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A T T I L A .

A ROMANCE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"THE GIPSY," "ONE IN A THOUSAND," &c, &c.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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A T T I L A .

CHAPTER I.

THE RETRIBUTION.

Shift we the scene, and return to the kingdom of Attila! It was the fourth day after Theodore had left the country of the Huns for that sweet distant land where happiness, as we have seen, awaited him, and a bright gleam of sunshine was destined to check his dark fate, when, at a short distance from the bank of the Tibiscus, two barbarians, who had left their horses with their followers by the stream, walked slowly on among the trees, wading through the long grass and tangled bushes. At length, suddenly, from a spot before them, came the flapping of heavy wings and a hoarse arid scream from many a foul beak, while five or six large vultures rose up, crashing through the branches above, and leaving open to the sight all that remained of the unfortunate Arab, Cremera. From some cause, a nail, which had fixed one of the hands, had fallen out, and the skeleton, for to such a thing was the corpse now nearly reduced, hung by the other palm; but two arrows were still seen hanging amid the fleshless ribs, and telling the manner of the freedman's death.

"Lo!" said the shorter of the two strangers--"lo! I have now seen it with mine own eyes! And this man's crime was but that he had obeyed my commands, and saved the life of the man that I loved! Shall this be suffered, Ardaric? Shall it last another hour, to ring in the ears of my people, to sound in their inmost hearts, that Attila avenges not his own, that Attila cannot protect those who perform his bidding? Think you it was really Bleda's doing?"

"Doubt it not, oh king!" answered Ardaric. "Was not the Roman carried to his village? Would not death have been the stranger's portion, too, had he not escaped? Some one bore thy brother the tidings of the youth's journey, and they waylaid him, to cut the thread of life on which they fancied thine depended."

"Ay! It is even so!" answered Attila. "Therein is it that the Roman sinned in their eyes. But they shall find that I can rid me of mine enemies and avenge my friends! To horse, Ardaric! we will to our horses quick. The cup of vengeance is full and flowing over. He whom no warning could deter shall drink it to the dregs. The leaders we ordered must by this time have crossed the mountains."

"They must have done so, oh Attila!" replied the King of the Gepidæ; "but what is thy will to do now? Thou wilt not surely ravage a part of thine own people's lands; or, by waging war against thy brother, give new heart to the pale Romans!"

Attila stopped as he was advancing, and fixed his dark eyes full upon the countenance of Ardaric. "Hast thou known me so long," he said, "and canst not yet guess what Attila will do? Am I not king over this man also, to punish him for his evil deeds when they are directed against myself. No, no! I will not ravage mine own land, nor slay mine own people. But the son of Paulinus will I protect, and even yon freedman will I avenge; and I will crush the worm that raises its head against me, even though it call me brother. Ardaric, dost thou not know what I will do? Bleda and I are no more for the same earth: I have borne with him long, but I bear with him no longer, and he dies! now thou understandest!" and, with a quick, firm pace, every footfall of which seemed to crush the earth it trod upon, he returned to the spot where the horses had been left.

About five hundred horsemen waited him there, and, at their head, Attila took his way towards the east. After two hours' riding, some three thousand more joined him on the road; and at the end of two hours more he paused, and sent messengers in different directions to chieftains whom he named. Night fell, and with the first star of evening the monarch resumed his way.

The autumn moon rose large and full, pouring over the wide plain in which the dwelling of Bleda was placed with a yellow, tranquil light: the voice of nature was all still; and not a sound was heard but the sighing of the wind through the branches, or the falling of a withered leaf amid those that had gone down before it. A shooting star traversed the blue fields above, outshining, for the brief moment of its being, the moon herself, and then ending in emptiness. A heavy bird of night glanced across the moonlight, and, with a faint scream, disappeared.

It was about midnight, and then from the neighbouring woods came forth, in dead, deep silence, troop after troop of shadowy forms; and, leaving the village on one side, they drew a circle, fatal and sure as the unerring bowstring of a kindred race, around the dwelling of Bleda. They were all now on foot; and when they had reached the distance of about two hundred yards from the building, the circle was complete, and they paused.

"Now, Onegisus!" said Attila, "what hast thou to tell of the inquiries thou hast made. Speak, and if thou hast aught to say which should induce the king to spare his kindred blood, I will take thee to my heart, and give thee kingdoms! Speak!" and he clasped his hands together, and wrung the sinewy fingers hard, under emotions that even his iron soul could not restrain.

"Alas! oh king!" replied Onegisus, "I have naught to say which may mitigate thy wrath. I had hoped that it would be otherwise; but I find--and I must speak truth unto the king--that even across the mountains the followers of thy brother pursued the Roman youth, and ravaged a village, killing several and driving away the herds of all, because they lent the son of Paulinus a horse to fly when he demanded it in thy name. Their dwellings are in the dust, and their blood stains the grass, and the widows and the children cry to Attila for vengeance."

"They shall have it!" replied Attila. "Let those appointed follow me!" and he advanced to the

portico of Bleda's house.

The chief door opened at once to the monarch's hand--"And can treason and treachery sleep so securely?" demanded Attila, in a sad tone, as he turned through the first passage of the noiseless dwelling to the large hall in which banquets were usually held. It still smelt strong of the feast; and the monarch paused in the midst, folding his arms upon his chest, and gazing bitterly upon the ground.

"Uldric," he said at length, "Uldric, where art thou?"

A man of powerful frame, and countenance more than usually ferocious, advanced before the king, saying, "I am here, oh Attila, and ready."

"Is thy sword sharp, and thy heart strong?" demanded Attila. The chief bent his head in token of assent, and the monarch went on: "Go, then," he said, "and do the deed which none but a noble and brave hand should do! But slay him not in his sleep, for that would seem as if thou wert a murderer, and he a coward afraid to die. Wake him! Tell him his doom! Tell him the cause! Say he was warned, and would not hear; and that the cup has overflowed! Ardaric, do thou see it done! Take warriors enough with thee that there be no resistance. Go! go! Yet stay!" continued Attila: "stay! Oh ye gods! why have ye put this upon me? Is there none here who can speak a word in favour of my brother? none who can say aught to stay the anger of the king? All silent? Go, then! go, Ardaric! It is time that it were done."

Attila waved his hand; then, bending down his eyes again, he remained motionless in the midst of those who stayed with him. But the only moment of indecision that he had ever shown throughout his life had passed away; and, as the moonlight streamed on his dark countenance, no trait of wavering doubt could there be seen. All was firm and calm, though stern and gloomy; and the knitted brow, the compressed lip, the clinched hand, told that there were pangs, but no hesitation within.

The last of those sent upon the mission of death left the hall, and with steps which were scarce heard even by waking ears, they went upon their errand. A minute elapsed, and then there came a murmur of voices, and then two or three loud shrieks from a woman's voice, mingled with sobbing, prayers, and sad entreaties: then a dead heavy fall--and then the tones of lamentation. Distant sounds succeeded, and the noise of steps in various parts of the building; cries of grief and terror followed, and some signs of contention were distinguished.

"Bid them shed no more blood!" said Attila, turning to one who stood near: "cut off the head, but mangle not the body!"

Almost as he spoke, however, a slave rushed in with a lighted torch of pine in one hand, and a drawn sword in the other; but when the light glared upon Attila, he stood suddenly motionless before the king, as if petrified with fear and astonishment. "Oh king, they have slain thy brother!" he cried at length.

"It is well!" answered Attila: "get thee on one side, so shall no harm befall thee." The next instant there came the sound of footsteps running quickly; and Neva, with her hair dishevelled, and her feet uncovered, ran into the hall, and cast herself at the feet of Attila.

"Oh, spare him! spare him!" she cried; "spare him for the memory of thy father! Spare him for the remembered days of infancy! Spare him, because of his weakness and thy strength! Pour not out thy kindred blood upon the dust! Remember that thou wert a brother ere thou wert a king! Spare him; forgive him if he have offended thee! But it cannot be! They have lied unto me; thou canst not seek thy brother's life! Thou wouldst never slay him who has slept in the same cradle, eaten the same food, and stood by thy side in battle! Yet what dost thou here? Oh, spare him! spare him!" and she clasped the knees of the dark monarch in the agony of apprehension.

Others had followed her, women, and children, and slaves; and at nearly the same time the chieftain called Uldric stood in the doorway, and held up before the eyes of Attila a naked sword, along the blade of which a drop or two of a dark red hue was seen to trickle in the torchlight.

"Maiden!" said Attila, laying his hand on Neva's head, "cease thine entreaties; they are now vain. Yet have not I done this thing. His own hand it was that pulled the ruin on his head. He it was that cast himself upon my sword, knowing that it was drawn, and that the hand was firm that held it. Weep, if thou wilt! Go to thy chamber and weep! it is the right and the weakness of woman. Go! but entreat no longer; thou hast none now to save!"

She heard not, or heeded not his words, but still clasped his knees, and with wild looks and streaming eyes she poured forth her supplications. They were interrupted, however, by her mother's voice, who passed through the crowd like a spectre, and, with spots of blood upon her garments, stood before the king. "Ask him not to spare, my child," she said, in a voice as calm as death; "ask him not to spare! He knows no mercy! Ask him rather to give us our own doom quickly. Thy father is dead already; why should we be left alive? Or is it thy will, oh king, that we be sold as slaves? We are ready; but we would rather die if the choice were left to such as us. We are but thy brother Bleda's widow and children, and therefore have no claim upon the conqueror of the world: no, not even to choose between death and bondage. He that spared not his own brother will not spare the women and the babes."

"Woman, I did spare him!" answered Attila, solemnly: "three times did I spare, when any other man on earth, had he been monarch or slave, had died for so offending Attila. Woman, I spared him so long as his deeds affected but myself; but when he forgot all law and justice to my people, when he made ready the spear and sword to raise up contention in the land, when he slew the innocent and the noble, Attila forgot he had a brother. Neither bondage nor death await thee and thy children; thy husband's crimes have not affected thee; honour, and wealth, and peaceful possession of all that he possessed shall be thine; thy children shall be as my children, and I will defend them against their enemies. Attila sought not his brother's wealth; he sought but to do justice, and justice has been done. Take them hence, Ardaric! take them hence! she is privileged to reproach and murmur; but Attila would not that his ear should have any words that might offend him. Take them hence!"

They were removed without resistance; and, after pausing for a moment in thought, Attila demanded of those who had been present at his brother's death, "What men have ye found in the house?"

"But few," was the reply; "and they were slaves."

"Was the deformed negro, Zercon, among them?" asked the monarch again. "No," replied the Hun to whom he spoke; "we found him not."

"Let him be sought," said Attila, sternly. "He it was, he it must have been who betrayed to Bleda the young Roman's journey. Accursed be all they who supply to kings the means of gratifying bad desires! Let him be sought, and, when found, scourge him from hence to Margus, and give him up to the chief whom they call bishop of that town. I promised him to love, defend, avenge his nephew; and I would that he should know I keep my word. Onegisus, thou shalt remain here. Keep the land in peace; assuage the grief that thou findest; and see that no evil spirit rise among the tribes, to call for the hand of Attila, and divide the power of the Huns. Ardaric," he continued, turning to the King of the Gepidæ, "I could wish, too, that messengers were sent to meet the son of Paulinus as he returns from the banks of the Juvavus: let them be despatched, and tell him to return by Margus. That good priest of the new God of the Christians will see him joyfully, as this matter may have reached his ears, and he may be fearful for his nephew's safety. I would," he added, laying his hand upon the sleeve of Ardaric's tunic, "I would that friends and enemies should see and know that the word of Attila, be it for good or be it for evil, is never broken; and that any one who finds a promise of the king unfulfilled, should boldly say, Attila is dead."

Thus speaking, he turned, and leaving the hall, issued out into the portico before the house of Bleda, over which the same calm moon was still shining; while round about, in awful silence, stood the dark circle of the Hunnish troops, waiting the conclusion of the fatal deeds enacting within that low and quiet-looking abode. Attila paused for a moment, and raised his hand to his eyes as if the moonlight offended his sight. Then, striding forth into the open space, he turned and gazed for a few moments on the dwelling of Bleda. That contemplation was probably bitter, for as it ended he exclaimed, "Alas, my brother!" And that was the only regret to which, throughout his life, the lips of Attila gave voice.

There were old men who had known him as a boy, and who lived to see his death, but they declared that within that one night was comprised the whole that Attila had ever felt, either of indecision or regret.

CHAPTER II.

THE NEGRO.

The wind blew keen over the plains through which the Danube wanders, ere, in approaching Orsova, it rushes between the giant mountains, through which it seems to have rent its onward course. Barbed with sleet, that cold wind dashed in the faces of the young Roman and his followers as he led them onward towards the city of Margus, according to the directions which he had received from Attila by the way. He passed by Singidunum, and he rode through Tricornium. When last he had seen them, they were full of busy life, garrisoned with numerous troops, splendid with all the profuse luxury of old and corrupted civilization. There was now a broken wall, a pile of ashes, solitude, silence, and the whispering grass--already, like the world's forgetfulness, grown up upon the grave of things once bright. From the gate of Singidunum started away a wolf as the young Roman passed; but under the wall of Tricornium, a solitary hovel, raised from the massy ruins of a gate, and thatched with the branches and the leaves of trees, showed that either accident or old attachment had brought back some human being to

dwelt in that place of desolation. Theodore approached, but he found it was no other than an old half-crazy woman, who, when she saw him, shrieked forth, "The Huns! the Huns!" and fled, stumbling and tottering amid the piles of ruins.

What a strange contrast was it when, the next day, he approached the gates of Margus! Gradually the desolation ceased; the country resumed its appearance of fertility; cultivated fields and rich gardens appeared; the villa, the palace, and the church crowned the summits of the gentle hills; and everything betokened uninterrupted peace, and a place of splendour, luxury, and repose. As he entered the gates were seen the Roman soldiers, fully armed and equipped; but his Hunnish garb, and the barbarian features of those who accompanied him, seemed rather as passports to secure his entrance than impediments in his way. No opposition was offered, and the soldiers gazed upon him with a smile.

In the market-place, which was crowded with people as gay, as lively, as splendid as any city of the empire could display, a number of Huns were loitering about among the rest; and a Greek flower-girl, mistaking him for one of the barbarians, ran up, and while she fixed a garland of myrtle, mingled with some of the latest flowers of autumn, to his saddle-bow, addressed him in a few broken, mispronounced sentences in the Hunnish dialect, desiring him to buy her flowers with some of the spoils of the enemy he had slain in battle.

Theodore could have wept; but he answered the girl in Greek, telling her to place her wreaths on the tombs of those who had died in defence of their country; and he was riding on, when suddenly his eye was caught by a train crossing the market-place, and his ear almost deafened by the acclamations of the people. While slaves and attendants, in extraordinary numbers, both followed and succeeded, in the middle of the group which attracted so much attention was seen a chariot of ivory and gold, drawn by four white horses; and in it sat, bowing his head to the people, and scattering benedictions as he passed with his hands extended wide in graceful dignity, Eugenius, bishop of Margus.

Loud and repeated were the vivats of the multitude; and Theodore heard nothing on every side but warm and joyful praises of his kinsman. "Our good bishop," cried one. "Bless him for ever," exclaimed another. "He alone saved us in peace and prosperity, when all was death and desolation round," said a third. "Ay," rejoined his neighbour, "and Theodosius himself, who would have given him up to death, is now thankful enough to him for having saved the town of Margus." "And well he may be," said a fifth, who overheard what was proceeding; "well he may be thankful to him for saving the finest, if not the largest city of his empire." "I have heard," said another, "that Theodosius has vowed to put him to death, but that he is forced to dissemble for fear of Attila." "He had better dissemble," answered one of those who had spoken before; "put to death! we would sooner give ourselves altogether up to the Huns." "The Huns are very good people," continued another, seeing Theodore and his followers endeavouring to make their way past them. "I love the Huns; they are honest, and keep their word, and are only terrible to their enemies."

Theodore could not but smile, although his heart was full of bitterness; but he thought, at the same time, "If all these people judge thus of the bishop's conduct, how many arguments may he not find in his own bosom to justify the acts he has committed." Thus thinking, he pushed on his horse, and made his way through the crowd towards the dwelling of the bishop, whither the chariot of the prelate seemed to have proceeded before him; for a crowd of men and boys, who had accompanied it with loud acclamations, were now gathered together round the gates, the janitor of which had much ado to keep them from pushing their way into the building. Theodore demanded to see his uncle, and told his name, on which he and all his followers were instantly admitted.

He found the bishop seated near the centre of the hall, with a crowd of attendants near him, while before him stood several Huns in their barbarian garb, one of whom had his hand upon a chain, which was attached to the neck and hands of the miserable, deformed, and mutilated negro, Zercon. He was nearly stripped of his fantastic clothing, and with bare feet, bloody with long journeying, he stood with a haggard but a tearless eye, venting, even at that hour of misery, one of those wild jests which had procured him favour with his former lord.

"Faith, sir," he said, speaking apparently to the bishop, "you had better order me death if you intend to punish me properly; I have tried all other punishments but that, and therefore you have no choice left; as for the horrid prison that you talk of, I once inhabited for fifty years a prison more horrible than any you can devise."

"For fifty years!" exclaimed the bishop, "for fifty years! Say, where was that?"

"Here!" said the negro, striking his hand upon his breast; "here! Match me that, if you can. Let the greatest tyrant that ever cumbered earth show me a prison that will equal this; and herein has dwelt, for fifty years, a being not less sensible of pain, not less alive to kindness, not less capable of gratitude than any; but more patient, more enduring, more courageous than you all. Here, in this loathsome and abhorred prison, has he dwelt, scorned, buffeted, contemned, accused, condemned, and punished without guilt, the sport of fools, and scapegoat of the bad. Everything has been tried upon me that human wickedness could frame or man's endurance bear. Try death, at last! I cannot lose by the exchange."

The eye of the bishop had remained fixed upon the deformed negro, while he poured forth, in

an eloquent tone, the words which we have repeated, and only wandered for a moment to the group of strangers who entered the atrium, observing nothing more than that they wore the common garb of the Huns. He was evidently moved by the man's speech, and was about to reply, when Theodore advanced, addressing him by his name. The bishop started up, and, after gazing at him for a moment, folded him in his arms.

"Theodore!" he exclaimed, "now can I welcome you to Margus; a Tadmor in the wilderness; a prosperous city in a land of desolation. But how came you hither?"

"I will tell you shortly, sir," replied Theodore; "but, in the first place, let me ask you, why stands this poor man before you thus?"

"He was sent hither," replied the bishop, "by Attila, that great and mighty king, whose words are as true as his arm is powerful. He promised me long ago to protect and defend you; and this slave, it seems, betrayed your purposed journey into the mountains to the ear of Bleda, your enemy. Therefore is it that Attila sends him hither, to receive what punishment I will. I doom no man to death; but I was about to sentence him to solitude and chains, in the tower by the water side."

"God has spared you a great crime," replied Theodore. "This man betrayed me not. Far from it. He aided to save my life, when, ere another evening sun had set, my fate would have been sealed. Twice has he contributed to deliver me from danger. Oh! set him free, my uncle. Take off that chain! it is not fitting for him. His mind is noble and generous, though his body is as thou seest. But what have we to do with that? God, wise and mysterious, has made him as he is; let us not trample on God's handiwork."

The negro sprang forward, dragging his chain after him; and casting himself at the feet of the young Roman, he dewed his hand with tears. "It is not," he cried, "it is not that you come to save me, but it is that you speak as if I were your fellow-man."

"Far be it from me, my son," said the bishop, "to treat any one possessed of our common nature otherwise than a Christian should do. We are all worms in the eyes of God, the greatest, the proudest, the most beautiful, as well as the lowly and the distorted. Take the chain from him, and let him go free. Now, tell me truly, man, I adjure thee, by whatever thou holdest sacred, tell me, was it thou who bore to Bleda the tidings of this youth's journey, and if so--"

"There is no if!" interrupted the negro, with solemn vehemence: "I opened not my lips. Was I not the first to warn him that Bleda hated him? Did I not convey to the ears of Attila himself timely notice of his brother's purpose, when Bleda whetted the sword against him between Viminacium and Cuppæ? Did I not hear Bleda vow, that, till age palsied his arm, or death closed his eyes, he would pursue that youth with vengeance, and seek the destruction of that bold Arab who dared to struggle with and overthrow him? Did I know all this, and do all this, and yet betray to the tiger thirsting for blood the track of the deer that he sought to overtake? Did I know all this, and do all this, and yet tell to Bleda that he who had shown me pity and sympathy, came, as it were, to offer his throat to the knife within eight hours of that fierce man's dwelling-place? Oh no! I opened not my lips. There were whole tribes of Bleda's people round when the boy Ernac told me that the Roman was about to depart from the land. They bore the tidings to the king; and he gained from Ellac, the eldest son, the course of his whole journey, and the number of people whom they supposed would follow him. The number proved ten times more than they expected, and Bleda had too few with him to attack them all. He took vengeance on the Arab, however: and the Roman youth, after Bleda's departure, fell into a trap baited with his freedman's blood. I betrayed him not, but I aided to save him, and he knows it."

"I do," answered Theodore; "had it not been for thee, and for one whom I will not name, I had ended my life long ere now. But say, how am I to return to the dwelling of Attila when the tribes of Bleda lie across my way?"

"Did not those who told thee to come hither tell thee more?" demanded the negro.

"They told me nothing," answered Theodore, "but that it was the will of Attila I should pass by Margus as I returned. Of Bleda they said nothing."

"Bleda, oh Roman," replied the negro, "the powerful, the revengeful, the unforgiving, is like a dry stramonium bush in the desert, whose bitterness is parched up and gone, whose very thorns are withered and powerless. His name, his mighty name, is like the whisper of the wind among the rocks, speaking of tempests that we feel no more, of blasts from which we are sheltered! Bleda is dead, oh Roman; his arm is in the dust."

"Dead!" said Theodore, a presentiment of the dark truth coming over him, even before it was spoken; "dead! How did he die?"

"Those who told thee to come hither," said the negro, "were right to tell thee no more. Over the name of Bleda, and over his fate, there hangs a cloud: the Huns speak of it not, and are wisely silent; but of this I am sure, that there are not twenty men throughout all the land who do not feel that they are more at ease since there has been one great and unquiet spirit less in the world."

"But his children!" exclaimed Theodore, now fully convinced by the dark hints of the negro that the death of Bleda had been of an unusual and a bloody kind. "His family? his children? what has become of them?"

"They are safe," replied the negro, "they are safe and well; and one fair maiden, good, and gentle, and kindly as thou art, would fain have saved even me, lowly as I am, from a fate that she knew I deserved not. But her intercession was of no avail; and to say the truth, for I am wellnigh wearied out with this sad life, I grieved more that she should plead in vain than that I should be the object for which she vainly pleaded."

"My nephew shall try to make life more supportable to thee," replied the bishop. "Thou shalt go back with him, and he shall clear thee before the king. For well thou knowest, that when Attila has resolved the destruction of any one, no land can prove a shelter, no distance a barrier, no time an impediment, till he be avenged or appeased."

"I know it well," replied the negro; "and I know also, and willingly will say it, that fierce and stern as that great king is sometimes called, no one is more easily appeased for personal offences, no one more attentive to justice where truth can be made plain. Even with his brother Bleda, did he not forbear to the very last, though he well knew that his designs were pointed against Attila, not against the son of Paulinus?"

"How so?" demanded the bishop; "thy words are dark, my brother; I know not, and cannot even divine the cause of Bleda's hatred to my nephew. He injured him not."

"I could make my dark words clear," answered the negro in Greek. "But I love not to talk of things that do not concern me when there are many ears around."

The bishop paused for a moment, and giving the attendants of Theodore and the Huns who had brought the negro thither into the hands of one of his own officers, he bade him entertain them well, and return to conduct the unhappy Zercon thence in a few minutes. The attendants of the bishop easily divined his wishes, and the hall being instantly cleared, the negro was left alone with Eugenius and Theodore.

"Now," said the bishop, "now explain this mystery, why a man in command of reason should hate and seek the death of another who had never injured or offended him, and that, too, at first sight."

"Speak, Zercon," added Theodore, "and let us know the whole, for I have heard from Ardaric and others a part of the story, yet much remains unexplained. Was it not some prophecy that--"

"Listen, and you shall hear," said Zercon. "When Attila first heard that this noble bishop had carried off some treasures--"

"I carried off no treasures!" exclaimed the prelate, "and so I proved unto the king."

"But he heard that you had," answered the negro, "and that cause--with many another offence committed by the Romans, together with some idle time on his part, and no other object of conquest before his eyes--made him resolve to pour the tide of war upon the Eastern empire. When Attila, then, first determined upon war, he gathered his myriads together on the first plain beyond the mountains; and while messengers came to and fro, in order to avert hostilities which were already resolved, the king went up to the mountains to ask a holy man, who dwells there, the issue of his enterprise. So has he done in all the wars of the last five years, and the words of the hermit have ever proved true; for he promised Attila victory, and to those who know him it needs not be a prophet to foresee that. Now, also, he assured him of success, but upon one condition. He told him that if he would ride down towards the Danube with but few followers, he would meet a Roman on the Hunnish bank of the river, whom he should spare, and protect, and love. If wrong befell that Roman, or any of his family, the old man told him, either from the hand of Attila himself or any of his people, and if, for seven years, he, Attila, did not secure and protect him against all his enemies, not only his course of victory would cease, but death itself would cut him off in his return to his own hearth. 'His fate,' said the hermit to the king when he told this tale, 'his fate is bound up with yours! See that no evil happen to him, for worse will instantly fall upon yourself. You shall do him no wrong--you shall show him all favour. Go now and seek him!' Such were the old man's words."

The Bishop of Margus smiled as the negro proceeded, but Zercon went on with his tale: "Attila rode on from that spot; but, ere he had reached the banks of the great river he was met by some people posting inland to say that a Roman had ventured across the stream but slenderly attended, notwithstanding the daily feuds that already gave notice of the coming war, and to ask what they should do with him. At those tidings, Attila and Bleda both saw the first part of the old man's prophecy fulfilled, and from that moment they doubted not one word of the rest. Attila went on without his brother, and found this youth. Ye yourselves know all the rest."

"Still we see not why Bleda should seek his life," replied the bishop, "unless, indeed, he sought to take his brother's also; and then he might have taken it at once."

"He sought not to take his brother's life," replied Zercon: "he dared not, or he would; but he believed the prophecy, and thought that if this young Roman, on whom his brother's life and

fortunes depended, were away, a hundred accidents in the course of war might lay the head of Attila in the dust. Ever through life did he covet whatever Attila possessed, and therefore was it that he sought at first to take a life on which that of his brother depended. Afterward revenge was added to the same ambition; but his plans had gone still farther. His daring had increased with impunity; and day by day he was nerving his heart to contend with Attila himself, vainly hoping that many of the great king's chiefs--perhaps even some of the monarch's children--would join him. But his life and his plots ended together."

"Wert thou with Bleda?" demanded Theodore, to whose ear the prophecy of the old man, and its partial accomplishment, appeared strange and interesting; "wert thou with Bleda and Attila when the hermit told him to go down to meet me?"

"I was!" replied Zercon, showing his white teeth with a wild laugh--"I was! Attila, when he set out, chose Ardaric and Onegisus to go with him; and Bleda asked the King of the Gepidæ whom he had better choose, for they made a solemn ceremony of it. Ardaric, who believes in no such things, replied, 'Why, take your black jester!' and whether Bleda thought that too a prophecy or not, I cannot tell; but certainly he took me, and I stood in the mouth of the cave while they conversed within."

He was interrupted by a woman entering to draw water from the tank in the midst of the hall; and, ere she was gone, the bishop's officer returned to conduct Zercon from his presence.

"Use him well," said the bishop, "and kindly. Put him among the most favoured slaves; give him water to wash his feet, and food, and wine. Nor must any one make a jest of him. It is forbidden in my dwelling to mock any of God's works."

The slave and the negro retired, and Theodore was left alone with his uncle, round whose lip a somewhat doubtful smile had hung during the whole of Zercon's account of that prediction which had obtained for his nephew security in some respects, and brought him into danger in others.

"The words of the good hermit, I rather think," he said, as soon as the negro departed, "have led even the mighty and clear-sighted Attila into error."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Theodore, in some surprise; "then you do not credit his pretensions to be a prophet?"

"He is better than a prophet, my son; he is a wise man," replied the somewhat worldly prelate; but instantly seeing, by the mounting colour in his nephew's cheek, that his profane words had shocked the sensitive mind of the youth, he added, "Far be it from me to say that the gift of prophecy is not excellent; but it is better to be a good man, and wise unto God, than to be a prophet and offend. This hermit is a man of all great qualities and Christian virtues; austere unto himself, charitable towards others; holy in life, spending his years in meditation and constant prayer! There is much reason to believe that to such a one the gift of prophecy might be extended. So much did I think of his wisdom, and so far did I trust in his advice being holy and good, that, ere the Huns poured down upon the Roman empire, I sent messengers to ask his counsel as to mine own conduct in such a moment of trial. He loves me well; and for many years I have profited by his wisdom and experience, till I am what I am. To show him and all men that personal fear was unknown to the bosom of Eugenius, I told him that on a certain day I would cross the Danube myself, and advance towards the mountains, if he would come down to meet me; and I doubt not that his prophecy referred to me and not to thee. Attila came down sooner than was expected, and encountered thee on the way: thy sudden coming delayed me for a day; and, ere I crossed the river, the myriads of the Huns were pouring down from the mountains. I obtained a promise of security, however, from Attila himself; saw him, found him mild to treat with, and easily appeased. The wiles of the Byzantine court he abhorred: but I told him truth. I offered to show him mine own treasury and the treasury of the city, and that we should purge ourselves by the most solemn oath of all share in taking that treasure which his people declared they had lost; but at the same time I proposed to repay it with fourfold its value as amends. He received the proposal well; swore to me, solemnly, that he would protect thee and Flavia, and all her household; and, upon some other conditions which he made, he promised to give the citizens of Margus peace. Thou seest how he has fulfilled his word."

"I see it, indeed, my uncle," answered Theodore; "I see that Margus, like an oasis in the Libyan sands, is fresh, and bright, and luxuriant, in the midst of ruin and desolation. But, alas! alas! would it have been so if Margus had not opened her gates to the invader? If the first city of the Roman empire had made a stand against the barbarians as they poured upon the frontier?"

"The only difference would have been," replied the bishop, his brow growing dark, "that Margus would now be in the same situation as the rest. What troops had we to resist? What means of defence had Theodosius given us? None! He thought but to appease the evil spirit of the war by drawing a line in my blood between himself and the wrath of Attila; and he took no measure to defend his territories, made no effort to protect his people. How did Viminacium stand, which had ten centuries within its walls? how did Tricornium resist? how Singidunum, how Naissus, Sardica, Ratiaria, and all the cities of the Illyrian border? Singidunum resisted for a day; Viminacium saw the Hunnish myriads with the dawning light, and was a heap of ashes ere nightfall. So was it with all the rest! Theodore, I am satisfied. In the midst of the desolation of the land, where many hundreds of thousands have fallen, where every trace of cultivation and of

sweet domestic peace has been swept away, I have saved a Christian people in peace and prosperity, without one drop of blood shed, either of our own or others."

Theodore thought that this was one of those few accidental cases where good had sprung from evil; but his heart, as a Roman and a man, told him that his uncle's reasoning was false. He replied not, however, and the prelate went on. "I have done all this, Theodore, and I am satisfied. Is it not enough for the shepherd to save his sheep from the wolf, though the monster be obliged to seek his prey in some other flock? Would it not be enough for me to have delivered from peril and death those whom God has given to me, without any consideration of others? But when I know, and did know, that nothing I could have done would have saved myself or benefited them who have since fallen, ought I not to be satisfied? Whenever in my own heart a weak doubt arises, one shout of the glad multitude who owe their lives to me is sufficient to put all at peace within my breast. Yes, I can look back to every circumstance, and say, this have I done, and I am satisfied! But I have done more, oh Theodore?" he added, his mind seeming suddenly to turn into another path, and a different expression coming over his countenance--"I have done more! The weak, pale, cowardly Theodosius, who, trembling on his throne, would have spilt my blood, out of the true tyrant's vice of terror--the heretical wretch, led by the subtle Eutyches to persecute all those who hold the pure and orthodox faith--dare no longer wag a finger at Eugenius, or talk of punishing the citizens of Margus for submitting to an enemy they could not resist, and from whom he refused to defend them. He dare not dream of striking a hair from the head of one of the citizens of Margus. Nor, since Attila is thy protector, would he dare to lay hands upon thee, even if thou wert to cross the courts of his palace to-morrow--no, not for his very throne!"

Theodore was unconvinced; but he refrained from reply, and turned the conversation to another part of the same subject, by relating to the bishop the kindly offers of protection which Flavia had received from Valentinian.

"He has kept his word," replied the bishop, "for such was the tenour of a promise that he made to me. Think not that I went rashly and hastily into even that act which I knew would save Margus. To Theodosius I had applied for aid in vain, and I then applied to Valentinian. He could not aid me, but he justified my conduct, and promised me personal protection in case of need. I sent him messengers when all was secure, and he engaged to give both to Flavia and yourself justice, protection, and support, in the empire of the West."

Theodore felt that his uncle was kind, far more kind than he could have expected or hoped; he felt, too, that his mind was powerful, and his heart not without high and noble feelings; but, alas! the threads of cunning selfishness ran hither and thither through the whole, and, like the veins of some inferior substance in a precious stone, rendered nearly valueless the better part. Theodore felt that he could love Eugenius; but he would not have been Eugenius for the world.

Thus passed the day; but the next morning, as Theodore sat at meat with his uncle, it was announced that Edicon, one of the favourite officers of Attila, together with Maximin, ambassador from Theodosius, approached the city of Margus in their way from Constantinople to the country of the Huns; and when Theodore beheld the reverence and respect which the ambassador himself, and those who accompanied him, evinced towards the prelate who had first received the barbarians into the empire, he could not help feeling how brilliant a thing in the eyes of man is successful evil. During a whole day the ambassador and his train sought repose in Margus--and Theodore determined to accompany him on his onward journey. His uncle forced upon him a casket of gold ere he departed, conquering his aversion to receive it by declaring that it was a debt he had owed Paulinus; and Theodore, feeling that it might be needful, made no further resistance.

CHAPTER III.

THE WIDOW'S DWELLING.

Near a bend of the Tibiscus, on a meadow that might have refreshed the weary eye in summer by its beautiful verdure, the Romans pitched their tents at the close of their first day's journey in the land of the Huns. The night was dark and gloomy; no golden sunset had cheered the world on the departure of the light; and covering all the heavens, in long wavy lines from the horizon to the zenith, stretched out a canopy of heavy clouds, like waves of molten lead rolled over the sky. Maximin, struck and pleased with Theodore, had invited him to his tent; and there, by skilful and kindly inquiries, he won from the son of Paulinus a sketch of all the events which had affected him personally since the death of his father. There was much that Theodore omitted, because he trifled not with the confidence of others; but Maximin learned enough to show him that the youth was held by Attila in a state of honourable, but unwilling captivity; and he resolved to use his best

efforts to redeem him from such a situation.

While they thus conversed by the dull lamplight, the pattering of some heavy drops of rain was heard upon the tent, and, mingled with the rushing murmur of the Tibiscus, came the low sobbing of the rising wind. Their conversation, however, was too interesting to allow them to give much attention to the storm without; for, besides the feelings of sympathy which Theodore had excited in the bosom of the noble Maximin, he had much information to communicate concerning the manners and habits of the Huns, and the character of Attila himself; all which the ambassador knew might prove most valuable to him at an after period.

The rain increased while they talked; the river roared and raged; the wind rose into fierce gusts, and the poles of the tent were seen to quiver under the violent blasts, while the trickling drops began to welter through the tent, and threatened to extinguish the light. At length, after a long moaning sound, a fiercer gust than all the rest swept the sky; the tent-poles shook, bent, gave way, tearing up the earth into which they were driven; the cords and pegs which stretched out the covering were broken or loosened in a moment, and the tent, with all that it contained, was dashed with fury to the ground.

