inactive part; therefore Gelimer expected from the right Roman wing no peril to his own left flank. He stationed the right wing of the Vandal troops tolerably far back, so that the enemy would have to march a considerable distance to reach it. Perhaps by that time the centre might already have won the victory, and thereby obtained the accession of the Huns.

So the King placed the best strength of his troops in the centre. By far the larger portion consisted of cavalry; there was a small force of infantry, Zazo's warriors, numbering nearly five thousand; here, too, he had posted Gibamund with his faithful two hundred men; here were the two Gundings and their numerous kinsmen, with boar helmets and boar shields, like their leaders; here he himself took his station with a large body of cavalry, to which he added the few faithful Moors from the Pappua Mountains under their young chief, Sersaon. The command of the two wings he had intrusted to two other noblemen. Before the beginning of the battle and during its course, Gelimer dashed in person on a swift horse everywhere through the ranks, rousing and stimulating the courage of his men.

The conflict began as the King had planned, by a total surprise of the foe. Just at the time the Byzantines were busied in preparing the morning meal, Gelimer suddenly led the centre of his army from behind the shelter of the row of tents to the left bank of the marshy little brook. This stream was so small that it had no name, yet it never dried up. And the left bank occupied by the Vandals was higher than the right. Belisarius was not yet on the ground, but his subordinate officers arranged their men as well as they could in their haste, where each division happened to be standing or lying. The right Roman wing on the hill consisted of the Huns, who did not move. Next to them, according to secret orders, stood Fara with the Herulians, watching these doubtful allies. Then followed, in the centre, Althias the Thracian and Johannes the Armenian, with their picked troops of their fellow-countrymen, and the shield and lance bearers of Belisarius's bodyguard. Here gleamed the imperial standard, the *vexillum prætorium*, the flag of the General, Belisarius. The left Roman wing was formed of the other auxiliary troops except the Huns. The Byzantines, too, had perceived that the victory would be decided in the centre of the two armies. When Gibamund, on his white charger, led his men forward, Hilda on her splendid stallion rode at his side. By her husband's wish she had protected her beautiful head with a light helmet, on which rose two white falcon wings; her bright golden locks flowed over her white mantle. He had also pressed upon her a small, shining shield, with a light silvery hue. Her white lower robe was girdled with the black belt which supported the sheath of Teja's dagger; but she had refused a breastplate on account of its weight.

"You will not let me fight with you or even ride by your side," she complained.

Already the Byzantines' arrows were flying over the Vandals and striking among Gibamund's men.

"Halt, love," he commanded, "go no farther! Not within reach of the arrows! Wait here, on this little hill. I will leave ten men as a guard. From this spot you can see a long distance. Watch the white heron's wings on my helmet, and the dragon banner. I shall follow it." A clasp of the hand; Gibamund dashed forward; Hilda quietly checked the docile horse. Her face was very pale.

The first encounter came at once.

Johannes the Armenian, one of Belisarius's best leaders, pressed with his countrymen through the stream, which reached only to their knees, and rushed out of it up the steeper Vandal shore. He was instantly hurled back. Zazo, with his foremost warriors, darted upon him with the weight with which a bird of prey strikes small game. Down the slope, into the midst of the stream, whose water was soon dyed red, and up the opposite bank, swept the Vandal pursuit. Hilda saw it plainly from her station. "Oh, at last, at last," she cried, "a breath of victory!"

But Zazo followed no farther. He prudently led his men back to the left bank of the stream. "We will pitch them down here again," he said, laughing; "we will profit once more by our position on the height."

The Armenians bore their brave leader away with them in their flight. Johannes, who had received through his shield a wound in the arm from Zazo's sword, said grimly to Marcellus, the commander of the bodyguard: "The devil has got into the cowards of Decimum. It confuses my spearmen to have them fight solely with the sword. The Barbarians thrust the long spears to the right, run under them, and cut the men down. And this fellow with the buffalo helm actually butts like a mountain bull. Give me your shield-bearers; I will try again."

With the shield-bearers, led by Martinus, the Armenians renewed the attack. Not an arrow, not a spear, flew to meet them; but as soon as they began to climb the Vandal shore, the Germans dashed down on them with the sword in a hand-to-hand conflict. Martinus fell by Gibamund's sword. Then the shield-bearers fled; the Armenians hesitated, wavered, fell into confusion, finally they, too, fled, pursued by the Vandals.

"Dash on the foemen!
Strive with and strike them
Down in close combat!"

rose in a roar from Zazo's troops, whom the latter again led to the left shore.

"They must repeatedly see the backs of the dreaded Byzantines before they have the courage to defeat them entirely," he said to Gibamund, who urged pursuit. "And where is Belisarius?"

The latter, with his five hundred horsemen, had reached the centre from Carthage just in time to see the flight of his men. When he learned that this was the second attack which had been repulsed, he ordered all his bodyguard, men trained to fight on foot as well as on horseback, to dismount and advance with Althias's Thracians for the third assault. His own special standard, the "General's banner," he commanded to be borne before them.

It was a mighty, a menacing spectacle. The tuba of the Romans blared to greet the standard of the commanding General. The Byzantines, in firmly closed ranks, advanced like a moving wall of bronze, their long lances levelled. Zazo saw that his men hesitated. "Forward! Cross the stream! On to the attack!"

He dashed on in advance of his troops. But he soon perceived that only a very few--the Gundings and their boar-helmeted kinsmen--were following. "Forward!" he commanded again. But the Vandals delayed. They felt that the rush down from the height had made their success far easier; they did not wish to leave the vantage-ground, and--they had seen Belisarius in the distance. The ranks of levelled lances, terrible, threatening, drew nearer and nearer.

"If we only had our spears!" cried voices in the ranks behind him. The Byzantines had already reached the stream; now they were wading through the marshy rivulet,--yet the Vandals on the heights did not obey the command to charge.

"You *will* not cross?" cried Zazo, furiously. "Then you *must*!" With these words he tore Genseric's dragon banner from the hand of the horseman at his right and shouting: "Bring back the standard and your honor!" he hurled it with all his strength across the stream into the midst of the Byzantines. Loud cries rose from friends and enemies.

One of the Byzantines instantly snatched the banner from the ground, raised it aloft, and was hurrying with it to Belisarius. But he did not go far. For when they saw the treasure of the kingdom in the hands of the foe, all the Vandals, on horseback and on foot, following their nobles, rushed down the slope into the stream and the midst of the enemy. By Zazo's side, on a powerful stallion, rode a strange figure,--a monk without helmet, shield, or breastplate; he wore a gray cowl and carried a sword. Breaking a passage through the hostile ranks, he reached the captor of the scarlet banner, tore it from his hand, and, with a single sword-stroke, cleft helmet and skull. It was Valerianus, the commander of the lance-bearers.

The victor swung the rescued standard high aloft, and instantly fell from his horse, pierced by five lances. But Gundobad, the Gunding, raised the banner from the hand of the sinking figure.

"Here, to the rescue," he shouted, "kinsmen of the Gundings! Here, you boars!"

Immediately his brother and the whole troop of boar helms gathered around him; the banner and its bearer were cut out for the moment. The ranks of the foe nearest to the Vandal banner wavered, yielded.

"Victory!" shouted the Vandals, pressing boldly forward, singing,--

"Forward to battle!
Follow the standard,
The fame-heralded
Consort of victory."

They struck their sword-blades on their shields till the sound echoed far and wide.

"Victory!" cried Hilda, exultantly, as she witnessed the whole magnificent spectacle.

CHAPTER XV

Belisarius also witnessed it from his station on the hill. "Fly," he cried to Procopius; "fly to Fara and the Herulians! They must swing to the left and take those red rags."

"And the Huns?" asked Procopius under his breath. "Look yonder; they are riding slowly forward, but not westward, not against the Vandals."

"Obey! This German war dance around the red banner must first be put to a bloody end, or their Teutonic battle fiend will take possession of them, and then all is over. My face alone will keep the Huns in check, should there be need of it."

Meanwhile the dragon banner had again changed bearers. All the lances and arrows were aimed at the dangerous emblem, visible far and wide. Gundobad's horse fell; its rider did not rise again. But his brother Gundomar took the standard from the dying noble's hand and ran the point of its shaft into the throat of Cyprianus, the second leader of the Thracians, whose battle-axe had cleft Gundobad's helmet and head as he tried to spring up from his dead charger.

Hilda had seen the red banner disappear for a moment, and anxiously gave her stallion a light blow with her hand. The fiery animal shot forward in frantic haste; not until she reached the edge of the stream could the Princess draw rein. Her companions gained the new position much later.

Althias now reached the second Gunding. Unequal, unfavorable to every bearer of the standard was the conflict. His left hand, holding the bridle and the heavy standard, could not use the shield, and this burden also impeded very considerably the action of his right arm in defence. After a short struggle Gundomar, transfixed by the Thracian's spear, sank from his horse. But Gibamund was already on the spot, and Zazo, dashing close behind him, no sooner saw the standard safe in his brother's hand than he shouted, "Belisarius has a banner too."

Turning swiftly to the left, by the mere weight of his horse he burst through a rank of the Thracians, reached Belisarius's bodyguard, who bore the gold-embroidered standard, and, with a sword-stroke through the front of the helmet into his brow, felled him. The Roman General's banner sank, while Gibamund, surrounded and protected by his band of picked warriors, waved the scarlet dragon standard high in the air.

Hilda saw it distinctly. Involuntarily she obeyed the impulse to go forward after the victory. The stallion, yielding to the lightest movement, bore her across the stream, whose water barely wet the edge of her long white robe. She was on the other side. She was pursuing victory. Before her, a little to the left, she already saw Gelimer and his troops; the whole Vandal centre was advancing. It was the crisis, the turning-point of the battle.

Again Althias tried to force his way through the Vandal ranks to Gibamund himself; he had almost reached him, and they had exchanged two whizzing sword-strokes, which made the sparks fly from their blades, when from the left cries of grief and rage fell on the Thracian's ear from the Byzantines. He turned, and saw his General's banner sink.

This was the second time; for Zazo had already struck down the second man who bore it. The victor was stretching his hand toward the shaft, which no third man seemed inclined to lift.

Just at that moment, close at hand on the right, German horns sounded in Zazo's ears. The Herulians, dashing on their snorting horses upon the Vandals' flank, broke through several of their ranks to their leader.

A spear--well aimed, for Fara had hurled it--shattered the buffalo helm on the hero's head. He could no longer think of Belisarius's banner. He was obliged to consider his own safety.

"Help, brother Gelimer!" he shouted.

"I am here, brother Zazo," rang the answer. For the King was already at hand. Slowly following the advance of the brothers, he had led his Vandals and Moors nearer and nearer, and noticed the second charge and the moment of peril.