As soon as Maximin and Theodore could disentangle themselves from the fallen mass, they found that the whole of their little encampment had shared the same fate. All was confusion and disarray. Every light had been extinguished: the torches, drenched with the fallen deluge, could not be lighted. The night was as black as the jaws of Acheron; and all that could be distinguished was a glistering line of water, every moment approaching nearer, as the Tibiscus, filled by a thousand mountain-torrents, began to overflow the meadow in which the Roman tents had been pitched.

While engaged in removing, with difficulty and haste, the horses and baggage to a more elevated situation, a number of lights were seen coming over the nearest hill; and in a few moments forty or fifty Huns, bearing torches of resinous pine, which neither the rain extinguished nor the wind blew out, came down to render assistance to the party of whose encampment in the neighbourhood they had heard before the storm. While some remained to aid in saving the baggage from the encroaching Tibiscus, others led Maximin, Theodore, and their companions towards the village, which they said was not far off; and as they went, Theodore saw several of the new-comers sporting, as an old acquaintance, with the negro Zercon, who had returned with him.

Calling the unhappy jester to him, Theodore asked who were to be their entertainers; and a feeling of pain, as well as interest, passed through his bosom, when he heard that their steps were bent towards the dwelling of Bleda's widow.

"I knew not that the village was so near the river," said Theodore, "and yet I know the country well."

"She dwells not where she did dwell," replied Zercon. "When gall is mingled with hydromel, we abhor the sweet drink that we used to love, and its very sweetness makes the bitter more nauseous. Scenes that we have loved, when associated with painful memories, like honey mixed with gall, are more repugnant to us from the remains of sweetness. She has never dwelt where she did dwell since her husband's death. It was in visiting that spot, after having been hidden for many weeks, that I was found by the soldiers of Attila, and driven on foot to Margus."

Theodore made no reply, but walked on thoughtfully by the side of Maximin. In a few minutes they saw before them the village towards which their steps were bent, and the porch of the widow's dwelling, from the windows of which streamed forth many a light to guide them on the way; and gladly the Romans approached the hospitable walls which promised them shelter from the inclemency of the weather.

As they entered the wooden portico, the widow of Bleda, and a number of other women, came forth to meet them, but Neva was not among the rest. With a calm but somewhat sad demeanour, the widow welcomed Maximin, and his companion Priscus, and Edicon, who followed next. But when her eyes fell upon Theodore she paused for a moment, and gazed on him with a dark and melancholy look. At length the tears burst forth in large drops from her eyes; and, casting her arms round the young Roman, whom in his illness she attended as her own child, she exclaimed, "It was not your fault, my son! it was not your fault! Be you welcome also!"

The table was already spread for a banquet in the great hall. Three blazing fires of odorous pine were lighted to dry the garments of the guests, and everything bespoke rapid preparations made to exercise the kindest rites of hospitality. No sooner were their vestments dry, than large portions of venison, and various kinds of game from the neighbouring woods, were set before them; and while the widow stood by to see that nothing was wanting to their comfort a fair train of girls, followed by several slaves, came in to hand the cups of rich and excellent wine, which flowed abundantly around. At their head appeared Neva, the daughter of the house. She was clad in deep gray cloth, with broad furs of sable bordering her robe. Her arms, up to the shoulders, were bare, and the snowy whiteness of her skin, beside those dark furs, looked like Indian ivory contrasted with ebony.

Theodore saw her enter with feelings of deep agitation, for he feared lest she should be pained

and grieved by the sight of him for whom she had done and suffered so much. It would appear, however, that some one had prepared her for his presence, for she looked not upon him when first she entered, but went round with the rest, and only raised her eyes once to his countenance ere she approached him in turn. That one glance showed Theodore that she recognised him, but was nevertheless quite calm; and when she approached him, and took a cup of wine from one of the attendants to give it to him, she stood by his side, and looking in his face with a melancholy smile, she said aloud, "How art thou, my brother? Art thou well after thy long journey? And hast thou seen the friends thou lovest? And are they happy?"

Theodore could have wept; there was something so sad, and yet so resigned under her grief, in the tone of that fair young creature, who, if ever sorrow spared a human breast, should surely have been sheltered from the arrows of adversity. He strove against his feelings, however, and replied calmly, thanking her for all her kindness and all her generosity. Maximin gazed with some surprise to see the tender interest which the family of the dead king seemed to take in his countryman, but he made no remark aloud; and retiring soon from the banquet, the whole party of journeyers sought repose.

Weariness made most of them sleep long; but Theodore was awake and up by the dawning day. Sleep would not visit him in that dwelling; and with the first gray light of the morning he left the chamber which had been assigned him. He found Zercon the jester stretched, sleeping, on a skin at his door; and the moment the passing of the young Roman woke him, he started up, and ran away through some of the passages of the house. Theodore went on into the porch and gazed out, and in a moment after Neva was by his side.

"I bade poor Zercon watch for you, Theodore," she said, "because I wished to ask you, ere you went, to wander for an hour once more with Neva in the morning woods. Will you not, my brother? I have many a question to ask you, and I cannot ask them here, where everybody may hear them or interrupt them. Will you not come, my brother?"

"Willingly, sweet Neva," replied Theodore, still holding the hand she had given him in his. "Let us go." And they wandered forth together along a path which, winding in among the trees, turned at each step of the hill, showing the woody world below under some new aspect every moment. The wind had cleared the sky, and the day was fine; but Neva seemed more sad than on the night before. She said but little for some way as they wandered on, but asked him questions about his journey in a wild, rambling way. At length, however, with a forced smile but a trembling tone, she said, "And of course you saw your promised bride?"

"I did," said Theodore, "and I told her that I twice owed my life to you, in sickness and in danger."

Neva, however, seemed to take but little notice of his reply. Continuing, apparently in the same train of thought in which she had begun, "And did you think her very beautiful?" she said--"as beautiful as ever?"

"More so," answered Theodore, "far more so."

Neva smiled. "May you be happy!" she said; "may you be happy! Doubtless the time since I saw you last has been a happy time to you and her, but it has been a terrible time to me and mine. You know that they came and slew my father, even on his couch of rest?" and she fixed her full bright eyes upon him with a look of painful earnestness.

Theodore saw that she waited his answer, and replied, "I heard so, for the first time, three days ago, at Margus."

"Did you not know it before?" she cried, eagerly. "Did no one tell it you? Did you not know that it would be so?"

"Never!" answered Theodore. "How could I guess that so fearful, so terrible a deed was so near its accomplishment?"

"Thank God for that!" she cried; "thank God for that! That is peace and balm indeed. But let us sit down here," she added, pausing at a rocky bank, where a break in the woods snowed the country stretched beneath their feet, and the Tibiscus wandering in the distance--"let us sit down here, and talk over it all. Oh, Theodore! my heart has been sad since I saw you. They came and slew my father in the night, and I knelt at the feet of his terrible brother and begged for his life in vain; and afterward they said that it was for what he had done against you that he was slain. I feared and fancied that you had stirred up Attila against him, and I remembered that I had set you free, and that I--I might thus have had a share in my father's death."

She paused for a moment, terribly agitated; but, ere Theodore could find words to comfort her, she went on rapidly: "But think not," she said, "think not, for one moment, that, even had it been so, I would have wished what I had done undone. I saved the innocent from the cruel death they meditated against him. I saved the good and the innocent, and I had naught to do with the rest. Yet it was terrible, Theodore--oh how terrible!--to think that I had aided to spill my father's blood, by saving him that I love;" and, leaning her head upon his shoulder, she wept long and bitterly.

"Weep not, Neva!" said Theodore, "weep not, my sister! You did but what was generous and noble, and that deed had no share in your father's death. All my own followers but one or two had escaped when I was taken, and they, not I, bore to the ears of the king the tidings of what had happened. I did nothing to provoke him against thy father; but, had I been slain, the wrath of Attila would have been still greater. Weep not, dear Neva!" he continued, as her tears, having once more burst forth, flowed on apace; "weep not!" And, holding her in his arms, he called up every argument to console her. He held her in his arms; he used many a tender and endearing epithet; he even pressed his lips upon her cheek; and yet no feeling but one, pure, noble, and generous, was in his heart at that moment. There was a being that loved him with the most devoted affection which the human heart can feel, clinging to him in her deep distress, weeping on his bosom, pouring out her griefs and apprehensions to his ear; and though he could not return her love as love, yet his heart told him that he would be ungrateful if he felt towards her otherwise than as a brother. The kiss that he pressed upon her cheek was not cold, because it was kindly; and the arms which encircled her held her tenderly, because gratefully: but it was with the embrace of fraternal protection. Shame upon those who cannot comprehend such feelings! That kiss and that embrace seemed but to say, "Neva, you have lost your father, but you have yet one in the world who, if he cannot, if he ought not to feel for you as you feel for him, will protect, will console, will sympathize with you--nay, will love you dearly, tenderly, though with but a brother's love."

Neva felt that it was so. She would have started from his arms with fear had there been aught of passion in their touch; she would have fled from him for ever had there been aught of fire on his lips; but it was all kindly tenderness, and she laid her head upon his shoulder to weep as she would have done upon a brother's.

After a while her tears ceased, and she looked up. "You have taken the thorn from my heart, Theodore," she said; "I shall now sleep at nights. My fancy had conjured up many strange things; for though I knew you to be kind and generous, yet I knew you had been greatly wronged, and that the poor Arab, who had watched you with me through a long, sad sickness, had been slain by my father's commands; and I thought that, in your anger, you might have gone back to Attila and demanded blood for blood. Then I, by saving you, might have slain my own father; and I was afraid to ask my own heart if I would not have done so even if I had known how it was all to end. But you give me peace by telling me that the end would have been the same, even had you been slain."

"The end might have been worse, my sister," replied Theodore, "for Attila's wrath might have known no bounds; and besides, his anger against your father was of no new date. I heard him warn him months before, that the cup of his indignation was full, and that another drop would make it run over. That drop was certainly the death of the poor Arab, Cremera, but of that Attila was aware ere I reached his dwelling after my escape, and the vengeance he took was all unasked by me."

"Oh, thanks be to the gods!" replied Neva, gladly, "for I have felt as if a rock had fallen upon my heart and crushed it ever since that thought crossed my mind. But now, Theodore, now I am happy."

"And happy, entirely happy, should I too be, dear Neva," replied Theodore, "if I could find any way of showing to you my deep gratitude and regard. Oh, Neva, that I could be a brother to you, and protect you against danger and sorrow, and wipe every tear away from your eyes!"

"And so you shall," she answered, with a smile which had still its share of sadness; though, as soon as the bitterness of her tears was over, she had withdrawn herself gently from the young Roman's arms, and now sat apart. "And so you shall. You shall wed your fair bride, and I will come and dwell near you, and see your happiness, and find pleasure in it too, Theodore, and never be envious; and you will be kind to me; and she will too, I am sure, for your sake. All the time too, that you dwell among the Huns, I will watch for moments to help and befriend you, so that I shall have a right to share in your regard and in hers too; and then, perhaps, the end of our days may glide by in peace. Oh, how gladly will I devote a whole life to guard and care for you! Remember, too, your promise! Send to Neva when you need aid or counsel. Aid, strong and powerful, she can procure you even yet; counsel, if she cannot give it wisely, she can obtain from those who can. And now let us return, my brother. You will be glad to know that you have made poor Neva as happy as it is possible for her to be."

Thus saying, and with one of those blander and more beaming smiles which Theodore had often seen upon her face, ere yet a grief had shaded it, she turned and led the way down the hill. The world were now all abroad; but she took her way on through the midst by the young Roman's side, seemingly careless of all attempt to conceal an attachment for which she felt no shame.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FEAST OF ATTLA.

Splendour and feasting reigned in the halls of Attila. Round the immense hall of his cottage palace were spread tables on every side; and the wooden walls, quaintly carved and ornamented, were further decorated for the festal day by large green boughs torn from the fir, the laurel, and the ilex. These, gathered together in a knot with cords of woven rushes, were fixed against the panels as high up as a man could reach; and, bending over like a plume of feathers, each nodded above some trophy of barbarian arms, the shield, the bow, the spear, the corslet, which, tastefully grouped together, hung, not without poetic meaning, in the midst of the evergreens. Above all waved a thousand banners, and between the trophies enormous torches shed a light redder than that of day, but scarcely less bright than noon.

Below, six long tables were covered with an immense mass of gold and silver. Cups, vases, beakers, of every form and shape, glittered on those boards; while round about, seated at easy distances, appeared all those bold and ruthless chiefs who, under the command of a greater mind, led on the myriads of Attila to battle. There might be seen every garb, from the furs of the extreme North to the silks and linen of the far East; and there, upon the persons of those daring leaders, blazed gems and precious stones of which the voluptuous monarchs of Persia and of India might have been envious. There, too, were all faces, forms, and complexions, from the small-eyed Tartar of remote Thibet to the fair-haired Northman and the blue-eyed Goth. There were the splendid features of the Georgian and Circassian hordes; the beautiful Alani, who brought a race of loveliness from the side of the Caucasus and the shores of the Caspian, and the hard-featured Hun, or the frightful Ougour, glittering with jewels and precious stones above the unwashed filth of his native barbarism.

All was splendour and pomp: cushions, of which luxurious Rome itself might have been proud, covered with crimson and lined with down, were spread over the seats and supported the arms of the guests; and the bright gleam of the torches was flashed back on every side from some precious or some glittering object.

In the middle of the side opposite to the windows was placed a small wooden table bearing a single dish, formed of oak, and a cup of wild-bull's horn: a dagger, that served for a knife, lay beside the dish, and a drawn sword of enormous weight stretched across the table. That table, with a seat of plain, unadorned whitewood, was placed for the use of the lord of all those around; and there he sat, the plain dark Hun, covered with no jewels, robed in no splendour, clad in the simple habit of the Scythian shepherds, but with more of the monarch in his looks than gems or diadems could have given, and with the consciousness of indisputable power sitting proud upon his towering brow. What were rubies or diadems to Attila? They were parcels of the dust on which he trod!

At the tables on either hand sat Ardaric, king of the Gepidæ, Valamir, king of the Ostrogoths, Onegisus, Ellac, Edicon, Maximin, Priscus, Theodore; and at tables farther off were placed Constantius, the Latin secretary of Attila, and Vigilius, the interpreter of Maximin's embassy. Many another king and many another chief was there; and nearly five hundred guests, almost all leaders of different nations, showed, by their different features and their different garbs, the extent of Attila's dominion. In the same hall, also, were collected the ambassadors from several distant countries; and there appeared humble envoys from Valentinian, emperor of the West, as well as Maximin, whose coming from the Eastern empire we have already noticed.

Viands in profusion were placed upon the table, and delicacies of every kind gratified the palate of the most luxurious: rich wines, of many a varied sort, circled in abundance; and barbaric music, wild, but not inharmonious, floated through the hall, mingling with, but not interrupting, the conversation of the guests. A multitude of slaves served the banquet with rapidity and care; and no one had cause to say that, in the hospitality of Attila, he had been at all neglected.

At length, an elevated seat was placed in the midst of the hall; and an old but venerable man, with long white hair and snowy beard, slowly ascended and took his place thereon, while an attendant handed him up a small rude harp. In a moment, all the Huns were silent, while, with careful hand and bent down ear, he put some of the strings of his instrument into better tune. The next moment, he looked up for a single instant, with the natural glance towards the sky which almost every one uses when seeking for elevated words and thoughts; and then, running his hand over the strings, he produced a wild and somewhat monotonous sound, to which he joined a rich, deep voice, a little touched, perhaps, but scarcely impaired by age. It was more a chant than a song; but every now and then the plain recitation ceased, and he burst forth into a strain of sweet, of solemn, or of majestic melody, as the subject of which he sung required.

The matter of his song was war and glorious deeds; and though the tale referred to former times and other countries, when Ruga first led the conquering Huns to triumph over all other nations of the earth, yet ever and anon, with dexterous skill, he alluded to some late exploit in which the warriors around him had had a share. The noble, reckless daring of Ardaric, the keen,

sagacious wisdom of Valamir, were mentioned with loud applause; and many another had his share of fame; but still, when wonderful policy, or heroic courage, or warrior skill, required some more striking and extraordinary comparison, the deeds of Attila still rose to the poet's tongue, and a new inspiration seemed to seize him when he borrowed his illustrations from the life of the mighty man before whom he sat.

While gazing upon him, as he struck the harp, with his white beard mingling with the strings, Theodore could have fancied that he beheld the great master of the epic, singing, amid the isles of Greece, the marvellous deeds of her primeval warriors; and for the first time he could guess what had been the enthusiasm, what the inspiring interest, with which the voice of Homer had been heard, and which, graving each word deep on memory, had served to transmit the great first model of the poet's art to after ages from his own rude and early day.

Breathless silence hung listening to the song, except when, on some more powerful appeal to the passions of his hearers, a loud and approving shout of gratulation burst upon the poet's ear. Even the slaves paused in their office; and, when the song was over--after one moment during which not a voice was heard--some lip broke the charmed quiet with a word of applause, and one universal cry of admiration completed the triumph of the verse.

A slave filled hastily the wine-cup for Attila, and, as the monarch rose from his seat, gave another to the bard.

"Father of song," said the king, "I drink unto thee--may thy hand never lose its strength, nor thy voice its sweetness, nor the footstep of time wear the memory of mighty deeds from the tablet of thy brain!"

The cup was filled again, and to each of his most famous warriors, calling upon them by name, Attila drained the cup with some words of thanks and praise. To Maximin and Priscus also he drank, and then with ready celerity the slaves cleared the dishes from the table, and another service as splendid as the first supplied its place.

At every course Attila thus drank to his guests, and song and music went on, but not with the effect that they produced at first. The merriment grew higher and more loud; and Attila at length despatched a slave across the hall to bid Vigilius, the interpreter of the Eastern embassy, to advance and speak with him.

With a bending head and air of profound reverence, the cunning Byzantine approached the king. The monarch motioned him to come nearer, and then addressed him in a low tone, laying at the same time one finger of his sinewy hand upon the blade of the naked sword that lay beside him. What he said no one heard; but the effect upon the countenance of Vigilius was strange and fearful. The rose at no time flourished very luxuriantly upon his cheek, but now that cheek turned pale as death. A green and ashy hue, something even beyond the tint of death itself, spread over all his face. His eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped; and both Maximin and Theodore, whose looks were fixed upon him, thought that he must have fallen to the ground. Attila, however, bowed his head, as a signal that the interpreter might retire; and then perceiving that he could scarcely walk, the king beckoned to an attendant, saying coldly, "Lead him back to the table, or from the hall, if he prefer it."

But Vigilius returned to the table, and drank cup after cup of wine. Attila looked round to Ardaric with a meaning glance, and then he bade one of the slaves send in the jesters. A moment after, two of those miserable beings entered the hall, and one of those scenes of rude and dissolute merriment ensued which makes the heart ache for human nature. Laughter rang from every part of the hall; but the face of Attila was unmoved even by a smile. He sat and heard with calm and thoughtful gravity; and though he looked round from time to time, and noticed with careful consideration his various guests, yet it is probable his mind was far away, occupied with more important interests.

At length, gliding in among the slaves, who, with their busy services, occupied the greater part of the space which the tables left unfilled in the centre of the hall, appeared the boy Ernac, and took his way towards the table at which his father sat. The first smile that crossed Attila's lip beamed on it as the boy appeared; and greeting him with many a fond caress as he hung at his knee, he spoke with him for a few moments in a low tone, with an expression which showed how that stern heart was melted at the sight of tender youth. After a while, lifting his eyes, he looked towards the part of the hall at which Theodore was seated, and at the same time spoke a few words to his son. The boy's eyes instantly followed those of his father; and bounding away as soon as they lighted upon Theodore, he was at the youth's side in a moment, and greeting him, with eyes radiant from pleasure, upturned towards his face, while his lips poured forth words of gratitude and gladness.

"I thought thou hadst gone away, and left us for ever," he said, "though my father said that thou wouldst return. Yet I remember, when I lost a young wolf that I had tamed, they all told me it would return, but it never came again. It was too wise," he added, laughing, but with a gleam of intelligent light beaming from his eyes--"it was too wise, when it had got back to its woods and to its own way of life, to come back to captivity and strange customs."

Ardaric, who sat near, laughed at the boy's simile; and Theodore, smiling also, answered, "And

so I suppose, Ernac, because we Romans say the great founder of our city was nourished by a wolf, you thought I must needs follow the example of your wolf's whelp. But did it promise you it would return before it went."

"No!" answered the boy, laughing; "and you did promise my father to come back: I know that is what you mean; and I did not intend to say that you were wrong to keep your word. If my wolf had returned, I should have loved it better, even though it made no promise, because that would have showed it loved me."

"And do you love every one who loves you, Ernac?" demanded Theodore: "if so, love me, for I love you."

"And so I do, noble Theodore," answered the boy: "ungrateful should I be if I did not love you. I always love those who are brave and generous, and I shall ever love you, because you saved my life, and risked your own to save it. So I will try in return to love you better than myself, and I will ask my father to make you a king instead of me."

"But would you not wish to be a king, Ernac?" demanded Ardaric. "Power is a great thing, boy! Power and command, to a brave and wise man, are not to be despised. Would you not wish to be a king?"

"Not I!" answered the boy: "I will be a chief under my father or my brother, and lead men to battle; but I never saw that kings were happier than other men. I would rather have some one to tell me what to do, and to make sure that I did not do wrong, than have no one to guide me, and be obliged to blame myself every day. Even you, noble Ardaric, you are a king, and yet you come to fight under my father's standard, and are willing to do what he commands."

A slight flush came over Ardaric's cheek; but he replied, without anger, "True, Ernac; but we have not every day an Attila. The wisest, and the noblest, and the bravest may be proud to obey him; but a weaker king might find a foe in Ardaric where Attila finds a friend. With pleasure we obey those that we respect, but we spurn from us those that we despise."

"That is what I mean," said Ernac: "I would sooner obey some one whom I could love and reverence, than take all the trouble of making others respect and yield to me. No, I would rather not be a king; but I would fain see Theodore a king, and striking down enemies beneath his arm as he struck down the wild urus."

Both Ardaric and Theodore smiled, perhaps to think how readily that unambitious spirit might learn in after years the lesson of aspiring; but if they thought so they were wrong; for such as it then showed itself was the natural moderation of the young chiefs spirit; and it never became contaminated, even in mingling in scenes of strife and contention, where every one strove for dominion except himself.

They looked up, however, at the same moment; and both remarked, as their glances accidentally wandered over the opposite table, that the eyes of Ellac, the eldest son of Attila, were fixed upon them and Ernac with a look of jealous malignity, as the boy stood by them and prattled of all his fancies.

Ardaric turned to Theodore, saying, in a low tone, "Were all as moderate as this fair boy, a bitter strife might be averted from the future."

But as Theodore was about to answer, Maximin and the rest of the Romans rose to withdraw; and knowing to what a pitch of excess the revels of the Huns were often carried, the son of Paulinus followed his countrymen from the hall.

Late and long the intoxicating juice flowed in the banquet-chamber of Attila; but early on the following morning Maximin was admitted to the presence of the king, and a long audience terminated as favourably as the Roman ambassador could wish. Even Vigilius seemed to forget the fear that some casual words of Attila had called forth; and, at the end of a few days, the envoy and his train took their departure from the Hunnish village, bearing with them rich presents. Several Roman captives also had been liberated at their request; but, alas! though Maximin tried eagerly to persuade Attila to free Theodore from the promise he had made to remain among the Huns, the monarch was, on that point, inexorable.

Some months passed by in the sports and occupations of winter, and Theodore became more and more accustomed to the manners of the barbarous nations among which he lived. The favour of Attila towards him was unbounded; and the commanding mind of that great conqueror was not without its effect upon the heart of Theodore. He became fond of the proximity and conversation of the Hunnish king, and felt a sort of strange and exciting pleasure in the vague sensation of awe with which Attila inspired all those who approached his presence. The monarch's kindness attached him, and his greater qualities gained the young Roman's reverence, even while the strange excess of his worse passions mingled a degree of regret in the sensations which he felt towards him.

At the same time, the favour in which Theodore stood with Attila, though it caused him some enemies, gained him many friends and courtiers; and kind-hearted, liberal, bold, skilful, and active, possessing all those qualities, in short, which barbarous nations most admire, united to

the graces and accomplishments of civilized life, Theodore won the love of many for his own sake; so that the halls of his dwelling were far more frequently filled with the noblest and greatest of Attila's chiefs than those of Ellac, the monarch's eldest son.

At length, as spring began again to blossom over the earth, the interpreter Vigilius once more appeared at the court of Attila, accompanied by his son. But then came forth the secret of his former journey, and of the words that Attila had spoken. The base intriguer was instantly seized and brought before the king, on whose right hand stood Edicon as his accuser. Around were placed the chieftains of the Hunnish nation, and, in their presence, Edicon charged the interpreter Vigilius with having endeavoured to seduce him, during his embassy to the court of Constantinople, to take the life of Attila on his return. Seemingly yielding to the entreaties of Vigilius and Chrysapheus, he had feigned, he said, to enter into all their plans; but immediately on reaching his native land he had revealed the whole to Attila, who, with noble magnanimity, had suffered the suborner of his subjects to come and go unarmed under shelter of the character of Maximin the ambassador, who had been kept in ignorance of the base designs of those who sent him. But when, after having been warned that his treachery was discovered, the interpreter dared again to show his face in the country of the Huns, bearing bribes to the officers of the king, vengeance might well be demanded, and Attila determined that the accusation should be publicly made, and the crime fully punished.

Vigilius, of course, denied his crime; but when the very purse which contained the bribe he brought to Edicon was laid before him, and death--bitter death--was awarded by the assembled chieftains, both to himself and to the son who was the companion of his journey and the sharer of his guilt, his courage failed; and, confessing his crime, but laying the burden thereof upon the eunuch Chrysapheus, he petitioned for life and pardon with all the eloquence of terror.

Attila gazed upon him as he would upon a writhing worm in his path; and, scorning to tread on so pitiful a thing, he sent his ambassadors to demand of Theodosius the head of the chief instigator of the treason meditated against him. Theodosius bought the pardon of his minions with gold wrung from his people; and Attila continued to treat with the monarch of the Eastern empire, while he prepared to turn his arms against the West.

These things, however, have been related on an eloquent, though not impartial page; and to that I must refer those who would go deeper into the history of the time. This is but a story of a narrower sphere.

CHAPTER V.

THE LETTERS.

He stood alone at the door of his dwelling, gazing forth upon the summer sunset, as--reflected in rays of gold and rose colour from the summits of the mountains where the snow still lingered--it spread in floods of brightness over the western sky. During the day there had been in the royal village of the Huns a certain degree of silent activity, the coming and going of messengers here and there, the frequent gathering together in small groups, the examination of horses and arms, and the arrival of strangers from distant lands, which betoken, in general, some approaching expedition. As Theodore stood and gazed out on the splendours of the dying day, he thought that ere now, on such an evening as that, he had drunk draughts of deep enjoyment from that well of sweet sensations, unpolluted nature; but yet, before the sun had risen again, the bright hopes to which that exciting draught gave rise had been trampled, like flowers before a war-horse, beneath the feet of fate. Perhaps it was that the indications of some near-coming change, which he had beheld during the day, had occasioned such feelings, and called up such memories; but, as he stood and gazed, a slave from the dwelling of Attila approached with rapid steps, and put into his hand some small leaves of vellum, rolled carefully up, and tied with waxed threads.

"From the land of the Alani," was all that the slave said, as he delivered them, and then departed without waiting for any questions. With a beating heart Theodore opened the packet, and, sitting down on a seat before his door, he read as long as the light of the declining day would permit, and then entering his dwelling, concluded his task by the lamp.

THE LETTER.

"You have not come, oh Theodore! You have not written. And yet to come was impossible, neither could any messenger bear me a letter hither, for the snow has lain upon the mountains

deeper and more terrible than ever I thought to behold. Why, then, should I think of things that were impossible for you to do? It was because I longed for that which was impossible; it was because love would not be persuaded of difficulties in the way of gratification.

"Oh how weary have been the hours, how dull, how tedious, since you left us to return to your barbarian home! Each moment has seemed to linger on the way, longer and more tardily than the rest; and the wintry year, as it went along, seemed to creep with the laggard steps of age, slowly and more slowly, as every new hour was added to the burden that it bore. Neither have the objects around me been such as to give my mind any means of withdrawing itself from that on which it dwells. The white robe of winter has covered all; clouds have hung upon the sky, and obscured the sun; the forests have disappeared beneath mountains of snow; and the grand features of the Alps themselves, softened and rounded by the same monotonous covering, have lost those fine and striking forms which we looked upon and admired together when you were here.

"During the summer, I found a thousand objects to take--no, not to take my thoughts from you, but by recalling sweet moments and beautiful scenes which we had enjoyed together, to create a bright illusion for my heart, and make me think the past not so irretrievable, the present less painful, the future more full of hopes. Then I could gaze over the lake, and mark the sinuosities of the shore, till I could have fancied myself at Salona, and mistaken that small water, with its tiny waves, for the grander and more splendid Adriatic. I could sit upon the little grassy promontory beneath the clump of pines, and think of the mound of cypresses by the banks of the Hyader; I could gaze upon the mountains, and remember blue hills that rose between us and Sirmium; and with all, and each, and everything, one beloved idea would mingle like sunshine, giving light and beauty to the whole, one dear form would wander by my side through the world of imagination, rendering all harmonious by the music of his voice.

"During the summer, I could gaze upon the flowers, I could listen to the birds, I could taste the fresh breezy air of morning, and think of you. Nothing that was sweet to mine eye, nothing that was dear to my heart, nothing that was melodious to mine ear, could I see, or know, or hear without remembering you. But, since then, the whole has changed: ere you had been gone ten days, the snow came down, covering the whole country round, even to our very door. The flowers are gone; the air of summer breathes no more; the birds are mute; no objects that we have seen together strike mine eye; no sounds that we have loved to listen to salute mine ear; and yet, day and night I think of you; but not with bright hopes or roused-up memories: rather with a sad and longing regret that you are not with me, to cheer the darkened prospect, and be the sunshine of my wintry life.

"Oh, if it be possible, come to us soon, my Theodore; come and sooth us by your presence, and direct us by your advice. There are rumours abroad among the nation with which we dwell, which add difficulty and uncertainty to the heaviness of exile and the pain of being separated from you. They say that the king of this land has offended Attila, and that the implacable monarch threatens vengeance. All hear the tidings with fear and horror; for his wrath is as unsparing as the breath of the tempest, which with one blast overthrows the weak and the strong together. Messengers are now sent to propitiate him, and they bear this letter; but Heaven knows, and Heaven only, whether any excuse will be received, any atonement permitted.

"Come to us then, my Theodore, if you can; and if you cannot come, find means to write to us speedily; inform us what we are to expect; tell us what we ought to do, for terrible, indeed, would be our situation, in the midst of a strange land, and of a people who, though kind, are but the friends of yesterday, if war were to be added to all that is already painful in our situation.

"My mother says that you will warn us of any danger, and inform us what is the best course for us to pursue. She declares that she has the most perfect confidence in you, and that at the court of Attila you will soon learn, and be able to warn us of the result. But still I perceive that she is anxious; still I see that she sits alone, and thinks with care over the future; still I mark that she listens eagerly to every tale and rumour concerning the approaching events.

"Ammian is as thoughtless as ever, thinking justly and wisely when he does think, but seldom giving himself the trouble to reflect at all; and yet, Theodore, it is time that he should think, for every day the change that is working itself in his form strikes me more and more; and though but a few months have passed since you saw him, I think you would say, could you behold him now, that he has made no small progress towards manhood. Nevertheless, his pleasures are still as wild, as roving, as uncertain as ever; he seems to find delight only in perils and dangers; in the rough exercise of the mountain chase, in springing from rock to rock, where even the mountain hunters tell him to beware, or in traversing the turbulent streams, bridged by the ice, when the footing is scarcely solid enough to bear him as he passes. Then, again, when he has roamed far and wide for many a day, he seems wearied with one kind of sport, and sits down to weave wreaths of evergreen for Eudochia's hair, or to sing us the songs that he composes in his wanderings, to the tunes that he catches up from the pipe of the mountaineers, as they sit watching their flocks in some sunny spot upon the hill-side.

"Often, too, Theodore, when I see him and Eudochia sitting together with all that fond affection which they have shown towards each other from infancy, I think how strange, and yet how happy it would be, if the same feelings, which have sprung up in your heart and mine from the same childish regard, should with them also arise to bind them for ever to each other. He

loves her, certainly, even now, as much as he loves anything, and he has, too, the power of loving deeply, notwithstanding all his wildness.

"How he loved your father, Theodore! how deeply! how lastingly! Even now, seldom a day passes but he thinks or speaks of Paulinus; and making his javelin quiver in his hand, longs to plunge it in the breast of Chrysapheus.

"Such feelings are strange, and I know not whence they arise; yet, when I think of them, I feel as if I too could experience them with the same intensity. If I picture to myself any one injuring you, oh Theodore! I fancy that I too could hold the dagger or cast the spear. Think you not that we ought all to have been born in the old times of Rome, when men sacrificed everything for their country, and even women shared in the same patriotic devotion. Always, Theodore, when my mind rests upon you, I imagine you overthrowing tyrants, hurling down the Tarquin, driving Appius from his polluted seat, or leading armies for the defence of Rome; and I believe that I could have stood by your side, have shared your dangers, consoled your cares, enjoyed your triumphs, or died in your defence.

"But whither am I wandering? Far from the present scene and present dangers, into the wide land of imagination, to encounter the chimeras of my own brain. Dangers enough and perils now surround us, without my dreaming of others; and your Ildica will show, beloved, that she can bear with firmness, if not act with energy, in difficulties, perhaps, as great as those which her fancy paints.

"I will not say, Come to us, my Theodore! for that may be impossible for you to do; I will not say, Write! for that may be equally so; but come if you can, write if you are able. Tell us how we ought to act, and we will do it. Show us if there be really the danger which rumour teaches us to apprehend, and say what you think the best way of avoiding it!

"My mother will not write herself, but she bids me ask, had we not better now accept the invitation of Valentinian, and retire to Rome? We have gold enough remaining for a long time to come, and in the Western empire we have powerful friends--but then we are farther from you, beloved. Nevertheless, what you advise, that we will do.

"Already, one of those weary seven years of your captivity has passed away; but oh! if I look back to the time when we parted after the terrible days we spent by the Danube, the space between seems interminable. Many and many a year appears crowded into that one; and yet it is vacant, filled with nothing but the tedious passing of empty hours, absent from him I love. It is like looking over the sands of the desert, one long, unvaried, interminable waste, with but one bright spot of verdure in the midst of the desolation, the few short hours that you passed with us during the autumn. Blessed and happy, indeed, are those hours, ever embalmed in memory. They were in their passing a dream of delight, and now, even in recollection, they serve as an antidote to all the cares and sorrows of the present!

"Yet those seven years will reach their end: and I shall see you again, and once more lean my head upon your bosom, and hear your voice, and tell you all my thoughts. Let them fly, let them fly quickly, though they may be taken from the brightest season of our life; yet if the spring be without sunshine, well may we long for the summer. Farewell!"

Theodore pressed the letter to his lips, to his heart. Her hand had touched it, her spirit had dictated it: and the very sight of those beloved characters was balm to his bosom. The news she told, however, was painful; the danger that she apprehended great, if the rumours on which her fears were raised had themselves any foundation in truth.

Without hesitation, Theodore took his way at once to the dwelling of Attila, and was admitted to the presence of the king.

The monarch's brow was gloomy, but he received the Roman youth with tenderness. "What wouldst thou, my son?" he said. "Thou hast had letters, I find, from the land of the Alani. Do they bear thee good tidings? Thy face is sad."

"They say that the chiefs of the Alani fear the wrath of Attila," replied Theodore, boldly.

"They have cause!" answered the monarch, sternly--"they have cause! but, if thou wouldst send any letters back, prepare them quickly, for by to-morrow's noon the messengers return, and some of mine own accompany them."

"I would fain ask a boon," replied Theodore, anxiously. "In the land of the Alani, as thou well knowest, oh mighty monarch, I have those whom I love better than life itself. If thine arms, victorious as they ever have been, are now destined to be turned against the Alani, I would fain visit those dear friends, and provide for their safety. They are but women and children, and cannot protect themselves."