"Forward! Cut Zazo out," he shouted, dashing upon the Herulians at the head of his men. A warrior sprang to meet him, clutched the bridle of the cream-colored charger with his left hand, and aimed his spear with the right. Before it flew, Gelimer's sword had pierced the Herulian's throat. Hilda saw it; for, as if irresistibly attracted by the battle, she rode nearer and nearer.

Just at this moment she perceived Verus in full priestly robes, unarmed, dash past her straight to the King. It was no easy task to force a passage to his side through the Moors and Vandals. Gelimer struck down a second spear-man, a third. Already he was close to Zazo. The charge of his Vandals now came full upon the Herulians. The latter did not yield, but they no longer gained a foot of ground. As two wrestlers, with arms interlocked, each unable to move the other from the spot, measure equal strength, the German warriors surged to and fro. Victory hung in the balance.

"Where are the foot-soldiers?" asked Belisarius, glancing anxiously toward the distant heights where the Numidian road extended toward Carthage.

"I have sent out three messengers," answered Procopius. "There! The Thracians are yielding! The Armenians are falling back! The Herulians are now pressed by greatly superior numbers."

"Forward, Illyrians, save the battle for me. Belisarius himself will lead you--"

And with a loud blare of trumpets, the General dashed down the hill to the aid of the Herulians. Gelimer heard the flourish, saw the charge, and summoned reinforcements from the

rearguard.

"There," he shouted, pointing with his sword, "and join me in the battle-song,

"Vengeance is preparing
The avenger of right."

"You here, Verus? What news do you bring? Your face is--"

"O King!" cried the priest, "what blood-guiltiness!"

"What has happened?"

"The messenger I sent to the prisoners--one of my freedmen--misunderstood your words: 'Have them taken away, where no one can free them.'"

"Well?"

"He has--he reported it to me, and fled when he saw my wrath."

"Well, what is it?"

"He has--killed Hilderic and Euages."

"Omniscient God!" cried the King, paling. "That was not my wish."

"But still more," Verus went on.

"Help, Gelimer!" Zazo's voice shouted from the densest ranks of the conflict.

Belisarius and his Illyrians had now reached him. Gibamund was by his side. Gelimer also spurred his horse.

But Verus grasped his bridle, shouting in his ear: "The letter, the warning to Hilderic--I found it just now, wedged between two drawers in the coffer. Here it is. Hilderic did not lie! He only wished to protect himself against you. Innocent--he was deposed, imprisoned, slain!"

Gelimer, speechless with horror, stared for a moment into the priest's stony face; he seemed stupefied. Then the battle-song of his men echoed in his ears:--

"Vengeance is preparing
High in the heavens
The avenger of right!"

"Woe, woe is me! I am a criminal, a murderer," the King shrieked aloud. The sword slipped from his grasp. He covered his face with both hands. A terrible convulsion shook him. He seemed falling from the saddle. Verus supported him, wheeled the King's horse so that his back was toward the foe, and gave the animal a blow on the hind quarter with all his strength. The charger dashed madly away. Sersaon and Markomer, the leaders of the cavalry, supported the swaying figure on the right and left.

"Help! help! I am being overcome, brother Gelimer!" Zazo's voice again rose,--more urgently, nay, despairingly. But it was drowned by the wild, frantic cries of the Vandals.

"Fly! fly! The King himself has fled! Fly! Save the women, the children!" And the Vandals, by hundreds, now wheeled their horses and dashed away toward the stream and the camp.

Then Hilda, now only a few paces from the tumult, saw Zazo's towering figure disappear. His horse, pierced by a spear, fell; it was bleeding from more than one wound. But the hero sprang up again.

Fara the Herulian reached him from the left, and cleft his dragon-shield with his battle-axe. Zazo flung the pieces at the helmet of the Herulian, stunning him so that he swayed in his saddle. Now Barbatus, the Illyrian leader, his long lance levelled, pressed upon Zazo from the right. With his last strength Zazo pushed it aside, sprang to the right, the shieldless side of the rider, and thrust his sword into his neck between the helmet and breastplate. Barbatus sank slowly from the saddle toward the left. But, in springing back, Zazo had fallen on his knees. Before he could rise, two horsemen with levelled lances stood before him.

"Help, Gibamund!" called the kneeling Prince, raising his left arm above his head in place of a shield. He looked around. Everywhere foes, no Vandal. Yes,--one. Yonder still waved the scarlet banner. "Help, Gibamund!" he cried.

One of his two assailants fell from his horse. Gibamund was at Zazo's side. He had struck the man under the shoulder of his upraised arm with the spear-point of the banner staff. But now

Fara, who meanwhile had recovered from Zazo's blow, dropping his bridle, grasped with his left hand at the shaft of the scarlet standard. With great difficulty Gibamund defended himself with his sword against the tremendous blows the Herulian's right arm dealt with his battle-axe. And already the other horseman, in front of Zazo, bent a leonine face toward him.

"Yield, brave man. Yield to me. I am Belisarius."

But Zazo shook his head. With failing strength he sprang up, his sword raised to strike. Then the Roman General drove the point of his spear with all his force through his breastplate up to the handle.

The dying warrior cast one more glance toward the left. He saw Gibamund's white horse, covered with blood-stains, falling; he saw the scarlet banner sink. "Woe betide thee, Vandalia!" he cried, as his eyes grew dim in death.

"That was indeed a hero," said Belisarius, bending over him. "Where is Genseric's banner, Fara?"

"Gone!" replied the latter, wrathfully. "Far away. Do you see? It is already vanishing over there, beyond the stream."

"Who has--?"

"A woman. In a falcon helmet. With a shining white shield. I believe it was a Valkyria," said the pagan, with a slight shiver of fear. "It happened so swiftly I scarcely saw it. I had just struck down the young standard-bearer's horse. Just at that moment a black steed--I never saw such an animal--plunged against my own horse so that it fell back upon its haunches. I heard a cry: 'Hilda! I thank you!' At the same moment the black charger dashed far, far away from me. I think it now carried two figures! A long fluttering white mantle--or was it swan-wings?--and above floated the scarlet banner. There, now they are vanishing in that cloud of dust. 'Hilda!' the German murmured to himself. The name suits too. Yes, the Valkyria bore him away."

"Forward!" shouted Belisarius. "Follow! Over the stream! There is no longer a Vandal army. The centre is broken and defeated. Their left wing--aha, look yonder, our right wing, the faithful Huns--" He laughed grimly. "Now they are rushing from their hill, hewing down the flying Barbarians. What heroism! And how they are all struggling to reach the camp to plunder! Now, at last, our infantry have joined our left wing; there, too, the Vandals are flying without a struggle. On, to the camp! Do not let the Huns secure the whole booty. All the gold and silver for the Emperor, the pearls and precious stones for the Empress! Forward!"

CHAPTER XVI

PROCOPIUS TO CETHEGUS:

I have witnessed many a battle, many a conflict of Belisarius,--usually from a very safe distance,--but never have I seen so strange an encounter. In this, which decides the fate of the Vandal kingdom, we have lost in all only forty-nine men, but solely picked warriors, and among them eight commanders. Fara, Althias, and Johannes,--all three are wounded. Yet we have not many--perhaps a hundred--wounded men, as the Vandals fought only with the sword. That yields almost as many killed as wounded. Most of our dead and wounded may be credited to the three Asdings, two noblemen in boar helmets, and an apparently crazy monk. Eight hundred Vandal corpses covered the field, by far the larger number of these fell during the flight. We have captured, sound and wounded, about ten thousand men; women and children unnumbered. In our two wings we did not lose a single warrior, except one Hun whom Belisarius was unfortunately compelled to hang. He had stuffed pockets, shoes, hair, and ears with pearls and gems which he picked up in the Vandal camp, especially in the women's tents, and which our Empress has honestly earned.

Our pursuit of the Vandals was checked only by our greed. The fallen and captive Vandals had many ornaments of gold and silver on their persons, their horses, and themselves; our heroes plundered every one before passing on. Our horsemen, who reached the camp first, did not venture, in spite of their longing to pillage, to enter it at once; they thought it impossible that a force so superior in numbers should not defend their own camp, their wives and children.

The King is said to have paused a moment as if stupefied; but when Belisarius with our whole body appeared before the tents, he exclaimed, "The avenger!" and pursued his flight toward Numidia, attended by a few relatives, servants, and faithful Moors. Now all the Vandal warriors who had reached the camp scattered in wild confusion, surrendering their shrieking children, their weeping wives, their rich possessions, without a single sword-stroke; and these men are, or were, Germans! It would be no wonder if Justinian should now try at once to liberate Italy and Spain from the Goths.

Our men dashed after the fugitives. All the rest of the day and the whole moonlight night they slaughtered the Vandals without resistance; they seized women and children by thousands to use

them as slaves. Never yet have I beheld so much beauty. Nor have I ever seen such heaps of gold and silver money as in the tents of the King and the Vandal nobles. It is incredible.

Belisarius was tortured after his victory by the most terrible anxiety. For in this camp, filled to overflowing with the most beautiful women, treasures of every description, wine and provisions, the whole army forgot every trace of discipline. Fairly intoxicated with their undreamed of good fortune, they lived solely for the pleasure of the moment; every barrier gave way, every curb broke; they could not satisfy themselves. The demon of Africa, pleasure, seized upon them. They roved, singly and in couples, through the camp and its vicinity, following the track of the fugitives wherever the search for booty or revelry lured them. There was no thought of the enemy, no fear of the General. Those who were still sober, laden with treasure and driving their captives before them, tried to escape to Carthage. Belisarius says that if the Vandals had attacked us again an hour after we took possession of their camp, not a man of us all would have escaped. The victorious army, even his bodyguard, had entirely thrown off his control.

At the gray dawn of morning with the blast of the trumpets he summoned all the warriors; that is, all who were sober. His bodyguard now came hastily in deep shame. Instead of thanks and praise, he gave leaders and men a lecture such as I never before heard from his lips. We have become mere hired soldiers, adventurers, ruffians, fierce and brave, like greedy beasts of prey; well suited for bloody pursuit, like hunting leopards, but not fit to leave the captured game to the hunter or bring it in and fasten it in a cage; we must first have our share of the blood and the food. It is by no means beautiful; yet it is far more enjoyable than philosophy and theology, rhetoric, grammar, and dialectics. But the Vandal War is over, I think. To-morrow we shall doubtless capture the fugitive King.

* * * * *

I always say so. The most weighty decisions hinge upon the most trivial incidents. Or, as I express it when I am in a very poetical mood, the goddess Tyche likes to sport with the destinies of men and nations, as boys toss coins in the air and determine gain and loss by "heads" or "tails."