"Thou canst not go, my son," replied Attila. "Thou goest with me wherever my steps are directed. Thus have I resolved for thy sake, as well as for mine own. When last thou wert absent, dangers, and wellnigh death, befell thee! The same may occur again. Bleda is dead; but even for

thy sake Attila could not slay a son. Thou understandest well that which I mean. While thou art with me, thou art safe; but among distant tribes, such is not the case. There, thy death might be accomplished without leaving a trace to tell me how. I know not yet whether the Alani are to be crushed as a swarm of wasps, or hived as bees. It depends upon themselves. Let them obey Attila, and they are safe; but, at all events, I go towards the western seas; and though Italy will not be visited, some of my hosts may sweep the mountains as they advance. It were better that they were not encountered by women--women such as these, who, I have heard from those who went with thee thither, are exceeding beautiful. Bid them remove to some other land. They dare not, I think you tell me, return to Illyria on account of the base, weak Theodosius; but, if thou wilt, I will issue my commands to that throned slave to receive them with friendship and favour. He dare not disobey!"

"Thanks, oh great king!" replied Theodore; "but willingly we will not tread that land again so long as he is emperor. Valentinian, however, in the West, offers them peace and protection. Thither will I send them, if, indeed, I may not see them ere they go. I fear not any danger to myself."

"It must not be," said Attila, in a tone that left no reply. "Thou must go with me; but I promise thee that, this expedition over, thou shalt have permission to visit them in that great pile of stones which you Romans call the capital of the world, and shall abide with them longer than thou didst before. In Rome thou wilt be safe; but I could not trust thy life in barren mountains and passes which would defy our search. The word of Attila is given: thou shalt visit them in Rome! and my promise, like thine, my son, can never be violated."

"I thank thee, oh Attila," replied Theodore--"I thank thee, and feel that thou art generous. So they be safe and free from harm, I am content to abide with thee."

"They shall be safe," replied Attila; "for my messengers to Valentinian shall command him to respect them as the children of his master; and the Alani shall have orders to guard them on their journey into the Roman state. Now hie thee hence and write thy letter--a weary task, I should think it! What need have men with letters? Was not speech enough? But they must still add to what the gods give them; and all their additions do but spoil Heaven's gifts."

Theodore took his leave and withdrew; and going back to his dwelling, he called one of his attendants, saying, "Haste thee to Constantius, the Roman secretary of the king; ask him to send me parchment, and reeds, and ink, or, if he have no vellum, let him send papyrus."

The materials for writing were soon brought to him; and sitting down by the fresh-trimmed lamp, Theodore spent the next four hours of the night in pouring forth to Ildica all the feelings of his heart.

THE REPLY.

"I have not come, oh dearest, and most beautiful, I have not sent, because to do either was impossible; and even now, my prayer has been refused, when I petitioned Attila to let me go, in order to guard thee from difficulty and danger. He gives me the means, however, of sending thee this letter; and although it will soon cause the distance between us to be increased, yet gladly and eagerly do I seize the opportunity of bidding thee fly from the land of the Alani ere it become dangerous for thee to tarry. Fly, my Ildica; bid our mother fly as speedily as may be; for although the anger of Attila towards the nation with whom thou dwellest may be appeased, yet the myriads of the Huns are arming for some distant expedition, and he himself has said that a part of the host take their way by the Norican Alps. On their course is danger and destruction; and even where they come as friends, perils not small, to all whom they approach, precede and accompany their march.

"Oh that I could be with thee, to guide and guard thy footsteps! Oh that I could be with thee, to shelter thee in my arms from every danger and from every injury! But it must not be: and I must bid thee go farther from me, leave the calm retreat where, even in exile, we have known together some of our brightest hours of uninterrupted joy, and plunge into the crowd of a wide, vicious, luxurious city, where thousands will strive to efface the memory of the absent from thy heart; where thousands will strive to win the hand that has been promised unto me; where thousands will deem thy beauty and thy love prizes to be won by any means, conquests to be made by any falsehood.

"Yes, my Ildica, thou must fly to Rome; and yet I bid thee do so without one fear that any thought or any feeling of her I love will be estranged from me by absence, that her affection will be diminished by any art of others to win it for themselves, or that her heart will not be as wholly mine when next we meet as when last we parted. If I know my Ildica aright, and judge not Rome too harshly, the capital of the empire will be but a wide desert to her, who has no feelings in common with its degenerate and voluptuous inhabitants. Ravenna itself would be worse; and I grieve that it is so, for my Ildica's sake, knowing well that, even were the best and the brightest of other days assembled round her, they could not steal one feeling of her heart from the first grateful object of her young but steadfast love.

"Go, then, to Rome, my Ildica! and, amid the best of those who still remain, thou mayst, perhaps, find some who will cheer thine hours during our separation, some whose example and advice may be necessary and salutary, both to Eudochia and to Ammian. Long, I fear, alas! too long, will be that separation; for although Attila has fixed a time at which I may once more fly to see thee, yet that time is named as the end of the expedition on which he is now about to set out; and it is only in the knowledge of one all-seeing Being how long that expedition may continue, or whither it may lead.

"Still, however, it is a bright hope, a hope that will cheer me and console me, though it may make the day seem long and the hours fly heavily, till they dwindle down to the moment of my glad departure. Of what may intervene, I will think the best: dangers may happen, sorrows may befall; but I will not anticipate either the one or the other, and will only think that every hour which passes only serves to bring nearer the time of our reunion.

"What I most fear is, that the arms of Attila are about to be turned against some part of our native land; for where, indeed, could he lead his hosts, without meeting some portion of the Roman empire? He demands, too, that I should accompany him; but be assured, sweetest Ildica, that the hand of Theodore will never be armed against the land of his fathers; and though, as a Roman, I feel that I should be justified in striking to the earth the head of a tyrant, or of a tyrant's favourite, by whom my father was unjustly doomed to die, there is a difference between the country and its oppressor. I might be a Brutus, but I would never be a Coriolanus. If I go with Attila, and if his arms are turned against the empire, I may go as a spectator to the war; but let it be remembered--and oh, Ildica, make it known, wherever a Roman ear will listen--that I go against my will, and as a captive; that I leave my sword behind me in these wars; that my shield is hung up by the hearth I leave in this barbarian land; and that, if I fall amid the events which may now ensue, I fall without dishonor.

"Let me turn, now, to sweeter thoughts; let me think of some dearer theme. I have dreamed, I have fancied, that after this expedition is over, perchance Attila may abridge the period of my captivity, and permit me to return, and at the altar of our God claim my Ildica as my own for ever. Oh, beloved! how my heart beats even when I think of that hour, when I think of the moment that shall make thee mine--mine beyond the power of fate itself--mine through life and through eternity--united unto me by bonds that nothing can sever--wife of my bosom--mother of my children--one, one with me in every thought, in every feeling--in hopes, in fears, in joys and sorrows, one! Oh, Ildica! what were heaven itself, could we but think that dear bond, that tie which binds the soul itself, could be burst even by the hand of death. Oh, no! I will not believe it, that even in another life I shall not know, and see, and love thee still; that purified, perhaps, and elevated, calmed down and tranquillized from the agitating fire that thrills through every vein when I but think of thee, the same intense affection which I now feel shall not survive the tomb, and become one of the brightest parts of a brighter state of being. Yes, Ildica, yes, it shall be so! Those who doubt it know not what love is; for oh, surely, if there be feelings in this life at all that deserve to be immortal, it is those which would make us sacrifice life itself, and all that life can give, for another.

"Thou thinkest of me, Ildica; yes, I know thou thinkest of me. My heart is a witness for thine, that not an hour of the dull day passes without some thought of those we love; and it is strange, oh, how strange! that out of objects which have no apparent connexion with such images, the idea of her I love is brought before my mind, and my heart, like the bee, draws the honey of those sweet associations from everything it finds. If, when hunting in the neighbouring woods, the sweet breath of the wild cherry blossom is wafted past me by the wind, the image of Ildica, I know not why, rises up instantly before my imagination; and every sweet perfume of the odorous flowers seems to gain an additional fragrance from the associations that they call up. If the singing of the spring birds strike mine ear, do not the tones of that dear voice come back upon memory, and thrill through my inmost heart? Everything is lost in thee; nothing that I admired, or loved, or delighted in before, seems now to have any separate existence in my eyes, but is all beheld with some reference to her I love.

"Oh, Ildica! do we not love each other better for all the anxieties and cares which have surrounded the first days of our affection? If so, let us not regret them, for they have been stern but kind-hearted friends, who may have chastised our youth, but have left us an inestimable treasure ere they departed: yes, inestimable, indeed, for there are gems to adorn existence as well as to ornament the body; and the brightest of all the diamonds of the heart's treasury is love such as I feel for thee.

"Tell Flavia that I love her as her son; and tell her all I feel for thee. It will be more pleasant unto her ear than aught I could say unto herself. Bid her not mourn more than needs must be to return to Rome--the city which she knew in days of happiness--now that so much of that happiness has passed away. Bid her cheer herself with hope, for the clouds are beginning to break away; and the sun may soon shine once more, if not for her as bright as ever, yet with a tranquil splendour that will refresh her heart.

"Cast thine arms round Eudochia, and kiss her with love for her brother's sake, telling her how deeply and bitterly he regrets that he is not permitted to guard her youth, and foster her beauty and her virtues, till a husband's hand took from his own the task. Greet Ammian, too, with love, telling him that he must curb his wild spirit, and keep all his courage and all his energies to protect those whom God has placed under his charge, and left without other safeguard.

"One word more, my beloved, to end this long epistle. Doubt not that at Rome you will find protection; for you have it from one whom you have seen, but hardly know--from one so mighty, however, that, alas! experience shows, even Rome herself must tremble at his frown. Attila protects you; and unto Valentinian he has sent a message to respect you and yours as if you were his children. The weak and corrupt monarch that Rome must obey dare as soon neglect this warning as fall upon his sword. The Alani, too, have orders to conduct you safely to the Roman territory. Oh that every step should thus bear you farther from me!

"As I cannot see thee, as I cannot embrace thee, I would willingly write to thee for ever. But it must come to an end. Farewell, sweet Ildica! farewell, my beloved! Remember me still, as heretofore! Love me ever! Love me as well as I love thee! I ask--I can have--no better love. Farewell, again and again farewell!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE BATTLE.

We must pass over the events of some months, and change the scene to the heart of France.

In the vast plains between the Seine and the Marne, where the eye can roam unobstructed over many a mile of open country, runs a brook of the clearest water, which, wandering on through vineyard and cornfield, joins the latter river not far from Soulanges.

At the time I speak of, however, no corn spread over that wide plain, no vines obstructed the progress of the eye, and nothing but thin low grass, which had sprung up where wheat and oats had been cut down or burnt, covered the brown surface of the earth with a robe of autumnal green. A wanderer, who stooped down to bathe his weary brow in that rivulet, had gazed, before he bent his head, upon the wide scene before his eyes, and over the whole plain not a living creature was seen to move. A raven winged its slow flight across the sky, but that was the only sign of life which the keenest eye could discover. When the wayfarer raised his head, however, and gazed again, a brown shadow seemed to lie upon the land near the horizon, and, mounting upon the base of a ruined landmark, he saw that dull shade creeping onward towards him. He looked up to the sky to see if it were a cloud, which, borne by the wind, might interrupt the light of the sun; but over the whole heaven was spread a thin, filmy vapour, which intercepted all the stronger rays.

He gazed again, and the shadow seemed to assume the form of a wide range of heathy bushes blown about by the air. Still the cloud advanced, and gradually spreading, like a high wave, seen rushing in a long bending line over the shore, it came forward across the plains, stretching out as far as the eye could reach. Distinct and more distinct at length the brown masses raised themselves above the earth, and in the end innumerable horsemen might be seen advancing with a slow pace from the westward. A cry of terror burst from the weary wanderer, and he fled as fast as his limbs would bear him. Ere half an hour had passed, the war-horse of Attila pawed the ground beside the fallen landmark, and the myriads of the Huns spread out over all the plain.

"Let the ground before me be cleared," cried the king; and then, poising his javelin above his head, he cast it forward with prodigious force. A hundred cubits farther than any other arm could throw, it still sang on through the air, then touched the earth, and quivered in the ploughed-up ground.

"There pitch my tent," continued Attila; "there fix our camp. Turn all faces back towards the west, for Attila has retreated far enough, and here we have space to wheel our horses on the foe. Oh Theodoric! Theodoric! thou hast deceived and betrayed thy friend. I offered to make thee a king indeed, instead of a puppet in the hands of Rome; but Ætius with his loud promises, and Avitus with his fair flattery, have seduced thee to the side of Attila's enemies, and, ere two days are over, either he or thou must die. Had it not been for thee and thy Goths, the Romans of Gaul, like the Romans of the East, had been now crouching in trembling terror at the feet of Attila. But they shall still tremble! Shall it not be so, oh Valamir? Will not thy subjects die their hands in the blood of their degenerate kinsmen? Shall it not be so, Ardaric? Will not thy Gepidæ smite the heads of the vain loquacious Franks? Attila will beard the Roman, and even here shall be the spot. Make the camp strong, and let no one sit apart from the rest. Let the wagons be placed around, and the spaces beneath them filled up, and leave no entrance but one; for if we destroy not this Roman army in the field, we will wait it in our camp, and by the head of my father I will not leave the land till it is dispersed. Bid the wise men and the diviners sacrifice, and consult the bones of the slain, that I may know what will be the event of to-morrow. Tell them that we fight, even if we die. Let them speak the truth, therefore, boldly. Ha! Theodore, my son, ride hither

with me."

The young Roman spurred on his horse at the monarch's command, and rode on beside him while he surveyed the field. Theodore, however, was not armed, and he only feared that Attila might be about to ask him some question in regard either to the Roman discipline or the arrangements of his own troops for battle, to answer which he might feel incompatible with his duty to his country. But Attila, as he proceeded, gave directions to the various leaders who followed him, interrupting, from time to time, for that purpose, his conversation with the young Roman, which turned to a very different theme.

"Those diviners," he said, "I have no trust in them. Would that we had here that holy man from the mountains beyond the Teïssa! Then should we have some certainty in regard to the result of to-morrow's battle. Dost thou know, my son, what are the means which the Christian augurs use to learn the future as they do? Valamir, my friend," he continued, turning to the King of the Ostrogoths, "seest thou yon mound, the only one which interrupts the eye as it wanders towards the east. Though that mound be scarcely bigger than a great ant-hill, much may depend upon it--even the fate of the battle," he added, in a low voice. "We will range our host along this brook, at the distance of two hundred cubits; the hill will be before us, but let it be seized ere the strife commences. Say, Theodore, knowest thou how the Christian augurs are accustomed to divine?"

"The Christians have no augurs, oh Attila!" replied Theodore. "There have been, and there are, prophets among them to whom is revealed by God himself some of the events that are to come."

"That is but a pretence," answered Attila. "We judge by the bones of the victims, other nations by their entrails. Some divine by the sand, some by the lightning, some by the flight of birds; but all who have any knowledge of the future gain it from some manifest sign. So must it be with the Christian augurs; but they conceal their knowledge, lest others should learn it and be as wise as they are. Ardaric, my friend and wise counsellor, place thyself early upon the right. Thou wilt never fly nor bend, I know, but let us all be calm in the hour of battle. Let not rage and rashness make us forget that victories are as often won by calm and temperate skill as by impetuous daring. Lo! yonder come the Romans! I would fain that they should not live another night on the same earth with Attila; but it is too late to destroy them to-day. I will not look upon them, lest I be tempted overmuch. What say the diviners?" he continued, turning to an attendant who came running up from a spot where a large fire had been hastily lighted.

"I know not, mighty king!" replied the slave; "but the sacrifice is over, and they come to seek thee."

Attila paused, and waited, while a crowd of Huns and slaves, all eager to hear the announcement, came forward, accompanying the diviners. They, unlike the Roman augurs of a former time, were dressed in no graceful robes; but, covered simply with the rude garments of the Scythians, they were only distinguished from the rest of the Huns by a wilder and fiercer appearance. As they came near, however, Attila dismounted from his horse; and the diviners approaching with less reverence than the rest of his people displayed towards him, the elder of the party addressed him boldly.

"Hear, oh Attila!" he said--"hear what the gods pronounce by the bones of the victims! Of the result of the battle we know nothing, and therefore we cannot promise you the victory; but we know that the leader of your enemies shall die in the strife. To-morrow's sun shall rise upon him living, and set upon him dead. We have spoken what we know."

"Ætius shall die, then!" said Attila. "So let it be! But can ye say nothing farther! Can ye not tell which will be successful in to-morrow's strife!"

"We had no answer," replied the diviner, with a gloomy look; "the gods left it doubtful."

"They left it to our own valour, then!" cried Attila, in a voice of triumphant confidence. "Our hearts and our arms shall make it no longer doubtful. Lo! yon Romans still advance over the plain. They must not come too near us. Ardaric, let thy Gepidæ recross the stream, and ensure that the enemy do not approach within a hundred bowshots. Theodore, wouldst thou leave me, my son?" he added, seeing the young Roman's eyes turned with a look of natural interest upon the advancing legions of Ætius--"wouldst thou leave me, my son? If so, Attila gives thee leave to go. I fear not that there should be one brave man added to yon mighty host of cowards. I have saved thy life, I have loved thee well, I have treated thee as my child; but if thou wouldst leave Attila at such a moment as this, thou shalt go in peace."

Theodore sprang to the ground and kissed the hand of the monarch. "I will not leave thee, oh Attila!" he said--"I seek not to leave thee, and of all times I would not leave thee now. Fight against my native land I cannot; but through to-morrow's field I will ride unarmed by the side of Attila, and defend him, as far as may be, from every danger in the strife. I am grateful, oh mighty king! for all your favours: I love you for all your kindness and all your noble qualities; and doubt me not, I beseech you, for though I fight not on your part, none will be more faithful to you than I will. Oh, doubt me not!"

"I do not doubt you," answered Attila; "but let us to our camp."

Difficult were it to describe, impossible to convey any adequate idea of the scene of tumult,

din, and confusion which the camp of the Huns presented during that night. The circle of wagons placed in a double row, and forming in reality a strong fortification, was nearly completed, when Attila led the way thither, and turned his steps towards his own tent. Fastened to strong stakes driven into the ground between the inner wheels, the wagons were immovable from without, but easily turned or withdrawn from within; and embracing an immense extent of ground, they afforded space for the mighty host which Attila had led into the plains of Gaul.

During that night, and comprised in a space of a few miles, more than a million of human beings, either in the Hunnish or the Roman army, prepared for battle and panted for carnage. No still quiet followed in the train of night: the blows of the hammer and the mallet, the ringing of armour, the voices of guards and commanders, the tramp of thousands passing to and fro, the murmur of innumerable voices, the loud and ringing laugh, the war-song shouted high and strong, the sounding of trumpets and of wild martial music, the neighing of several millions of horses,^[1] raised a roar through the whole air, in the midst of which the sounds of an accidental conflict that took place between the troops of Ardaric and those of Theodoric, the Gothic ally of Ætius were scarcely heard; though so fierce was the struggle for the bank of the rivulet, that fifteen thousand men were left dead within a stone's throw of the Hunnish camp.

Thus passed the night; and early on the following morning Attila appeared at the door of his tent, and was soon surrounded by the different leaders of the nations under his command. His countenance was serene and bright; and the attendants who had passed the night in his tent declared that he had slept as calmly as an infant, from the moment that he lay down his head to rest to the moment that he woke to battle. Calmly and tranquilly he asked the tidings of the night; and, in a brief conversation with the leaders, assigned to every one his proper post, and pointed out the great objects to be striven for in the coming conflict. Towards the third hour after daybreak, one of the watchers before the camp of the Huns announced that they saw movements in the Roman camp; and Attila, instantly springing on his horse, led forth his troops himself through the single aperture which had been left for that purpose. Two hours more elapsed ere the whole of that mighty host were in array; but then to any eye looking along over the wide plain, strange and fearful must have been the sight, yet grand and magnificent.

On one side of that little brook, running pure and clear between those hostile armies--like the bright stream of divine love, pouring on its refreshing waters of peace amid the strife and turbulence of human passions--stretched forth the host of Attila, nearly seven hundred thousand horsemen from every land and every nation of the North. There, in the centre, under his own immediate command, appeared the dark line of dusky Huns, little embarrassed with defensive armour, but bearing the strong and pliant bow upon their shoulders, and at their side the quiver, loaded with unerring arrows; the large heavy sword, too, was in the hand of each, and at many a stirrup of the wilder tribes hung, as an ornament, a gory human head. Far on the right appeared the Gepidæ, fairer in complexion, more bulky in limb, and more splendid in arms and apparel, but generally reputed less active, less fierce, and less persevering than the Huns. On the left, again, were seen the Ostrogoths, tall, fair, and powerful; and the intervening spaces were filled up with a thousand barbarous tribes--the Rugi, the Geloni, the Heruli, the Scyrri, Burgundians, Turingians, and those called the Bellonoti. A thousand tongues were spoken in that host, a thousand varieties of face and garb were seen, but all were actuated by the same feelings--hatred to the Romans, and reverence for the mighty Hun.

On the other side of the brook, again, appeared, not less in number, and not less various in appearance, the vast army which Ætius had collected from the different nations that inhabited Gaul; the long-haired Frank, the blue-eyed Goth, the sturdy Armorican, the powerful but doubtful Alan; and there, upon his right, appeared Theodoric, the wise and valiant monarch of the Visigoths, with his white hair, speaking the passing of many a careful year, and his three gallant sons, ready to obey, with the activity of youth, those directions which the wisdom of his age might dictate. In the centre were placed all the more doubtful allies of the Roman empire, mingled with such as might act as a check upon their wavering faith. On the left of the line appeared the Roman eagles, under the command of Ætius in person. There, too, might he be seen, in the eyes of the whole army, riding from rank to rank, and with bold and cheerful words encouraging his soldiers, and exciting them to great exertion. Small in person, but graceful, well proportioned, and active, with the lion heart of the hero and the eagle glance of the great general, the whole aspect of Ætius breathed courage and inspired energy. Wherever he rode, wherever he appeared, a cheerful murmur greeted him; and when at length he galloped his splendid battle-horse along the line, and, riding up to Theodoric, embraced the old chieftain without dismounting from his charger, a loud and universal shout burst from the army, and seemed to the ears of the Romans a presage of victory.

Calm, grave, and immovable sat Attila upon his black charger, a stone's throw before the line of the Huns. On him every eye in his own host was turned; and in that moment of awful suspense which precedes the closing of two mighty powers in the first shock of battle, the barbarian myriads seemed to forget the presence of their Roman adversaries in the intense interest with which they regarded their terrible leader. Armed, like themselves, with a bow upon his shoulder and a sword in his hand, Attila sat and gazed upon his forces, turning from time to time a casual glance upon the Romans, and then looking back along the far extending line of Huns, while a scarcely perceptible smile of triumphant anticipation hung upon his lip.

He sat almost alone, for his nearest followers and most faithful friends remained a few paces

behind; while, with that stern, proud glance, he ran over his often victorious bands, and seemed waiting with tranquil confidence for the approaching strife. At length, all seemed prepared on every side, and the stillness of expectation fell upon the field. It continued till it seemed as if all were afraid to break it, so deep, so profound grew that boding silence.

Slowly turning his horse, Attila rode back towards the centre of the Hunnish cavalry, and then, with a voice so clear, so distinct, so powerful, that its deep rolling tones are said to have reached even the Roman lines, he exclaimed, "Unconquerable race, behold your enemies! I strive not to give you confidence in me or in yourselves. Here is no new leader, no inexperienced army. Well do you know how light and empty are the arms of the Romans. They fly not with the first wound, but with the first dust of the battle! Fearing to meet you unsupported, and remembering that where Romans have encountered Huns the Romans have fallen like corn before the reaper, they have called to their aid degenerate tribes, who have taken shelter in the vicious provinces of Rome, after having been expelled from among the native Goths, from the Gepidæ, the Heruli, the Alani. These, whom we have driven from among us--these, weak, corrupted, degraded as they are--form the bulk, supply the strength, afford the courage of the army before you. Behold them as they stand! are they not as one of their own fields of corn, which we have a thousand times trodden down beneath our horses' feet? We are no weak husbandmen, that we should fail to reap such a harvest as that. On, warriors, on! Pour on upon the Alani! Break through the degenerate Goths! At the sound of our horses' feet, the Roman eagles, as is their custom, will take wing and fly; and yon dark multitude shall disappear like the mist of the morning! Why should fortune have given unto the Huns innumerable victories, if not to crown them all with this successful day? On, warriors, on! Drink the blood of your enemies! Let the wounded, in dying, strike his javelin through his foe, and no one dare to die ere he have brought a Roman head to the ground. I tread before you the way to victory; and if any one follow not Attila, he is already dead!"

A loud acclamation burst from the nearer ranks, and ran along all the line of the Huns, while even those who had not heard poured forth their own clamorous applause of the words which they fancied had been spoken; and the clang of arms dashed violently together, mingled with the deafening shout that rose up from the barbarian host.

"Seize on yon hill, Valamir!" cried Attila, while the roar continued: "it should have been done before."

The monarch of the Ostrogoths hastened to obey; but scarcely had his troops been put in motion, when a corresponding movement was seen upon the part of the Romans; and the terrible strife of that day--the most fierce, the most sanguinary that Europe ever has seen--was commenced by the struggle for that low hill, between the two rival tribes of Goths.

For a time the rest of both armies remained unmoved, as if spectators of the combat; but rage and emulation increased in their bosoms every moment as they gazed, and at length it became impossible for the leaders on either part to restrain in their troops the burning thirst for battle. On poured the Huns upon the Romans: on rushed the Romans on the Huns. The whirling masses of the Scythian horsemen, enveloped in a cloud of dust, from which shot forth a hail of arrows, passed through and through the ranks of the enemy, casting themselves in vain upon the firm legions of Ætius, scattering the Franks and the Sicambres, sweeping down whole ranks of the Alani and the Goths. On, in heavy line, with their long spears lowered, poured the multitude of the Gepidæ, bearing slaughter and confusion wherever they came.

But still Theodoric and his Goths maintained the hill; still Ætius and his legions fought unconquered on the plain; still the Franks and the Alani, knowing that valour could alone save them, continued the combat against the Huns. Hour after hour passed by; rank after rank was mowed down; the rivulet, late so pure and clear, flowed onward one unmingled stream of blood; and the feet of the Hunnish horses, as they charged again and again the confused but unsubdued masses of the Romans, splashed up a gory dew from the pools that lay unabsorbed upon the loamy soil. So great, so terrible was the slaughter, that the horses could scarcely keep their feet among the bodies of the dead and dying. Each waving sword dismissed some erring spirit to its last account; each footfall trampled on the writhing limbs of some mangled fellow-creature.

In the foremost ranks of battle, wherever danger was pre-eminent, wherever the foes remained unbroken, wherever the carnage was most intense, there was seen Attila; and wherever he appeared, there for the time was victory obtained. Through the whole of that day, too, Theodore was by his side; and for the second time he saw upon him what his followers not unaptly called "the spirit of the battle." Though prompt and clear in every command, keen and ready to seize every advantage, the calm and moderate sternness of his demeanour was gone; and, fierce as the lion of the wilderness, rapid as the leven bolt of heaven, remorseless and unsparing as the hurricane, he swept on. No one stood before him for an instant; no one was struck a second time; but, wherever an adversary crossed his path, there was left, at a single blow, a disfigured corpse upon the ground, or else his horse's feet trampled out the faint sparks that his sword had left.

Death seemed to march before him against his enemies, nor ever turned to approach himself; and only twice, when surrounded almost on every side by the foe, could Theodore interpose to parry with an iron truncheon, which was the only weapon that he bore throughout the day, the blows of a spear and a javelin, which were aimed at the monarch's throat. The young Roman knew not that he had seen the service rendered; but at length, when the day was far spent, Ellac,

his eldest son, crossed the path of the monarch, saying, "Ride not in the battle with the Roman, oh my father! He is of the country of our enemies, and may kill thee when thy back is turned. Let me slay him even now, lest the traitor destroy thee!"

"He has saved my life twice this day!" cried Attila, urging forward his horse. "Out of my way!" he continued, seeing that his son still stood before him. "Out of my way! or, by the god of battles, I will send thee to the land of spirits! Out of my way!" and he raised his sword over his son's head as if about to cleave him to the jaws.

Ellac saw that the moment was not his; and, reining back his horse, he sought another part of the field, while Attila pursued his career, and strove, but strove long in vain, to obtain possession of the hill. At length, as the closing day waxed faint and dim, and the gray shade of evening falling over the whole bloody scene, announced that the battle must soon close or be prolonged into the night, Attila for a moment gained the summit of that long-contested eminence, and slew with his own hand the last of the Gothic warriors, whose especial charge had been to defend that post. Up to that instant he had rushed on like a devouring flame, leaving nothing but ashes behind him; but there he suddenly paused, gazed forth upon the confused and mingled masses of the Huns and Romans, that, with equal success, and very nearly equal numbers, were seen spread over the plain for many miles around. He then lifted his eyes towards the sky, marked the dim gray that mingled with the blue, and the bright star of evening betokening that the brighter sun was gone; and with a sudden calmness said, in a low, tranquil voice, "It is too late for victory to-night! It is too late! Let the trumpets be sounded!" he continued, to some of those who followed--"let the trumpets be sounded, to recall all men to the camp! Gather together the ten nearest squadrons upon this slope! The Romans, I think, have had enough of strife to-day, and will not seek it further; but they have fought well for once, and Attila must defend his own, while they seek a place of repose for the night."

He added some further orders; and in a few minutes was heard, from the Hunnish camp, the sound of trumpets, giving forth the peculiar notes of recall with which the Huns and other barbarous nations were acquainted; and, separating themselves gradually but securely from the masses of the Romans, the various tribes which had followed Attila to that bloody battle were seen moving, in firm and regular order, towards their camp.

What would have been the result of this movement under other circumstances, it is difficult to say, had the eye of Ætius marked the proceedings of the Huns, or the mind of Theodoric directed the movements of the enemy; but trampled under the horses' feet, not far from the spot where Attila then sat, lay the disfigured body of the Gothic king, and the Roman general was far away, embarrassed with a party of the Gepidæ, by whom he had nearly been taken.

The inferior commanders of the Roman host gladly perceived that a battle, of which they were beginning to despair, was not entirely lost; and seeing the dark cloud of Huns, with which Attila on the hill covered the man[oe]uvres of his troops, they dared not act any very vigorous part, with thinned and exhausted troops, against so bold and well-prepared an enemy. The trumpets of Attila continued to sound for two hours after nightfall: his forces entered the camp unmolested, and the last of the host who left the battle-plain was the monarch of the Huns himself. ^[2]

CHAPTER VII.

THE RETREAT.

"Let the dead be numbered!" said Attila, as he entered his tent--"let the dead be numbered! I have lost many of my children! Let every chieftain of every tribe count up their numbers, and tell me how many are wanting. We are brave men, and can look our loss in the face. Theodore, my son, I thank thee; and I give thee leave, as a Roman, to rejoice that, for the first time, Attila has fought without winning a victory."

Thus saying, he passed on, and Theodore turned to where his own tents were placed. It had been a day of terrible excitement; and no man, probably, in either army, had felt such strange and contending emotions as the young Roman, who, riding by the side of Attila through that terrible conflict, exerted every energy to defend the monarch's life, and yet from his heart wished success unto his enemies. Though every moment his own person had been in danger--the more, perhaps, because he sought to take the life of none himself--yet, during the day, he had not felt even that slight exciting shade of apprehension which is rather pleasing than otherwise. His whole thoughts had been divided between Attila and the Romans. He had sought most eagerly, and he had found completely, an opportunity of proving his gratitude to the monarch of the Huns for all the great and singular favour which he had displayed towards him.

That gratitude had indeed been great. It is true, he had discovered that Attila had a personal object in the first signs of forbearance which he had shown towards him; but Theodore was not one to scan narrowly the causes of gratitude, or to weigh it out in very fine and accurate scales; and yet, though he would willingly have given his life to save that of the mighty king who had protected and befriended him, he could not find in his heart to wish his fellow-countrymen defeated. Thus he had watched the wavering progress of the fight with an anxious and a beating heart, longing every moment to spring forward and rally the legions when he saw them shaken, or to form again the cohorts broken by the Hunnish cavalry.

The same feelings continued, and agitated him still after he had re-entered the camp. Throughout the night a low and moaning murmur went up from the plain between the two armies; and when Theodore, raised upon one of the wagons, gazed over that bloody field, as it lay in the tranquil moonlight, he could see among the piles of dead, which now broke the flat line of the land, a number of objects moving slowly, and darkening, here and there, those spots where the beams of the calm, bright planet were reflected from heaps of corslets and shining arms. The whole camp around him, except a few solitary warriors keeping guard, seemed now to have fallen sound asleep, wearied out with exertion, and none of the noises of the preceding night broke the stillness of the air. Horses and men, equally tired, uttered no sound; and that low moan, not unlike the sighing of a melancholy wind, was all that interrupted the silence. As Theodore gazed, a step near him made him turn; and the next moment, mounting upon the same part of the rampart on which he had raised himself, Ardaric stood by his side, and gazed out in the same direction for some time without speaking.

"What can that faint moan proceed from?" said Theodore, at length. "You hear it, do you not, noble Ardaric? The stream is too small to be heard here!"

"I hear it well," answered Ardaric. "It is the groaning of the many wounded, I suppose, though I never listened to such a sound before."

"Nor ever, probably," said Theodore, "saw such a field?"

"The world never has seen such till this day!" replied the King of the Gepidæ. "The number of the dead is fearful. I alone have lost seventy thousand men: so say the leaders of the tribes. Did you not think the enemy seemed to have suffered as much as we had at the close of the day?"

"Fully!" answered Theodore. "But is it possible that the sound we hear can proceed from the wounded and dying? It is horrible to think upon!"

"It may be the spirits of the unburied dead mourning over their fate," replied Ardaric. "But what are yon moving objects? They must be either the Romans come to seek for their friends, or the wounded crawling about among the slain. Hark, that cawing! and see, they fly up for a moment into the air! It is the ravens already at their repast. The carrion-eaters in all lands, the vulture, the worm, and the crow, have cause to be grateful to Attila. On yonder field, I should guess, must lie, either dead or wounded, some half million of men. What a banquet! See, they settle again! and now some wise crow, perched upon a Roman corslet, shall peck, unreprieved, the throat of one of those who used to call themselves the masters of the world."

"Cannot we go forth and aid the wounded?" demanded Theodore. "It is dreadful to think of leaving them to die."

"Why so?" demanded Ardaric. "They will be at rest all the sooner. Those who had any strength left have crept into the camp long ago; those who had none are as well where they are, for neither can they serve us nor we them. It is only a pity that those ravens are not vultures, such as we have in the East: they speedily make the dead and dying, one. But, doubtless, there are wolves here too, out of the great forest behind us. They will soon clear away the carrion. I should not wonder if that moaning, which I took for the groans of the wounded, were the well-pleased murmur of the wolves over their unexpected feast."

"Nevertheless," said Theodore, "I should much like to take a small body of men with me, and pick out those we can aid among the wounded."

"What! and have the Romans or the Visigoths upon you, declaring that you were pillaging the dead!" replied Ardaric; "and then I should be obliged to go out to defend you. More Goths, more Huns would come up, and a night-battle would finish what a day-battle has so well begun. No, no, my young friend; by my counsel and good-will, not a man shall stir forth from this camp either to-night, or to-morrow, or the day after, so long as yon army lies before us. Our loss is nearly equal now. We are in an enemy's country, where we cannot hope to increase our numbers by a man: they are at home, and probably, ere to-morrow, may receive re-enforcements. Could we have crushed them in the battle of yesterday, the whole country would have been ours at once; but, as we failed to do that, we must no longer leave them the advantages they possess. Here, in our camp, we must await them, where our defences are as much as half a million more warriors. They cannot starve us, for we have food enough for months, what with our horses and our cattle; and if they attack us boldly, they must be utterly defeated. No, no, Theodore, my friend, no one must leave the camp. Attila, I know, will seek to go forth and destroy them in the open plain; but all voices will be with me if he asks counsel of any one; and, having asked it, he will take it if we all agree. Now let us to our tents, my friend. After all, these tents are convenient things, though

when we first entered the Roman territory as enemies we had none, and despised them as idle luxuries, unworthy of a warrior. Now, not a leader among us but has many."