You, O Cethegus, have condemned my philosophy of the world's history as old wives' croaking. But judge for yourself. A bird's cry, a blind delight in hunting, a shot sent to the wrong mark, and the result is this: the Vandal King escapes when already within the grasp of our fingers; the campaign, which seemed ended, continues, and your friend must spend weeks in an extremely tiresome besieging camp before an extremely unnecessary Moorish mountain village.

Belisarius had committed the pursuit of the fugitive King to his countryman, the Thracian Althias. "I choose you," he said, "because I trust you above all others where swift, tireless action is needed. If you overtake the Vandal before he finds refuge, the war will be over tomorrow; if you permit him to escape, you will give us long-continued severe toil. Choose your own men, but do not take time to breathe by night or day until you seize the tyrant, dead or alive."

Althias blushed like a flattered girl. He took besides his Thracians several of the bodyguard and about a hundred Herulians under Fara. He asked me also to accompany him, less, probably, for the sake of my sword than my counsel. I willingly consented.

And now a flying chase, such as I had never imagined possible, began in the rear of the Vandals. Five days and five nights, almost without a pause, we pursued the fugitives; their hoofmarks and footprints in the sand of the desert were unmistakable. We gained on them more and more, so that on the fifth night we were sure of overtaking and stopping them the next day before they reached the protection of the mountain--Pappua, it is called.

But the capricious goddess did not wish to have Gelimer fall into the hands of Althias. Uliari, one of the Alemanni bodyguards of Belisarius, is a brave, strong man, but reckless, fond of drink like all Germans, and, like nearly all his countrymen, a passionate lover of the chase. He had been repeatedly punished because, while on the march, he pursued every animal that appeared. On the morning of the sixth day, just at sunrise, as we were remounting our horses after a short rest, Uliari saw a big vulture perched on a prickly bush about the height of a man, which rose alone from the desert plain. To seize his bow, snatch an arrow from the quiver, aim, and shoot was the work of a single instant. The cord twanged, the bird flew away, a cry rose. Althias, who had again dashed forward in advance of us all, fell from his horse, wounded in the back of the head under his helmet. Uliari, usually an unerring marksman, had not yet slept off his potations of the night before. Horrified by his deed, he set spurs to his horse and fled to the nearest village to seek sanctuary in its chapel.

But we were all trying to help the dying Althias, though he commanded us by signs to leave him to his fate and continue the pursuit. We could not bring ourselves to do it. Nay, when Fara and I, after our friend had died in our arms, wished to go on; his Thracians demanded with threats that the body should first be buried, otherwise the soul would be condemned to wail around the place until the Day of Judgment. So we dug a grave and interred the dead hero with every honor. These few hours decided Gelimer's escape; we could not make up the lost time. The fugitives reached their goal, the Pappua Mountains on the frontier of Numidia, whose steep,

inaccessible peaks everywhere bristle with jagged rocks. The Moors who dwell here are bound to Gelimer by ties of loyalty and gratitude. An ancient city, Medenus, now a mere hamlet of a few huts on the northern crest of the mountain, received him and his train. To storm this narrow antelope path is impossible; a single man can bar the ascent with his shield. The Moors have scornfully rejected an offer of a large reward to deliver up the fugitives. So the watchword is "patience." We must pitch our tents at the foot of the mountain, bar all the outlets, and starve the people into a surrender.

That may occupy a great deal of time. And it is winter; the mountain peaks are often covered in the morning with a light snow, which, it is true, the sun soon melts when he breaks through the clouds. But he does not always break through. On the other hand, mist and rain continually penetrate the camel-skin coverings of our tents.

CHAPTER XVII

We are still encamped before the entrance of the mountain ravine of Pappua. We cannot get in; they cannot get out. I have seen a cat watch a mouse-hole a long time in the same way,--very tiresome for the cat. But if the hole has no other outlet, the little mouse finally either starves or runs into the cat's claws.

To-day news and reinforcements came from Carthage. Belisarius, who had been informed of the state of affairs, gave the chief command to Fara in the place of Althias. Fara and his Herulians won Belisarius's most glorious victory, in the Persian battle at Dara, when the Roman ranks were beginning to waver and only the German boldness which is nearly allied to madness could save the day. Fara left more than half his Herulians dead on the field. The General himself is marching on Hippo.

* * * * *

Fresh news--from Hippo.

Belisarius took the city without resistance. The Vandals, among them numerous nobles, fled to the Catholic churches, and left these asylums only on the assurance that their lives would be spared. And again the wind blew, literally, rich gains into our hands. The Tyrant, distrusting the fidelity of the citizens and the broken walls, had prudently removed the royal treasure of the Vandals from the citadel of Carthage, and placed it on a ship. He ordered Bonifacius, his private secretary, in case the victory of the Vandals seemed uncertain, to sail to Hispania to Theudis, the King of the Visigoths, with whom, if the kingdom fell, Gelimer intended to seek refuge, perhaps with the expectation of recovering the treasure by the aid of the Visigoths.

A violent storm drove the ship back into the harbor of Hippo, just after Belisarius had occupied it. The treasure of the Vandals, gathered by Genseric from the coasts and islands of three seas, will go into the hands of the imperial pair at Constantinople. Theodora, your piety is profitable!

Yet no; the royal treasure of the Vandals will not reach Constantinople absolutely intact. And this is due to a singular circumstance, which is probably worth relating. Perhaps, too, I may mention the thoughts which the incident aroused in my mind. Of all the nations of whom I have any knowledge, the Germans are the most foolish: these fair-haired giants blindly follow their impulses and run to open ruin. True, these impulses and delusions are in a measure honorable--for Barbarians. But the excess, the fury with which they obey their impulses, must ruin them, aided by their so-called virtues. "Heroism," as they term it, they carry to the sheerest absurdity, even to contempt of death, keeping their promises from mere obstinacy; for instance, when, in the blind excitement of gambling, they stake their own liberty on the last throw. They call this fidelity. Sometimes they manifest the most diabolical craftiness, yet they often carry truthfulness to actual self-destruction, when a neat little lie, a slight, clever manipulation of the bald truth, or even a calm silence would surely save them. All this is by no means rooted in a sense of duty, but in their tameless pride, in arrogance, in defiance; and they call it honor. The key of all their actions, their final unspoken motive is this: "Let none think, far less be able to say, that a German does or fails to do anything because he fears any man, or any number of men; he would rather rush to certain death." Therefore, no matter what any one of these stubborn fools may have set his heart upon, to go to destruction for it is "heroic," "honorable." True, they often set their hearts on their people, liberty, fame; but just as frequently on swilling,--it cannot be called drinking,--on brawling, on dice-throwing. And they pursue the heroism of swilling and gambling just as blindly as that of battle. Anything rather than to yield! If "honor" (that is, obstinacy) is once fixed upon anything,--wise or foolish,--then pursue it even to destruction. Though pleasure in the game has long been exhausted, out-drink or out-wrestle the other man; do anything but own that strength and spirit are consumed; rather die thrice over. I can speak thus, because I know these Germans. Many thousands of them--from nearly every one of their numerous tribes--have I seen in war and peace, as soldiers, prisoners, envoys, hostages, mercenaries, colonists, in the service of the Emperor, as leaders of the army, and as magistrates. I have long wondered how any Germans are left; for, in truth, their virtues vie with their vices in hastening their

destruction.

Of all the nations I know, the shrewdest are the Jews, if shrewdness consists first in the art of self-preservation, and then in the acquisition and increase of worldly goods. They are the least, as the Germans are the most ready, to rush upon ruin through blind passion, through noble or ignoble impetuosity and defiance. They are the most crafty of mortals and at the same time by no means the worst. But they are clever to a degree which makes one marvel why they did not long ago rule all other peoples; something must be lacking there too.

Do you ask, O Cethegus, how in the camp of Belisarius before Mount Pappua I have attained this singular view of the much-despised Hebrews? Very simply.

They have accomplished something which I consider the most impossible. They have not plundered; by no means, not even stolen, for they steal almost less than the Christians; but they have actually talked many thousand pounds of gold belonging to the Vandal booty out of the avaricious hands of the Emperor Justinian. The Emperor Titus, after the fall of Jerusalem, brought to Rome the treasures of the Jewish Temple,--candlesticks, vessels, dishes, jugs, and all sorts of gold and silver articles set with pearls and precious stones. When Genseric pillaged Rome, he bore away the Temple treasures on his corsair ships to Carthage. The Empress knew this, and probably it was not the least of the reasons for which the Bishop was compelled to dream. Belisarius wished to exhibit all the booty on his entrance into Constantinople; but when it was unloaded at Hippo, to be taken at once, with the rest of the treasure, to Carthage, the oldest of the Jews in Hippo went to him and said: "Let me warn you, mighty warrior! Do not convey these treasures to Constantinople. Listen to a tale from the lips of your humble servant.

"The eagle stole from the sacrifice burning on the altar a piece of meat and bore it to his eyrie. But a few glimmering coals clung to the offering which had been consecrated to God. And these glimmering coals set fire to the nest of the great bird of prey, and burned the young, which were not yet able to fly, and the eagle mother. The male eagle, trying to save the young brood, dashed into the flames and scorched his wings. So perished miserably the strong robber that had borne to his own abode what belonged to God. Indeed, indeed, I tell you, the capitol of Rome fell into the hands of the foe because it contained the sacred vessels of Jehovah; the citadel of the Vandals fell into the hands of the foe because it concealed these treasures. Must the stronghold of the Emperor--God bless the protector of justice--at Constantinople become the third eyrie which is destroyed for their sake? In truth I say unto you, thus saith the Lord: This gold, this silver, will wander over the earth, will destroy all the cities to which the stolen treasure is dragged, until the gold and the silver again lie in the holy city, Jerusalem."

And, lo, Belisarius was startled.

He wrote to the Emperor Justinian the story of the old Jew, and--really and truly--the patriarch Moses can work still greater miracles than Saint Cyprian. Justinian, more greedy and avaricious than the whole race of Jews put together, ordered these treasures to be taken, not to Constantinople, but Jerusalem, where they are to be divided among the Christian churches and the Jewish synagogues.

So the old Jew has recovered a portion of the treasures of his people,--without a single sword-stroke,--while Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, gained them only after fierce battles and much bloodshed. Does the old man believe in the curse that rests upon the treasure? I think he does. He does not lie, and it is useful for his purpose to believe it; so he credits it easily and seriously. The German says: "Gain by blood rather than by sweat." The Jew says: "Gain by sweat rather than by blood, and far, far rather by money than by sweat!" It may be said in praise of the Jews that both their faults and their virtues vie in preserving them and increasing their wealth and their numbers, while the Germans destroy themselves, their lives, their possessions, and their power by boundless indolence and boundless revelling no less than by their boundless obstinacy and their stupid heroism of honor. (True, these Vandals in their carousing have even forgotten their obstinacy and their love of fighting!) We hate and despise the Jews; I think we ought to fear and--in their good qualities strive to excel them.