"So would it be, Ardaric, with every other Roman luxury," replied Theodore. "What you contemn now, you will learn to tolerate, and at length to like."

"The gods forbid!" answered Ardaric. "Then will we cut our beards, and call ourselves women."

"The Romans have not fought like women this day, my friend," replied Theodore.

"True! true!" replied the other. "A fair reproof, Theodore! They have fought well, and I did them injustice. Now, good-night, and sleep you well. I was heated, and, to say the truth, somewhat anxious; and I came forth for the cool air, and for something else to think of than *to-morrow*. I have found both, and have also made up my mind, even while gazing upon that plain. Sleep you well!"

Sleep, however, was not known to the eyes of Theodore during that night. He was not yet sufficiently habituated to the mighty trade of war to see thousands perish, and know that thousands more were lying around in agony, with a calm and unconcerned bosom. He lay down to rest his limbs, but sleep visited not his eyelids. Shortly after dawn, he rose and went out before his tent; but the host of the Huns was already up and stirring, and multitudes covered the tops of all the wagons, gazing out over the plain and towards the Roman encampment. Attila was still within his tent, though his battle-horse stood caparisoned by the side of the standard which was planted at the entrance. But Theodore was told that six or seven of the chief leaders were in council within the tent; and, joining himself to a party of Hunnish chiefs who stood in the open space hard by, he remained waiting, with no slight anxiety, the result of the conference.

At length the curtain of the tent was raised, and Attila, followed by his chief leaders, came forth. But little alteration was visible in his countenance, and yet that alteration had rendered the expression more harsh and severe. He was speaking when he came out, and the deep tones of his powerful voice reached to where Theodore stood.

"If it must be so," he said, "why, let it be so. Nor do I say that your counsel is not wise and prudent, though I feel within me the power to crush yon swarm of insects as I would emmets beneath my feet. Still I would spare the people, if it may be so. But let it be remembered that Attila must never be defeated! It is sufficient not to have been victorious; we must die here or conquer! Let my Huns, with their unerring bows, mount upon the ramparts of the camp. Let the other nations, my friends and allies, stand by to support them; then raise me up a funeral pile before the entrance of this tent. There shall be the bed of Attila, if fortune and the god of battle should desert him! To the ramparts, my friends, to the ramparts! Let no man say that Attila does not yield to wise counsels, even when they are opposed to the most burning desire of his heart."

With extraordinary celerity and perfect order, the Huns immediately spread themselves over the long line of chariots which formed the rampart of their camp; and, intermingled with the Gepidæ, and with the spearmen of Valamir, stood prepared, with their bows in their hands, and the arrow resting on the string, to send the winged death among the Roman legions as soon as they should advance to the attack.

Several times during the course of the day bodies of the Roman and Gothic troops were seen whirling about over the plain, and twice a large division advanced very near the Hunnish camp, as if to feel their way towards a general attack. But a hail of arrows, darkening the sky, and carrying death and confusion into their ranks, caused them to retreat even faster than they came; and day closed without the expected attack.

Early the next morning a rumour became prevalent in the Hunnish camp that the army was dispersing; and, on examining more accurately, it was found that an immense body of Goths, and another of Franks, had left the camp of Ætius before daylight that very morning. Infinite were now the conjectures throughout the barbarian host as to what would be the conduct of Attila under the present circumstances. It was not soon decided, however. Scouts returning to the camp after having been sent forth to ascertain the movements of the enemy, and reporting that the Goths and the Franks had halted at the distance of a few leagues after leaving the Roman army, the ramparts of the Huns remained guarded during the whole of that day; and no one was suffered to leave the camp, except some small parties sent forth to reconnoitre.

Attila only once left his tent during the whole day, when the unexpected appearance of a large body of cavalry, supposed to be Goths, on the eastern side of the plain, led to the belief that a general attack was about to take place upon the camp of the Huns. They passed away, however, without approaching; and Attila, returning to his tent, remained in solitude during the rest of the day.

By dawn of the next morning the Romans themselves removed to a greater distance, and towards noon an order was given for the Hunnish army to prepare to march. None knew the direction that they were about to take, none knew what purpose was in the bosom of the king; and when he himself rode forth among the troops, not even Ardaric, his most familiar friend, was aware of the course they were about to pursue.

A few words announced the intentions of the monarch. "To the south," he said; "I will not be further bearded by these Romans, though they be leagued with all the runaways from the hardy North. On to the south, I say! Let them attack me, if they dare!"

The tone in which he spoke was such as showed no inclination to receive counsel or follow advice, and his orders were instantly obeyed. No obstruction was offered to his march: the Roman army, as a whole, had disappeared; and though from time to time a few small bodies of cavalry was seen upon the right of the Huns, showing that Ætius either followed or accompanied the march of the invaders, yet no attempt was made to bring on a general battle; and when, at the end of a four days' march, the Roman cohorts approached somewhat too near, they were speedily driven back by the Hunnish cavalry.

On the fifth day, towards noon, the towers of a large and important city appeared, crowning the summit of some high hills, round the basis of which the barbarian army had been winding since the morning. Massy walls, close and elevated flanking towers, built from the bowels of the rock on which they stood, announced a well defended fortress, which, in the time of Rome's greatest glory, might well have been looked upon as impregnable. Nevertheless, no sooner did the eyes of Attila rest upon it, after gazing over the country round, as if to ascertain its capabilities for military man[oe]uvres, than, stretching forth his hand towards Langres, he exclaimed, "It must fall! Valamir, my friend, lead the troops to the attack. I, with one fourth part of the army, wait upon this gentle slope for the coming of the Roman, if he dare to show himself. Let not the sun set, and see this city in the hands of the enemy."

Langres fell, and Ætius struck no stroke to relieve it. Some of its inhabitants found means to escape into the recesses of the mountains, and some even hid themselves in various parts of the town, where they were not discovered, but all the rest perished by the sword; and the streets of Langres flowed with human blood. As was very customary with the Huns, it was fired in several places ere they left it as night fell; but the solidity of the buildings, and the incombustible nature of the materials, saved it from anything but partial destruction, and Attila passed on without waiting to see that it was utterly consumed.

Besançon shared the same fate as Langres; and on the morning after its destruction, Attila gazed from the heights in the neighbourhood, and exclaimed with a glance of triumph, as he beheld no force on any side either to watch his progress or oppose his will, "We are not defeated! Let them write it in their histories, that after a pitched battle, in which five hundred thousand men were slain, Attila rode unrestrained through Gaul, and sacked two of her finest cities before the eyes of Ætius. But they will not write the truth--they will not, they dare not, lest in after ages every boy should spit at their memory. Now we may safely turn our steps towards our native land, lest the winter again set in, as it did when we were coming hither, and bind us with icy chains amid the fastnesses of the mountains."

The direction taken by the army was now towards the east; and leaving Gaul, Attila plunged into the passes of the Jura, pausing from time to time amid the sweet Helvetian valleys, as if he even hoped that the Romans might follow him thither, and once more try the fortune of battle. He who through his life had gone from victory to victory, whose steps had been upon the necks of conquered nations, and whose daily food had been success, had met with a check, had encountered disappointment, had been unsuccessful, if not defeated; and he seemed to thirst for an opportunity of wiping away the only stain, slight as it was, which a thousand battles had left upon his sword. None of his confidence had abandoned him; his reliance on his own mighty genius and daring courage was unshaken; but yet the check received in that undecided battle had wrought a change in Attila, and that change unfavourable. Ever stern and unyielding, he had now become fierce and irascible; nor was that all: many of the vices of the barbarian character, which had been kept down, and, as it were, overawed in his nature by the greater and more splendid qualities, so long as success had attended him, now seemed, like slaves on the first reverse of their master, to rise up turbulently in his bosom, and threaten to usurp the supreme control.

It was remarked, also, that Attila--fearing, perhaps, that his first want of success might have deprived him of some portion of his vast influence over the minds and hearts of his followers--had become suspicious, wily, exacting in regard to outward reverence, occasionally violent, and often intemperate. He assumed, too, a greater degree of pomp and external magnificence; as if the simple splendour of his powerful mind was sufficiently tarnished by the one slight reverse he had met with, to require the substitution of a meaner sort of majesty, to dazzle the eyes where the heart was unsatisfied.

The change, indeed, was not very great in any one particular, but still enough so in each to attract the attention of a person who remarked so closely as Theodore, and, in the aggregate, sufficient to strike the eyes of others. This mood, too, increased in him daily; and, as he marched onward, it drew the attention of Ardaric himself.

Through those wide beautiful valleys, clad in the everlasting green with which a temperate climate and a happy soil has robed them, the Hunnish cavalry wound on, feeding their horses by the banks of the streams and lakes, which, scattered in bright confusion throughout the free Helvetian land, have rendered it, in all ages, a country of enchanted sights. Through those deep passes, too, clad with the fir and pine, whose evergreen garmenture bore no token of the approaching autumn, the long and dusky troops of barbarian horsemen poured on, lifting, with

wild enthusiastic delight, to the mountain, the rock, the rugged precipice, the variegated foliage, and all the beauties of uncultivated nature, those eyes which looked with scorn or abhorrence upon all the productions of civilized art, and on the mighty master works of the human mind.

Every now and then, however, where the beech, or the ash, or the elm, or the oak was mingled with the unchanging trees of the mountain, the sear aspect of the withering leaves, the tints of yellow and of brown, told Theodore but too surely that the autumn was far advanced. The expedition of Attila had now lasted a year and nearly nine months. It was more than that since he had heard the slightest news of Ildica. It was two years since he had seen her he loved: but time could do nothing to diminish feelings such as his; and the longing once more to clasp her to his heart grew daily stronger and stronger instead of decreasing. He thought the rapid marches of the army slow and tedious--the way seemed long and interminable.

At length began to appear the wide plains, the dark woods, the broad rivers, which announced once more their approach to the land of the Huns. Their last three days' march, however, was through fallen and falling snow: but Theodore was not to be disheartened; and on the very day that followed their arrival on the banks of the Tibiscus, he claimed audience of Attila, and, reminding him of his promise, demanded permission to set out on his visit to Italy.

The answer was stern and decisive. "It is impossible!"

The monarch said no more, and Theodore, grieved and disappointed, waited on through a long, dark, tedious winter. With the first blossoms of the spring, however, as the young Roman sat within his dwelling, leaning his head upon his hand, and thinking of the past, the boy Ernac, now growing up in splendid beauty, ran gladly in, exclaiming, "My father calls for you! Come, Theodore, come! Attila demands your presence; and he is in a milder mood than he has been since his return from Gaul."

A glad hope passed through the bosom of Theodore, and, rising from his seat, he followed to the presence of the king.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE REUNION.

Rome, immortal Rome! the capital of the greatest and most despotic of governments, whether democratic, imperial, or clerical, that ever this world has known; the fountain-head of the mightiest and most pervading power that ever has been exercised on earth! Rome, immortal Rome! the heart of the whole world during centuries of glory, from which issued forth, poured through a thousand veins and arteries, the impulses of civilization to the remotest points of her mighty limbs! Rome, immortal Rome! wonderful in her rise, her duration, and her fall! Wonderful in her splendour, wonderful in her decay! Even when the time shall come that men pass the ploughshare over her walls, or that the beasts of the field find grass in her desolate dwelling-places, still shall she remain immortal in history and tradition; still shall she walk the earth among the spirits of the past, exercising over the destinies of unnumbered ages an unseen influence through the record of her marvellous deeds! Rome, gigantic spectre, still haunting the ruins of the greatest empire that the world has ever seen! Rome, from which arts, and knowledge, and power, and religion have flowed to distant ages as from a source; but which--oh, strange to say!--has ever presented in herself the spectacle of anarchy, vice, and irreligion; and which stood forth from the whole world as the darkest and most polluted spot through many centuries and for many crimes. Rome, immortal Rome! We must now bend our steps through Rome.

It was on a spring holyday, in one of the brightest months of the year, ere summer had brought her burning heat, and after winter had lost his chilling frown. The vegetable world was all in flower, and nature, like an April bride, was crowned with garlands. The sky was all in smiles; the air was all balm; and the whole of a soft and pleasure-seeking population was pouring forth into the streets, or thronging the public places of the city, which had once been, indeed, the queen of empires, and was still majestic, though her reign was over.

Some show or some amusement, some procession or some festival, called the gay multitude forth towards the forum; and oh, how merrily, as they went along, did the laugh ring up into the sky--did the gay song or the loud jest echo through the streets.

Among the number who took their way onward through one of the long narrow streets, were two girls carrying a basket of flowers between them, and thus singing as they went of the sweet

burden they bore.

FLOWER GIRLS' SONG.

Oh, the flowers of spring! the sweet-smelling flowers,
Gay-robed companions of life's happy hours:
They have come again to visit us here;
They have come hand in hand with the young bright year.
Oh, flowers! Buy my flowers!

Oh, the flowers of spring! the beautiful flowers,
In garlands we twined them in infancy's hours;
And every blossom we strung on the wreath
Was like the sweet moments that flew beneath.
Oh, flowers! Buy my flowers!

Oh, the flowers of spring! the beautiful flowers,
They have wreathed the door-posts of love's own bowers;
They have given their breath to the lover's sigh,
And their hues to the loved one's cheek and eye.
Oh, flowers! Buy my flowers!

Oh, the flowers of spring! the beautiful flowers,
Fed with May sunshine and bathed with spring showers;
When you have babes, as soon you may,
Let them sport with flowers through their young bright day.
Oh, flowers! Buy my flowers!

Oh, the flowers of spring! the beautiful flowers,
When manhood puts forth his mightiest powers;
Each noble thing does its wreath require,
The warrior's sword and the poet's lyre.
Oh, flowers! Buy my flowers!

Oh, the flowers of spring! the beautiful flowers,
They are dear to us still when old age lours;
We gaze on the blossoms that spring at our feet,
And the perfume of mem'ry rises sweet.
Oh, flowers! Buy my flowers!

Oh, the flowers of spring! the beautiful flowers,
They have still their charm for all life's hours;
And when at length in the tomb we are laid,
Let our last bed of flowers be made.
Oh, flowers! Buy my flowers!

Oh, the flowers of spring! the beautiful flowers,
Where saw you flowers so fair as ours?
They are sweet to the scent, and bright to the eye,
Oh, take them before they fade or die.
Oh, flowers! Buy my flowers!^[3]

So sung the flower-girls, as, carrying between them their basket, heavy with the rifled treasures of the spring, they walked on among the crowd, selling from time to time a wreath or a nosegay. The passers-by, however, unembarrassed with any burden, were more rapid in their movements. The crowd became thinner and thinner as the more early hurried on. Scattered groups succeeded, hastening forward with an accelerated pace, lest they should be too late, or gain but bad places at the show; and at length the numbers were so diminished as to leave the street nearly vacant; while the girls themselves, finding that they had been outstripped by their customers, hurried their pace as fast as they could, in order to find a new market, where the multitudes were assembled.

At the time when the street was the thinnest of people, however, the trampling of horses, coming at a quick pace, was heard, and both the girls turned round to look, the one exclaiming, "It is the bishop, I am sure," and the other replying, "No, it is the quæstor by the number of horses: the bishop always goes in his chariot, foolish girl."

"Wrong, both of us," rejoined the first; "it is but a large troop of barbarians."

"Oh, they will buy our flowers, then," cried the other. "I dare say they are from Ætius's army; and the barbarians always spend their money as fast as they get it."

As they thus spoke, the troop which called forth these observations approached; and the two girls--one of them was remarkably pretty, and the other thought herself so--turned their faces, with an air of modesty which it is possible they did not really possess, towards the point straight before them, and taking up again the burden of their song, "Oh, flowers! Buy my flowers!" they went on carolling gayly as the strangers came near.

He who rode at their head was a young man of about two-and-twenty, dressed in the Roman costume; but those who followed were clothed, though with some appearance of splendour, in the

wilder garb of the Huns. Riding up, the young stranger stopped his horse by the side of the first flower girl, who instantly held up a bunch of very beautiful blossoms, singing on, with an air of sportive coquetry, "Oh, flowers! Buy my flowers." Theodore, for he it was, took the flowers, and gave her a piece of money, saying, at the same time, "Canst thou tell me, pretty lass, where dwells Julius Lentulus. His house used to be here, methinks; but it is long since I saw it, and where I thought it stood appears nothing but a high wall."

"True, beautiful youth," replied the girl--"true, his house stood there: but Valentinian wanted the land to make a fishpond of; so he pulled down the house, and Julius Lentulus was obliged to remove; and now dwells farther up, at the side of the Aventine. The emperor, however, betook himself to Ravenna; the fishpond was never made, and the edile had the ground walled up; for he dare not give it back to Julius Lentulus for fear of the emperor."

"Canst thou not direct me more exactly," demanded Theodore; "for I wish to find the house instantly."

"Ay! now I warrant thee," answered the girl, "thou art seeking the pretty Eudochia: often does she buy flowers of me when I go by the Aventine. Ay! I warrant thee, some old lover of hers; for I remember, when she came back from exile in the barbarian land herself, some two or three years ago. But alas! fair youth, thou hast a rival--nay, not one for that matter, but a hundred, though only one that is dangerous."

"Pray who is that?" replied Theodore, with a smile, which encouraged the girl to run on.

"As fair a youth as any in the imperial city," answered the girl: "she calls him her brother Ammian; but once, as I rested in the gardens of their villa without the walls, I saw their lips meet as brothers and sisters rarely do meet; and I found afterward that there was no such near blood between them."

Theodore's cheek reddened from feelings that would be difficult, and are unnecessary to define. "Alas, poor youth!" continued the girl--"alas, poor youth, I am sorry for thee! but these things must be borne, sweet heart, and thou wilt soon find thee another bride."

"Thou art mistaken, pretty lass," replied Theodore: "Eudochia is my sister, and Ammian I love as a brother; but have you no news of the Lady Flavia and--"

"Ha, ha, I have thee now!" cried the girl; "thou wouldst ask after the fair Ildica. Thou art safe, then, stranger, thou art safe. She lives as a nun, and keeps her maiden beauties from the searching eyes of admiration. Seldom have I even seen her, but she is very beautiful. Thou wilt find her, too, by the Aventine; and if thou wouldst know where Ammian is, I could tell thee too."

The girl assumed an air of mystery as she spoke, which excited Theodore's curiosity; and, without appearing to be anxious on the subject, he merely asked, "And where, pray, is that?"

"I do not know whether I will tell or not," answered the girl; "it might cost the pretty boy his life; but thou wilt not repeat it, and may keep him from such follies hereafter. He has gone out," she added, approaching closer to Theodore's horse, and speaking in a lower tone--"he has gone out to see secretly a great sacrifice which is to be offered to Jupiter by the people who dwell at the foot of Pincianus: I saw him going thither as I came along; for I heard that the good old pagans--as we Christians call them--were about to risk their throats for the sake of offering a sacrifice to a god in whom they do not half believe, and I went thither to sell my garlands. As we came back, we saw the young wanderer going thither for sport, and we decked him and his horse out with flowers, as if he were verily to be the sacrifice himself."

"God grant that it may not be so," thought Theodore; but he merely asked, "Are not the laws against these sacrifices very severe here in the West? They are so in the Eastern empire at least."

"Death to every one who beholds them," replied the girl; "but since the emperor has dwelt at Ravenna, people have not been so strict, and one may swear by Jupiter, or even by Venus, without danger. What it will be, now that Valentinian has returned, I cannot tell; but I must on to the palace to sell him flowers, for he will soon be going to join the procession, and the præpositus always buys flowers of me and Claudia for the emperor's own use, he tells us."

Thus saying, she tripped on; while Theodore turned his horse's head towards the Aventine Mount: and, on inquiring for the house of Julius Lentulus, he was directed to a stately but somewhat gloomy edifice, enclosed within its own walls and gardens, and bearing an air of majestic decay, which harmonized but too well with the state of the city and the country. On reaching the gates he asked at once for Flavia; but the old janitor considered him attentively for some moments ere he gave him admission, for the person he inquired for received but few visitors.

"What is your name?" he asked--"what is your name, young lord! I am not going to admit you and all these barbarians to the Lady Flavia, who rarely sees any one. Then that wild youth Ammian has gone forth, and there is no one but the lady and her daughter within."

Beyond the great gates stood the house, with its long colonnade; but planted in the space between were some bushes and low apple-trees, which prevented Theodore from seeing anything

but the two steps which raised the portico from the ground, and the lower part of the pillars which composed it. As he looked on, however, he saw a female figure pass along the colonnade; and, though he could not see the face, yet the sight of the small graceful foot that moved the full and floating robe was enough to make his heart beat high.

"I am Theodore, Ancinus," he said. "Let me pass, my good friend. These strangers can wait for me without. I am Theodore, son of Paulinus; I say let me pass."

There was a cry of joy from within; for the tones of that voice had caught the ear of Ildica, and she had paused to listen--there was a cry of joy, a few steps, quick as those of the fawn bounding after its mother over the morning dew, and Ildica was in her lover's arms.

"At length! at length!" she exclaimed, as, twined in his arms and pressed to his heart, she raised those large dark lustrous eyes to his face, swimming with tears sweeter than the happiest smile that ever shone upon the human countenance. "At length, at length, my Theodore, thou art come! Come after two long years and a half. Oh how weary has felt my heart under the passing of that tedious time; and how busy has fancy been with all the dangers and with all the horrors in the storehouses, the wide, dark storehouses of possibility! How I have tortured myself to think why my Theodore did not write; but thou art come, and the clouds are all dispelled."

"Beloved, I did write," replied Theodore. "Twice have I written; but it was under such circumstances that I could hardly hope thou wouldst ever see the characters my hand had traced. Nor have I heard from thee, my Ildica; but I fancied no neglect, no forgetfulness, no change of affection."

"I too wrote, beloved," she answered; "but I wrote only once, because no other occasion presented itself of sending letters to the country of the Huns. Forgetfulness! neglect! change of affection! Oh, Theodore! could anything in life change that which I feel sure death itself can never alter? What have I thought of but thee since last we met? But let us to my mother; let her share our joy."

"That joy will be greater, my beloved, when you hear all," replied the youth; and, still circling her fair form with his arm, while her hand remained clasped in his, he accompanied her back into the house where Flavia sat, unknowing his arrival.

"Joy, dearest mother, joy!" cried Ildica: "here is our Theodore returned."

"Ay, and returned," added Theodore, "never to quit you again! Attila--though I saw that it gave him no slight pain--has freed me from the rest of the term which I had bound myself by promise to remain with him. He has but exacted that I shall never bear arms against his people, nor provoke them to strife with me; for he has a superstition that the first injury inflicted by any of them upon me will be followed by his ruin or his death."

"Happy superstition!" cried Flavia, embracing him: "and so I trust our long sorrows are over, my dear son. We have needed thee much; but now that thou wilt not leave us more, my cares are at an end: and when I have seen thee and my Ildica united for ever, I willingly quit a world of which I have long been weary."

"Quit us not, my mother!" replied Theodore, "quit us not! but remain with us, to behold our happiness and to share it! But oh, let that happiness be made complete as soon as may be. Let no time elapse ere Ildica becomes my own. Till I hold her to my heart, my own dear wife, I shall fear lest every hour that flies may bring some new misfortune to separate us again. Say, Ildica, say, when will you be mine?"

The blood rose in the beautiful girl's cheek, and neck, and brow, spreading through that pure and ivory skin like the blush of dawn upon the snowy heads of the mountains; and feeling how the crimson was mounting in her face, she hid it upon her lover's breast, replying, "When my mother thinks fit."

"To-morrow! oh, to-morrow, dear mother!" cried Theodore.

"Nay, nay," said Flavia, with a smile, "not quite so soon as that! Let it be the following day. What say you, Ildica? Is that too soon?"

"Speak, beloved! speak!" cried Theodore; but she still hid her eyes upon his breast, and yet the soft clasping of her hand upon his told him that she gave no unwilling consent. Feeling that she was much agitated, he sought some other theme to release her mind from its happy burden, till custom should render it lighter to bear.

"She consents, my mother!" he said, "she consents! but where is Eudochia? She must come and share our joy. I wonder she has not yet heard of her brother's return."

"She has gone to the capitol," replied Ildica, raising her head: "there is a splendid sight there to-day; and Ammian sent a messenger to say he had found a place for her where she could see it all."

"Ammian!" exclaimed Theodore: "I heard, as I came along, that he had gone out of the city

towards Pincianus."

"Oh no," replied Flavia: "he went to the capitol, and sent both a messenger and a litter for Eudochia, saying that he had found a place for her at the house of Julius Sabinus, otherwise she should not have gone."

But Theodore was not satisfied. Though the words of the flower-girl might be idle words, yet they remained upon memory, and a cloud came over him as of new sorrows approaching. At that moment they heard voices at the door, and one of them speaking with the tones of a woman in loud entreaty. Theodore listened: "I must see him, I must speak with him," cried the voice: "it is not to sell my flowers: it is on business of importance to him himself that I seek to see him. Only tell him I am here, and see whether he will not let me speak with him."

"That is the voice of the flower-girl," cried Theodore, "who told me that Ammian had gone out to Pincianus. Some evil has happened, I fear!"

"Again!" cried Ildica, "again!" and she cast down her dark eyes towards the ground with an expression of deep despondency, as if she asked of the dust from which we rise and to which we fall--"What is this inscrutable fate, that dogs us through existence, never suffering us to know a moment's happiness, without pouring into the cup the bitter drop that turns it all to gall?"

Theodore had in the meantime advanced towards the gate, and was met midway by the flower-girl, with whom he had spoken, and who had now passed the gatekeeper and was hurrying in.

"You told me you were her brother!" she cried, as she met him--"you told me you were her brother! If so, and if you would save her from Valentinian, fly to the palace, quick! They have borne her thither. I saw her carried to the inner court in a litter, and heard her cries and entreaties when she discovered where they were taking her to. If you are her brother, hasten thither quickly with your Huns! You may save her yet; for almost all--guards, attendants, officers--have gone to the show. You may save her yet, perchance--or at least avenge her!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE TYRANT.

In a room in the imperial palace, lighted from above, and far removed from any of the chambers usually inhabited by the emperors, upon a luxurious couch of down, covered with crimson, and strewn with the flowers of the hyacinth, whose sweet perfume mingled with that of a thousand other flowers, gave the whole chamber an atmosphere of delicious but overpowering perfume, lay Valentinian, the weak, luxurious, vicious monarch of the West, clothed in a light and floating robe of silk, and with his odour-dropping hair bound effeminate with a fillet twined with flowers.

He seemed to listen eagerly for some sounds; and in a moment or two the trampling of feet, some sobbing cries, and a voice in the tone of expostulation, were heard. The next instant the door of the room--for it was one closed by a door furnished with locks and bolts--was thrown open, and a litter was borne in and set down in the midst of the chamber.

The slaves of Valentinian, for--though not habited in the usual garb of the imperial household--they were but the ministers of his pleasure, instantly withdrew, and, starting from the litter, a lovely girl, terror in her aspect, and her eyes dewed with tears, stood gazing wildly round the room, as if seeking some means of escape. She was yet in her early youth, and modesty and innocence were written in every line of her fair countenance. But neither modesty, nor innocence, nor youth had any effect upon the corrupt and selfish man before her, who, as soon as the slaves were gone, advanced, and taking her hand, endeavoured to sooth her, pouring into her ear all the vile but honeyed words of a consummate corrupter.

Snatching her hand from his, and shrinking back from him into one corner of the room, Eudochia gazed upon him in silent terror, as she would have gazed upon some poisonous serpent suddenly crossing her path. But Valentinian still pursued, exclaiming, "But listen to me, fair Eudochia. It is the emperor seeks your love. It is Valentinian who commands your obedience. The wealth and splendour of a world shall be poured out at your feet, the love of your sovereign shall encircle you with all earth's choicest gifts;" and he went on with words on which we will not dwell to wrong her innocent ear with evil persuasions.

For a time Eudochia gazed in silence, as if terror and horror had deprived her of the use of her

intellect; but as Valentinian concluded, and was again approaching her, she suddenly seemed to recollect herself, and, with a quick start forward, cast herself at his feet.

"Hear me, oh emperor!" she cried, "hear me, if there be one spark of noble feeling left in your bosom. If you be a monarch, if you be an emperor, if you be a man, hear me, and set me free! I cannot love you, I ought not to love you, but as a subject loves an emperor. You are already wedded; my heart is already given to another! Wrong not your empress, wrong not me, by seeking love that never can be yours. Let me go! oh, let me go! and show yourself really worthy of your high station. You cannot--surely you will not be the first to violate the laws which you are bound to maintain. How would you punish another were he to treat me even as your slaves have done? Oh let me beseech, let me entreat, let me adjure you, by all you hold sacred, to set me free! Hear me, hear me! Oh, monarch, hear me!"

And with uplifted hands and streaming eyes she went on, urging him to justice and compassion; but even her terror and distress had charms for the base tyrant. He attempted to throw his arms around her; he kissed her fair brow as she kneeled imploring at his feet. But at that act Eudochia felt all the spirit of her race rise up within her, as she saw her prayers unheeded and her appeals to justice only provoking deeper insult. She sprang upon her feet, she freed herself from his arms, she snatched from his girdle, even in the struggle to cast him off, a small Eastern dagger which the weak tyrant wore. "Stand back!" she cried--"stand back! or, by the memory of my father, who died to save his country, I will drive this blade into thy heart, thou Tarquin!"

"Girl, you dare not!" cried Valentinian, drawing back; "you dare not raise your hand against your emperor!"

"All girl as I am, I dare raise my hand against any tyrant on the earth," replied Eudochia, "let him clothe himself with whatsoever name he will. Come not near me, or you die! Tyrant, I am resolved! My honour is as dear to me as life to you! Let me go free, or Valentinian shall this day cease to live and reign!"

"Well, well! thou shalt go!" said the emperor, in a softened tone; "but I must call the slaves, to make them open the door from without. Promise me that thou wilt not strike me as I approach the door."

"I will not," replied Eudochia, "so as you set me free."

"You shall be free," answered Valentinian, moving towards the door--"you shall be free."

But when between Eudochia and the entrance of the room, within a single step of either, he suddenly turned, sprang upon her, wrenched the dagger from her grasp, and casting it on the other side of the couch, exclaimed, "Now, girl! now! what punishment shalt thou undergo for daring to hold a dagger to the breast of thine emperor?"

Eudochia gazed round in hopeless despair. But then came a sound of hasty steps and angry voices; and, with sudden hope rushing through her bosom, she uttered scream after scream, to attract the notice of any one who might be passing near. Valentinian seemed not to have heard or not to heed the sounds, for he pursued his evil course; but while he endeavoured to silence the unhappy object of his passions, the door of the chamber was shaken violently.

The bolts and locks resisted; but another and another blow came crashing upon the woodwork. Valentinian, with a cheek as pale as death, retreated towards the couch, and sought for the dagger, which was the only weapon he had worn. The next moment the door gave way, and the brother of Eudochia, followed by twenty or thirty of the armed Huns, rushed into the chamber. His sword was drawn and bloody in his hand; and stretched across the long passage might be seen the corpse of one of the base instruments of the tyrant's vices, who had dared to resist the passage of the Roman, hastening to the deliverance of his sister.

Theodore caught her in his arms, and Eudochia wept upon his bosom. But such thoughts as had inspired the bosoms of his ancestors were in his heart at that moment, and he gave her little time to weep.

"Are you safe, my sister?" he cried, with his eyes still glaring on Valentinian. "Are you pure! By the memory of our father, I adjure you! are you unpolluted?"

"I am, Theodore! I am!" she answered: "thanks to God and to you, I am!"

"Vile slave!" cried Valentinian, attempting to assume the air of empire; "who are you? How dare you--"

But Theodore cut him short. "Base, effeminate, soulless tyrant!" he answered, "well may you thank God that I arrived in time to save you from the crime you sought to commit! Well may you thank God! for your cowardly and pitiful life had surely been ended here had you succeeded in injuring her; and your soul had been sent to hell burdened with the sin it had just perpetrated."

Valentinian trembled and turned pale, the coward blood forsaking his heated cheek at the stern aspect of the young Roman. He attempted, however, though in a weak and faltering voice,

to call for his guards and his officers; but Theodore replied, with a look of withering scorn, "You call in vain, tyrannical disgrace of Rome--you call in vain. The means that you have taken to ensure that your crime should be effected in silence and secrecy, have left you as powerless as the lowest slave in your dominions. All the better and the purer part of your court, sent forth to take part in the procession, have left you alone in this wing of the palace, with none but the slavish ministers of your pleasures near thee. They are in the hands of my followers, except yon rash fool, lying there in his blood who attempted to stop a brother flying to his sister's rescue. Thou art in my power," he added, "to take or leave thy pitiful life as I will; and couldst thou but see how contemptible a thing thou hast made thyself, as thou standest there, quivering with fear and guilt before thine injured subject, shame would surely supply the place of virtue, and thou wouldst blush for the crimes that have degraded thee so low."

"Traitor!" exclaimed Valentinian, with the blood rushing up into his face--"traitor, thou shalt rue this day!"

"Monarch, I shall not," replied Theodore, "were even your power as extended as it is weak and circumscribed; were the Romans found base enough to suffer a tyrant to oppress a citizen for defending a helpless girl, and that girl his sister, you dare not, no, you dare not openly raise a hand against my life. Know that in me you see one whom Attila, at whose very name you tremble, looks upon as his son. Letters are already in thy court announcing my coming, and bidding thee do me justice in all things; and thou darest as soon raise thy hand against me as thou darest offer thy neck to the axe."

"So," cried the base monarch, glad, like all weak minds convicted of crime, to seek revenge in scorn, where they have no refuge in justice, and no power of retaliation--"so thou art one of those degenerate Romans who fight against their country in the ranks of the barbarians!"

"Monarch, thou liest," answered Theodore, boldly. "I have never fought against my country. My sword has never been drawn, my spear has never been pointed against a Roman breast. I have saved the life of Attila; I have saved the life of his son; but I have taken no part in his wars, and defy thee to show that I have ever been guilty of one act against my country. Little, too, would it become thee, oh emperor, to reproach any one for betraying his native land. Hast thou not given tribute to the barbarian? hast thou never sacrificed the innocent to the fury of the Huns? hast thou never encouraged the hordes of Scythia to invade the Roman territories. But I leave thee, oh monarch. My sister is safe. Thy crimes are averted; and, as if clad in a panoply of iron, my innocence defies thy power and scorns thy menaces. Come, Eudochia, come. The litter and the slaves which brought thee hither as the object of a base monarch's passion shall carry thee back as pure as when thou camest."

Throwing his arm round her, but without sheathing the sword he carried in his right hand, lest any opposition should be made to his retreat, Theodore placed her in the litter; and, at a word to some of his followers, the slaves of Valentinian who had borne her thither were brought in, raised their fair burden from the ground, and obeyed at once the young Roman in bearing her away homeward. The dark Huns who had accompanied him surrounded them on every side; and Theodore himself, after casting one more look of mingled scorn and indignation upon the tyrant from whom he had just snatched his prey, followed his sister from the palace without obstruction, and almost without notice, so carefully had Valentinian removed from the precincts of those apartments every one who might behold, or report, or interrupt the commission of the crime he had meditated.

While his own slaves had been compelled to bear Eudochia away, the weak monarch of the West had remained, with impotent fury burning in his bosom, and eyes glaring angrily upon that which he could not prevent. His features had worked, his hands had wrung each other, his colour had varied under the influence of passion like the complexion of a timid girl. He had more than once sought for the hilt of the dagger, too, as if he would fain have struck it into the heart of the bold youth who taunted him so scornfully. But fear had restrained his violence; and, when Eudochia was gone, he remained for several minutes motionless as a statue, gazing down upon the floor, without any perceptible movement except a slight pressure of his hands together, and the sterner knitting of his angry brow.

What were all the dark and the painful thoughts, the burning bitter shame, the lowered but still fierce and venomous pride, that now raged within, it matters not to inquire; suffice it, that so intense and potent were they, that they seemed to absorb his whole soul and mind; and there he remained, as we have said, for many minutes, without speech or movement. At length, however, the imprisoned tempest burst forth, and stamping violently upon the ground, he poured forth a torrent of curses and imprecations upon himself, upon Theodore, upon Eudochia, upon the whole world; and then, casting himself down upon that flower-strewed couch, he raved and gnashed his teeth, in the agony of anger, degradation, and disappointment. After a time, starting up again, he leaned his brow for a moment or two upon his hand, as if in thought, and then called loudly for his attendants.

"Ho, without there!" he exclaimed; "is nobody near? Is everybody fled? Are ye all fools, or cowards, or traitors? Does nobody answer to the voice of the emperor?"

As his voice ran along the passages of the building, with slow and fearful steps a single eunuch crept out from some corner, in which he had concealed himself; and stepping with evident terror

over the body of the fallen slave, who had been slain in attempting to prevent the entrance of Theodore, he approached the door at which the monarch stood, and cast himself at his feet.

"Pitiful, cowardly wretch!" exclaimed Valentinian, "why didst thou abandon thy lord, to be insulted by that frantic boy; or, if thou hadst not power to resist him and his barbarians, why didst thou not fly, by the opposite passage, to the chief apartments, and call up the chamberlain and his guards?"

"I had but time to hide myself in the bath, from which there is no outlet," replied the eunuch. "My comrade was smitten to the ground in a moment; and I should have shared the same fate, without serving thee, oh great monarch! if I had not darted away where first I could find refuge."

"Well, get thee gone quick," replied the emperor. "Call up hither, instantly, the prefect of the palace, and also the chamberlain. Lose not a moment."

The eunuch hastened to obey; and after having been absent some time, which Valentinian passed sitting on the edge of the couch in deep and angry thought, he returned with several inferior domestics, but neither of the two high officers he had been sent to seek.

"Where is the prefect, where the chamberlain?" exclaimed Valentinian, with his eyes flashing and his brows knit into a more bitter frown than ever. "Do all my servants neglect and abandon me?"

"Both the prefect and the guardian of the secret chamber," replied the slave, "as well as the count of the domestics, and all the other high officers of the palace, are gone, by your own imperial order, to grace the procession around the capitol."

Valentinian again stamped with rage; but, after a few moments' consideration, he sent away the greater part of the attendants, and calling to him one in whom he seemed to have more confidence than the rest, he demanded, "Dost thou remember, Elius, whither we were told that wild youth, Ammian Flavius, had gone this morning?"

"I know well, oh emperor," replied the domestic--"I know well; for the men who lured him thither were sent by myself to get him out of the way. The inhabitants of two of the villages at the foot of Pincianus hold to-day, we hear, a secret sacrifice to Jupiter; and this wild youth, whom anything that is strange or extravagant will mislead, was easily induced to go out to behold it, notwithstanding the penalties of death pronounced against all present."

"Hark!" said Valentinian; "as soon as the procession is over, send out to Pincianus men enough to drown all these incorrigible pagans in their own blood. Let them slay all they find. Jupiter shall have victims enough; but on no account let them touch this Ammian. Take especial care to save him. Let him be brought into the city guarded. He shall be empaled alive! We will put down these sacrifices--but hark thee again, there is more to be done! Get thee gone, eunuch. Thou art a coward, and not fit to listen to the deeds of brave men. Elius, a youth has been here and snatched the girl from my hands--her brother, it would seem--that Theodore whom we have heard of. He has borne her back to the Aventine. He has insulted me, the emperor. He has slain one of the slaves, and he must die, Elius. But on account of this Attila, it must be no public act. He must die, Elius! but it must be by some chance accident, or in some casual strife. He must die, Elius, he must die! Let not the sun rise upon him again: I leave it to thee, my faithful servant--I leave it to thee to do justice upon the traitor. There is a fair estate not far from Aricia. Thou knowest it well--rich in wine, in oil, and corn--it is thine if this Theodore be dead ere to-morrow morning. See to it!"

"I will find means," replied Elius, calmly.

Valentinian gazed in his face; and finding there a look of assurance which had never failed him, he felt as satisfied as if the deed were done, and with a slow step he sought the other part of the palace.

CHAPTER X.

THE PAGAN SACRIFICE.

There is even now--when the sweeping hand of ages has levelled with the earth so many of the things which in the times we speak of were in their splendour--there is even now at the foot of Pincianus a deep, shady grove of tall trees, amid the stems of which the treacherous sunshine of the Roman spring pours its mellow light with a peculiar charm. This, however, is but a small

vestige of the magnificent wood that at one period covered the side of the hill, and swept over the undulating country at its base, a wood consisting solely of high upright trees, springing from a green and luxuriant turf, which their own shadow kept cool and verdant. A bright stream, long since licked up by the burning sun, then meandered round the foot of the hill full of delicious water, brawling sportively with the stones which formed its bed; and by the side thereof, every here and there an open space appeared, as if left by the taste of some skilful planter, either for wanderers through that enchanted scene to pause upon and gaze on the cool wave, or for the gay and happy to meet in and prolong the hours with feast and revelry.

At either end of the wood, nearly a mile apart from each other, the one being situated half way up the slope, the other at its base, were two villages, which, though not remote from Rome, had, from various accidental circumstances, maintained in all ages much less communication than might have been expected with the great city, and which preserved with peculiar tenacity those old manners and customs which the secluded and the rustic adhere to with such fond affection. In vain had the customs of the city changed--the villagers of Pincianus changed not with Rome. In vain had empire succeeded republic, and effeminacy and luxury flowed in with demoralizing power--the villagers retained their old simplicity, and, when they carried their produce to the town, but shrugged their shoulders at the strange and women-like men that they beheld. In vain even had the emperors put down by severe laws the poetical religion of their forefathers, and established a purer faith in its place--the villagers still loved their old deities and served their old gods. Even more, they resisted the words of truth when the ministers of truth visited them in person; and driving forth from among them the preachers of the Gospel, they returned to their old rites with persevering zeal.

Severe and more severe measures had been employed to put down paganism. Temples had been changed into churches; altars had been overthrown; the blood of the priest had been mingled with the blood of the victim, and the lives of the worshippers had been taken in the very act of sacrifice: but still the villagers adhered to their old faith, and through nearly a hundred years of persecution and suffering had retained, either openly or secretly, their reverence for the things their fathers had revered before them.

A season of comparative tranquillity had succeeded; and though the persecution of the idolaters had been cruel and virulent during the first years of the reigns of Theodosius and Valentinian, yet for the last lustre this rigour had been relaxed; and though still obliged to conceal, as far as possible, the rites and ceremonies which they practised, those who persevered in heathenism had suffered no very severe inflictions.

It was in one of those open spots, by the side of the stream which we have already described, that on a bright May day were assembled a multitude of people, clothed in white garments, and met together, apparently, for the purpose of offering sacrifice. The turf, out of which no tree grew, covered a space of nearly a hundred yards in diameter; but over a great part thereof hung the wide-spreading branches of the large oaks around, giving shade to the sylvan amphitheatre thus formed on the banks of the little river. The waters flowed on clear and sparkling; the murmurs of a distant fall filled the air with music; bright sunshine was pouring over all the scene and dancing through the leaves upon the turf below; flowers crowned the heads of all the assembly, and gemmed the verdant carpet on which they trod. Everything was smiling and beautiful; and, if the mind could be divested of the remembrance of the dark and sinful object for which the idolaters met, the whole scene had in it something so graceful, so poetical, so exciting, that one might well gaze with raised enthusiasm, even if one took no part in the rite which was about to be performed.

With such feelings stood Ammian Flavius, a little apart from the rest, leaning against one of the trees, at a little distance from which two servants held his horse. Four years had now passed since the period which the reader first beheld him; and while Theodore had expanded into a handsome and powerful man, Ammian, from the wild and beautiful boy which we at first portrayed, had grown up into a tall, graceful, manly youth. His fine features, his noble air, and his symmetrical form, might well attract attention; and many were the eyes that turned upon him among those who met to offer on that day a sacrifice to their false deity. They gazed, however, without any mingling of apprehension; for it was not uncommon for some of the wild youths of the great city to steal out in secret to behold those rites to which their concealment gave an additional charm.

The day had waned considerably, and the sun was approaching the west. The flamen of Jupiter, as he called himself, though the office had been long abolished, stood in his purple robe beside a small altar raised in the midst, and strewn with flowers, and a number of gay laughing boys led along, with sportive glee, a milk-white bull, its neck wreathed with garlands, and its broad brow crowned with flowers. Long nurtured for the purpose of the sacrifice, and rendered familiar with the hands of men, which had never yet been raised against it with violence, the noble beast, unconscious of its coming fate, walked calmly in the midst, suffering itself to be led up to the altar with an untightened rope. Beside the priest stood the cultrarius, leaning on his axe, and all pressed near to behold the ceremony of immolation.

The invocation and the prayer had been pronounced; and the cultrarius, turning to the priest, demanded in the accustomed form, "Shall I do it?"

"Do it!" replied the priest, and swinging the axe above his head, the stout peasant who

performed that office laid the monarch of the herd, at a single blow, dead at the foot of the altar. The priest was hastening to apply the knife, when Ammian, hurrying forward, exclaimed, "I hear coming horses, my friends, be upon your guard."

All looked up and listened, and some thought that they also heard the sounds; but if it was so, those sounds ceased almost instantly, and the ceremony proceeded, while Ammian, with his colour slightly raised at the mistake he appeared to have made, retired again to the tree by which he had formerly stood, and continued to gaze upon the proceedings of the rest.

Before many minutes were over, however, a troop of Roman horsemen appeared on the other side of the stream; dashed through its shallow waters; and with their spears and swords carried slaughter and confusion among the heathen worshippers. The priest was at once struck down; but the cultrarius defended himself with his axe for some time, and was at length slain by a javelin thrown from some distance. Resistance was also made by several others, who had arms concealed upon their persons; and if the whole body had taken the same precaution, they might in all probability have resisted successfully the force sent against them, which did not consist of more than fifty or sixty men.

In the midst of the strife, five of the soldiers, leaving the others to pursue their attack upon the heathen, cut straight across and surrounded Ammian; who, seeing that no words were spoken, but death inflicted indiscriminately upon every one, drew his sword, and determined to sell his life dearly. He was overpowered, however, before he could offer any effectual resistance, by one of the Romans springing from behind the tree and clinging to his right arm. In another moment he found himself tied with cords, and dragged away into the midst of the confusion, where the soldiers were still, with merciless activity, slaughtering the unhappy wretches whom they had detected in celebrating the forbidden rites.

Without preserving any order themselves, the troopers pursued wherever they saw a victim to strike; and the villagers, taking advantage of the trees, in many instances kept their cruel persecutors at bay for some time; while the shifting of the horses here and there; the rushing of the crowd of victims, now driven into a body together, now scattering wide to avoid their pursuers; the efforts of resistance; the gestures of supplication; the shrieks of the women and children; the groans of the dying, formed altogether a scene of agony and horror such as the eyes of Ammian had never before beheld.

In the midst of it all, however, he suddenly perceived a horseman clothed in the wild arms of the barbarians mingling with the Roman soldiers. Another and another appeared as if by magic, urging their swift horses through the trees on all sides. The Romans, accustomed to see the barbarians in the emperor's service, seemed to look upon all, except the villagers, as their friends, and took no notice of those who appeared among them, till the number became formidable--equalled--surpassed their own; and then he who appeared to be the commander of the imperial troop suddenly drew up his horse and gazed upon the strangers.

"The barbarian is striking a Roman," he exclaimed. "What is the meaning of this? Fellow, art thou mad?"

The only answer which he received from the man to whom he shouted forth those hurried questions was a javelin cast by an unerring hand, which smote him between the eyes, and cast him lifeless beneath the horse's feet.

All was now confusion tenfold confused. The well-armed barbarians, hand to hand and man to man, drove back the Roman soldiers. The villagers, mad with rage against their oppressors, and inspired with hope by the unexpected aid they had received, became in turn the assailants, and following the Huns among their retreating adversaries, armed with the knives which they bore upon their own persons, or the swords which they caught up from the dead or dying, cut the sinews of the Roman horses, or gave the stroke of death to any one who fell wounded from his charger.

For a short time the imperial troops resisted; but they were soon driven across the stream into the open country. Ammian, whom they had placed on his horse, was led along with them, his arms tied as they were behind him, and unable to resist. But at length the rout of the Romans became complete, and they fled precipitately towards the city; while a small body of the Huns, urging their horses into double speed, dashed with a furious charge into the midst of the fugitives; reached the point where Ammian was borne along, slew the man who led his horse, and, seizing his bridle-rein, hurried him away in the opposite direction, leaving the Romans to pursue their flight without further interruption.

So rapidly did the barbarians urge their horses on, that Ammian had neither time nor breath to ask any questions. Only once they paused, as, pursuing their course at full speed, they took their way towards the ancient Umbria; and that was when they perceived that the adverse force, recovered from its terror, had detached a small body to watch their motions. Then, wheeling so suddenly upon it that retreat was impossible, they left not one of its number to bear back the tidings which it had been sent to obtain. Soon after, the sun set, and with a short twilight night came on. The star of evening, however, shone fair over the whole world, and light sufficient lingered in the skies to show a small lake spreading out across their path. At the spot where the road, taking a direction on either side of the lake, divided into two, stood a barbarian dressed and

armed like the rest, and apparently waiting for them. A few eager and quick words were spoken in a tongue which Ammian did not understand; but he guessed, by seeing the man point down to one side of the lake with his spear, and by various other gesticulations used on both sides, that he was directing the Huns to some body of their comrades; and he ventured to ask whither they were about to carry him.

"Fear not," answered the man who led his horse, in very good Latin, while another took advantage of the pause to cut the cords that bound his hands--"fear not, you are with friends, and you are saved from death: we bear you to a place of safety, where you will hear more."

Thus saying, he took the road to which the other man had pointed, and galloped on at the same quick pace as before. The moon was now rising over the neighbouring hills; and at the distance of about a mile they came to a number of tents, pitched in a meadow by the bank of the lake. Several large flat boats were gathered together along the shore, and eight or nine armed men were watching on the verge of the lake; while round two or three fires, lighted at a short distance from the tents, were seen a multitude of barbarians revelling as usual over their evening meal.

The sound of the coming horses had no effect upon the Huns; but seemed to call the attention of the persons, whosoever they were, within the tents; for the hangings of two of them were pushed back as Ammian and his conductors approached, and several people in the garb of Romans came forth. By the moonlight the youth could not distinguish their features, but there was more than one woman of the party; and as he sprang from his horse with feelings of joy mingled with doubt, he was clasped to the bosom of his mother, Flavia, and then pressed in the arms of Theodore. Eudochia, Ildica, too, were there; and in a few brief words he related to them all that had happened to him. At length, shading his eyes from the light, he was led into the tent, and found the whole of Flavia's household assembled as it had left Dalmatia, with the exception of those whom the stern monarch of the grave had taken as his allotted tribute during four years of wandering.

"What is all this? how is all this?" exclaimed the youth, gazing round: "are we about once more to try our fortunes on the wide world?"

"Even so, Ammian," answered Theodore: "circumstances compel us to it, even when we fancied we were united once more, to dwell in peace together for the rest of our days."

"Well, I care not," cried Ammian: "one land is the same to me as another; and wherever liberty is, we may find or found a Rome for ourselves. But hearken, Theodore! Listen to me, my dear brother! In all our past wanderings some one of us has been separated from those who were as dear to his heart as a part of itself. There wants some magic link between us to bind us all together; so that, wherever we go, we may, as slaves to our affections, be chained inseparably to one another. I have a bond to propose, Theodore, which, though it be formed of flowers, will yet prove as strong as adamant. You are to be united to my sister by the dearest ties; why should I not be united to yours by the same. Thus shall we become all, indeed, one family. What say you, my beloved Eudochia? But you have said already, dear one," he added, casting his arms round her, "and it is needless to ask you. Theodore, Eudochia is mine--my promised bride! What say you, my brother?"

"Nothing in opposition, Ammian," answered Theodore, with a smile; "nothing, but that you are very young, and somewhat wild, my brother!"

"Out upon such buts!" cried Ammian, laughing. "I am young; but people would laugh at me more if I married when I was old. Youth is the time of love, and Cupid should surely be the only god that leads us to his brother. As to my wildness, I own it has been so; but it is past. To-day, for the first time, I felt it, and regretted it, and whatsoever I regret the possession of, I cast away, from that minute. When the imperial soldiers burst upon my poor friends with their white bull, and seized upon me myself, slaying all around me, I thought of Eudochia, Theodore; I felt I had done wrong; I regretted my wild thoughtlessness; and resolved, if Heaven spared me, never more so to offend again. I thought of Eudochia, Theodore; that thought cured me of my wildness, and will be my safeguard against the same disease again."

"Well may it be so, my son," replied Flavia; "and when you know all that has befallen to this dear girl since you left us this morning, you will still more deeply feel the evil of such heedlessness; you will guard your bosom still more strongly against its recurrence."

"What has happened?" cried Ammian, his lustrous eyes flashing with eagerness--"what has happened?--Valentinian? Ah, I know it all! I saw him gaze, and sigh, and pass us ten times on the course the other day. What has happened, my mother? Tell me! tell me!"

"I will," answered Flavia; but Eudochia clung to her, exclaiming, "Not now! not now, my mother! Oh, not now! Oh, then I will go away!" and hiding her blushing face upon Ildica's bosom, she hurried away with her into another tent.

All was then told to Ammian of Eudochia's danger and her rescue, and deep and sad seemed to grow his feelings as he listened. "Fool that I was to leave her! Fool that I was to suffer myself to be seduced to behold that idiot sacrifice! for seduced thereunto I was, doubtless, by the agents

of that imperial villain. Why did you not slay him, Theodore? I would have slain him where he stood."

"And so would I," replied Theodore, "if he had committed the crime he intended. He should have died that moment had my own death followed the next; but Eudochia was saved; and I had still hopes of being able to remain in Rome. When I returned to the Aventine, however, I heard enough to make me resolve on flying. I found, too, that the Huns who had accompanied me from Dacia bore the commands of Attila to all their fellow-countrymen in the service of Valentinian to return instantly to their native land. I had nearly a hundred with me, several thousands more are at Rome and Ravenna; and I found that I could retreat from the wrath of the tyrant without his power being sufficient to prevent me. As we came hither, we saw a small body of horse go out from the gates towards Pincianus, where we had heard you were; and, fearing some danger, instead of merely sending a messenger to bid you join us, I sent a sufficient body of my followers to defend you in case of need. Their leader, who has been faithful to me for four long years, pledged his own life to bring you to me in safety; and here at length you are, though I hear with pain that Roman blood has been shed. Doubtless we shall be pursued; but every hour fresh parties of the Huns are coming hither to accompany us, and ere to-morrow morning we shall be too strong for Valentinian to effect aught against us. However, Heaven forbid that the time should come when I may have to draw the sword against my fellow-countrymen even in my own defence; and to avoid it, we will cross the lake an hour before daylight to-morrow morning, then on through the mountains to rejoin Attila, who has ever befriended me, and will, I doubt not, befriend me still."

CHAPTER XI.

THE UNEXPECTED MEETING.

In a mountain pass a little to the westward of the spot where now stands the small town of Bassano, among the first shoots of the Rhætian Alps, travelled onward the family of wanderers, whose various course we have traced from the beginning of this tale, as, compelled by circumstances, and dogged by misfortune, they were driven from land to land.

They were no longer, however, alone and undefended amid all the strife and danger of those perilous times: for the small body of Huns which had guarded Theodore in his journey to the imperial city had formed a nucleus, round which the Hunnish auxiliaries in the neighbourhood of Rome had gathered, as he retraced his steps towards Pannonia; and a little army of barbarians now accompanied him on the way. Those who had been attached to him from his first arrival in the Hunnish territory had not failed to magnify his deeds and reputation to every detached troop who joined them. The favour in which he stood with Attila was told and commented on; and his power and influence, as well as his courage, skill, and conduct, were so highly represented, that each party tacitly submitted to his authority; and in all great things, such as the direction and general regulation of their march, suffered the young Roman to retain the command of the whole force, as well as of his own particular followers.

He was thus enabled to save the country through which he passed from pillage; and though two or three times reports reached him of bodies of the imperial troops following his path, and even rumours of Ætius having returned, and being on his march across the fertile plains of Lombardy with a powerful army met his ear, he was happily enabled to reach the foot of the Alps without having recourse to one act of violence against any Roman citizen whatsoever.

The spot where they now halted for the day was by the banks of one of those small lakes, whereof so many fertilize and beautify the lower passes of the Alps. On every side around rose up the mighty mountains; and over their wooded sides the clear masses of light and shade flew swift as the soft large clouds were borne by the quick wind through the lustrous summer's sky. It was evening time; and in all the thickets round about the nightingales--sweet untaught choristers, in whose tuneful art no time nor cultivation can improve a tone or sweeten a single note--were chanting their thrilling anthem to the God of nature. In the clear mirror of the lake, deep down appeared the inverted mountains, with the softened sky beyond, and every quick change of light and shade.

It was a lovely scene; and though the hearts of Theodore and Ildica had now become sadly learned in the lessons of frequent disappointment, yet that spot recalled their sweet refuge on the other side of those dark Alps, where, amid the friendly Alans, they had enjoyed some brief, but never to be forgotten, hours of unalloyed delight. It recalled that place of refuge, and the hopes which they there had felt; and though those hopes had again been disappointed, they blossomed anew, different, yet the same; changed a little in form and arrangement, but not less

beautiful, not less sweet--flowers of another spring, but of the same kind, from the same stem, from the same earth.

They had pitched their tents in a situation which recalled their former resting-place the more strongly, as it was upon a projecting point a short way up the hill. Below them lay the encampment of their Hunnish followers, and around them the domestic servants of their house; and as they sat there, and wisely encouraged once more the happy feelings that were willing to return, Theodore urged that, as they were now once more in safety, Ildica might give him her hand, whenever they could meet with a minister of religion to sanctify their union. Ildica said not one word against it; and as, with a slight blush and downcast eye she gave no unwilling consent, Theodore thought her far more lovely than ever, although a shade of melancholy, gathered from frequent disappointment, anxiety, and grief, hung over her as if it had been a veil, seldom, if ever, raised entirely, even in her happiest moments. That shade of melancholy also was somewhat darker now, inasmuch as her fair and beloved mother had shown signs of failing strength under the long and weary journey which they had just been compelled to take. Theodore hoped that the day's repose which they were now enjoying in that calm scene might sufficiently restore Flavia to proceed with comfort; but Ildica clearly saw that her mother could bear no great fatigue; and from some casual words which had fallen from her parent's lips, she had gathered that it was her intention, as soon as the double union of her children with those of Paulinus had taken place, to retire for ever from the busy world, and pass her remaining days in one of those places of seclusion which were at that time to be found in almost every part of the world. Ildica could not contemplate such a separation without pain; and though she shrunk not from her union with one whom she loved so deeply and intensely, yet she feared the parting with her mother, whom she had loved so long, and who loved her so tenderly.

Upon the brow of the promontory, Theodore and Ildica sat and gazed, and thought over the future, with sweet hopes and dark apprehensions crossing the expanse of thought, like the sunshine and the shade that flitted across the mountains before their eyes; and ever and anon they spoke over many things, with that unreserved confidence which is one of the sweetest drops in the ambrosial cup of love. Since they had last met, the tone of Ildica's mind had undergone some alteration. It had become deeper, more intense, more enthusiastic. In everything that engaged her--though there might be fewer things that did so--she took a profounder interest; and, whether it was her love for Theodore, her devotion to the bright faith in which she had been reared, her love for her mother, or any other thing in which her heart was concerned, there was a depth, a strength, an energetic eagerness in her whole feelings which raised and ennobled her still more than ever in the eyes of her lover.

They sat and gazed. Wide spread over the valley below, and up the sides of the hill, even higher than themselves, might be seen various parties of the Huns, seeking forage for their horses, or food for themselves; and as the eye of Theodore was turned towards the entrance of the valley, where mountain falling over mountain seemed to close up the pass, he thought he saw a considerable degree of bustle and movement in a body of about thirty or forty of the barbarians, whom he had marked winding down in that direction by the banks of a small stream that entered the lake hard by. It subsided in a few minutes, however, and he took no further notice, pursuing his conversation with Ildica, and looking on well pleased, while the Huns, in a spot void of other inhabitants, engaged themselves in a thousand peaceful occupations, as if they never sought for strife or dipped their hands in blood.

Half an hour more had elapsed, or perhaps scarcely so much, and Theodore and Ildica were deep in the business of their own hearts, when suddenly a step sounded among the tents behind them, which--wherefore he knew not--made Theodore start and turn round.

What was his astonishment when, not a spear's length from him, he beheld Attila himself,^[4] who, advancing with a slow step, looked upon the young Roman with a smile as distinct as ever crossed his stern, fixed countenance. The next moment, however, the glance of the barbarian monarch turned upon Ildica; and the light of suddenly-excited admiration shone forth from his eyes. It was but momentary, however, and, addressing himself kindly to Theodore, he said, "So, my son, thou hast left the bright court of Valentinian to come back to the barbarian. Thou art welcome; for I may chance to have much need of thee; and thou shalt find, as thou hast found, higher honours and a kinder monarch in the land of the stranger than in thine own."

Thus saying, he sat himself familiarly down upon the bank between Theodore and Ildica. She, however, rose, and was about to retire into the tent; but he stopped her, gently saying, "Do not depart! Fear me not, fair one; I will not injure thee. Who is this, my son?" he continued, addressing Theodore--"is this thy sister?"

"Not so, oh king!" answered Theodore, who had always found it best to speak to Attila the straightforward truth, without the slightest disguise or concealment. "Not so: she is my promised bride, and in a few days will be my wife."

"'Tis well!" said Attila; "'tis well! She is beautiful, and doubtless good. I will witness thy nuptials, and give thee the bridal present; for I hear, from those whom I met but now at the end of the valley, that thou needest a protector, and one shalt thou find in Attila."

Ildica still stood lingering, as if anxious to retire; and the monarch of the Huns perceiving her embarrassment, added suddenly, "Well, hie thee in, then, fair one; thou fearest the barbarian

king; but Attila can be gentle to those he loves. I will pass this day with thee, my son; and this timid girl shall see that he whom she has been taught to look upon as a cruel tyrant, can sit him down as peacefully to a calm and humble board as the most polished and effeminate Roman of them all can cast himself on his couch to gorge upon a thousand dishes. Hie thee in, fair one; I will speak with thy lover alone."

Ildica obeyed; and after she was gone Attila remained for several moments in a deep fit of thought. Then, raising his head, he turned to some of his attendants who stood near, saying, "Get ye gone, and bring up hither the roe deer that the men took in the forest as we came along, with what fish ye can find in the stream. Here will I take my evening meal. Get ye gone, all of you."

The attendants departed as they were bid; and Attila again fell into a deep fit of thought, after which he turned to Theodore, and said, abruptly, "I am glad thou hast come back. This Valentinian, this woman-emperor, is insolent, and must be punished; and I am well pleased that thou dwellest not among those who will soon feel the sword of Attila. Knowest thou what has happened in the East?"

"I heard as I went to Rome," said Theodore, "that the base murderer of my father, Theodosius, is no more; but I have heard no further tidings, and only guess that the empire has fallen to his sister, Pulcheria."

"And that Pulcheria has taken unto herself a husband," added Attila, "on whom she has conferred the rule of the land. We hear that he is a brave man and a wise man. If he be wise he will pay our tribute, or he will have to do with a braver than himself."

"Doubtless he will pay it," replied Theodore, with a sigh. "Hast thou sent to demand it, oh mighty king?"

"I have," answered Attila. "For if it be not paid after conquering Rome, I march to Constantinople. But doubtless he will pay it."

"Is this new monarch's name known?" demanded Theodore: "I know most of those who were in favour at the court of the East; but I know none on whom Pulcheria was likely to shower such gifts."

"His rise has been sudden," answered Attila. "He had gained some renown as a soldier, and was a military tribune; but enjoyed no great favour with the empty Theodosius: his name is Marcian."

"Marcian!" exclaimed Theodore, with joy sparkling from his eyes: "he was the dearest friend of my dead father, and since my father's death has been equally the dear and considerate friend of his friend's children. He is, indeed, great as a warrior--noble and wise as a man."

Attila's brow grew dark, as if he loved not to hear such praises of the Eastern emperor.

"Think you," he demanded, harshly, "that he will pay the tribute? Think you that he will yield obedience to our commands?"

"I think," replied Theodore, firmly, "that he will yield to no demand urged in a haughty tone. Were the greatest monarch on all the earth, I would rather have Marcian for my friend than for my enemy."

"Ha!" cried Attila: "he had better set his naked foot upon an asp than cross my path of victory. Ha! what sayest thou? will he dare to raise himself up against Attila?"

"Perchance not, oh great king," replied Theodore, "perchance not; but it will depend upon Attila's demeanour towards him. Marcian is no Theodosius. Bred in arms from his youth upward, his birthplace was the battle-field; the camp his cradle; war and strife the sport of his youth; command the employment of his manhood. He is no silken reposer on soft couches, but a hardy soldier, for whom the palace will scarcely afford a pillow hard enough to prop his head. If Attila entreat him fairly, Marcian is one to reverence and to love the high qualities of that mighty monarch, and to grant him the friendship that one great man is fond to feel towards another; but if Attila declares himself the enemy, and seeks to become the master of the emperor, Marcian will draw the sword, and it will never be sheathed till one or the other lie in the cold grave. Oh Attila, you have never yet met with Marcian. Better, oh king, better far to have him for your friend than for your enemy!"

Attila rolled his dark eyes fiercely as Theodore spoke; but for some minutes he answered not, and then, gradually resuming his stern calmness, he said, "We shall see! We shall see! I seek not to wrong him--but we shall see! So this Macian was your father's friend; and you know and love him yourself?"

"I do, oh Attila!" answered Theodore, "and I have cause. After my father's death, Marcian sought out, protected, befriended me; enabled me and mine to pursue our flight in safety, and risked even the emperor's wrath in order to favour our escape. I love him dearly, and he, for my father's sake, loves me. He is one of those men who, like thyself, oh king, are hard and firm as some fine gem, which nothing but a gem will cut; but upon which, the lines once engraved no

power will afterward remove; and there they last, as clear and definite under the wearing power of time as if nothing but a soft stream passed over them. My father's love will never be forgot."

"The tribune might remember," said Attila, "what the emperor may forget."

"Not so, oh king!" answered Theodore: "Marcian changes not. The same was he as a common soldier in the Roman ranks, as when a tribune, possessed of vast power. When in the lowest military station in the state, his conduct, his manners, his mind, showed him worthy of the highest; and when midway to power and dignity, unlike the changeful herd of ordinary men, authority sat as lightly on him as obedience. What he was as a soldier he was as a tribune, and will be as an emperor. Though not born in that high station, he was born for it; and not only his virtues and his talents, but many another more marvellous indication showed that one day God would place in his hand the destinies of the Roman people."

"Indeed!" cried Attila, fixing his eye upon the young Roman with a greater expression of surprise than he ever manifested on any ordinary occasion. "Indeed! What were these portents?"

"They have been many, as I have heard," replied Theodore. "Escapes from danger almost miraculous; and twice, when sleeping in the open field, an eagle has been seen to hover over his head, and shade him from the scorching sun. These I report but on hearsay. Once, however, I can speak myself to an event of the same kind. After a great earthquake, some four years ago, he was coming from Salona to Aspalathos, and was met by us upon the road. He pitched his tent where we encountered him; and while we were still with him, an eagle, which had followed his troop all day, came down and rested on the tent-pole."

Attila started up and seemed troubled. "This is very strange," he said: "you were present yourself?"

"I was," answered Theodore. "There is no more doubt of it than that I stand here."

"An eagle!" exclaimed the monarch: "so wild and fierce a bird to alight and rest amid a troop of men!"

"It is strange, indeed, oh king!" said Theodore, "most strange, but no less true; and its very strangeness made all men but himself believe that it was an indication of some future greatness."

Attila replied not, but remained several minutes with his eyes bent upon the ground; and then, starting somewhat abruptly, he exclaimed, "Let us into thy tents, my son; I will eat with thee and drink with thee this night; and then leave thee till to-morrow, when thou shalt go back with me to Tridentum. There my own ambassadors and those of Marcian come to seek me; and as I will not ask thee to bear arms against thy country, instead of taking thee with me to sweep away Valentinian and tread upon Rome, I will send thee to this noble monarch of the East. Thou mayst do more with him, perchance, than a mere stranger."

The heart of Theodore beat high, for he saw before him a prospect of better things and happier days. The hope of a journey to Constantinople, where he might place Ildica, and all who were dear to him, under the generous protection of Marcian, was in no slight degree joyful, and he at length beheld, or imagined that he beheld, a certain and permanent refuge for the future, and a happy termination to all his wanderings. Gladly, then, did he express his willingness to accept the office which Attila proposed to confer upon him; and though there was something dark, and even gloomy, in the countenance of the king as he followed the young Roman into his tent, yet the eyes of Theodore were lighted up with joy and satisfaction, which spread itself to all around.

He found no opportunity of relating what had happened, or of explaining the hopes and prospects which had cheered his breast, yet Ildica saw sufficient in the glad smile of Theodore's lip to feel sure that some new source of joy had been opened out for them all. At heart, indeed, she was anxious for her mother, who, ill at ease, and reposing in another tent, entered not that in which the king partook of the evening meal with her children; but still the demeanour of the monarch himself, and the satisfaction which he saw upon the countenance of Theodore, banished the darker apprehensions which had mingled with her former hopes.

The dark monarch of the Huns, retaining all his simple habits, drinking from the cup of horn, and served on no richer materials than wood, unbent in the tent of the young Roman, as far as his own stern nature would suffer him to do, from the rigid gravity of his usual demeanour. He spoke kindly and gently to Theodore and the rest, whom he made sit around him, and from time to time his lip almost relaxed into a smile at the wild, light spirit of Ammian, which would have way, notwithstanding the overawing presence of that mighty and terrible man. On Eudochia he gazed as on a beautiful child; and though he but seldom turned his eyes towards Ildica, yet when he did so there was in them an expression which showed that her exquisite beauty, however graceful and refined, was appreciated by the barbarian monarch as much as it could have been by the most delicate sculptor of ancient Greece. Theodore, however, felt no alarm; and as soon as Attila had mounted his horse and departed for his own camp, which was at the distance of but a few miles, the young Roman hastened to communicate to Ildica and her mother his hopes and wishes. He told them the prospect of his being sent on a mission to Marcian; and he besought her he loved to give him her hand, and to go with him as his bride to the city of Constantine. Flavia's

countenance lighted up with joy at the thought, and Ildica said not nay. Again the time of their union was named, with but an intervening day, and Theodore lay down to rest with as much happiness as hope can pour into the human breast.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PURPOSE OF INJUSTICE.

It was in a vast hall in the ancient city of Tridentum, hanging over the Adige, where, rushing through the mighty rocks of the Rhætian Alps, that river pours on to fertilize the plains of Lombardy, that Attila stood alone, on the evening of the day following his meeting with Theodore. He had sent on messengers to demand the peaceful surrender of the city; and he had promised, in simple but direct terms, that if no resistance were shown, no violence should be offered. The citizens, without any means of defence, gladly embraced the chance of safety; and Attila, entering with a few thousand men, occupied the public places and buildings; while the innumerable army that followed him lay encamped upon the mighty hills that sweep up round about the town, and the trembling inhabitants, shut up in their houses, waited in terrified expectation, hoping that the monarch's promise might be kept, but fearing lest it should be broken.

Attila stood alone; and little could he have brooked that any eye should behold the unwonted emotions that then shook his firm unbending nature. To all his host it had become evident, indeed, that since his encounter with Ætius a great change had come upon him; that his mind had lost a portion of its mighty calmness; that his strong passions had been gradually triumphing over the powerful intellect which had alone sufficed to rule them. But none had ever beheld him moved as he now was moved; and Attila himself, finding that he was shaken by the tempest within his breast as he had never before suffered himself to be, grew fierce at his own weakness, and added to his own emotions, by his very anger at not being able to suppress them; and yet those emotions were not displayed like the passions of ordinary men.