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I have read aloud my opinion of the Germans to my friend Fara, whose thirst for honor did not impel him toward reading and writing; he heard me quietly to the end, drained a cup of unmixed wine, stroked his long reddish-yellow beard thoughtfully, and said:

"Little Greek! You are a shrewd little Greek! Perhaps you are not altogether wrong. But to me my German faults are much dearer than the virtues of all other nations."

Gradually--so we learn--all the rest of the Barbarian kingdom will be plucked leaf by leaf, like an artichoke, without a sword-stroke, for Justinian's wide-open mouth. Belisarius's first care, after his victory over the land forces, was to secure the hostile fleet.

He discovered its landing-place from the prisoners, and also learned that it was lying at anchor almost wholly without men; Zazo had taken all his troops to his brother. A few of our triremes, sent from Carthage, were sufficient to capture the one hundred and fifty galleys which

were occupied only by sailors; not a single spear flew. Genseric's much-dreaded dragon-ships were towed to Carthage; they allowed themselves to be captured without resistance, like a flock of wild swans, which, storm-beaten, wearied, and crippled, enter an inclosed pond; the proud birds can be grasped with the hand. One of Belisarius's commanders obtained Sardinia; it was necessary, but amply sufficient, to show them Zazo's head on a spear; the islanders would not believe in the defeat of the Vandals before; now that they could touch the head of their dreaded conqueror, they did believe it.

Corsica, too, submitted. Also populous Cæsarea in Mauritania, and one of the Pillars of Hercules; Septa, with Ebusa and the Balearic Isles. Tripolis was besieged by Moors, who, during the battle between the Byzantines and the Vandals, were trying to win land and people on their own account. The city was occupied by our troops and received from the hands of Pudentius for the Emperor.

One might think the whole Vandal nation existed in its royal family and a few of the nobles. When Zazo and the nobles about him fell, after the King vanished, all resistance ceased; it was like a bundle of sticks: when the string that fastens them is cut, they all fall apart. Since the day of Trikameron the Barbarians everywhere allow themselves to be seized like sheep without defence. They are mainly to be found weaponless in the Catholic basilicas, where, seeking refuge, they embrace the altars which they have so often dishonored. The men are just the same as the women and children.

Really, if their brothers in Italy and Spain, and their cousins, the Franks, Alemanni, or whatever else the Barbarians in Gaul and Germany are called, were as highly educated as these Vandal writers of Greek and Latin poetry, the Emperor Justinianus could speedily recover the whole West through Belisarius and Narses. But I fear the Vandals alone have attained such a degree of culture.

CHAPTER XVIII

More news! Perhaps another war and conquest close at hand.

Am I really, O Cethegus, to be permitted speedily to seek you in your Italy and help to free Rome by the aid of Huns and Herulians? Your tyrants, the Ostrogoths, have made the bridge for us into this country; it was their Sicily. Justinian's gratitude is swift-winged. By the Emperor's command--Belisarius received it sealed, directly after our departure from Constantinople, with the direction not to open the papyrus until after the destruction of the Vandal kingdom--our General has already demanded from the court of Ravenna the cession of a considerable portion of Sicily,--Lilybæum, the important promontory and castle, and all that the Vandals had ever possessed in that island. For the Vandal kingdom had now lapsed to Constantinople, so everything that had ever belonged to that domain also fell to it. A man is not Emperor of the Pandects for nothing.

True, it seems to me somewhat brutal to set their limitless stupidity before the eyes of the deluded people quite so speedily. Though of course it is the acme of statecraft to defeat the first with the help of the second, and then, in token of gratitude, overthrow the second. Yet it is long since it was done so openly. Belisarius is obliged to threaten war at once, not only upon Sicily, but all Italy, Ravenna, and Rome. The letter to the Regent Amalasintha concludes,--I had to compose it for Belisarius in his tent, according to the Emperor's secret order directly after the battle of Trikameron: "If you refuse, you must know that you will not incur merely the *danger* of war, but war itself, in which we shall take from you not only Lilybæum, but everything you possess contrary to justice; that is, all!" To-day came the news that there had been a revolution in Ravenna. Very wicked men, who had already wished to support the Vandals against us, do not love Justinian (but also unfortunately do not fear him), barbaric names,--you will be more familiar with them than I, O Cethegus! Hildebrand, Vitigis, Teja, have seized the helm there and flatly refuse our demand. It seems to me that there is the blast of the tuba in the air.

But first of all we must subdue this Vandal King without a kingdom up above there. The siege is lasting too long for the patience of Belisarius. Hitherto all proposals for surrender have been refused, even those on the most absurdly favorable conditions, made because Belisarius desires to bring the war here swiftly to an end, as it seems to me that he may be able speedily to celebrate a triumph in Constantinople such as has not been witnessed there for centuries, and then continue in Italy what he had begun here.

And since this singular King, who sometimes seems to be soft wax, sometimes the hardest granite, is not to be influenced by fair words, we will address him to-morrow with spears.

Fara hopes that hunger has so enfeebled the Vandals and Moors that they cannot withstand a violent assault. The truth is: Fara, a German,--and a thoroughly admirable one,--can endure everything except long-continued thirst and inactivity. And we have very little wine left. Poor wine too! There is nothing to do except by turns to sleep and mount guard before the mouse-hole called Pappua. He is tired of it. He wants to take it by force. The Herulians will fight like madmen; that is their way. But I look at the narrow ascent in those yellow cliffs, and have my

doubts of success. I think, unless Saint Cyprian and Tyche work in our behalf to-morrow, we shall get, not Gelimer and the Vandals, but plenty of hard knocks.

We have had them,--the hard knocks! And they were our just due. The Vandals and Moors up yonder vied with each other in trying which could serve us worst, and we paid the penalty. Fara, as leader and warrior, managed matters as well as it is possible to do in dealing with the impossible. He divided us into three bodies: first, the Armenians, then the Thracians, lastly, the Herulians. The Huns--whose horses can do much, but cannot climb like goats--remained below before our camp. In bands of two hundred strong we rushed in a long line of two men abreast up the only accessible path. I will make the story short. The Moors rolled rocks, the Vandals hurled spears, at us. Twenty Armenians fell without having even seen the crest of a foeman's helmet; the others drew back. The Thracians, despising death, took their places. They advanced probably a hundred feet higher; by that time they had lost thirty-five of their number, had not seen an enemy, and also turned back. "Cowardice," cried Fara. "It is impossible," replied Arzen, the severely wounded leader of the Armenians,--a Vandal spear with the house-mark of the Asdings, a flying arrow, had pierced his thigh.

"I don't believe it," shouted Fara, "follow me, my Herulians."

They followed him. So did I; but very near the last of the line. For, as the legal councillor of Belisarius, I do not consider myself under obligation to perform any deeds of special heroism. Only when he himself fights do I often foolishly imagine that my place is by his side.

I have never seen such a storm. Fragments of boulders and lances hurled by invisible hands crushed and spitted the men. But those who were left climbed, leaped, crept higher and higher. The top of the mountain--which neither of the two former scaling parties had approached--was gained. The hiding-places of many of the Moors concealed under the cliffs of the central portion were discovered, and numbers of these lean brown fellows paid for their loyal hospitality to the fugitives with their lives; I saw Fara himself kill three of them. He was just ranging his breathless band, and on the point of giving the order to rush up to the narrow gateway in the rocks that yawns in the mountain summit, when from this gateway burst the Vandals, the King in advance; the crown on his helmet betrayed him. I saw him very close at hand, and never shall I forget that face. He looked like a rapturous monk, and yet also like the hero Zazo, whom I saw fall before Belisarius. Behind him was a youth who strongly resembled him. The scarlet banner, I believe, was borne by a woman. Yet I am probably mistaken; for the whole charge fell upon us with the speed and might of a thunderbolt. The first rank of the Herulians was scattered as completely as if it had never stood there.

"Where is the King?" cried Fara, springing forward.

"Here," rang the answer.

The next instant five of his Herulians were supporting their sorely wounded leader. This I saw, then I fell backward. The young Vandal behind the King had sent his spear whizzing against my firm coat of mail; I staggered, fell, and slid like an arrow down the smooth sandy incline, much faster and more easily than I had climbed it. When I came to myself and rose again, Fara's faithful followers were bearing him past me on two shields. The leader of the Armenians was leaning on his spear.

"Do you believe it now, Fara?" he asked. "Yes," replied the German, pressing his bleeding head. "I believe it now. My beautiful helmet," he went on, laughing. "But better to have the helmet cleft than the skull under it, too." When he reached the bottom of the mountain he laughed no longer; one hundred and twenty of his two hundred Herulians lay dead among the rocks. I think this will be the only storming of Mount Pappua.

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Fara's wound is healing. But he complains a great deal of headache.

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They must be miserably starving to death on that accursed mountain. Deserters often come down now, but only Moors. Not a single Vandal during the whole campaign has voluntarily joined us, in spite of my fine invitation to treason and revolt! Of the much-lauded German virtues fidelity seems to be almost the only one which has remained to these degenerates.

Fara gave orders that no more should be received.

"The more mouths and stomachs Gelimer has, the smaller his stock of food will be," he said.

But now, as they will no longer be accepted as comrades in arms, the Moors sell themselves for slaves for a bit of bread. Fara also prohibited this sorrowful trading. He said to his men:

"Let them starve up there; you will get them all as captives of war so much the sooner."

Yet it does the Vandals (it is said that there are not more than forty of them) all honor that they still hold out while the Moors succumb. It is the strongest contrast conceivable; for everything we heard in Constantinople concerning the luxury and effeminacy of the Vandals was surpassed by what we saw in their palaces, villas, and houses, and by what the Carthaginians have told us. Two or three baths daily, their tables supplied with the dainties of all lands and seas, all their dishes of gold, nothing but Median garments, spectacles, games in the Circus, the chase,—but with the least possible exertion,—dancers, mimes, musicians, outdoor pleasures in beautifully kept groves of the finest fruit-trees, daily revels, daily drinking bouts, and the most unbridled enjoyment of every description. As the Vandals led the most luxurious, the Moors led the most simple lives of all peoples. Winter and summer, they are half clad in a short gray garment, and live in the same low felt hut or leather tents, where one can scarcely breathe; neither the snow of the high mountains nor the scorching heat of the desert affects them; they sleep on the bare ground, only the richest spread a camel-skin under them; they have neither bread, wine, nor any of the better foods. Like the animals, they chew unground, even unroasted barley, spelt, and corn.

Yet now the Vandals endure starvation without yielding, while the Moors succumb.