He stood in that hall alone, and remained for many minutes with his eyes bent sternly on the ground, while over his harsh features passed a thousand shades of varying expression. But his form at first seemed calm; and the only movement perceptible through his whole frame was the clasping and the unclasping of his left hand upon the hilt of his massy sword. At length, however, he broke from that quiescent attitude, and strode quickly up and down the hall, then paused again, and once more gazed upon the marble pavement, enriched by the beautiful art of ancient Rome with a thousand flowers and fruits smiling up out of the cold stone.

But the eye of Attila saw not the rich mosaic over which it wandered; and, after another deep, long pause, he exclaimed, "Why should I not? Is he not my slave, my prisoner? Is not his life and all he has mine own? That which I left to him upon sufferance, can I not resume when I will? By all the gods I will do it! He has had favours enough at my hands already. He may well sacrifice something to gratify Attila!" And again he fell into a fit of musing, which was at length broken by the door of the hall being slowly opened, and Onegisus, one of his most attached chieftains, entering with a cautious and apprehensive step.

"So," said Attila, speaking to himself--"so--so I will do it. I would not see his grief, nor hear his complaints--Ha! Onegisus! What seekest thou?"

"Pardon me, mighty king!" replied the chieftain; "I come from thy son Ellac. He finds not food enough for his troops upon the mountain, and he would fain force these dronish citizens to give up the stores they have concealed from us in their houses."

"Thou meanest he would fain plunder the city," replied Attila, sternly. "But it must not be: Attila has pledged his word. Tell him to seek for food in the valleys, or, if his troops be women, who cannot bear an evening's hunger, let him lead them down into the plains beyond. There shall he find food enough! Yet stay, Onegisus, I would speak with thee on another matter. Ellac was busy at mine ear to-day with the beauty of this maiden, this Roman girl, who, some people say, is to be the bride of Theodore. Thinkest thou," he continued, putting on a tone of indifference--"thinkest thou that Ellac covets her for himself? That cannot be, you know, unless she herself be willing; for I have promised protection both to him and her."

"Not so, oh mighty king!" replied Onegisus, casting down his eyes, and, to speak but truth, appearing pained and embarrassed--"not so: Ellac has but lately taken unto himself a bride, as thou well knowest, and he seeks no other. He did but think that this maiden was too beautiful to be cast away upon a stranger. Perhaps he fancied that she were fair enough even to attract the love of such a king as Attila himself."

"Vain talk!" cried Attila, sharply. "She is very beautiful, it is true--as fair, perhaps, as the eye of man has ever seen--but Attila has other thoughts before him. Conquest! Victory! Onegisus, they shall be the brides of Attila. Bear Ellac my message, and tell Ardaric I would take counsel with him."

Onegisus retired without reply, and Attila remained waiting the coming of Ardaric; but the monarch had, with the words he had spoken, resumed his habitual self-command: the sound of his own voice had recalled him to himself; and no trace of the varying passions which had lately agitated him could now be seen upon his countenance.

But, alas! Attila was not what Attila had been. The firm immovable nature which he now assumed had then been really his own. He had formerly been what he now appeared. A change, a sad change had come over him since he had fought without conquering. He felt fallen from that height of irresistible power which he had once possessed: he felt irritated at its loss; angry with himself for the very irritation that he felt; and obliged to have recourse to duplicity to conceal the change from himself and others. For that duplicity again he contemned himself, and gave way to many a wilder passion, which had formerly been controlled, in order to relieve his thoughts from irksome contemplation. He conquered almost all external appearances, however; the victory of his internal enemy was within. With him it was like a sudden strife in a banquet hall, where contention raged fiercely in scenes that had once been calm, and where few signs betrayed to those without that fury and wrath struggled within those halls, from the windows of which the lights beamed calmly, except when a passing shadow, flitting rapidly across, told of some violent movement, the nature of which could hardly be divined.

Thus seating himself in an ivory chair that stood at the farther side of the hall, he waited for his friend and counsellor with a calm countenance, playing with the hilt of his sword, and apparently listening to the murmurs of the river as it flowed by the building, and gazing upon the changeful light and shade as it danced upon the blue masses of the opposite mountains.

Ardaric, however, was not long ere he appeared; but it was evident that there was some degree of embarrassment upon his countenance.

"Hast thou seen this new ambassador, my friend?" demanded Attila as soon as he approached. "Hast thou seen this Apollonius?"

"I have, oh king!" replied Ardaric; but there he paused, and spoke no further.

"What said he then?" exclaimed the monarch of the Huns, impatiently. "Why art thou such a niggard of thy words, my friend? What answer gives the puppet on the Eastern throne unto our just demand? What says he to our contract with Theodosius? Has he sent the tribute therein promised?"

"No tribute has he sent, oh Attila!" replied the King of the Gepidæ, looking suddenly up, as if forced at length to tell unpleasant tidings, and resolved to tell them plainly. "No tribute has he sent, oh Attila! and touching the contract he replies, that it was only between Attila and a monarch that is dead; and that Marcian is not Theodosius. Further, he declares that he will have no talk of tribute; and he bids your own ambassador say, that Marcian has gold for his friends, but steel for his enemies."

Attila had remained with his left hand resting on his sword; but as he heard the bold reply of Marcian to his demands upon the Eastern empire, the long sinewy fingers clasped upon the hilt; and though he uttered not a word, he drew the blade half out of its sheath in the agony of suppressed rage, while his white teeth might be seen shut close together, as if to imprison in his own breast the angry thoughts that struggled vehemently to burst forth. In the meanwhile Ardaric, who had now told the worst, and whose purpose was to sooth rather than to irritate the Hunnish sovereign, hastened to add what he thought might, in some degree, mitigate his wrath. "Nevertheless so, Attila," he said, "though this man's words and actions are bold indeed, yet he is not without that reverence for the fame and might of Attila which all inferior kings must feel; and this ambassador, this Apollonius, is loaded with presents far more costly and splendid than ever were wrung from the weakness of Theodosius."

Attila sprang up from his seat, and grasping firmly the arm of Ardaric, he gazed sternly in his face, exclaiming, "Seek not to sooth me, Ardaric, seek not to restrain my wrath! It is vain! It is unnecessary! The conduct of Attila shall not be governed by rage! Indignation shall have no share therein! Policy shall rule all: my conduct is determined; has been long determined, Ardaric; and thou shalt see that, provoked even to the utmost, Attila can play the lamb till the time be come for him to play the lion! Slaves, ho!" he continued, raising his voice; and instantly a number of attendants rushed into the room, among the first of whom was Zercon, the black jester of his dead brother Bleda.

There was something in the sight that seemed to irritate the king, and, fixing his flashing eyes upon the hump-backed Moor, he cried, "Who bid thee hither? What dost thou, listening to the king's private counsel? Take him away; take the foul, impotent lump away, and strike the eavesdropping ears from off his head! Away with him! Answer not, but let it be done! Thou!" he continued, to one of the attendants who had followed--"thou! Get thee to this ambassador from the East. Tell him that Attila has not time to give attention to such trifling things as the tribute

due from Marcian; but, that as soon as he has a moment for lighter affairs and things of no importance, he will see him. In the meantime, let him deliver the presents that he bears unto my officers. Hence! Do my bidding quickly!"

The attendants withdrew without a second warning; and Attila resumed his conversation with Ardaric, who felt not a little relieved to find that the mighty king to whom he had attached himself could still so far govern his rage as to consult the dictates of good policy rather than those impulses of passion to which he had but too frequently given way since his encounter with Ætius.

"I have thought over all this, my friend," said Attila, calmly, "since a conversation which I held yesterday with the young Roman, Theodore."

Ardaric marvelled somewhat at the cold epithet which Attila bestowed upon Theodore, whom, during the two or three last years, he had been accustomed to call, not the young Roman, but "my son," or "my adopted son." Nevertheless he was well pleased that the conversation of Theodore had produced such an effect, and he replied, "Thy conduct, oh Attila! shows that you have considered well, and, as ever, have determined wisely."

"I think I have, my friend," replied Attila; "for if I had not, indignation would have trampled upon reason, and I should have been tempted to abandon that in which I am engaged, to tread upon the neck of the dog that thus snarls at my heels. But, as I have told thee, ever since that conversation I have thought over this. The youth, it seems, has known this Marcian for many a year, and tells me that he is, as he shows himself, bold, cautious, and vigilant. Now, though Valentinian and Marcian separately are but as scorpions, on which Attila would set his sandal's sole without a fear, yet the bite of the two might be dangerous, or at least painful. As it is, Ætius, possessed of Gaul, and planning to raise himself up there a separate kingdom, looks on not unwillingly while I crush the petty sovereign whom he has long despised and ruled. But if Marcian, joined to Valentinian, were to give the Western emperor a chance of resisting Attila with success, Ætius would be obliged to unite his forces to theirs, lest, at an after period, they should march together to punish the rebellious or negligent subject, who left them to struggle unassisted against the mighty power of the Huns."

"Wisely and well hast thou considered all things, oh Attila! I, less politic, had only thought of the union of Marcian with Valentinian as dangerous to us. But if the power of the East and the West were swelled by all the forces of Gaul, armies might be collected which, perchance, we should find to be overwhelming. How, then, oh Attila, do you purpose to deal with Marcian."

"As a skilful fowler, Ardaric, when he approaches his half-sleeping game, coming nearer and nearer while he pretends to be looking and going another way. We will treat his ambassador as if angry, but not enraged past all endurance. We will send him back with messages regarding the tribute, which will seem as if we were more covetous of gold than of honour, and would, perhaps, take a part, if we could not obtain the whole. Thus shall he lull himself with embassies; while we, marching on, sweep Valentinian from the earth, lay Rome in ashes, and scatter the dusty fragments of her once mighty power unto all the quarters of the earth over which her empire in other days extended. Still, as we advance and conquer, as if wholly absorbed in the great undertaking before us, we will make greater and greater concessions to this Marcian, and he, if he be a true Roman, will exact more and more, till at length, with justice on our side and conquest on our sword, our strength united and increased, and our troops fresh from victory, we will pour into the fertile plains of Greece, and, with our free and martial tribes, leave not a trace of any former yoke throughout the land. If my foot shall ever again tread the plains of Thrace, never again, so guard me all the gods who have made me what I am, will I go back one single step so long as one stone of all Byzantium remains upon another!"

He was still going on, when a door at the farther end of the hall opened, and the attendant whom he had sent to the ambassador presented himself. The man paused for a moment, with a pale countenance, as if uncertain whether to advance or not. He was evidently under the influence of terror; but Attila's irritation had subsided while pouring forth his plans into the ear of Ardaric, and he made the attendant a sign to advance, with an expression of countenance which partly reassured him. Hurrying forward, then, he cast himself prostrate at the feet of the king, exclaiming, "How shall I dare, oh mighty Attila, to relate the bold words of the most insolent Roman that ever approached thy presence?"

"Speak, speak!" said Attila: "thou art pardoned, if any pardon be needful, for repeating what it imports the king to hear. Speak! what said the ambassador?"

"His reply, oh king," answered the attendant, looking up, and half doubting the assurances of pardon that he heard--"his reply was, 'Tell Attila the king, that though the time of the servant of Marcian is of less value than the time of the monarch of the Huns, yet the dignity of the emperor must not be trifled with, and his ambassador is not one to sacrifice it. If Attila be willing to see me, let him fix the time and keep it. Hither have I followed him to Tridentum, from the wilds of Upper Dacia, and I will follow no farther, to be a spectacle to his nation or to others. As to the presents, they are of little import; some thirty vases of solid gold, and some caskets of jewels; but, if Attila would have them, he must receive them with his own hands. To him were they sent, and to none other will I deliver them.' Such were his words, oh mighty king," continued the attendant--"I have repeated them truly, and if I have offended, let me die!"

To the surprise of the attendant, and even of Ardaric, something like a grim smile passed over the harsh features of the Hunnish king. "He is a bold knave, this ambassador," he said; "he is a bold knave, and well chosen to do a dangerous embassy! Tell him to get him hence, and take his presents with him! Say also that Attila, though he loves courage, will not bear insolence, and therefore it is he will not see this man. However, he is not willing to lose the friendship of Marcian, who promises to fill the royal seat of the old Cæsars more nobly than late monarchs have done, and therefore Attila will send back unto him Theodore, the son of his friend Paulinus, with power to treat of things that concern the friendship of the two nations. He shall accompany the ambassador on his way. Go! tell him the words of the king."

Ardaric, at the mention of the mission of Theodore, suddenly cast down his eyes and bit his lip; and as soon as the attendant had risen from Attila's feet and departed, he exclaimed, "Hear me, oh Attila, and take thought before you determine upon sending this young Roman on such a task to the new emperor. Theodore is bold and faithful, I know it well, and love him truly. But he is one of those who will think his duty to his country superior to aught else on earth. He will reveal to Marcian all your plans and purposes, tell all the secrets of your court, and of the past as far as may affect the future, and think it a duty to caution Marcian against trusting to the semblance of moderation you put on."

"Wouldst thou do so, Ardaric, if thou wert a Roman?" asked Attila, with a smile; and then, before his friend could answer, he added, "Perhaps thou wouldst. In truth, I believe so. But I am prepared against that also, Ardaric. This Theodore has now with him a beautiful--a most lovely girl--his promised bride; and even to-morrow morning he fondly thinks she shall be his. He is mistaken, Ardaric; for I will keep her and her mother here, as sureties for his doing my bidding to the letter--as hostages for his speedy return. However strong may be his wishes to serve his country, be you sure that nature and passion will have its way. What is it that passion will not do? To what will it not blind our eyes? What will it not make us see in things the most different? With this Theodore, it will act to give the fairest colouring to everything that may keep Marcian at peace with Attila, and give him the opportunity of returning speedily to claim his beautiful Dalmatian bride. He will tell no tales, Ardaric! He will give no advice! He will speak no warnings that may raise up an eternal barrier between him and that most lovely woman! He will think he does his duty to his country, and will do it, as far as nature will let him; but passion will still have a voice in the council of his bosom, and make him do his duty unto me!"

Ardaric made no reply, but looked gravely down upon the ground, and Attila fixed his eyes upon him for several moments, as if in surprise at his silence. But there was something in the breast of Attila, a consciousness, a sense of duplicity even towards Ardaric, which made him forbear to question his friend. Attila was afraid to ask why Ardaric replied not! Attila, the mighty, the unconquered, the unconquerable Attila, was cowed by his own heart! Yes, Attila was afraid!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT.

It was the same hall, but the things within it were changed. It blazed with lights; it was crowded with people; and the leaders of the Hunnish host stood round Attila the King, while in the clear deep tones of command he gave directions for their march on the following day. On his left hand, at some distance from the chair in which he sat, appeared a group in the Roman dress, consisting of Ildica, Ammian, Eudochia, and Theodore, with a number of the household slaves of Flavia, and the barbarian followers of the young Roman gathered together behind them.

Seated in the midst of her children was Flavia, the only person except the monarch who did not stand; but there was the weariness of illness on her face and in her attitude, and the chair she occupied had been looked upon by her and her family as a token of Attila's kind observation.

Suddenly the tones of Attila ceased as he gave his last commands to the leaders round him, and then, after a pause, he exclaimed, "Theodore! Come hither, my son; the king has a duty to impose on thee!"

Theodore gave a bright glance to Ildica, and advanced till he stood before the monarch, his countenance beaming with happy anticipations, and his heart beating high with the glad hope of soon bearing his sweet bride back to their own dear land. But the countenance of Attila was stern and grave; and Ardaric, who stood on his right hand, cast down his eyes as Theodore approached.

"My son," said Attila, "thou art very young, and yet unto thee am I about to intrust a mission on which may depend the lives of millions, the fate of empires, and the destiny of the whole

world. The monarch of the East has sent unto me hither a bold and insolent ambassador; and were I to read the feelings of Marcian in the conduct of his messenger, I should instantly employ those arms which carried death and victory to the shores of the Ægean Sea not many years ago, to humble the pride and punish the faithlessness of this new emperor. But I have heard what thou canst tell of him--thou who hast known him from thy childhood; and Attila is inclined to respect and love Marcian. Attila may be his friend, if Marcian will; for while he treads upon the worm and struggles with the tiger, he admires the lion and the eagle--kings in their kind like himself. Go, then, to this thy friend: return to him with the ambassador he has sent hither, and tell him the words of Attila. Say, if thou wilt, that on thy report of his great nobleness, Attila desires rather to be at peace than at war with Marcian; and ask what he will do to gain our friendship. It is not the pitiful thought of a few ounces more or less of yellow earth that moves Attila; and if Marcian be poor, let him say so; but justice Attila will have in all things, and his honour and dignity will he defend so long as he has life. Go, then, to Marcian; tell him these things. Tell him what Attila is, and bring us speedily thine answer. If thou usest diligence, thou wilt find us between this and Rome. Seek the envoy from the East, and depart with him. Thou shalt have the train of a prince to honour Attila's mission, and gold to pay thy journey through a sordid land and among a grasping people."

"Willingly, oh Attila!" replied Theodore, "do I accept the charge; and honouring thee, as I do from the depth of my heart, for all the noble deeds that I have seen, and loving thee for all the kind ones thou hast done to me and mine, I will labour with the zeal of true affection to do thy bidding well."

As he spoke, a red flush came over Attila's forehead; and a large vein that wandered through the broad skin of his uncovered temples swelled and wreathed like a snake caught under the fork of a husbandman. Theodore, however, marked not the unwonted emotion, and went on. "Nor do I doubt," he said, "success in my undertaking; for, in the same manner, do I love and honour Marcian for the same noble deeds and the same kindness unto me and mine. I hope, I trust, I think that he loves me too, and therefore do I judge that I, perchance--however young and inexperienced I may be--that I may succeed better than one older and a stranger. Give me but tomorrow for repose, and on the following day I am ready to set out."

"Thanks for thy willingness, my son," replied Attila, "and thanks also for thy love; but thy young limbs scarcely do need repose, and the time thou seekest cannot be afforded thee. By the first ray of light tomorrow morning this insolent ambassador must leave the camp, and thou must go with him on the way."

Theodore's countenance fell. "Alas!" he said, "I have told thee, oh king! that after many a painful year of absence I have found and brought with me my promised bride, one to whom my heart is tied by bonds of old affection, with whom my childish hours were spent, to whom the thoughts of youth have all been given--" Attila made an impatient gesture with his hand. "Thou hast thyself promised, oh king," added Theodore, quickly, "to witness and confirm our union."

"And so I will," answered Attila, sharply, "when thou returnest from the mission on which I send thee."

"Oh, let it be before," exclaimed Theodore, eagerly--"oh, let it be before. I ask but a day, a single day, and then all can go with me to our native land, my bride, my mother, my sister, and her promised husband, Ammian. Once more re-established in peace, in the bright country of our birth, all my hopes will be fulfilled, and--"

"And thou wilt never return to Attila," said the deep voice of the king.

"On my life, on my soul, on my hopes of happiness in this life and hereafter," exclaimed Theodore, vehemently, "I will return if I be in life, ere two months be over, and bring thee an account of my mission and its success."

"It cannot be," said Attila, sternly--"it must not, and it cannot be. Youth, I will not tempt thee by granting thy request. We are all subject to be led astray. Nature is strong within us, is stronger far than all good resolutions; and with thy bride, thy mother, and thy family beneath the shield of Marcian, in thy native land, thou wouldst have strong temptation to remain, and bitter agony of heart to leave them all and come back hither. I say not that the frail thread which bound thee to return would even then be broken; but I say that Attila will never willingly stretch it more than it is formed to bear. Thy mother and thy bride shall stay with me; not as a pledge for thy good faith, for even wert thou to prove faithless, Attila would never injure those beneath his protection; but as inducements to make thy return speedy and joyful. Thy bridal must not be till thou hast seen Marcian and return to me. Attila has said it, and his words are not revoked."

The angry blood rushed up into Theodore's cheek, and his eyes sparkled as few were accustomed to flash in the presence of that mighty and terrible monarch. "Then, oh king," he exclaimed, in a sharp voice, "then, oh king--"

But at that moment a hand was laid upon his arm, and Flavia, anticipating the refusal that was about to burst from his lips, stood by his side, saying, in a low voice, "Go, my son, go! obey the will of the king!" but her interposition seemed to come too late, for the dark thunder cloud of wrath had gathered heavy on the brow of Attila; and while the chieftains near gazed with painful

apprehension on the unwonted signs of emotion which he had suffered to appear, he demanded, in a voice that rolled like distant thunder round the hall, "Darest thou dispute the commands of Attila?"

Theodore's eye quailed not, however, under that fierce glance; and, with his spirit all in arms, as it was at that moment, he might have replied with words that would have sealed his fate for ever: but without waiting to hear him speak, Ildica, trembling with apprehension for him she loved, but filled with energetic resolution by that very love itself, glided past him, and kneeling at the feet of Attila, raised her hands towards him in earnest supplication.

"Forgive him, oh mighty king!" she cried, "forgive him! He will go willingly; he will go, and do thy bidding truly and faithfully. I, I will be the hostage for his faith and his obedience. Forgive him, oh forgive him! and let not your great soul be moved by the momentary rashness of one who loves thee well, and will serve thee, as he has served, honestly, truly, bravely, zealously."

The cloud cleared away from the brow of Attila as he gazed upon that beautiful creature kneeling at his feet, and he replied at once, "He is forgiven; let him do our bidding, and return. We will protect thee and thy mother till he comes again, and none shall harm thee. Thou art rash, oh Theodore, and hasty in thy youth; but Attila is great enough to be able to forgive: and, to show thee that thou art quite forgiven, we will grant thee one favour. But yesterday we were told that yon youth, Ammian thou callest him, and the maiden, thy sister, were plighted to each other, and that for his and her sake it was that thou fleddest from Valentinian. Thou thyself must return to seek thy bride and her mother; but, if thou wilt, thy sister, ere the earth be three days older, shall give her hand to him, and follow thee with our presents to the court of Marcian."

Theodore turned with a melancholy smile to Ammian and Eudochia, who, in the anxiety of the moment, had advanced to his side. He saw happiness in the bright eyes of the one and in the blushing, downcast face of the other; and then, looking again towards Attila, he replied, "My bitter disappointment, oh king! shall neither make me selfish nor ungrateful. I receive your offer as a favour, and am thankful for it as such. Let their union take place, oh king, as speedily as may be, and let them join me in Thrace. It will take, at least, from my mind part of the load which bears it down, to see them in peace and security."

"Be it so, then," replied Attila--"be it so. They shall follow thee quickly. Thou knowest thy mission; thou knowest my will. Early to-morrow morning, with thine own attendants and those that I shall send unto thee, thou settest out for Constantinople. So fare thee well upon thy journey! All now may go--Attila seeks rest."

With a sad but calm brow Theodore led Ildica and Flavia from the great hall of the palace of Tridentum to a distant part of the same building, in which a lodging had been assigned to them. Eudochia and Ammian followed; but no one spoke for some time, till at length, when they re-entered the chamber from which they had been summoned to the presence of Attila, Ildica raised her eyes, and gazed sorrowfully in the face of her lover. Flavia, too, paused and looked upon them for a moment with a sad and heavy heart; and then, beckoning to Ammian and Eudochia, she departed, and left the two alone.

Ildica cast herself upon the bosom of Theodore, and they both wept bitterly. "Oh, my Theodore! oh, my beloved!" cried Ildica, as soon as tears would let her.

He pressed her to his heart in silence; but, ere he could find words to reply, the door of the chamber was thrown open by one of the household slaves of Flavia, crying, "One of the barbarian kings, noble Theodore, would speak with you instantly;" and, almost as he spoke, Ardaric entered the chamber. The King of the Gepidæ pointed to the door, and the slave, who gazed upon him with some wonder, instantly closed it and retired. Then advancing to Theodore, Ardaric took him in his powerful arms, and pressed him frankly to his bosom.

"Theodore, my brother," he said, speaking the language of the Huns, which Ildica did not understand--"Theodore, I love you well, and grieve for you. We have fought together, and been enemies; we have eaten bread together, and been friends. Our enmity has been wiped out, our friendship never can; and I think that Attila deals hardly with thee. But look to thy fair bride," he continued; "she looks pale and faint: let her go from us; I will not keep thee long; but yet I would fain speak with thee ere thou departest."

"Ildica, my beloved," said Theodore, in the Latin tongue, but speaking slowly, so that Ardaric might hear and comprehend what he said, "this is one of my best and noblest friends. While I am absent, thou mayst trust safely in him. He has something of importance to tell me, and I will seek thee again instantly!"

Ildica made no reply, but retired into the inner chamber to her mother.

"Thou hast spoken truly, my friend," continued Ardaric: "she may trust in me when you are gone! and she may have cause to trust. Attila has dealt hardly with thee, I know not why. I love not to inquire. Let me not wrong him by suspicions; but ever since that fatal battle in Gaul he has been an altered man. Had he been always thus, he would never have reached the height of power he has attained. He has grown more like his brother Bleda, jealous, hasty, intemperate--ay, and deceitful too. He may hide his future purposes from mine eyes, perchance; but Ardaric knows

that he is changed, and is upon his guard."

"I see it too," cried Theodore--"I see it too; but even if this change bodes ill to me, what can I do to guard myself against it? What evil, think you, he meditates against me?"

"Nay, I cannot tell," said Ardaric: "I know not, nor will pretend to guess; and as to guarding against it, I can give but one advice--return as speedily as may be. Lose no time; fear not to kill your horses; and as you named two months to Attila himself, be not a single hour beyond that time, as you value happiness and peace."

"But why," exclaimed Theodore, "why think you that his wrath points more particularly to me?"

"I know not well how to answer," replied Ardaric. "When we see a dull gray vapour gathering over the western sky, we say there will be a tempest soon. When we see the light clouds making the mottled heaven look like a dappled steed, we augur it will rain. Light signs forbode heavy storms; and when I see many a changeful variation in the mood of a man once so firm and steadfast, I am apt to augur evil, and to guess where it may fall. Towards you, to whom he was once kind as the spring rain, Attila is now harsh and fierce, and I argue thence that, for some cause, you have lost that favour which shielded you hitherto. But there is another reason why I bid you be upon your guard. You once tarried long, I have heard, in the house of Bleda, the brother of the king, and must have often seen his daughter Neva."

"Often, very often," answered Theodore: "a sweet, devoted, beautiful girl, whose whole happiness seemed to rest in doing good to others. But I injured her not!"

"Thy fate seems of deep interest to her," replied Ardaric, with a passing smile, "for she sought me out this evening as we were encamping on the hills--"

"Is she here, then?" cried Theodore, in surprise.

"Yes, and thousands of others," answered Ardaric: "the camp is full of women. One would guess we were going to people some uncultivated land, for we bear almost all our women and children with us. But Neva is here; for, alas, poor girl, her home is now desolate. Her mother died some few weeks ago. But, as I have said, not only the men of the land, but the women of the land also, have come forth to war."

"Then I shall leave my Ildica," said Theodore, "with a lighter heart. Where there are women, she will find some to pity and console her."

"Many, I trust," answered Ardaric; "but let me tell you, for the time wears, that this fair girl, Bleda's daughter, for whose orphan state my heart has often ached, sought me out this evening, and, calling you 'her brother Theodore,' besought me to aid and to support you against your enemies. Her words were somewhat wild and rambling; but it was evident she had reasons to fear that evil threatened you."

"Upon the journey?" demanded Theodore.

"No, no!" rejoined Ardaric. "I cannot tell you my own suspicions: I must not repeat the words she spoke. We may be both mistaken; and, even were we right, our warning could be of no avail if you neglect to follow the advice I have given. Hasten to Marcian; lose not an hour upon the road; fulfil your mission quickly, and bring back a reply, or good or bad, without delay. Suffer yourself not to be entangled by any one in long discussions; but simply tell your message, receive your answer, and return within the space that you yourself have mentioned. In your absence I will protect, as far as may be, the precious pledges that you leave behind; my wife is in the camp; and though she speaks not their tongue, our hearts, oh Theodore! shall speak for us. Ardaric has some power, and it shall be used for your service. Now fare you well, for I must leave you;" and pressing Theodore once more in his arms, he turned and left the apartment.

The young Roman paused for a moment in deep thought; and then, with a heavy heart, sought those from whom he was to part so soon.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MARRIAGE AND THE DEATH.

Trent was still in the possession of the Huns--though the main body of their innumerable host

had passed on--when, on the third day after the departure of Theodore, two young and beautiful beings stood before the altar of the high church of that venerable city, in youth's brightest day to pass youth's brightest hour. There is certainly, in that peculiar moment of happiness in which the young heart of woman plights its full faith to the man she loves, a beautifying influence, which gives to features not otherwise remarkable a loveliness of expression that they possess not at other times. It is the beaming forth of the sweet chastened joy of fulfilled hope and gratified love: it is the picture presented by the speaking face of many of those beautiful feelings whereof external loveliness is but the type and symbol. Joy, timid modesty, pure affection, bright hope, unshaken faith, the fruition of long-nourished wishes, the fulfilment of the brightest expectation of a woman's heart--all, all are there when she kneels before the altar with the man she loves, to bind that solemn tie which nothing but the grave should break.

There knelt Eudochia by the side of Ammian; and though a slight shade of sympathizing melancholy stole across the sunshine of her face when she turned her eyes on Ildica, yet her look was as bright as hope and happiness could make it, and in the serious but still enthusiastic countenance of her young lover might be read, in its very gravity, a deeper happiness than ever his lighter smiles betrayed.

Ildica, poor Ildica, had twined the flowers in the fair bride's hair; and though a tear had fallen upon them, spangling their sweet leaves like a drop of morning dew, yet she had struggled hard to banish every selfish regret, and share to the full in the joy of those dear beings whose union, and, as she trusted, whose happiness that day was to secure.

Beside Ildica stood her mother; but oh! what a sad change had the passing of less than five years wrought in the fair form of Flavia, since first we saw her on the bright shores of the Adriatic. She had known grief, deep grief before that period; she had tasted disappointment, and undergone misfortune of many kinds: but there is a time of life when the springs of health and sources of enjoyment flow up so full and bounteously, that the most scorching heat cannot dry them up; when the earthquake itself cannot overwhelm them; when still they flow on, under the fiercest sun of summer, and are but choked up in one place to burst forth and sparkle in another. But there comes an after period, when, choked up and nearly obliterated by the sands of time, the fire of lesser misfortunes will exhaust them quite, and leave the empty fountain, the dried-up spring, without a drop of water to moisten the lip of hope. So had it been with Flavia: the misfortunes of her early years, the loss of her loved husband, the tyranny of a capricious and greedy monarch, an anxious widowhood, watching over her orphan children, had rendered the stream of life calm and dull, but had not diminished its waters nor seemed likely to shorten its course. But when a later epoch of existence had come on, and fresh sorrows, labours, anxieties, and cares had fallen fast about her, the very hopes she had nourished, and the placid joys which had rendered life verdant, faded by the wintry blast of late disappointment, like the withered leaves of winter trees above a fountain, had dropped fast and thick, and filled up the very well of life itself. Her step was feeble; her once bright eye was dim; and though the graceful line of that fair form remained, though the black hair was little more silvery than before, and the white teeth had lost none of their ivory purity, yet the pallour of her countenance, the bloodless lip, the languid, drooping eyelid, and the quick, difficult respiration, all spoke that "the body was broken by its cares and labours," and the spirit, weary of its ruined tenement, was hesitating whether it should not fly for repose.

She gazed, however, with a bright and cheering smile upon Ammian and Eudochia, as they knelt to pledge that sacred vow which she, too, hoped and believed would secure for them as much happiness as this world could bestow. She herself felt within her bosom rise up at the sight the memory of bright hopes and aspirations passed away, and the spring of life for the moment flowed more freely. They, as they looked upon her, saw a happy change, and gladdened their own hearts by the thought that her health was better, and looked forward to the future with hopes for her as well as for themselves.

Others, however, were present in the church; and Attila himself, with arms folded on his bosom, stood not inattentive to the words which a Christian priest addressed to the fair young beings met together there to be parted no more. That priest was a venerable and a fearless man; and after his blessing had been spoken, and the indissoluble contract sealed, he poured forth an exhortation to maintain and hold fast the purer faith in which they had been educated, touching boldly on the doctrines of his holy religion as contrasted with the pagan superstition of many who heard him, and appealing to the consciences of all men to decide whether sublime purity of soul and body were not the doctrines which God might teach and men revere.

Attila listened in silence, though many of the barbarian chieftains around frowned angrily to hear their ancient faith assailed from the lips of one of a people whom they looked upon as conquered and trodden upon under foot. Attila, however, listened, as we have said, in silence; and only twice during all that ceremony did he take his eyes from the priest, to turn them for a moment upon the lovely countenance of Ildica, and glance over that unrivalled form which might well have made the sculptor blush at his imperfect works. They were withdrawn as quickly as turned thither, and he fixed them on the priest again, and listened to his glowing eloquence as one who could admire, though unconvinced.

The ceremony was over, the prayer prayed, the exhortation made. The feet of Ammian's horse was heard without pawing impatiently the ground; the litter which was to bear Eudochia into Thrace was prepared; the slaves who were to accompany her, and the guards which Attila had

directed to conduct them in safety to the frontiers of the Eastern empire, stood ready before the gate. But when the bridegroom and the bride rose up from the altar, without turning to bid their mother farewell, they advanced hand in hand to Attila, and knelt together at his feet.

"Oh, great king!" said Ammian, "thou hast made us happy, and we have to beseech thee to add yet one favour more. To return unto our native land is joy, for we love no land like that; but if our mother return not with us, the joy withers, and, like a flower in the night, it may be beautiful, but we cannot see it for want of the sunshine to make it expand. Let us beseech thee, then, oh king! crown thy great goodness unto us, and either let our mother and our sister bear us company on the way, or let us remain here till they may go there too."

Attila listened with the same calm, steadfast look which in former days used never to be absent from his countenance; and no features of his face could have betrayed the slightest emotion produced by the words of Ammian. When the youth had done, he replied, "Thy mother and thy sister must not depart; and I have promised the son of Paulinus that thou shouldst join him with his sister in Thrace."

He paused for a moment, and thought deeply, turned his eyes to Ildica and Flavia, and then added, "Nevertheless, ye shall stay or go, as your mother wills. If ye go not, the breach of the promise be upon you. Attila has prepared to fulfil it; but he will not, he cannot drive a son from a mother, and that mother ill as she is."

Ammian and Eudochia rose and clung to Flavia, each exclaiming, "Oh let us stay, my mother! let us stay till Theodore returns!"

Flavia pressed them to her heart, and kissed the fair brow of that sweet girl; but she did not reply for some moments; while Eudochia, linking her hand in that of Ildica, exclaimed, "Plead for us, dear Ildica! Plead for us, my sister!" and Ildica turned her lustrous eyes upon her mother, as if doubting and inquiring what she should do.

To Flavia it was a moment of the most intense pain, to which the heart of any mortal being can be subject--it was the struggle of duty against the tenderest, the noblest of human affections. It was a dying mother placing one of her children in safety, with the certainty of never beholding him again, even while obliged to leave another in the midst of perils without any support. It was a moment of most intense, intolerable pain; and yet she conquered it.

"Eudochia," she said, calmly, "it must not be, my beloved child! Ammian, do not agitate and distress me! Theodore might wait for you. Your staying might delay his return. At all events, it is but for a short time that we are parted," and she raised her eyes to heaven, while her lips still moved, but in silence. "Go, my children, go," she said: "hasten Theodore's return; bear him my blessing."

"Must it be, my mother?" cried Ammian.

"It must, beloved!" answered Flavia, kissing him. "Take her, oh take her from me," she added, unclasping the arms of Eudochia, who clung round her knees weeping. "Dear, affectionate girl, farewell! Take her, Ammian, take her! God's blessing and her mother's be upon you, my sweet children!" Ammian raised Eudochia, and half bore, half led her from the church.

The eyes of Attila remained fixed upon the countenance of Flavia with a deep, earnest, contemplative gaze, which might have been painful to her had not other feelings absorbed every thought; and when, as Ammian and Eudochia disappeared through the portal, Flavia raised her robe to her eyes, and for the first time wept, Attila, the stern, dark Attila himself was moved, and pressing his sinewy hand upon his brow, he exclaimed aloud, "Noble, noble woman!" Then turned, and, as if stung by some sudden pang, strode hastily out of the church.

There came a sound of rude music from without, and of young voices singing, as a troop of boys and girls, gathered together for the marriage, accompanied Eudochia and Ammian on their way to the gate of the city. But oh, how strange and harsh sounded that bridal song upon the ears of the sad few who remained within the church! Flavia stood and wept; and the large drops rolled slowly over the fair cheek of Ildica. But at length Ardaric, who had not followed Attila when he departed, advanced, and in a kindly tone which spoke to their hearts, notwithstanding his small knowledge of their language, bade them take comfort.

"Let us leave this place," he said at length. "You have need, lady, of repose: to-morrow night the last of our forces leave Tridentum. It were needful for thee to pass all the intervening time in repose: and if thou wouldst take some simples, such as our people know well how to prepare, it might give thee strength for the journey. But let us leave this place--the sight of it only makes thee grieve."

"Let those sounds cease without, and then I will go," replied Flavia; and as soon as all was quiet in the street, the mother and the daughter, left alone in the midst of a strange and barbarous host, took their sad way back towards the dwelling which they had inhabited since their arrival in the city of Trent. There Ardaric left them; and, entering into their own apartments, Flavia sent away all the slaves.

As soon as she was alone with her daughter, to the surprise and grief of Ildica, the lady sunk

upon her knees at her own child's feet. "Pardon me, Ildica, pardon your mother," she said--"pardon your mother, if, in the agony of this day, and in the anxiety to secure safety and happiness for one child, I have failed to purchase, even at his risk, support and protection for another."

Ildica cast her arms around her, and striving hard to smile, she said, "Alas, alas! dear mother, why should you ask pardon of me? Know you not that your Ildica would gladly, willingly sacrifice everything but virtue, and honour, and the love of those who love her, to secure the happiness of her dear brother and the sweet sister of her infancy. Oh no, think not that I regret even for a moment that you have sent them from us, if by their presence they could not have comforted and supported you. Ildica has a resolute heart, my mother, and can bear, with strong determination, whatever fate her God may send her. With her own hand she can protect her honour, if need should be; and she fears nothing else; for death is little terrible to her, and that is the worst that can befall."

"But, alas! you know not all, my child," answered Flavia, sinking into the seat to which her daughter led her, but still holding Ildica's hand, and gazing in her face. "Dear, beloved girl. I am dying!"

"Speak not such cruel words, dear mother," replied Ildica, not knowing how terribly the ravager had proceeded in the frame of the loved being who was now her only support. "I see, indeed," she added, "that you are far from well; but I trust that fatigue and anxiety is the chief cause, and that now you have seen so happy an event as the marriage of our dear Ammian with Eudochia; now that you know them to be in safety; now that the speedy prospect of returning to our own land is open before us; now that nothing is wanting to our future peace and happiness but Theodore's return--I trust, I hope, I am sure, dear mother, that joy will prove a good physician, and restore you quite."

"Ildica," answered Flavia, "let us not deceive ourselves, my child. I shall never see the Dalmatian shores again. How long this shattered prison may keep the struggling spirit in its ruined walls, I know not; but in my bosom there is kept a fatal calendar, whereon is marked how much each day takes from the small remaining store of life, and I feel that that store is nearly gone. Like a spendthrift with his treasure, Ildica, I would now fain hoard the little that remains, but know not how, and fear that it will fail me soon. When, five days ago, we halted by the little lake in those grand mountains, I felt that death was coming, but still thought that repose might keep him yet at bay, and give me time to reach some surer resting-place. But in that day's repose, the active enemy still strode on his way; the next day's journey brought him nearer still; and the sad scene of your dear Theodore's parting led him onward almost to the door. I have shut my ear while he knocked, listening to Hope while Ammian's bridal has gone forward; but I felt that Death went with me into that church, and has come hither to sit beside me till I follow him to a brighter land, where the dark herald leaves us for ever at the gate."

Ildica wept bitterly; and her mother, after pausing for several minutes, proceeded:--"Must I tell thee not to weep, my child? Nay, I will not do thee so much wrong! Yes, weep, my Ildica! weep as I would weep for thee; but listen to me. I have said that I felt myself dying when in yon church I sent from us Ammian and Eudochia. I sent them from us, knowing that I might soon have to leave thee here alone, in the midst of a barbarous people, till thy Theodore, thy husband, shall return--alone, with no one to protect thee but domestic slaves, who, though faithful and attached, are still but slaves. Was not this cruel, Ildica? Wilt thou forgive me?"

"Forgive you, dear mother!" cried Ildica, looking up reproachfully at the very thought of forgiveness being necessary; "think you that for my selfish sorrows I would have had Ammian and Eudochia stay in scenes of danger, when peace, and joy, and safety were before them? If peril awaits me, Ammian could not, with his single hand, have averted it. If death be following me, too, in any shape, he could not have shielded me from the lifted dart; and--for the sake of a few kind words and tender consolations, the balm of sympathy, and the fine elixir of kind familiar looks to sooth and cure a wounded heart--think you, dear mother, that I would have perilled his young happiness, and perhaps cast the cloud of misfortune over his whole life? No; let me meet the coming ills alone. There are many with whom I would gladly share the cup of joy, but none whom I would force to drink a part of the bitterer draught which I am bound to quaff. Forgive you, dear mother! oh, there is nothing to forgive!"

"Dear Ildica," cried Flavia, pressing her to her bosom, "noble, beloved girl! Sure, sure I am that, through whatever scenes the will of Heaven may lead you, you will bear up nobly still, and never, never forget that you are the daughter of a Roman. Remember, Ildica--oh, ever remember--the land and race from which you spring. Think of their great deeds and steadfast courage. Remember that, among the best and greatest of our ancient names, your father might have boldly, confidently written down his own; and, whenever difficulty or peril falls upon you, think how a Roman of old days would then have acted, and so act!"

"I will, my mother," cried Ildica, sinking on her knees beside Flavia; "I promise you, by all which is most sacred, that I will! Nothing shall ever make me forget that I am a patrician's child, bound by my nobility of blood to noble conduct. And should the time ever come that I must be tried, the names of my ancestors shall not be blotted out from the roll of fame by any weakness of mine. I promise it! I vow it!" and, with high resolution beaming in her beautiful eyes, she rose, and stood in the majesty of loveliness by her dying mother's side.

"May God bless you, and give you strength in all things, my true child!" Flavia answered; "and yet, Ildica avoid all such trials; turn from all such dangers when you may. Seek not for dangers, but act boldly in them. And now, my child, one more direction, and I leave you to the keeping of your own heart and God's directing Spirit. If I should not live, which is, indeed, beyond all likelihood, to witness Theodore's return, let no vain sorrow for the dead restrain you from giving him your hand at once. If but a single day have passed since the grave has closed over me, meet at the altar with the tear of memory dimming the eye of hope; but delay not your union by a single hour. Wed him, my Ildica! wed your beloved without a hesitation; and fly with him, as speedily as may be, to our dear, beautiful land, where peace and safety shall attend you. To him, Ildica, to him only of all the world could I give you without a fear, without a sigh--to him, noble, just, wise, brave, firm yet tender, generous yet prudent, ardent yet temperate. Oh, Ildica! oh that I could see that day! my last, brightest hope, my fondest wish, my only remaining aspiration on this side of the grave would then be fulfilled; and, as calmly as for a happy sleep, I could lay down my head in the tomb and say, 'Come, quiet Death! life has all finished well!'"

The tears streamed anew down the cheeks of Ildica; and her mother, after a short pause, drew her gently to her, kissed her pure brow, and added, "Now leave me, my sweet child, for one half hour. We shall both be the better of a brief solitude."

Ildica withdrew without reply; for she sought not to add to her mother's emotions by emotions of her own. In her own chamber she turned the hourglass, neither to fall short of nor to exceed the space of time that Flavia had appointed; and she would fain have bent her thoughts to contemplate all the frowning features of her present fate, and the still darker countenance of the future. She felt, however, that to do so would unfit her mind for the task of soothing and consoling the last days of her mother; she felt that she might be shaken and overwhelmed by the burdens which she was destined at different times to bear, if she suffered imagination to attempt to raise them all up at once, in order to feel and try their weight. She resolved, then, that she would not contemplate them until they came upon her one by one; and, murmuring the holy maxim of Him who alone could teach us the wisdom from on high, "Sufficient for the day be the evil thereof," she sank upon her knees and passed the half hour in prayer. When she rose she was calm and prepared, feeling that, though philosophy may teach us to resist firmly the evils of life, it is only religion that can teach us to bear them meekly.

Her mother received her with a smile; and she, too, was calmer--for the fatal truth had been spoken between them, the dark secret had been told; and Flavia herself, prepared to die, was glad to have prepared Ildica for her death. The rest of the day passed over tranquilly; and Flavia seemed relieved, and even better. There was a slight flush upon her cheek, which, though it was not exactly the rosy hue of health, gave a false appearance of returning powers. Her eye, too, was bright, and she breathed, or fancied that she breathed, with less difficulty. She cherished no hope, however; and Ildica was not deceived into the belief that her mother could recover. Her disposition had once been full of hope; but the spring had lain so long under a heavy weight that it had lost its elasticity; and the evening passed calmly, but not cheerfully.

At length, towards her usual hour of retiring to rest, Flavia took out of a casket a golden bracelet of an antique form, and, laying it on her knee, gazed upon it thoughtfully. It had been the first present that she had received from her dead husband, and in all her wanderings, under every blast of adversity, that bracelet still had remained with her. She had worn it on the shores of Dalmatia; it had been carried forth amid the rocking of the earthquake; it had been restored, with other property, at the command of Attila, after having been taken by the Huns; she had possessed it among the Alani; she had carried it with her to Rome; she had brought it thence to where she sat even then. Every night, through a long life, she had gazed upon that token of early affection; and now, with her thoughts turning to her husband, she looked upon it again, thinking, "I go to join him, where we shall never be separated more!"

As she thus thought, she tried to clasp it on her arm: but suddenly it slipped from her fingers, rolled from her knee, and dropped upon the ground. With a quick motion, she stooped forward to catch it ere it fell or pick it up; then suddenly pressed her hand upon her breast, and sunk back upon the cushions that supported her, exclaiming, "My child! my Ildica!"

Ildica darted forward, and caught the hands that her mother now extended towards her. The lips of Flavia still moved, but no sound followed; she fixed her eyes with a look of deep love upon her child; the brightness of being was still there; the flame of life's lamp shone in them still brightly; but, in a moment after, it waxed dim and faint: light and life, lustre and meaning, passed away; the jaw fell; the features became rigid; and the gray hue of vacant death spread over the soulless countenance. A loud long shriek rang through those apartments; and when the slaves rushed in, they found their mistress dead, where she sat, and her daughter lying senseless at her feet.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ANTICIPATIONS OF EVIL.

Long and dark was the sleep that fell upon Ildica: the overwrought mind, the overexcited feelings, the heart and brain, stretched beyond their bearing to support each other, had worked in the mortal frame that complete overthrow of the equipoise which such a state almost invariably will produce. The sleep of Ildica's mind--for the reasoning soul remained asleep long after the eyes had opened again to the light of day after her mother's death--was not the sleep which brings repose; and when at length she really woke, and gazed about her with full returning consciousness, she found an unknown scene around her.

She was stretched upon a rich couch, round which fell the hangings of a tent; and though two of her own female attendants sat at the farther side, there was watching over her a face as beautiful as she had ever beheld, but which was altogether strange to her eye. It was beautiful, as I have said, most beautiful; and though the hair was dressed in the barbarian mode, and the garments were not such as the Romans wore, yet the pure and snowy skin showed tints very different from the dingy complexion of the Huns; and, though Ildica knew not the face, yet there was something in it--something in the exquisite loveliness of those devoted deep blue eyes--that was not unfamiliar to her imagination. It was as if somebody, in former times, had sung, or told, or written to her about eyes like those. Her mind, however, wandered still; and she could not recall where or how such an impression had been made upon her. But she saw, as she moved, those eyes bent upon her with a look of tender pity; and laying her hand upon that which rested on the couch beside her, she would have spoken, but her voice was so weak that she herself started at its altered sound.

"You are better," said Neva, for she it was who sat beside her--"you are better; I see you are better." And though the tongue in which she spoke was but a mixture of Latin with her barbarian dialect, yet her looks spoke eloquently, and Ildica began to remember, or rather to guess, who she was.

Neva watched her gently and assiduously; and Ildica recovered health and strength; and grateful and tender did she feel towards that fair companion, who wound herself day by day so closely round her heart, that she only wondered that Theodore could have continued to love Ildica when he had unknowingly won the heart of Neva. But though Ildica recovered rapidly, that illness had wrought a change. She remained long in deep silent fits of thought. Sometimes, when she was spoken to, her mind, intensely occupied with the dark past or the dim future, seemed to deaden her ear, and she made no reply. But, what was still more strange, she spoke of her mother, she talked of her death, she inquired of her burial, without a tear moistening her eyelids. She would fain have wept; she longed to do so; but no drops, no kind relieving drops came from the dried-up well to give her ease. Her mother and Theodore were the two great themes of her thoughts; and of her lover's coming back she talked with joy and smiles to her own attendants; but, with kindly care, which showed how thoughtful she was for others, she avoided, as far as possible, the mention of his name to Neva.

Bleda's daughter, indeed, was now her chief companion; shared the same tent, and spent whole hours with her on each succeeding day. On Ildica she seemed to look as on a superior being; and seated at her feet, with her arm resting on the fair Dalmatian's knee, she would gaze up into her face, trace all those beautiful lines, and mark the full lustrous eye, the swelling lip, and clear and rounded nostril, pure and defined, but soft and graceful as if chiselled from the Parian marble. Thus she would gaze, and think in her own mind, that it was no wonder such a face and form as that, with such a spirit as shone through all that beauty, had lighted and kept alive, as pure and unextinguished as the fire of Vesta, the flames of love within the heart of one worthy of her--within a heart incapable of forgetfulness or falsehood.

Twice only did it happen that Ildica, who, however sadly her own heart might be wrung, forgot not easily the feelings of another, mentioned even the name of Theodore in the hearing of Neva. The first time the fair girl coloured and looked down; but the second she was sitting, as we have said, at Ildica's feet; and though her countenance glowed, she gazed up and asked, "When you saw him, did he never mention Neva's name?"

Ildica bent down her head, and kissed the fair girl's brow, saying, "Yes, dear Neva, he did mention you."

"And what did he say?" demanded Neva, burying her face in Ildica's robe--"what did he say?"

"He told me," answered Ildica, pressing her hand gently, "he told me how kind and good you had been to him; how you attended him in sickness, saved him by your care from death, and rescued him in his moment of utmost danger from the hands of those who would have slain him. He told me all, dear Neva, he told me all."

Neva cast herself upon Ildica's bosom and wept. "Then he told you," she murmured, through her tears, "how I loved him, and how kindly and gently he soothed the feelings he could not return; how nobly and honestly he told me that he loved another, whom he must ever love."

Ildica pressed her in her arms; and, raising her eyes towards heaven, she said, in a low voice, "Oh God! why should I hope to be happy when this sweet being is wretched?"

"Nay, nay, Ildica," cried Neva, starting back as her ear caught those words, "I am not wretched; I am as happy as my state will admit; I am happy in possessing the next best blessing to the great one of his love. I have his friendship, his gratitude! I am happy in having served him; I am happy in having seen the being that he loves, and in loving her myself," and she pressed a fond kiss on Ildica's glowing cheek. "Now, Ildica," she continued, "now you know how I feel. I have seen you; I know you; I am sure you are worthy of him; and so help me all the gods, if it were in my power this moment to take him from you and bind him to myself, I would rather die than do it! Speak to me about him when you will, you will inflict no pain upon my heart. He is your own, your beloved, your rightful husband. Neva is contented with her lot."

Ildica smiled sadly. "Oh Neva," she answered, "it is hard to be generous in love! There is no one thing on earth I know of that I would not give to make you happy, except the affection of Theodore."

"And now I would not have it, could it be given," Neva replied; "but he will soon be back again, dear Ildica. More than three weeks out of the two months allotted for his absence have already passed, and he will soon be here: Ildica will then be his bride, and Neva will weave the bridal flowers for her hair. Only remain within your tent, Ildica, as long as you can; and when the army marches on again, be carried in your litter without speaking, so that Attila may think you are still ill."

Ildica started, and gazed on Neva with surprise. "Why should I try to deceive Attila?" she demanded: "I have long wondered why you should oppose my going forth to breathe the free outward air when I am ill no longer. Tell me, dear Neva, tell me what I have done to offend Attila?"

"You have done nothing to offend him," answered Neva: "oh no; it is not his wrath that we fear! It is, that the sight of your beauty might inflame his love. Therefore was it that Ardaric, who loves your Theodore, so strongly counselled that you should hold the semblance of sickness as long as may be."

Ildica sank back upon the cushions that supported her, and hid her pale face in her hands, as if the doom of death had been pronounced in her ear. Terror overcame every reasoning power for some moments, and it seemed as if the fate which had been spoken of as merely possible, was certain and inevitable; and with her hands covering her face and her bosom heaving with convulsive sobs, she sat for several moments in silence; while Neva, alarmed by the state into which her words cast her, tried, by every kindly effort, to sooth and reassure her.

At length the fair Roman suddenly removed her hands, exclaiming, "I had forgot myself, Neva! and had given way to terror, a feeling that should have no empire in my bosom. I do not, I will not fear this man, terrible as he is. I will hide myself from his eyes most willingly. Till Theodore comes back, I will never leave my tent: but if my evil fate should draw his looks upon me; if what you fear on my account should occur, he shall find that the daughter of a Roman can act a Roman's part. No, I will not leave this tent till Theodore returns."

"Alas! dearest Ildica," replied Neva, "ere two days be over you will be forced to leave it. Attila has ravaged all this part of the country: these plains, so fertile and so populous not a fortnight since, when we first issued forth from the mountains and encamped a two days' journey from Tridentum, are now as bare as the summit of the Alps, and not a human being save the followers of the mighty king can be seen for miles around. The white bones of the Romans who have been slain, indeed, whiten the ground; and troops of wolves have followed us from the mountains, as if they had been called by the voice of Attila himself to the feast he fails not to prepare for them; but nothing living and breathing is to be seen but ourselves and those fierce beasts; and the day after to-morrow we are appointed to march on and carry the same bloody scourge, the same fiery sword, farther into the empire."

Ildica looked up towards the sky. "Oh God!" she murmured, "must such things be? Hast thou no chosen instrument, as in the days of old, to check the ravager in his course, to smite the mighty murderer of nations?" and, clasping her hands together, she fixed her eyes upon the ground, falling into a long, intense fit of gloomy meditation.

"It is strange," she continued, when, rousing herself at length from her revery, she found Neva still sitting beside her in silence, and gazing anxiously upon her--"it is very strange! But who can tell the purpose of the Almighty? who can see into the wise counsels of the Omniscient? who can tell at what trifling stumbling block this great conqueror may fall down, or what small and insignificant means may, in the hand of God, bring all his sanguinary expeditions to an end?"

"I do believe," said Neva, "that when he killed my father, Bleda, I should have slain him myself if I had ever been within arm's length of him, and alone. But he is much loved by his own people, and they keep a watch for him; and now he has been kind to me, and wiped out the memory of my father's death by tenderness and affection both to my mother and myself."

"No personal revenge," said Ildica, thoughtfully, "can ever justify us in shedding a human

being's blood--at least I think so, Neva; but in our own defence, or in the defence of those we love, or of our country, or our faith, surely, surely God, the God of Hosts, will hallow and sanctify the deed. I think so, Neva, I believe so, but I will meditate upon it: I will inquire from the only source where we can find sure guidance."

"Where is that?" demanded Neva.

"In the word of God," answered Ildica, abstractedly, and again she fell into a fit of meditation, from which her fair companion did not choose to rouse her. At length Ildica woke up of herself, and the sort of shadowy gloom which had hung upon her seemed in a degree banished by reflection; for when she looked up, a smile, faint and chastened indeed, but still most beautiful, played upon her lip for a moment.

"I cannot but think, dear Neva," she said, "I cannot but hope, that we have been combating imaginary adversaries. Why should Attila think of me? why should any idle beauty that you talk of make him persecute one who never injured him, or wrong a man who, like Theodore, has served him well, and whom he himself professes to love."

"You know him not, Ildica, you know him not," replied Neva; "his passions are fierce, and devouring as the flame; and we poor women, but the slaves of his pleasures, are no more in his eyes than merchandise, things to be used while they please, and to be cast away when the gloss of novelty is gone. Besides, those passions, though they once had a check, have now none. He is changed, Ildica, he is changed! Within the last two years a change has come over him which renders him no longer the same man. In former days you might rely upon his justice, if not upon his humanity; you might trust in his friendship as much as you were compelled to fear his enmity. He was sincere, though never frank; and those who knew Attila well could calculate his rising up, and his going down, and his course throughout the day, as surely as they could calculate the rising and setting of the sun himself. But he is changed, Ildica, he is changed! He has grown suspicious of his dearest friends, deceitful towards those who love him best, intemperate in all things; and while by day he revels in blood, at night he revels in wine, till drunkenness closes the day which was begun with slaughter. The only thing that ever withholds him from gratifying his desires is shame; and if we can but keep thee from his thoughts till thy lover returns, the fear of sinking lower in the esteem of his chieftains will keep him from doing thee a wrong, from violating his word."

"But why should I fear," said Ildica, "more than all the many women who, I learn, are in the camp."

"Because thou art more beautiful than them all," answered Neva, looking up in her face with a smile.

"Yes, but he let Eudochia go," replied Ildica; "he suffered her to depart without one apparent wish to stay her; and she was much more beautiful than I am--younger, lovelier in every way."

"Oh no," cried Neva, "not half so lovely! But, besides, if I must tell thee all, I heard my cousin Ellac, the great king's son, contriving with Onegisus to inflame Attila's love for thee. He has hated Theodore ever since he set foot among our tribes, and he knew that he could take no more terrible revenge upon him, that he could bring down no more certain destruction upon his head, than by raising up against him Attila as a rival in his love. I heard them lay their plot, and I know that they executed it in part. For that purpose was Theodore sent forth; for that purpose wert thou kept here; and had it not been for thy illness and for Ardaric's protection, who loves thy promised husband, thou hadst received, ere this time, terrible proofs that our fears for thee are anything but vain."

"I do remember," answered Ildica, "that on that sad night before Theodore's departure, one of the barbarian leaders, a noble-looking man, whom he called Ardaric, and in whom he afterward bade me trust implicitly, came to us, and warned him of some approaching danger--"

"It was I who warned Ardaric," interrupted Neva, "because I knew that he was sincere and true, and loved thy Theodore well. All that he knew he heard from me, or from that unhappy Moor, that deformed and mutilated negro, whom thou hast seen twice follow me into thy tent. He also watched and saw much; and, with a shrewdness all his own, perceived that Attila was not unwilling to follow where his baser son would lead him."

Ildica clasped her hands and gazed down upon the ground. "Oh, Neva!" she said at length, "you must aid and protect me; for--though I know, and feel sure, that if the hour of difficulty were to come I should find courage, on the instant, to behave as befits my race and nation--though I feel sure and confident that there is no act which I should fear to do, that justice and my honour required of me--yet, Neva, yet I would fain shrink from the trial. In the contemplation of it I am but a woman; and my very soul sinks, faint and dispirited, at the very thought of what I may be called upon to suffer and to do."

"I will aid you, I will assist you, dear Ildica," replied Bleda's daughter; "and there are many more in the camp who can assist you better, and who are willing to do so too; but I hear some one in the outer tent. It is the voice of Zercon, I think, speaking with your slaves in him, too, you may trust; for he is one who will be faithful unto death. He has known me from a child, and loves me

well; and, since my father's death, there is scarce a bitter cruelty in all the long dark catalogue of inflictions which man's savage, demon-like heart has invented, that Attila has not practised upon him. He hates Attila, therefore, and he loves all who are persecuted by his persecutor."

"I have heard Theodore mention him," replied Ildica. "Did he not aid in his escape? I would fain see him again, and speak with him. All who may assist or aid me are valuable to me, dear Neva."

Neva advanced, and drew back the curtains of the inner tent for a moment, saying, "Dost thou seek me, Zercon? What wouldst thou with me? Come hither, and speak with me," she added, ere the man could reply. Returning to the side of Ildica, she seated herself near her on the cushions; while the negro, Zercon, came forward, and drew the curtains of the tent behind him.

"I came to warn you," he said, "that there are orders gone forth for the whole host to move forward by dawn of day to-morrow, upon Verona itself. Be wary, be cautious, lady," he added, fixing his eyes upon Ildica; "all has gone well as yet; but the malice of enemies has but a light slumber."

"My friend," said Ildica, in a calm but sad tone, "I have to thank thee both for thine interest in myself and for the services thou hast rendered to one dearer to me than myself. This sweet lady near me, thy dead master's child, tells me that thou wilt befriend me, and will be faithful unto me even unto death."

"That were saying little, lady," replied the negro. "Death, to me, is not a thing to be feared. I will serve thee, if I can, through severer trials than that; though I think that all the skill of Attila himself will hardly discover a new torture or indignity which the body of man can suffer--without being separated from the spirit--that he has not already practised upon this wretched frame."

"I am sorry for thee, my friend, I am sorry for thee," replied Ildica. "*Thy* sufferings should teach us to bear *our* lesser evils with more patience and fortitude."

"Lady," said Zercon, "the difference between thy state and mine renders the computation of evils in our several cases very different also. Those evils, which to you are of the greatest magnitude, to me are less than the sting of a piping gnat; and it is not that we bear them differently, but that our states from infancy to this hour have rendered them really different. You have been nurtured in ease, in peace, and happiness. God made you beautiful as the day, and poured through your young veins a stream of lordly blood, drawn from a source of mighty conquerors. Philosophers and schoolmen taught you how to enjoy; and wise and good relations showed you, from your youth up, the path of virtue, and bade you prize honour as much, or more than life. Your heart and feelings, your mind and soul, even like your tender body itself, are subject to a thousand pangs, acute and dreadful, to which mine are all insensible. I, born on an arid soil, sprung from a despised race, gifted with deformity, nurtured in hardship, companion from my infancy with famine, thirst, disease, and pain, tutored but to bear, and bred up in the bitterest school of suffering--I look upon evils which to other men are great, as enjoyment--actual happiness! I may have heard the voice of philosophy, too; I may have listened to wise and learned men; but the only doctrine which has been preached to me is to suffer all things--the only lesson that I have learned through life has been endurance. The couch that feels hard to other men as a flinty rock, is a bed of down to me. Contumely and disgrace have lost their sting: my body is insensible to blows, and my heart to indignity. If I lie down to rest without the mutilating knife of tyranny lopping away my limbs, I mark the day with a white stone, and cry! 'Oh happy chance!' And though I have been too well tutored in bearing the worst ever to take refuge at the altar of death, where tyrants dare not follow, till fate shall lead me thither, yet, when the hour comes that opens that sanctuary to me, how glad will be its shelter, how heavenly its repose. Lady! oh, beautiful lady! if you can give me any service which can merit death, I will bless you as for an inestimable boon."

"Alas! my friend, I know not what may come," answered Ildica, with tears standing in her eyes. "The time may not be far distant when I, too, shall look to death as the only relief."

"I understand you, lady," answered Zercon, "and I know your danger; but it is one from which your own hand can righteously deliver you if ever it becomes imminent. Zercon--the poor, the despised Zercon--can give you a gift worth more than a talent of gold in the hour of peril. Look here!" and, approaching closer to Ildica, he drew from his bosom a small dagger, the blade of which might be somewhat more than a span in length. The haft was small, and formed of ivory; and the blade, when he took it from the sheath, though dull in colour and in polish, was evidently as sharp as a knife both at the point and edge.

"This steel," continued Zercon, "hard as a diamond and sharp as a graver's tool, would, if struck with a firm hand, pierce the strongest corslet that ever came from the armorer's anvil. In the hand of an infant, it would slay a giant; and I give it unto you, lady, against the hour when terror shall give place to resolution, and horror shall conquer fear."

He spoke like a prophet; and Ildica took the dagger, and gazed upon its blade. "Do you mean," she asked, after a long pause, "that I should use this thing against my own life?"

"No," answered Zercon, eagerly; "no! I have never used it against mine; but I have felt that

there was a point at which endurance was bound to stop; and that, if the time should come when opportunity favoured the blow, I was called upon by the immutable command of nature to strike in my own defence. That opportunity has never come; for it would but little serve me, when a tyrant ordered his slaves to cut away my ears or my thumbs, to take the life of one or two of his instruments. Had he been within arm's length himself, he had died as surely as I lived."

Ildica mused with a melancholy look, still holding the dagger on her knee, while Neva, with the negro slave, gazed up in her face. The Moor seemed to read her thoughts. "Lady," he said, "I hold the same faith as you do. I have held it from my youth; but I am justified. Read in that book, if thou canst read; not in the latter part alone, but in the former also; and thou shalt find that our country's defence or our own has been held just and righteous cause for slaying the oppressor. Lady, I say no more. Conceal the weapon in your robe; and should you ever have cause to use it, let it be no hasty, ill-considered blow, aimed in the terror of the moment, but with calm deliberation, in a chosen time, with the strength of virtue and of justice, and the firmness of conscious right. I have given you what, if wisely used, is better than a jewel; but I will serve you with my heart's dearest blood to avoid the necessity of ever using it; and now farewell."

He retired as he spoke; and Ildica, taking up the dagger, held it for a moment firmly in her hand, and then placed it in her bosom. Neva gazed upon her as she did so with a look of deep emotion; and then, sinking on her knees beside the fair Roman, threw her arms around her, and hid her face upon her lap, murmuring, "Oh, may you never have to use it!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE POWER OF RESOLUTION.

Scarcely was Zercon gone when the hangings of the tent which he had let fall behind him were again pushed aside, and an old woman, of some barbarian tribe, frightful in features, and fantastically dressed, entered and stood before Ildica. Neva started up; and when she beheld this personage she turned very pale.

"What wouldst thou?" demanded Ildica, in her own language; but the woman did not seem to understand her, and continued to gaze upon her from head to foot.

"What wouldst thou?" repeated Neva, in the Hunnish tongue; in reply to which the old crone burst into a loud and scornful laugh, adding, "I came to see what I have seen!" and, turning as she spoke, she left the tent without waiting for further inquiries.

"Who is that, dear Neva?" demanded Ildica. "She is rude and strange in her demeanour."

"Alas! alas!" replied Neva; "I fear her coming bodes no good. She is skilled in healing, and dwells among the wives of Attila; and I doubt not that she has been sent to see if thou art still as ill as we have reported."

At these words Ildica herself turned pale, and gazed anxiously upon the countenance of Neva. She had no time, however, to inquire further; for scarcely had the woman left the tent when there was a cry of "Attila! Attila! The king! the king!" and the domestic attendants, who had followed the fair Roman girl and her mother through all their fortunes, ran in with looks of apprehension from the outer tent, and surrounded their beloved mistress.

The moment after the cry of "Attila! Attila!" was repeated, the hangings were again drawn back, and the dark monarch of the Huns advanced at once into the tent. There was a mortal paleness upon Ildica's countenance; but, from the moment that the cry of "Attila! Attila!" had sounded on her ear till the moment that he came into her presence, the eyes of those who surrounded her saw an expression of high and noble resolution gathering upon that fair, lofty forehead, as the electric clouds upon a summer's day may be seen rolling round some mountain peak, till that which, in the morning light, was all clear and fair, becomes, ere noon, awful in the proud majesty of the coming storm.

All rose and retired a step as Attila entered, except Ildica; but she, with queenlike calmness, kept her place: and it was wonderful to all eyes to behold that sweet and gentle girl, full of tenderness and soft affections, changed in a moment, by the power of a great mind and mighty resolution, into a proud and lordly being, fit to cope with the great conqueror of one half of the earth. There she sat immovable, gazing with the unquailing light of her lustrous eyes upon the dark monarch as he advanced towards her; and even Attila himself--though the cause was surprise and admiration only--paused for a single instant midway in his approach, and scarcely

could believe his eyes, that this was the same creature whom he had last beheld dissolved in tears beside her departing brother. Her beauty, however, was as radiant, though it shone through another air; and, again advancing, he seated himself beside her calmly on the cushions, saying, "They have deceived me: they told me you were ill!"

"I have been ill, oh king!" replied Ildica, in a voice not a tone of which faltered, even in the slightest degree, "I have been ill, very nearly unto death."

"Illness seldom wears so lovely a form," replied Attila, in a softened voice. "Attila trusts that thou art better, fair maiden; else thy beauty belies thy state."

"I am better, oh king," answered Ildica; "and I trust that a few days more of repose may restore me completely unto health."

"Were it not better for thee," said Attila, "to seek the open air, and draw in the pure breath of the summer day, than, sitting here in the close atmosphere of a tent, to waste the hours of sunshine?"

"The covering of this tent, oh king," replied Ildica, boldly, "shuts out from me more things than the pure air; and if, in going forth, I should gain advantage from the sweet breath of heaven visiting my lips, the sights that I should behold would carry tenfold poison to my heart by the sure channel of the eye--at least, if all be true that I have heard."

"What hast thou heard?" demanded Attila, quickly, rolling his eye over those that surrounded them, "what hast thou heard, sweet Ildica?"

"I have heard," she replied, unwilling to call down the anger of that terrible monarch upon any one else, however sure she might be of encountering it ultimately herself--"I have heard but the usual tale of warfare: I have heard of populous cities taken and made desolate; of blood drowning out the fire on the dear domestic hearth: of thousands and tens of thousands slaughtered, and their bodies lying unburied in the fields, or nailed, if they resisted, to the trees of their own fruitful gardens. I have heard of the whole land swept of its produce, its arts obliterated, its monuments destroyed, its husbandmen slain, even its women and children put to the sword--and that land my country!"

She paused; but Attila made no reply, and sat listening as if he expected her to go on. "Pardon me, oh king," continued Ildica--"pardon me, if I am bold to say thus much; but as it was grief which brought me nearly unto death at first--deep, bitter grief!--I am told that any grief whatsoever, added anew, may complete what the other left undone, and bring me at once unto the grave."

"A mother's death," replied Attila, without any sign of anger at the bold and proud demeanour of the fair Roman girl--"a mother's death, so sudden and unexpected, might well shake the strength and fortitude of a daughter; but, as to other things, I see not why she should let her mind rest upon them."

"Let me not boast, oh king!" replied Ildica, resolved to leave no word unspoken which might guard her against all she feared--"let me not boast, but yet I may say, my fortitude is never shaken. It was the bodily strength gave way, and not the resolution of the heart. Neither was it a mother's loss alone: that was the last of many sorrows. Before it went the parting with my brother and the sister of my heart; and before that again the still bitterer parting with my promised husband, with him I loved, and always have loved, better than anything on earth."

Attila's brow grew dark, and he fixed his eyes bitterly upon the ground. Ildica marked the expression, however much he strove to control it, but she proceeded all the more eagerly; and had he been a tiger ready for the spring, still she would have gone on. "Yes, oh king! that, though the first, was the bitterest stroke of all--for who shall tell how I love him, how deeply, how sincerely, how beyond all other things I love him. Without him, life to me is a dark blank; and when you forbade our union, and sent him from me to a distant land, you struck the blow that undermined my health; you filled high the cup that my mother's death caused afterward to overflow."

She paused again, and Attila looked up and replied, "Thy voice is sweet and musical, lovely girl, but thy words are harsh and somewhat grating to mine ear. Attila seeks not to make thee unhappy; but be not rash, and change the tenderness which he feels for thee and thine into a less gentle temper. I would not force thee to behold sights which may be painful to a woman's eye; but to-morrow early, thou, as well as the rest, must set out upon our onward march."

"Must we then go on," said Ildica; "I had hoped, as thou hast encamped here long, some cause might induce thee to turn thy fiery sword another way, and not let the edge fall heavy upon Rome."

"We must upon our march!" replied Attila, "we must upon our march! The country around us is exhausted of its stores. We have dried up the land of its wine and oil, like the summer's sun shining on a scanty brook. All is consumed; and where the foot of Attila's horse has trod grows no grass afterward. I paused here," he added, with a grim smile, "because my son sent me word that a pitiful city of the Venetian province resisted the army of Attila, one of those stony piles in which

you Romans love to dwell, called Aquileia."