It is incomprehensible! Sons of the same nation from whom, in two short battles, we wrested Africa. To our wondering question how this can be, all the deserters make one reply: "The holy King." He constrains them by his eyes, his voice, by magic. But Fara says his magic cannot hold out long against hunger and thirst. And since, as these strong Moors, emaciated to skeletons, say that the King and his followers do not utter a word of complaint while enduring these sufferings, Fara thought, from genuine kindness of heart, that he would try to end this misery. He dictated to me the following epistle: "Forgive me, O King of the Vandals, if this letter seems to you somewhat foolish. My head was always more fit to bear sword-strokes than to compose sentences. And since you and my head met a short time ago, thinking has been still more difficult than usual. I write, or rather I have these words written, plainly, according to the Barbarian fashion. Dear Gelimer, why do you plunge yourself and all your followers into the deepest abyss of misery? Merely to avoid serving the Emperor? For this word, 'liberty,' is probably your delusion. Do you not see that, for the sake of this liberty, you are becoming under obligations of gratitude and service to miserable Moors, that you are dependent upon these savages? Is it not better to serve the great Emperor at Constantinople, than to rule over a little band of starving people on Pappua? Is it disgraceful to serve the same lord as Belisarius? Cast aside this folly, admirable Gelimer! Think, I myself am a German, a member of a noble Herulian family. My ancestors wore the badge of royalty of our people in the old home on the shore of the dashing sea, near the islands of the Danes—and yet I serve the Emperor, and am proud of it. My sword and the swift daring of my Herulians decided the victory on the day of Belisarius's greatest battle. I am a general, and have remained a hero, even in the Emperor's service. The same fate will await you. Belisarius will secure you on his word of honor life, liberty, estates in Asia Minor, the rank of a patrician, and a leadership in the army directly under him. Dear Gelimer, noble King, I mean kindly by you. Defiance is beautiful, but folly is—foolish. Make an end of it!"

* * * * *

The messenger has returned. He saw the King himself. He says the sight of him was almost enough to startle one to death. He looks like a ghost or the King of Shades; gloomy eyes burn from a spectral face. Yet when the unyielding hero read the well-meant consolation of his kind-hearted fellow-countryman, he wept. The very man who struck down the unconquerable Fara and endures superhuman privations wept like a boy or a woman. Here is the Vandal's answer:--

"I thank you for your counsel. I cannot follow it. You have given up your people; therefore you are drifting on the sea of the world like a blade of straw. I was, I am King of the Vandals. I will not serve the unjust foe of my people. God, so I believe, commands me and the remnant of the Vandals to hold out even now. He can save me if He so wills. I can write no more. The misery surrounding me benumbs my thoughts. Good Fara, send me a loaf of bread; a delicate boy, the son of a dead noble, is lying very ill, in the fever caused by starvation. He begs, he pleads, he shrieks for bread—it tears one's heart-strings! For a long time not one of us has tasted bread.

"And a sponge dipped in water; my eyes, inflamed by watching and weeping, burn painfully.

"And a harp. I have composed a dirge upon our fate, which I would fain sing to the accompaniment of the harp."

Fara granted the three requests,—the harp could be obtained only by sending to the nearest city,—but he guards even more closely than before the "Mountain of Misery," as our people call it.

CHAPTER XIX

Dull, misty, and gray, a cold damp morning in early March dawned upon the mountain. The sun could not penetrate the dense clouds.

The ancient city of Medenus had long since been abandoned by its Carthaginian and Roman founders and builders. Most of the houses, constructed of stone from the mountain, stood deserted and ruinous. Nomad Moors used the few which still had roofs as places of refuge in winter. The largest structure was the former basilica. Here the King and his household had found shelter. A scanty fire of straw and fagots was burning in the centre on the stone floor. But it sent forth more smoke than heat, for the wood was wet, and the damp fog penetrated everywhere through the cracks in the walls, through the holes in the roof, pressing down the slowly rising yellowish-gray smoke till, trailing and gliding along the cold wall, it sought other means of escape through the entrance, whose folding-doors were missing. In the semicircular space back of the apses coverlets and skins had been spread upon the marble floor. Here sat Gibamund, hammering upon his much-dented shield, while Hilda had laid the scarlet standard across her lap, and was mending it.

"Many, many arrows have pierced thee, ancient, storm-tried banner. And this gaping rent here,--it was probably a sword-stroke. But thou must still hold together to the end."

"The end," said Gibamund, impatiently completing the nailing of the edge of the shield with one last blow of the hammer. "I wish it would come. I can bear to witness the suffering--*your* suffering--no longer. I have constantly urged the King to put an end to it. Let us, let all the Vandals,--the Moors can surrender as prisoners,--charge upon the foe together, and--He would never let me finish. 'That would be suicide,' he answered, 'and sin. We must bear patiently what God has imposed upon us as a punishment. If it is His will. He can yet save us, bear us away from here on the wings of His angels. But the end is approaching--of itself. The number of graves on the slope of the mountain is daily increasing.'"

"Yes, the row constantly lengthens; sometimes the high mounds of our Vandals surmounted by the cross!"

"Sometimes the faithful Moors' heap of stones with the circle of black pebbles. Yesterday evening we buried the delicate Gundoric; the last scion of the proud Gundings, the darling of his brave father Gundobad."

"So the poor boy's sufferings are over? In Carthage the child was always clad in purple silk as he rode through the streets in a shell carriage drawn by ostriches."

"Day before yesterday the King brought to the miserable heap of straw where he was lying the fragrant bread he had begged from the enemy. The child devoured it so eagerly that we were obliged to check him. We turned our backs a moment,--I was getting some water with the King for the sick boy,--when a cry of mingled rage and grief summoned us. A Moorish lad, probably attracted by the smell of the bread, had sprung in through the open window and torn it from between the child's teeth. It made a very deep impression on the King. 'This child, too, the guiltless one? O terrible God!' he cried again and again. I closed the boy's dying eyes to-day."

"It cannot last much longer. The people have killed the last horse except Styx."

"Styx shall not be slaughtered," cried Hilda. "He bore you from certain death; he saved you."

"*You saved me, with your Valkyria ride,*" exclaimed Gibamund; and, happy in the midst of all the wretchedness, he pressed his beautiful wife to his heart, kissing her golden hair, her eyes, her noble brow. "Hark! what is that?"

"It is the song which he has composed and is singing to the harp Fara sent him. Well for thee, Teja's stringed instrument, that thou art not compelled to accompany such a dirge," she cried wrathfully, springing up and tossing back her waving locks. "I would rather have shattered my harp on the nearest rocks than lent it for such a song."

"But it works like a spell upon the Moors and Vandals."

"They do not understand it at all; the words are Latin. He has rejected alliteration as pagan, as the magic of runes! He allows no one to mention his last battle-song."

"Of course they scarcely understand it. But when they see the King as, almost in an ecstasy, like a man walking in his sleep, with his burning eyes half closed, his wan, sorrowful face surrounded by tangled locks, his ragged royal mantle thrown around his shoulders, his harp on his arm, he wanders alone over the rocks and snows of this mountain; when they hear the deep, wailing voice, the mournful melody of the dirge, it affects them like a spell, though they understand little of the meaning. Hark! there it rises again."

Nearer and nearer, partly borne away by the wind, came in broken words, sometimes accompanied by the strings, the chant:

"Woe to thee! I mourn, I mourn!
Woe to thee, O Vandal race!
Soon forgot, will be thy name,
Which the world, a tempest, swept.

"Gloriously didst thou arise
From the sea,--a meteor.
Fame and radiance lost for aye,
Thou wilt sink in blackest night.

"All the earth's rich treasures heaped
Genseric in Carthage fair.
Starving beggar with the foe,
Now for bread his grandson pleads.

"Let thy heroes strengthen me;
God's wrath on thee resteth sore;
Leave fame and honor to the Goths,
To the Franks:--they are but toys."

"I will not listen; I will not bear it," cried Hilda. "He shall not revile all that makes life worth living."

Nearer, more distinctly, sounded the slow, mournful notes.

"Vanity and sin are all
Thou hast cherished, Vandal race;
Therefore God hath stricken thee,
Therefore bowed thy head in shame.

"Bow thee, bow thee to the dust,
Bruised race of Genseric;
Kiss the rod in gratitude.
It is God the Lord Who smites."

The dirge died away. The royal singer ascended with tottering steps the half-ruined stairs of the basilica, his harp hanging loosely from his left arm. Now he stood between the gray, mouldering pillars of the entrance, and, laying his right arm against the cold stone, pressed his weary head upon it.

Just at that moment a young Moor came hurrying up the steps; a few bounds brought him to the top. Gibamund and Hilda went toward him in astonishment.

"It is long since I have seen you move so swiftly, Sersaon," said Gibamund.

"Your eyes are sparkling," cried Hilda. "You bring good tidings."

The King raised his head from the pillar and, shaking it sorrowfully, looked at the Moor.

"Yes, wise Queen," replied the latter. "The best of tidings: Rescue!"

"Impossible!" said Gelimer, in a hollow tone.

"It is true, my master. Here, Verus will confirm it."

With a slow step, but unbroken strength, the priest ascended the mountain-top. He seemed rather to be prouder, more powerful than in the days of happiness; he held his head haughtily erect. In his hand he carried an arrow and a strip of papyrus.

"To-night," the young Moor went on, "I had the watch at our farthest point toward the south. At the earliest glimmer of dawn, I heard the call of the ostrich: I thought it a delusion, for the bird never ascends to such a height, and this is not the mating season. But this call is our concerted signal with our allies among the Southern tribes, the Soloes. I listened, I watched keenly; yes, yonder, pressing close against the yellowish-brown cliff, so motionless that he could scarcely be distinguished from the rock, crouched a Soloe. I softly answered the call; instantly an arrow flew to the earth close beside me,--a headless arrow, into whose hollow shaft, instead of the tip, this strip had been forced. I drew it out; I cannot read, but I took it to the nearest Vandals. Two of them read it and rejoiced greatly. Verus happened to pass by; he wanted to tear the papyrus, wished to forbid our speaking of it to you, but hunger, the hope of rescue, are stronger than his words--"

"I thought it treachery, a snare; it is too improbable," interrupted Verus.

Gibamund snatched the strip and read: "The path descending southward, where the ostrich called, is unguarded; it is supposed to be impassable. Climb down singly to-morrow at midnight; we will wait close by with fresh horses. Theudis, King of the Visigoths, has sent us gold to save you, and a little ship. It is lying near the coast. Hasten."

"There is still fidelity. There are still friends in need!" cried Hilda, exultingly, throwing herself with tears of joy, on her husband's breast.

The King's bowed figure straightened; his eyes lost their dull, hopeless expression.

"Now you see how wicked it would have been to seek death. This is the finger which God's mercy extends to us. Let us grasp it."

CHAPTER XX

Verus, in order to make the enemy wholly unsuspecting, offered to propose to Fara an interview with Gelimer at noon the following day, on the northern slope of the mountain, in which the last offers of Belisarius should be again discussed. After some scruples of conscience, the King consented to this stratagem of war. Verus reported that Fara was very much pleased with his communication, and would await Gelimer on the following day. Nevertheless, the besieged band kept a sharp watch upon the besiegers' outposts and camp--the high mountain-top afforded a foil view of their position--to note any movement in the direction of the descent which might indicate the discovery of the intended flight or the Soloe hiding-place at the foot of the mountain. Nothing of the sort was apparent; the foemen below spent the day in the usual manner. The guards were not strengthened, and after darkness closed in, the watchfires were neither increased nor changed. At nightfall the besiegers also lighted their fires on the northern side in the same places as before.

Shortly before midnight the little procession began its march. The Moors, who were familiar with the way, went first provided with ropes and iron braces. At every step the fugitives were obliged to feel their way cautiously with the handles of their spears, testing the smooth, crumbling surface of the rock to try whether it would afford a firm foothold. Next followed Gibamund and Hilda; the Princess had folded Genseric's great banner closely and tied it about the pole, which she used as a staff; then came Gelimer, behind him Verus and the small remaining band of Vandals. So they moved for about half an hour along the summit of the mountain, until they reached the southern side, down which the narrow path led. Each step was perilous to life; for they dared not light torches.

As the little group began the descent, Gelimer turned. "Oh, Verus," he whispered, "death may be very near to us all. Repeat a prayer--where is Verus?"

"He hastened back some time ago," replied Markomer. "He wished to bring a relic he had forgot. He bade us go on, saying that he would overtake us at the next turn in the road before we descended the ravine."

The King hesitated, and began to murmur the Lord's Prayer.

"Forward!" whispered Sersaon, the leading Moor. "There is no more time to lose. We need only pass quickly around the next projecting rock--Ha! Torches, treason! Back to--"

He could say no more; an arrow transixed his throat. Torches glared with a dazzling light into the eyes of the fugitives just as they turned the jutting cliff. Weapons flashed, and before the ranks of the Herulians stood a man holding aloft a torch to light the group.

"There, the second one is the King," he cried. "Capture him alive." He took a step forward.

"Verus!" shrieked Gelimer, falling back unconscious. Two Vandals caught him and bore him up the height.

"On! Storm the mountain!" Fara ordered below. But it was impossible to storm a height which could be climbed only by clinging with both hands to the perpendicular cliff. Fara himself instantly perceived it when, by the torchlight, he beheld the path and saw Gibamund standing with levelled spear on the last broader ledge of rock which afforded a firm footing.

"It is a pity!" he shouted. "But now this loophole will henceforth be barred also. Surrender!"

"Never!" cried Gibamund, hurling his spear. The man by Fara's side fell.

"Shoot! Quickly! All at once!" the Herulian leader angrily commanded. Behind the Herulians were twenty archers, dismounted Huns. Their bows twanged; Gibamund sank silently backward. Hilda, with a cry of anguish, caught him in her arms.

But Markomer, raising his lance threateningly, already stood in the place of the fallen man.

"Cease," Fara ordered. "But keep the outlet strongly guarded. The priest said that they must yield either to-morrow or on the following day."

Gelimer was roused from his unconsciousness by Hilda's shriek.

"Now Gibamund, too, has fallen," he said very calmly. "All is over."

Supported by his spear, he climbed wearily back. A few Vandals followed him. He vanished in the darkness of the night.

Hilda sat silent with the head of her lifeless husband in her lap, and the staff of the banner resting on her shoulder. She had no tears, but groped in the thick gloom for the beloved face. At last she heard a Vandal, returning from the King, say to Markomer:

"This was the final blow. To-morrow--I am to announce it to the enemy--Gelimer will submit."

Now she sprang up, and asking two of the men to help her--she would not release the dear head from her clasping hands--carried the dead Prince to the top of the mountain. In a little grove of pines, just outside the city, a small wooden hut had been built which had formerly contained stores of every kind. Now it was half empty except for a large pile of the wood used for fires. In this hut she spent the night and the dark morning alone with the dead. When it grew light she sought the King, whom she found in the basilica on the spot where formerly--the remains of some steps showed it--the altar had stood. Here Gelimer had placed in a crack between two stones a wooden cross, roughly made of boughs laid across each other. He lay prone on his face before it, clasping the cross with both arms.

"Brother-in-law Gelimer," she said in a curt, harsh tone, "is it true? Do you mean to surrender?"

He made no reply.

She shook him by the shoulder.

"King of the Vandals, do you mean to give yourself up as a captive?" she cried more loudly. "They will lead you through the streets of Constantinople as a spectacle! Will you shame your people--your *dead* people--still more?"

"Vanity," he answered dully. "Vanity speaks from your lips! All that you are thinking is sinful, vain, arrogant."

"Why do you do this so suddenly? You have held out for months."

"Verus!" groaned the King. "God has abandoned me; my guardian spirit has betrayed me. I am condemned on earth, and in the world beyond the grave. I can do nothing else!"

"Yes. Here, Gelimer, here is your sharp sword."

Stooping, she tore it from the sheath which lay with the sword-belt at the foot of the steps.

"'The dead are free' is a good motto."

But Gelimer shook his head.

"Vanity. Pride of heart. Pagan sin. I am a Christian. I will not kill myself. I will bear my cross--as Christ bore His--until I sink beneath it."

Hilda flung the sword clanking at his feet and turned from him without a word.

"Where are you going? What do you mean to do?"

"Do you suppose I loved less truly and deeply and fervently than that delicate Greek child? I come, my hero and my husband."

She walked across to a building now turned into a stable, the former curia of Medenus, where, a short time before, many horses had stamped. Only Styx, the stallion, now stood in it. Hilda grasped his mane, and the wise, faithful animal followed like a lamb. The Princess went with the horse to the hut. It hung back a moment before following her into the narrow inclosure, which was dimly lighted by a pine torch in an iron ring by the door.

"Come in," Hilda said coaxingly, drawing the horse gently after her. "It will be better for you too. You will perish miserably. Your beauty and your strength have gone. And after serving love in that brave ride through the battle, the enemy shall not seize you and torment you with base labor. What says the ancient song:

"Heaped high for the hero
Log on log laid they:
Slain, his swift steed
Shared the warrior's death.
And, gladly, his wife,
Nay, alas! his widow.

Burden of life's weary
Days sad and desolate
Would she, the faithful,
Bear on no farther."

She led the stallion to the side of the lofty pile of wood, where she had laid the beautiful corpse, drew Gibamund's sword from its sheath, and, searching with her hand for the throbbing of the heart, thrust the blade into it with one powerful blow. Styx fell lifeless. Hilda threw down the blood-stained weapon.

"Oh, my love!" she cried. "Oh, my husband, my life! Why did I never tell you how I loved you? Alas! because I did not know myself--until now! Hear it, oh, hear it, Gibamund, I loved you very dearly. I thank you. Friend Teja! Oh, my all, I follow you."

And now she drew from her girdle the keen black dagger. Severing with one cut the long floating banner from its staff, she spread it over the corpse like a pall. It was so wide that it covered the whole space beside the body. Then, with the blazing torch, she lighted the lowest wood, bent over the dead Prince, again kissed the pale lips fervently, and seizing the dark weapon, which flashed brightly in the light of the flames, buried it in her brave, proud heart.

She fell forward on her face over her beloved husband, and the fire, crackling and burning, seized first the scarlet banner which enfolded the young pair.

The morning breeze blew strongly through the half-open door and the chinks between the logs--and the bright flames soon blazed high above the roof.

CHAPTER XXI

PROCOPIUS TO CETHEGUS:

It is over! Thank God, or whoever else may be entitled to our gratitude. Three months, full of utter weariness, we remained encamped before the mountain of defiance. It is March; the nights are still cool, but at noonday the sun already burns with scorching heat. An attempted flight was baffled by treachery; Verus, Gelimer's chancellor and closest friend, deserves the credit of this base deed. Obeying the priest's directions we sought the Soloes concealed on the southern slope who were to accompany the fugitives to the sea, but found only the prints of numerous hoofs. We blocked the outlet. Then the King voluntarily, without any farther trouble, offered to surrender. Fara was greatly delighted; he would have granted any condition that enabled him to deliver the King a captive to Belisarius, who was even more impatient for the end of the war than we. At the entrance of the ravine, which we had never been able to penetrate, I received the little band of Vandals--about twenty were left. The Moors, too, came down; at Gelimer's earnest entreaty, Fara immediately set them at liberty. These Vandals--what images of misery, famine, privation, sickness, suffering! I do not understand how they could still hold out, still offer resistance. They could scarcely carry their arms, and willingly allowed us to take them.

But when I saw and talked with Gelimer--crushed though he is now--I realized that this man's mind and will could control, rule, support others as long as he desired. I have never seen any human being like him,--a monk, an enthusiast, and yet a royal hero.

I entreated Fara to let me shelter him in my tent. While we could scarcely restrain the others from immoderately greedy indulgence in meats and other foods of which they had long been deprived, he voluntarily continued the fast so long forced upon him. Fara with difficulty induced him to drink some wine; the Herulian probably feared that his prisoner would die on the way, before he could deliver him to Belisarius. For a long time he refused; but when I suggested that he was probably seeking death in this way, he at once drank the wine and ate some bread.

Long and fully, for nearly half the night, he talked with me, full of gentle submission, concerning his destiny. It is touching, impressive, to hear him attribute everything to the providence of God. But I cannot always follow his train of thought. For instance, I remarked that, after holding out so long, the baffled attempt to escape had probably caused the sudden resolution to surrender. He smiled sadly and replied: "Oh, no. Had our flight been frustrated by any other reason, I would have held out unto death. But Verus, Verus!" He was silent, then he added: "You will not understand it. But now I know that God has abandoned me, if He was ever with me. Now I know this, too, was sin, was hollow vanity, that I loved my people so ardently that from pride in the Asding blood, in our ancient warlike fame, I would not yield, would not surrender. We must love God alone, and live only for Heaven!"

Just at that moment Fara broke into the tent somewhat rudely.

"You have, not kept your promise. King!" he cried wrathfully. "You agreed to deliver up all the weapons and field flags, but the most important prize,--Belisarius specially urged me to look to it, for he saw it rescued from the battle, and I myself noticed it in a woman's hand a short time ago, when we made the attack,--King Genseric's great banner, is missing. Our people, I myself, guided

by Vandals, have searched everywhere on the mountain; we found nothing except, among the ashes of a burned hut, with some bones, these gold nails,--the Vandals say they belonged to the pole of the banner. Did you burn it?"

"Oh, no, my Lord, I should not have grudged you and Belisarius the bauble; a woman did it Hilda. She killed herself. O God, I beseech Thee for her: forgive her!" And this is not hypocrisy. I hardly understand it. Yet these strange events force upon me thoughts which usually I would willingly avoid. Whoever has once meddled with philosophy--I shun it, but carry it ever in my brain--will never again escape the questioning concerning the Why?

Lucky accidents have always happened in the destinies of men; but whether any enterprise has ever been attended with such good fortune as ours is doubtful. Belisarius himself marvels. Five thousand horsemen,--for our foot-soldiers scarcely entered the battle,--strangers who, after they were put on shore, had no refuge, no citadel, possessed no spot of ground in all Africa except the soil on which they stood, did not know where they were to lay their heads,--five thousand horsemen, in two short conflicts, against ten times their number, destroyed the kingdom of the terrible Genseric, took his grandson prisoner, seized his royal citadel and royal treasures! It is incomprehensible. If I had not witnessed it myself, I would not have believed it. After all, is there a God dwelling in the clouds who wonderfully guides the destinies of men?

Belisarius's generalship, and our brave, battle-trained army did much; something, though not a large share, was accomplished, as now appears, by Verus's long-planned treachery, carried out to the end. Without our knowledge, he has corresponded all this time with the Emperor, and especially with the Empress. The most was due to the degeneracy of the people, except the royal House, which lost three men in the struggle. The incomprehensible, contradictory nature of this King also contributed to the destruction. Yet all these things would not have produced the result so speedily, but for the unexampled good fortune which has attended us from the beginning.

And this luck--is it blind? Is it the work of God, Who desired to punish the Vandals for the sins of their forefathers and for their own? It may be so. And not without reverence do I bow to such a rule. But--and here again the mocking doubt which never entirely deserts me, again rises in my mind--then we must say that God is not fastidious in His choice of tools, for this Gelimer and his brothers are hardly surpassed in virtue by Theodora, Justinian, Belisarius himself; perhaps, O Cethegus, not even by the friend who has written you these lines.

CHAPTER XXII

The day after Gelimer's surrender Fara's camp was broken up and the train of victors and captives began the march to Carthage. Couriers were despatched in advance to Belisarius.

At the head rode Fara, Procopius, and the other leaders on horses and camels; in the centre were led the captive Vandals, bound, for the sake of precaution, hand and foot with chains which permitted walking and even riding, but not running, and surrounded by foot-soldiers; the Hun cavalry formed the rear. So, resting at night in tents, they slowly traversed in fourteen days the road over which, in their swift pursuit, they had gone in eight.

Verus usually rode alone; he avoided the Vandals, and the Byzantines shunned *him*.

On the second day after the departure from Mount Pappua,--Fara and Procopius were far in advance,--at a turn in the road, the priest checked his horse and waited. The prisoners approached. Many a fettered hand was raised against him, many a curse was called down on his head; he neither saw nor heard. At last, holding in his manacled right hand a staff that extended into a cross, Gelimer tottered forward on foot. Verus urged his horse through the ranks of the guards, and now rode close beside him; the prisoner looked up.

"You, Verus!"

He shuddered.

"Yes, I, Verus. I waited for you here--you and this hour,--this hour which at last has come, slowly, lingeringly; this hour for which I have wished, longed, labored by prayer, by counsel and action, for which alone I have lived, suffered, struggled during years and tens of years."

"And why, O Verus, why? What injury have I done you?"

Verus uttered a shrill laugh, and reined in his horse, stopping suddenly.

Gelimer started. He had rarely seen this man smile, never had he heard him laugh aloud.

"Why? Ha! ha! You can still ask? Why? Because--But to answer this question I should have to repeat the whole story of our--the Romans', the Catholics'--sufferings from the first step which Genseric took upon this soil. Why? Because I am the avenger, the requiter of the hundred years of crime called 'the Vandal kingdom in Africa.' Hear it, ye saints in Heaven! This man--he was present when all my kindred were horribly murdered, and he asks why I have hated and, so far as

I had power, destroyed him and his people?"

"I know--"

"You know nothing! For you can ask me: *Why?* You know, you mean, of my dying mother's curse. But this you do not know--for you had fallen senseless--that when she hurled the curse at you I wrenched myself free from my ropes, from my martyr's stake, sprang to her into the midst of the flames, clasped her in my arms, and wished to die with her. But she thrust me back out of the fire, crying: 'Live, live and avenge me--and all your kindred--and fulfil the curse upon that Vandal and all his people!' Again I pressed forward, clasped the dying woman's hand, and swore it. Your warriors tore me away from her; I saw her fall back into the flames, and my senses failed.

"But when I recovered consciousness, I was no longer a boy--I was the avenger! I saw, heard, and felt nothing but that last clasp of my mother's hand, her glance, and my vow. And I abjured my religion--apparently. And you, miserable Barbarians, made stupid by arrogance, you believed that I had done this from cowardice, from fear of torture and the flames! Oh, how often in former years I have felt your silent, scarcely-concealed contempt, you foolish simpleton, and borne it with mortal hatred, with a fury which burned my heart. Arrogant brood of vain fools! Cowardice, fear, to you the most infamous of insults, you attributed to me without hesitation. Blind fools! As if I did not suffer more, ten times more than death in the flames, during all these years, while ruling myself, enduring without a word of explanation the scorn of the Carthaginians, the Catholics, for my apostasy; stifling every emotion of hate and wrath and hope in my heart, that you might not perceive them, wearing an outward semblance of stone, while my whole soul was seething with fury, to serve you, to conduct your blasphemous service of God as your priest, bearing your insufferable boasting! For you Germans, without boasting aloud (your loud braggart is easily endured, we despise him), are silent boasters. You walk over the earth as if you must constantly crush something; you throw back your heads as if you were greeting and nodding to your ancestors in heaven: 'Yes, yes, the world belongs to us!' And that you do not know and feel it, while you are insulting us mortally by such conduct, because it is a matter of course--is the most unbearable thing about it. Oh, how I hate you!" He struck with his whip at the figure walking by his side, who received the blow, but did not seem to feel it. "You Barbarians, who, a few generations ago, were cattle-thieves on the frontier of our empire, whom we slaughtered, enslaved, threw to the beasts by hundreds of thousands--naked, starving beggars who gratefully picked up the crumbs flung to them by Roman generosity--hence with you all, all, you wolves, you bulls, you bears, whom only bestial strength and God's permission--as a punishment for our sins--allowed to break into the Roman Empire! Hence with you!" He again raised his whip to strike, but seeing a Herulian warrior's eye fixed threateningly upon him, he lowered his arm in embarrassment.

Gelimer remained silent, except for frequent sighs.

"And your conscience?" he now said very gently. "Has it never rebuked you? I since escaping the lion--I have trusted you entirely, I laid my heart in your hands, you became my confessor; did you feel no shame then?"

A scarlet flush dyed the priest's pallid face for an instant, but it passed like a flash of lightning. The next moment he answered:

"Yes! So foolish was my heart--often. Especially at first. But," he went on wrathfully, "I always conquered this weakness by saying to myself whenever I felt it, and your insulting arrogance made me feel it daily (oh, that Zazo! I hated him most of all): They deem you so base that, in the presence of the dead bodies of all your kindred, you abjured your faith! These insolent, incredibly stupid Barbarians--but it is arrogance, even more than stupidity--believe that you, you, the son of these parents, could really be devoted to them, could forget your martyrs, to serve them and their brutal, imperious splendor. They think that you can be so inconceivably base! Avenge yourself, punish them for this unbearable presumption! Oh, hate, too, is a joy, the hatred of nation for nation! And so long as a drop of blood flows in the veins of other nations, you Germans must be hated, unto death, until you are trampled under foot."

He dealt a heavy blow with his clenched fist upon the uncovered head of the tottering King. Gelimer did not look up, did not even start.

"What threat are you muttering in your beard?" asked Verus, bending toward him.

"I was only praying, 'As we forgive our debtors.' But perhaps that, too, is vanity, sin. Perhaps--you are not my debtor. Perhaps you are really," again he shuddered, "my angel, whom God sends, not to protect me, as I supposed in my vanity, but in punishment."

"I was not your *good* angel," laughed the other.

"But--if I may ask--?"

"Ask on! I want to enjoy this hour to the utmost."

"If you hated me so bitterly, desired to avenge your mother on me, why did you carry on this game for so many long years? Often and often--when I lay helpless in the lion's power, you might have killed me, so why--?"

"A stupid question! Have you not understood even yet? Fool! True, I hated you, but even more--your nation. To kill you had its charm. And I struggled sorely with my hate at that time, in order not to kill you instead of the lion."

"I saw that."

"But I perceived: here, in this man, lives the soul of the Vandal people. To raise him to the throne, and then rule him, is to rule his people. If I should kill him now, I should drive Hilderic to a secret treaty with Constantinople. Zazo, Gibamund, others, will resist long and bravely. But if this man, who, above all, could save his people, should become king, and then, as king, be in my power, his countrymen will be most surely lost. If it should become necessary to kill him, an opportunity can probably always be found. Far better than to murder him is through him to rule--and ruin--the Vandal nation!"

Then Gelimer groaned aloud and, staggering, involuntarily caught at the horse's neck for support. Verus thrust his hand aside; he stumbled and fell on the sand, but instantly rose and pursued his way.

"Did the priest strike you. King?" cried the Herulian, threateningly.

"No, my friend."

But Verus went on:

"Hilderic must be removed from the throne, for he would not implicitly obey my will. He demanded all sorts of indulgences for the Vandals, and Justinianus was ready to grant them. But I desired not only to make Gelimer and his Vandals subjects of the Emperor,--I wanted to destroy them. Your rough brother discovered my intercourse with Pudentius; if I had been searched at that time, if Pudentius's letter had been found, all would have been lost. Instead, I gave it to him; I betrayed his hiding-place, but I knew he was already outside the walls, mounted on my best racer.

"The King and you both entered the trap of my warnings. I rejoiced at your readiness to believe in Hilderic's guilt, because you--desired it; because with secret, though repressed eagerness, you longed for the crown. Even though you dethroned Hilderic in good faith, how alert, how ardent you were to secure the throne! I aided, I saw you strike down poor Hoamer, who was perfectly right when he denied Hilderic's purpose of murder. You called the duel a judgment of God, you believed you thereby served Heaven's justice, and you served only your own lust for power and, through it, *me!* Your passion--stimulated by Satan, not God--gave you the impulse, the swift strength of arm, to which Hoamer instantly succumbed. It was a devil's judgment, a victory of hell, not a decree of God. Now I became your chancellor; that is, your destroyer. I quarrelled openly with the Emperor; I negotiated secretly with the Empress. I sent your fleet to Sardinia, after learning the day before that Belisarius had set sail with his army. After the battle of Decimum, I advised you to shut yourself with your troops in Carthage. The game would then have been over six months earlier, but this one move failed,--you would not accept my counsel. I was obliged to guard against Hilderic's vindicating himself, so I took out of the chest before I let Hilderic search it, the warning letter, which I had dictated. But I could permit no scion of Genseric's race to live: Justinian would have received your two captives with honors after the victory of Belisarius! I had them killed by my freedman and secured his escape. But you--I had long reserved it for the hour of your greatest supremacy, in case of the most extreme peril of our plans--you I crushed at the right moment by the revelation that you had dethroned Hilderic without cause and then murdered him. But my mother's curse and my oath would not be fulfilled until you walked in chains as Justinian's captive.

"Therefore, to prevent your escape, I shared all the suffering, all the privations, of these last three months. Letters from King Theudis, directly after the battle of Decimum, had offered you rescue through the coast tribes by the galleys of the Visigoths. You never saw those letters; I suppressed them. Not until deliverance really beckoned, when you already stretched your hand toward it, did I strip off the mask to destroy you utterly. Now I shall see you kiss Justinian's feet in the hippodrome at Constantinople; this is the final consummation of my mother's curse, my oath, and my people's vengeance."

He ceased, his face glowing, his eyes flashing down at the prisoner.

Gelimer stooped and kissed the shoe in Verus's stirrup.

"I thank you. So you are God's rod which struck and felled me. I thank God and you for every blow, as I thanked God and you when I believed you to be my guardian spirit. And if, meanwhile, you have committed any sin against me, against my people,--I know not how to express it,--may God forgive you, as I do."

CHAPTER XXIII

HE went all the way to Carthage on foot, declining horse or camel, remaining silent or praying aloud in Latin, no longer in the Vandal language. Fara offered him suitable garments instead of the worn, half-tattered purple mantle which he had on his bare body. The captive declined, and asked for a penitent's girdle, with sharp points on the inside, such as the hermits wear in the desert. We did not know how to obtain such crazy gear, and Fara probably disapproved the wish, so the "Tyrant" himself made one from a cast-off horse-bridle which he found and the hard, sharp thorns of the desert acacia. Close to the gate of his capital, his strength failed, and he fell, face downward, in the road. Verus stopped behind him, hesitating. I believe he meant to set his foot on the King's neck; but Fara, who probably had the same suspicion, roughly pushed the priest forward, and raised the monarch with kind words. Directly beyond the Numidian gate, in the spacious square in the Aklas suburb, Belisarius had assembled the larger portion of his army, filling three sides; the fourth, facing the gate, remained open. Opposite the entrance, on a raised seat, the General, in full armor, sat throned; above his head rose the imperial field standards; at his feet lay the scarlet flags and pennons of the Vandals which we had captured by the dozen; every thousand had them. Only the great royal banner was missing; it was never found. Around Belisarius stood the leaders of his victorious bands, with many bishops and priests, then the Senators, aristocratic citizens of Carthage and the other cities, some of whom had returned from exile or flight during the past few months; Pudentius of Tripolis and his son were among them, rejoicing. To the left of Belisarius, on purple coverlets at his feet, lay heaped and poured in artistic confusion the royal treasure of the Vandals: many chairs of solid gold, the chariot of the Vandal Queen, a countless multitude of treasures of every description,--how the jewels glittered under the radiant African sun,--the whole silver table service of the King, weighing many thousand pounds, and all the rest of the paraphernalia of the royal household, besides weapons, countless weapons from Genseric's armories; old Roman banners, too, which, after a captivity of years, were again released; weapons enough in the hands of brave men to conquer the whole globe; Roman helmets with proudly curved crests, German boar and buffalo helmets, Moorish shields covered with panther skins, Moorish fillets with waving ostrich plumes, breastplates of crocodile skin,--who can enumerate the motley variety? But at the right of Belisarius, with their hands bound behind their backs, stood the prisoners of the highest rank, men, and also many women, beautiful in face and figure,--the whole picture, however, was inclosed, as though in an iron frame, by our squadrons of horsemen and the dense ranks of our foot-soldiers. How the horses neighed; how the plumes in the helmets waved; how the metal clanked and glittered with dazzling brightness! A magnificent spectacle which must fill with rapture the heart of every man who did not view it as a captive. Behind our warriors crowded eagerly the populace of Carthage, taught by many a blow with the handle of a spear that it had nothing to say, and bore no part in this celebration of its own and Africa's deliverance.

Our little procession stopped within the vaulted gateway, awaiting a preconcerted signal. A tuba blared; Fara and I, followed by some subordinate officers and thirty Herulians, rode into the square to Belisarius's throne. He commanded us to dismount, rose, embraced and kissed Fara, and hung around his neck a large gold disk,--the prize of victory for bringing as prisoner a crowned King. Then he pressed my hand and asked me to accompany him in all future campaigns. This is the highest reward I could receive, for I love this man who has the courage of a lion and the heart of a boy!

At a signal we took our places on the right and left of the throne. Two blasts of the tuba. Clad in the richest vestments of the Catholic priesthood,--I noticed that even the narrow Arian tonsure had been changed to the broader Catholic one,--Verus came from the gateway into the square, his figure drawn up to its full height, his head thrown back proudly. He was evidently thinking: "But for me you would not be here, you arrogant soldiers." Yet that is by no means true; we really should have conquered without him, though more slowly, with more difficulty. And in the degree to which it was correct--just so far it irritated my friend Belisarius. His brow contracted, and he scanned the approaching priest with a look of contempt which the latter could not endure. When he bowed he lowered his lashes--arrogantly enough. "I have a letter from the Emperor to read to you, priest," said Belisarius. He extended his hand for a purple papyrus roll, kissed it, and began:

"Imperator Cæsar, Flavius Justinianus, the devout, fortunate, glorious victor and triumphator, at all times Augustus, conqueror of the Alemanni, Franks, Germans, Antæ, Alani, Persians, now also the Vandals, Moors, and Africa, to Verus the Archdeacon.

"You have preferred, instead of dealing with me, to conduct a secret correspondence with the Empress, my hallowed consort, concerning the fall of the Tyrant to be consummated, with God's assistance, by our arms. She promised you, if we conquered, to ask me for the reward you desired. Theodora does not intercede with Justinian in vain. After proving that you had only apparently adopted the faith of the heretics, while in your heart, and also to your Catholic confessor, who was authorized to grant you dispensation for that external semblance of sin, you had always been faithful to the true religion, you are recognized, having secretly received the Catholic consecration, as an orthodox priest. So I command Belisarius, immediately on the receipt of this letter, to proclaim you at once Catholic Bishop of Carthage.'--Hear, all ye Carthaginians and Romans: in the Emperor's name, I proclaim Verus Catholic Bishop of Carthage, and will put on the Bishop's mitre and deliver the Bishop's staff. Kneel, Bishop."

Verus hesitated. He seemed to wish to receive the gold-embroidered mitre standing; but Belisarius held it so low, so close to his own knees, that the priest could do nothing but submit, if the desired ornament and his head were to meet. The instant he felt it covered, he sprang up

again. Belisarius now placed in his hand the richly gilded, crooked shepherd's staff. Then the Bishop, holding himself haughtily erect, was about to move to the right of the throne.

"Stop, Reverend Bishop," cried Belisarius, "the Emperor's letter is not yet finished." And he read on:

"So the desired reward is yours. But Theodora, as you have learned, does not intercede with Justinian in vain; so I will also fulfil her second request. She thinks so bold and so crafty a man would be too dangerous in the bishopric of Carthage; you might serve your new master as you did the old one. Therefore she entreated me to have Belisarius, immediately on receipt of this message, seize you,"--at a sign from the General, Fara, with the speed of lightning and with evident delight, laid his mailed right hand heavily on the shoulder of Verus, whose face blanched,--"for you are exiled for life to Martyropolis on the Tigris, upon the frontier of Persia, as far as possible from Carthage. The Empress's confessor, whom she desires to have transferred from Constantinople to Carthage, will manage the affairs of the bishopric as your Vicarius, with the consent of the Holy Father in Rome. There are penal mines in Martyropolis. During six hours in the day you will care for the souls of the convicts. That you may be better able to do this, by thoroughly understanding their state of feeling, you will, during the other six hours, share their labor.' Away with him!"

Verus tried to answer, but already the tuba blared loudly again, and, before it sounded for the third time, six Thracians had hurried the priest far away from the square, and disappeared in the street leading to the harbor.

"Now summon Gelimer, the King of the Vandals," said the General, loudly.

And from the gateway into the square came Gelimer, his hands fettered with a chain of gold. One of the numerous pointed crowns found in the royal treasure had been pressed upon his long tangled locks, and over his ragged old purple mantle and penitent's girdle was flung a magnificent new cloak of the same royal stuff. He had submitted to everything unresistingly, motionless and silent, only at first he had objected to the crown; then he said gently, "Be it so--my crown of thorns." In the same unresisting, unmoved silence he now, like a walking corpse, crossed with slow, slow steps the space,--possibly three hundred feet,--which separated him from Belisarius. While, at the mention of his name, a loud whisper, mingled with occasional exclamations, had run through the ranks, all the many thousands were silent now that they saw him: scorn, triumph, curiosity, vindictiveness, pity no longer found any expression; they were silenced by the majesty of this spectacle, the majesty of utter misery.

The captive King crossed the square entirely alone. No other prisoner, not even a guard or warrior accompanied him. He kept his eyes, shaded by long lashes, fixed upon the ground; they were sunk deep in their sockets; his pale cheeks, too, were deeply sunken; the thin fingers of his right hand were clenched around a small wooden cross. Blood--visible when the mantle slipped back in walking--was trickling from his girdle, down his naked limbs, in slow drops upon the white sand of the square.

All were silent; a deathlike stillness pervaded the wide space; the people held their breath until the hapless King stood before Belisarius.

Deeply moved, the Roman General, too, found no words, but kindly extended his right hand to the man before him. Gelimer now raised his large eyes, saw Belisarius in all the glitter of gold and armor, glanced quickly around the three sides of the square, beheld the magnificence and pomp of warlike splendor, the victors' banners fluttering high in the air, on the ground the standards and sparkling royal treasure of the Vandals. Suddenly--we all started as this corpse burst into such wild emotion--he flung both hands, with their long gold chain, above his head, clasping them so that the metal clashed; the cross slipped from his grasp; he uttered a shrill, terrible laugh.

"Vanity! *All* is vanity!" he shrieked, and threw himself prone upon the sand just at the feet of Belisarius.

"Is this illness?" whispered the General to me.

"Oh, no," I answered in the same tone. "It is despair--or piety. He thinks that life is not worth living; everything human, everything earthly, even his people and his kingdom are sinful, vain, empty. Is this the last word of Christianity?"

"No, it is madness!" cried Belisarius the hero. "Up, my brave warriors! Let the tubas blare again, the Roman tubas which echo through the world! To the harbor! To the ships! And to the triumph--to Constantinople!"

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