"What? Aquileia, the beautiful, the proud," exclaimed Ildica, "the provincial Rome?"

"The same," replied Attila, "It dared to shut its gates against those I sent to possess it; and when I reached them myself, I found that it had made its resistance good. It was different from the usual Roman towns. There were more than women and boys within. The catapult and balista had been plied in vain. The walls held out; and as I rode around, the soldiers on the towers, in their fancied security, laughed loud, and mocked the arms of Attila. But there was a certain stork-wiser, by the gods' own teaching, than the fools within--who saw the horse of Attila pause before the spot where she had built her nest upon the ramparts, and, auguring destruction to the towers on which he looked, she took her young ones on her back, and flew away for ever. Over the fragments of her nest, strewn upon the ruins of that wall, passed the horse of Attila ere nightfall; and now let after ages look for Aquileia, and find some scattered stones spread over a desolate plain. The brothers of those who defended it shall never gather their bones into their family sepulchre; for the flames of that city have confounded all, and nothing but dust is left. Thus perish all who resist the will of Attila," he added, and fixed his eyes full on Ildica.

"They did but die," replied the Roman girl, and she gave him back his glance as proudly as it was sent. The light of irrepressible admiration rose in that mighty monarch's eyes, and for several minutes he remained gazing upon her in silence; but there mingled with that steadfast look an expression which, in spite of every effort, called the quick and modest blood into the cheek of Ildica.

"Those whom Attila loves," said the king, "are as sure of benefits as those who resist him of punishments; and surely the regard of one, before whom the proudest monarchs of the earth bow down their heads, is a prize worth having to those whose hearts are noble and their spirit high. The great, the generous, and the lofty minded should ever love each other; and I say to thee, fair maiden, that thy noble and thy daring mind has this day commanded the esteem of Attila more fully than even thy radiant, thine unequalled beauty has called forth the admiration of his eyes."

"Esteem, oh Attila!" replied Ildica, in a calm, solemn tone, "must ever create esteem; for it is founded on virtue, and ever springs from it. Those we esteem we would never debase, and dare not injure; and Ildica rests tranquilly upon the esteem of Attila for protection against all men--even should it be against himself."

Attila cast down his eyes, and for a few moments remained in thought; then turning to the attendants round, he said, in a tone that admitted no reply, "Leave us!"

One by one, those who stood near left the tent, Neva following more slowly and with downcast eyes. Ildica lifted her heart to heaven, and prayed internally for strength and wisdom, for she felt that the hour of trial might be coming near. The hangings of the tent fell; but scarcely had they fallen when there came sudden voices sounding eagerly without, and in a moment after Onegisus entered the presence of Attila.

"Let me die if I have offended, oh mighty king!" he said, in breathless haste; "but I have tidings that admit no delay."

"Speak them!" said Attila.

"Ætius, oh king, has passed the mountains," replied the chief; "he brings with him the legions of Gaul. Valentinian has left Ravenna, and gathers an army under the walls of Rome. The fleets of Marcian are upon the Adriatic."

Attila listened without a change of countenance. "Thy news from the East is false," he said: "Marcian stirs not. Valentinian is a fly in a spider's web. Is it sure that Ætius has passed the mountains?"

"The tribe of Ilgours, who were in the country of the Burgundians," replied Onegisus, "followed his march, and have sent on messengers to warn the king."

"Then it is true," said Attila, rising, "and we must scourge him back into Gaul. Attila marches for Milan. I leave you, my friend, to tread upon Verona and Padua, and to sweep the plains behind me of all adversaries. Leave nothing dangerous behind, and follow with all speed. Where are Ardaric and Valamir? They must accompany me this night!" and with a slow and deliberate step he left the tent, giving no sign of emotion of any kind, unless his leaving Ildica without a word, or even a look, might be construed into a proof of how much the tidings he had just heard affected him at heart.

Ildica lifted her eyes to heaven, and clasped her hands, exclaiming, "Oh God, thou dost not desert me in my utmost need! On thee will I rely!" and, with a heart relieved, she burst into a long but happy flood of tears.

"To Milan!" she thought--"to Milan! That is far off. Ætius, too, is before him. Ere I shall see his face again, Theodore will have returned, and I shall be delivered!" and again she wept. Her attendants flocked around her; and some seeing her state, without knowing why, mingled their tears with hers.

"Weep not, my friends," she said at length--"weep not! I weep for joy! Leave me alone for a while; and give me the ivory scrinium with the silver clasps. There is a book therein I would fain read to tranquillize my mind."

The attendants obeyed; and bringing her the casket which she had mentioned, set it down beside her and retired. Ildica opened the scrinium, and, from among a number of rolls of parchment and papyrus, selected a manuscript in vellum, gathered together into the form of two or three small volumes, and pored eagerly upon the pages, seeming to find there matter for deep meditation and solemn interest. Now, her eye ran rapidly over the lines, and her hand turned the pages without pause; and then again she would suddenly stop, and looking up, as if for light and direction, would think for several minutes over what she had just read, as if the sense were doubtful, or the precept difficult of application. But the book was one which, in every age since first its words were traced upon that page of light, has caused, and well might cause, the mind of man to lose itself in lofty musings. It was the book which to the eye of the inspired patriarch of old was shown, in the vision of those heavenly steps by which the angels of God came down to earth, and ascended back again on high. It was the book which leads the soul, step by step, from the thoughts of earth, and the common and familiar things which the mind of man can grasp, up to those wide and sublime regions where, standing at the footstool of the Almighty throne, we still gaze up on high, and thought loses itself in the boundless space of mercy, power, and wisdom. It was that book, down each gradation of which angels and prophets came to visit earth, and lead back into heaven the just, the humble, and the true.

There, as she read, the eye might see the history of that sacred Being during his short stay on earth, whose life was mercy and purity; whose words were wisdom and holiness; whose birth and whose death were equally miraculous and beneficent, an example, a teacher, a guide, a sacrifice, an atonement. There, too, as her eye ran back over the long record, which marks the preservation of the revealed knowledge of our God, holy, and true, and wise, throughout ages and among nations, corrupt, perverse, unfaithful, the eye might trace the simple, touching story of the early fathers of mankind, and see displayed in the candid words of Divine truth their thoughts, their errors, and their virtues, without a shade of palliation or excuse. There lay revealed the mighty trial of Abraham's triumphant faith; there, the sweet history of Joseph and his little brother; there, the tale of Ruth, and of the widow and her son, and the mighty faults and virtues of Israel's psalmist king; there, his son's instructive wisdom and monitory fall; there, all those affecting scenes which, in their grand simplicity, defy the brightest eloquence of every people and of every time, to move the heart of man as they do.

But it was not on such scenes that the eye of Ildica principally rested. She sought for matters more assimilating with her fate and fortunes at the time. She read of the battles of the chosen people of God, their wars, their victories, their reverses. She paused, and thought upon the history of Sisera and Jael; but oh, how her heart thrilled when she read the tale of the tyrant warrior, from whom a woman's hand delivered the people of the Lord! She read! she trembled! she gasped for breath! She laid down the book and wept aloud!

Oh let us leave the secret feelings of her heart to commune with themselves undisclosed! for who can say what those feelings were, how deep, how sad, how terrible? Who can tell them all perfectly, who can display the struggle, and the mingling, and the strife, wherein a thousand opposing thoughts, and hopes, and fears, bright sympathies, noble aspirations, lofty purposes, and mighty inspirations, together with woman's shrinking modesty, intense love, and tender nature, contended like hostile nations bent on mutual destruction within the narrow battle-field of that fair, beautiful bosom? Who can tell them all? and, if not all, should we trifle with a part? Oh no, no! we have said enough!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WEAK AGAINST THE STRONG.

Through the most fertile plain that Europe can display, amid the olive and the fig, the loaded vine and the ripening corn, with on one side a vast and interminable view over lands laughing in the richest gifts of nature, and on the other mounting up into the sky the gigantic mountains which separate that bright land from all the rest of earth, passed on a multitude of those savage warriors, who were destined to change the rich plains of Lombardy from the garden of the world to the most desolate spot of this quarter of the globe.

But, alas! not alone did those fierce warriors take their way, unaccompanied by any of the children of the soil. On the contrary, closely following their march, appeared a body which contained within itself sad samples of all the vice, the weakness, the baseness of the land. There

was the skilful engineer, whose warlike but not perilous art provided the means of destruction for other men's hands to use; there was the theoretic strategist, whose pen prepared the plans of battles that he could not fight; there the sculptor and the limner, ready ever to transmit unto posterity the features of those whose actions commanded admiration, though not applause; there the thousand fawning slaves, ready to forget all ties, so long as they could cover baser bonds by the golden ties of interest. Besides all these were the captives, not chained, indeed, but dragged along by fetters as powerful as rings of iron, selected and preserved from slaughtered myriads for a fate worse than death itself, on account of those qualities which adorn and beautify the blessed state of freedom. Beauty, skill, strength, and activity: these were the sad gifts that purchased slavery.

In the midst of these--herself a captive, though surrounded by her own slaves, now all in bondage to another--was borne along the fair Dalmatian girl, whose fate has occupied so much of our attention. Her way was cleared by parties of the Huns appointed expressly for that purpose; and honours, too queenlike, awaited her wherever she paused. In many a place she found garlands strewed in her way, and tutored rejoicings greeted her at every resting-place. But oh! the coldest silence, the most icy indifference would have conveyed more warmth to her heart than those demonstrations of a distinction which she feared. Seldom, very seldom did she raise her eyes; but, poring earnestly on a book before her, seemed buried in contemplations from which no external objects could awaken her. Twice only during the second day's journey from Verona did she look up, and then her attention was called forcibly towards too terrible a sight by the wild ejaculations of the attendants who surrounded her. On either side of the road appeared, when she did look up, a range of trees, which had been planted to afford a pleasant shelter to the weary wayfarer from the burning rays of the summer's sun. But now, fixed upon those trees, were immense crosses of wood, on each of which, extended by nails in the hands and feet, was seen the dead body of a human being, contorted with the agonies of a painful death. Nor had one nation alone nor one country furnished the victims for that awful sacrifice; for there were seen the dark-visaged Hun, the fair-haired Frank, the large-limbed Goth, the strong-featured Roman--all, in short, against whom any charge of deceit or infidelity towards Attila and the Hunnish nation could be brought, were arrayed in fearful assemblage to terrify the passer-by.

Ildica gazed on them when her attention was forced towards them; and then, clasping her hands, she looked up on high, while her lips murmured woman's prayer for patience under all the sad scenes which she was destined to act in and behold. Then again, casting down her eyes, she strove to avoid, as far as possible, such fearful sights, hoping that brighter days and more joyful objects might come, and blot them out for ever from the tablets of memory, or soften the harsh lines so that they should be no longer painful. But still, as they marched onward, fresh scenes of desolation and horror were forced upon her sight, and, whether she would or not, the indignant heart swelled up, and a voice within her bosom exclaimed, "Oh for a warrior's soul and a warrior's might! Oh for an ancient Roman's undaunted energy, to stem this dark and ruinous torrent in its course, to drive back the destroyer of my native land, to snatch the bloody scourge out of the hand of fate, and hurl it for ever into the gulf of death!"

At length a large and magnificent city appeared before her; and Ildica prepared her eyes to behold the same utter destruction which she had beheld in every other town. Her astonishment was great, however, on entering Mediolanum,^[5] to behold the inhabitants pursuing their ordinary occupations; the shops opened, and their wares exposed in the very presence of those ruthless barbarians who had come to spoil and desolate the land. It is true, the great body of Attila's army was encamped without its walls, and that but a few thousand of the Huns were permitted to enter the city; but still, with its gates in their possession, and its walls covered by their troops, Milan was at the mercy of the Hunnish multitude, and nothing but the awful name of Attila saved it from destruction.

The troops of Onegisus entered not the gates of the city; but the litter of Ildica was borne forward through the principal streets, and at length stopped before a magnificent pile of building, which was, in fact, the royal palace of Milan. Those who accompanied her waited for directions from some one within; and, after a brief pause, the litter was again carried on into the interior of the palace. At the foot of the great staircase it was set down, and Ildica with her attendants was bade to follow on foot. From room to room, from hall to hall, from gallery to gallery, she was led onward by several of the barbarian chiefs, beholding, as she advanced, with wonder, not unmixed with pleasure, that, amid all the splendour which that building displayed, amid all the monuments of art which it contained, no act of violence had been perpetrated by the hand of the barbarians, but that there every object remained untouched, or at least uninjured. At one spot, indeed, she beheld a painter busily employed in labouring with the brush upon the walls, but he was a Roman; and on looking nearer she perceived that he was making a complete change in one of the pictures, which represented some barbarian kings kneeling at the feet of a Roman emperor.

"What doest thou, my friend?" she asked.

"I am working at the command of the mighty Attila," replied the painter, "in order to change this picture so as to suit the changes of the time. When I have done, two Roman emperors will be seen kneeling at the feet of a Scythian king."

Ildica walked on without reply, feeling bitterly in her heart the truth of the sad lesson which Attila thus taught.

At the farther extremity of the building she found the apartments assigned to her; and in a moment or two after she had entered them, and when the Huns who conducted her had withdrawn, Neva, whom she had not beheld for many days, approached, and took her fondly in her arms. The girl's countenance was sad, however, and while she gazed upon Ildica the tears rose in her eyes.

"Shall I say welcome?" she asked--"shall I say welcome, when I fear that much grief awaits you? shall I say welcome to a place where you must hear many things that will grieve you!"

At these words the dull, heavy weight fell again upon Ildica's heart, and the struggle recommenced, the painful struggle, of strong and high-minded resolution against woman's natural fears and apprehensions. "Speak," she replied, "speak, dear Neva. Tell me what new cause of sorrow and of terror has arisen. Tell me what step has been taken in the warfare that fate seems resolved to wage against my happiness on earth."

"Alas!" replied Neva, "alas! that my lip should tell it; but it is only right to warn thee of what you might hear too soon from other lips, and might hear unprepared. Attila speaks of thee often: Attila speaks of thee with love: Attila speaks of thee as of one destined to be his; and thou knowest, Ildica, that his will is like the will of fate."

"Not so, Neva; not so," replied Ildica. "There is a will above his!" But while she thus expressed her trust, the tears rolled from her eyes in despite of every effort, and she wept bitterly. "There is a will above his," she said, "holier, more merciful, and mightier far! In it will I trust, Neva, in it will I trust! But what do I do weeping?" she added--"what do I do weeping, when I have to think, to resolve, and act? what do I do weeping, when lo he comes, and I have need of vigour, not of tears; of determination, not of terror? Hear you not his step, hear you not his step? He is coming! he is coming! Hear you not his step?" and, as she spoke, she grasped the arm of the fair girl tight in her hand, and gazed towards the door with a look of wild and painful anticipation, which, had it not been too well justified by her circumstances, might well have passed for the vivid but wandering glance of insanity.

"It is not his foot you hear," replied Neva, fondly linking herself to Ildica, and striving to assuage the fears which she had herself occasioned. "That is not his step--I know it well, Ildica! I have known it, and trembled at it from my infancy. As the beasts of the field have an intimation of the earthquake, and fly trembling from the walls over which the impending ruin is suspended--as the light summer insect, to whom the falling drop of a spring shower is a deadly ocean, finds some warning to seek shelter beneath the foliage against the coming destruction--as the birds cease their song, and the cattle seek the fold before the approaching storm--so unto me has been given an augury of danger and of terror, in the world-shaking step of that awful king. I have heard it in the sunshine of summer, and the sunshine has been clouded: I have heard it in the dead of the night, and night has assumed the horror of the grave. But hark! Whoever it is that speaks with the attendants without--that voice is not Attila's, nor was the step."

As she spoke the curtain was withdrawn, and there appeared, not the form of the Scythian king, but that of Ardaric, chief of the Gepidæ. His countenance, as we have already said, was naturally frank and open; and, unlike that of Attila, it displayed, as in a highly polished mirror, every emotion of his heart, except when, by some great effort, he drew an unwonted veil over the picture of his thoughts, which there found their ordinary expression. His face was now clouded; and advancing towards Neva, he spoke a few words to her in the Hunnish dialect; and then turning towards Ildica, addressed her, though with considerable difficulty, in the Latin tongue.

Agitated, terrified, and confused, it was with difficulty Ildica gathered his meaning. She found, however, that what he said consisted of warnings of approaching danger, like those which Neva had already given, and of caution and advice as to how she should avoid or mitigate them. Though for the time Ildica's mind could scarcely grasp those counsels, yet they returned beneficially to her in the hour of need. She heard him tell her that delay to her was more valuable than beaten gold, and remind her that in her case any sort of duplicity was justifiable to foil a tyrant who knew no scruples, and joined deceit with power. But all that Ildica could reply, under her overpowering sense of the fearful struggle she saw approaching, was, "Can I not fly? Oh, can I not fly?"

"For fifty miles around on every side," replied Ardaric, "the troops of the Huns are spread over the country; and for more than fifty miles beyond those, scattered parties from a thousand different nations, but all attached to Attila by vows, by love, or by fear, roam through the country, and keep, as it were, an outer watch on his camp. The eagle may escape from the net woven to catch a sparrow; the lion may rend into a thousand pieces the toils which were set to catch the stag or the elk; but thou canst no more escape from the midst of the host of Attila than a small fly can disentangle itself from the meshes of the spider."

Ildica wept bitterly, nor was it with the kind of tears which bring relief. They were not tears for the past--the dark, irretrievable past, for the beloved and the dead, for the hours wasted or the pleasures passed away--they were not tears, in short, for any of those things which may be mourned with mourning sweet and profitable--but they were the deep, bitter, fruitless tears of apprehension, wrung forth by the agony of a fearful but unavoidable fate. She wept bitterly, she wept wildly; she noted not Ardaric, she heeded not the voice of Neva. Hopes and consolations they offered her in vain. Advice and direction seemed to fall unheeded on her ear: she appeared

not to notice their presence or be conscious of their sympathy. Indeed, so totally was she absorbed in the overpowering sorrows of her own heart, and the fearful contemplation of the destiny before her, that she knew not when they left her, or awakened from the vision of her woe till another voice demanded, in a tone that made her start wildly from her seat, "Why weepst thou, maiden? why weepst thou so bitterly?" and Attila stood before her.

She gazed upon him with a wandering and anxious look while one might count ten, but then the triumph of the powerful mind began again. The moment of terror and apprehension was over--the moment of resolution and of action was come. Womanly weakness had had its hour, and was passed. The Roman heart was reawakened by the voice that called her to the trial. The sight of Attila, like the fierce sun shining on the dewy grass after a storm, dried up the tears in her eyes; and after that brief pause she replied, "I weep, oh king! because as a woman I am weak; because I am apprehensive of the future; because I am uncertain of the present; because I grieve for the past. Little cause is there to ask any one living why he weeps. Thou wouldst do more wisely wert thou to ask any one in this world why he smiles."

"Maiden," replied Attila, "dost thou think that such vague words can deceive me? Thinkest thou that so thin a veil can hide the features of thy mind? Thou weepst for thy lover! thou thinkest that he is either dead or faithless, because he has not come so soon as he promised!"

"Thou art mistaken, oh Attila!" replied Ildica; "I neither think him dead--for God protects the good, the virtuous, and the noble--nor do I think him faithless; for to judge so harshly of him would be to wrong the God who formed his heart, and made it upright, true, and constant. I may have fears and apprehensions, but they are not of him or of his truth. What they are matters not to any one; for though I may be carried captive after a mighty conqueror's army, the freedom of my thoughts he cannot touch; and I am still at liberty in heart and soul, above his reach, and far beyond his power."

Her words, however bold, seemed to give no offence to Attila; but, on the contrary, as she spoke, a brighter and a warmer fire glowed up in his countenance, and taking her unwilling but unresisting hand, he led her back to the seat from which she had risen, saying, "Thou art bold as well as beautiful, and well fit to be the bride of some great warrior, whose soul is capable of prizing such as thine."

"May such be my fate!" replied Ildica. "Theodore, to whom all my thoughts and feelings are given, is worthy of much more than this weak hand. Hast thou heard news of his return, oh king? and dost thou come to make me happy with the tidings!"

Attila's brow grew dark for a moment; but the angry cloud soon passed away, and the light of other passions returned to his countenance. "No, Ildica, no!" he said, "I come not to tell you of his return, for no news of his coming has yet reached the camp, though the time fixed by his own lips as the utmost period of his absence has wellnigh expired. No, Ildica, no! I come to tell thee of a brighter and a loftier fate which may be thine, if thy mind be capable, as I am sure it is, of higher aspirations and more noble hopes."

"I seek no loftier fate, oh king!" cried Ildica, shrinking from his eager gaze, and striving to delay the utterance of words by Attila which, with woman's keen insight into the heart of man, she knew would bind him to pursue his purpose by the bond of pride, stronger, far stronger than even passion itself--"I seek no loftier fate, I entertain no higher aspirations! To be the wife of him whom my heart has loved from infancy to womanhood--to wed him who has loved me through every change of fate, through peril and danger, through absence and temptation--to wed him who has so loved me, and whom I so love, is to my mind the brightest fate, the loftiest destiny that woman could obtain."

"But if he be dead?" said Attila, fixing his dark eyes full upon her.

"Then," replied Ildica, seeing the danger of the slightest hesitation in her answer to such a suggestion, "then will I either die also, or, vowing myself to silent prayer, leave for ever an idle and a sorrowful world, and hide myself with some of those lone sisterhoods who spend their days in solitude."

"Not so," answered Attila, drawing closer to her: "thou shouldst have a better destiny; thou shouldst be the bride of Attila--his chosen, his best beloved bride; honoured and revered above all others; queen of his heart; mistress of his actions; sovereign of all the nations that bow to his command."

Ildica sprang from his eager arm, and cast herself upon her knees before him. The terrible words were spoken! There was no escape left but in determination strong as his own! She could no longer avoid the theme most dreaded; and her task was to meet it boldly and at once!

"Hear me, oh king!" she cried, earnestly--"hear me! I am small, and thou art great! Hear me, and save me even from thyself! I love another deeply, devotedly, truly; but even were that other dead, I could never love thee as thou wouldst wish to be loved--nay, as thou deservest to be loved. Mighty warrior! great and magnanimous king! unequalled conqueror! wilt thou debase thyself to contend with a woman? wilt thou degrade thyself to violate the sanctity of thy word, to wrong the innocent and the unoffending, to betray those who trusted thee, to destroy him who loved thee?"

Wilt thou risk being defeated by the strong and resolute heart of a girl like me? Monarch! I am not in thy power, but in God's! To God I will appeal against thee; and sooner than become thy bride, will give my spirit back to Him who lent it. Think not that thou canst frustrate my purpose, and debar me of my will. A camp has always weapons whereby my own life can be reached; no tent but has its cord; no banquet but has its knife. Not a tower of this city but affords me the means of defying the mighty power of Attila; and the flinty bed beneath yon window would, to me, seem a couch of down compared with thy bridal bed, oh king! But thou wilt spare me! thou wilt spare me! I know thy better thoughts and nobler nature. Thou dost but try me. Thou wilt still be just, and wise, and esteemed of all men! If Theodore be dead, tell me so; and I will vow myself to God--I can bear such tidings with calm grief; but never, never can I love Attila as Attila should be loved! Oh, let me reverence and admire him still! Force me not to see in him the pagan king--the destroyer of my country--the enemy of my faith--the slayer of my promised husband--the betrayer of his trust--the falsifier of his word--the tyrant of a woman whom he had vowed to protect!"

So rapidly, so earnestly, so vehemently did she speak, and at the same time so lovely did she look in the attitude of eager supplication, that Attila had neither time nor inclination to interrupt her; and, though admiration and tenderness were crossed by jealousy at the words of love which she bestowed on Theodore, and by anger at the daring terms she feared not to apply to himself, he remained silent for a moment after she had done, gazing on that splendid countenance and that beautiful form, awakened, as both face and figure were, into a thousand fresh graces by the imploring earnestness of her address.

"Take care," he exclaimed at length, "take care. Remember, love may be turned into hate; and the hate of Attila is a thing to be feared."

"Not near so much by me as is his love," replied Ildica. "Oh king! thou canst but slay me, and I fear not death. No torture that the cruellest tyrant ever yet invented is equal to the torture of the mind; and were I to wed Attila, could my mind ever be free from agony?"

"Why? why?" demanded Attila, fiercely. "Is it that this form is hateful to thee? Is it that this hand, which a thousand conquered kings have felt proud to kiss, is abhorrent in thine eyes?"

"No, no! oh no!" cried Ildica, taking the hand that he had partly extended, and pressing her lips upon it--"no, mighty king, far from it! It is that I love another with a love that death itself can never change. It is that our faith is different, all our thoughts unlike, that thou art the avowed enemy of my country. Yet all that were nothing compared with my love for another. Were he dead to-morrow, still would he live in my heart as vividly, as strongly as if I saw him every day. This is no vain dream, no idle fancy! I have known it and proved it during long, long years of absence; and I should but gaze upon thee and think upon him--I should live in the past and hate the present for his sake! Oh, mighty Attila! be generous, be noble! and command, by thine actions, the only kind of love that Ildica can yield thee. Heaven is my witness, that far from feeling towards thee with the cold abhorrence which thou seemest to think I experience--far from striving to hate thee even as the enemy of my country, and to regard thee with detestation, as many of my nation do--ever since that day when first in the plains of Margus thou savedst the life of him I loved, and didst free me and mine from terrible captivity, I have ever loved thee with deep veneration. I have thought of thee as at once mighty and generous, a conqueror, but a noble one, the enemy of my country indeed, but a great, a wonderful, a just, a lofty-minded man. Thus have I thought of thee, and thus has my beloved Theodore ever taught me to think, by word and by letter, by the tale of thy great deeds, and by his knowledge of thy noble nature."

Attila was evidently moved; and, folding his arms upon his breast, he turned his eyes from Ildica as if from some impulse of shame, and fixed them on the ground. The fair girl, however, saw that she had produced some effect, and she proceeded eagerly in that strain which had been thus far successful.

"Think, oh Attila," she exclaimed, "think what has been the conduct towards thee of him whom I so dearly love. I know not half of what he has done, for he boasts not of good actions; but sure I am that you have ever found him faithful, zealous, and true; and thou canst in thine own mind trace, as in a picture, all that he has done for thee and thine. Have I not heard, here in the camp, that he saved the life of thy youngest child, the beautiful youth whom they call Ernac? Have I not heard that in some battle in Gaul more than once he risked his life to defend that of Attila? Has he ever failed thee in the hour of need? Has he ever spoken to thee or of thee one unjust word? Has he ever betrayed thee in small things or in great? Has he ever been untrue to thee, oh king? And wouldst thou now betray him; wouldst thou make *his* life miserable who always sought thy welfare? Wouldst thou take that life which was risked to save thine own? Wouldst thou take his bride, the chief object of his existence, from him who, from the jaws of destruction, rescued thy beloved child?"

"No, no, no!" cried Attila, taking both the hands that she held out towards him in the act of adjuration--"no, no; I will not wrong him! Thou hast conquered! Whatever I may feel, however strong and burning be the passion that thou hast kindled in my heart, I will not take his bride from him who saved my son. Rise, maiden, rise! and set your heart at rest! If the son of Paulinus return to claim thee for his bride, his bride thou shalt be, and I will send ye together far from me, that the memory of these feelings may never be reawakened by the sight of thy beauty. A week hence is the utmost term that he allowed himself to return; I will add thereunto another week ere

I see thee again, that I may not increase the fire that burns even now within my heart. If he be not then returned, Attila will cause diligent search and inquiry to be made, that his fate may be clearly ascertained. Attila will do justice to the son of Paulinus; but if he be dead, as in these times of trouble and of pestilence he well may be, Ildica will do justice unto Attila."

Her heart sunk at his last words; but she had gained so much already that she dared not risk all again by reply. All she answered then was, "God defend us both!" and covering her fair face with her hands, she gave way to the many mingled emotions that struggled in her breast--present relief--future apprehension--hope, never-dying, consoling hope--her dark, inseparable companion, fear--the agitation of a great struggle achieved; and the overpowering sense of success beyond her anticipations--she could not restrain them all--she gave way, and wept.

Attila gazed upon her for several minutes in silence, and then exclaimed, "Thou art too lovely! But be comforted," he added, "thou mayst be happy yet!"

Thus saying, he turned, and left her to indulge her tears in peace.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE POWER OF MIND.

"On to Rome! on to Rome! On to the eternal city! On to the ancient capital of empires! On to the throne of mighty kings of old! Attila has conquered Ætius! The two mighty men have met; and the weaker has given way. Attila triumphs over Ætius! On to Rome! on to Rome! The world is open and prostrate before the sword of Attila. On to Rome! on to Rome! On to spoil, and to victory, and to triumph!"

Such were the cries that ran through the host of the Huns, as they marched on from Milan towards the devoted city of the Cæsars, And mighty and terrible indeed was that innumerable multitude, as, composed of a thousand nations, it flowed on like an overwhelming deluge upon its way. Those who stood and gazed upon its wide-extended front, as, rushing on irresistible, it swept the fair plains of Lombardy, might well want language and figures to express the awful advance of the barbarian world.

The dark thunder-cloud, sweeping at once over the clear blue sky, and shutting out sunshine and daylight beneath its ominous veil, is too slow in its course, too unsubstantial in its form, to afford an image of that living inundation. The avalanche that sweeps down the side of the Alps, overwhelming flocks, and herds, and cities in its way, is but petty when compared with the immense masses of that fierce and furious multitude. The long wave of the agitated sea, when cast by the breath of the tempest upon the echoing shore, would give but a faint idea of that rushing multitude of armed men.

No! Neither bounded to a narrow space, nor gradually and slowly carried forward, nor checked in its course and retiring to return again, did the multitudes of Attila advance. But, spread out from sea to sea--rushing onward with the swiftness of the wind--irresistible, overpowering, vast, like the dark tide of lava when it rushes down the channelled sides of Etna, came the barbarian myriads, finding brightness and beauty before them, and leaving darkness and desolation behind.

Through every road, over every field, into every city, across every river, they passed. Like the sword of the destroying angel in the dwellings of the Egyptians, nothing seemed to stop them, nothing to impede their progress, even for an hour. Terror and lamentation went through all the land; and the voice of weeping was heard from the banks of the Athesis to the Straits of Scylla; Ravenna, defensible as it was, was abandoned in a day; and Rome itself wailed in trembling for the approach of a new, a fiercer conqueror than Alaric.

At length the tent of Attila was pitched by the side of a grand lake, where from its bosom flows the stream by whose banks the sweetest of the Roman poets sung. No longer simple, as when he first entered Greece, appeared the camp of the barbarian king; no longer was seen the ring of wagons only, and the multitude sleeping in the fresh air of night; but there, tents of every form and every hue diversified the plain which stretches along, from the base of the gigantic mountains that enclose the stormy waves of the Benacus, to the soft green fields of the fair Mantuan land, where the "silver-gray cattle" of which Virgil sung still bathe in the placid waters of his native Mincius.

Far and wide as the eye could see extended that vast encampment; and the air, for many a

mile, rang with the neighing of horses and the clang of arms. At the very junction of the lake and the river, on a high sloping ground, whence the eye of the monarch could behold both the far plains covered by his innumerable host and the waters of the lake, with all its grand and beautiful shores, was pitched the tent of Attila, together with those of the persons immediately attached to the monarch himself: and splendid was the sight, when, after a night of repose, the cloudless sun of Italy rose up and poured its flood of splendour over one of the loveliest scenes of earth, living and animated with the figures of those wild but splendidly-attired horsemen.

At the entrance of the tent, beside which his horse was held prepared, stood Attila, gazing over that thrilling sight; and, strange as it may seem, there was something in the picturesque beauty of the scene, in the poetical aspect of the whole, the mighty host, the mighty mountains, the beaming sunrise, and the glowing lake, that found, even within the breast of the fierce conqueror, a sympathizing appreciation of what is bright and beautiful in nature.

He stood and gazed, and felt his soul calmed and soothed.

"We will stay here to-day," he said. "The land is rich and plentiful: the people will be happy in this place of oil and wine. We will stay here to-day; and to-morrow, onward towards Rome! But what is that?" he continued, after gazing for some minutes longer. "What is that, winding slowly along in the distant country, following the road by the side of the river? It looks like a long train of horsemen approaching slowly, and it can hardly be any of our own tribes returning at this early hour. What can that be?"

No eyes, however, but his own were keen enough to distinguish, in the far distance, the object to which he pointed; and he added, "Let some one be sent forth to see, and let no man be injured who comes to us in the garb of peace. This day there shall be no blood shed, unless our enemies seek it themselves. Here we will taste repose and tranquillity."

Several hours had elapsed; the myriads of the Huns were all awake and stirring; thousands of wild horsemen were galloping over the plain, exercising their horses, or practising with the javelin or the spear: and others on foot were moving about among the tents, in all the bustling activity of the morning's duties, when the train which Attila had seen approaching through the distant country entered the Hunnish camp, and were led forward towards the tent of the monarch. Some of his own messengers, who had gone out to meet the strangers, hurried on before to inform him that envoys from the Emperor Valentinian were even then coming near his presence. But the monarch, who still, though changed in many things, retained in some degree his contempt for pomp and show, merely ordered the hangings of his tent to be drawn up, and, seating himself in the entrance, awaited the arrival of the imperial ambassadors.

At their head appeared an old man, riding on a mule; and though the Huns gathered round in crowds to see an equipage to which they were unaccustomed, yet there was something so venerable and commanding in that old man's air, that even the rude barbarian soldiers forbore to press upon him, and merely gazed; while--with his look now raised to heaven, as if in momentary supplication, now cast down upon the ground, as if in deep thought--he rode slowly on through the midst of that fierce and blood-accustomed host, as if fear and wonder were utter strangers to his bosom.

After him followed a number of other men, clothed with princely splendour, and mounted on fiery chargers; but ever and anon their eyes were cast around upon the sea of dark faces that surrounded them, and an expression, perhaps not of fear, but certainly of anxiety, might be seen upon their countenances. At first the Huns demanded among themselves why the old man upon the mule rode first before the warriors; but when they compared his aspect with those who followed, they saw that he was in his proper place.

Last came a number of domestic servants and attendants, followed by slaves beating on a long train of beasts of burden; and in the slaves might be seen--as with hard hearts and unsparing hands they struck unmercifully the dumb suffering creatures but a grade below themselves--in them might be seen, though springing from a lower motive, the same fearless indifference to the presence of the strange multitude as he who led them displayed from a sense of faith and duty.

At the foot of the little hill on which stood the tent of Attila the multitude of the Huns paused, and followed the strangers no longer; and there, too, the envoys of the emperor were directed to dismount. The command was instantly obeyed; and leaving the servants and the train of baggage in the hands of some of the officers of the camp, all the rest began to ascend the hill towards the presence of the monarch, who, seated in the door of his tent, with but a few of his chief leaders around him, waited above, examining the persons and the air of each of the strangers as he approached.

With a slow step, dignified, calm, and collected, that old man who had led the Romans climbed the hill, slightly bowed by age, but rather stiffened than enfeebled. He was tall and largely proportioned; and his snowy hair, which, like that of the barbarians, felt not the steel, escaping from a cap of a peculiar form that he wore upon his head, flowed down in wavy curls upon his shoulders. His eye, which he but once raised towards the tent of Attila as he ascended, was calm and mild, but full of sleeping fire; and his step, though slow, was planted firmly upon the ground, giving to his whole demeanour an air of resolution and of power, which was not without its effect on those who watched his advance up the mountain.

Attila himself, as he sat in the stern silence natural to him, and beheld the calm and equable approach of the messenger of Valentinian towards his presence, might wonder at that unshaken firmness which so few displayed under similar circumstances. He moved not a muscle, however, but gazed sternly upon the envoy, till at length, when within ten paces of his seat, the great Pontiff of Rome--for he it was--paused in his advance, and said to those who followed, in a full, steady voice, "Let Avienus and Trigetius come with me! The rest wait here!" and then, proceeding on his way, he drew near to Attila.

"Who art thou?" demanded the barbarian king, in that full deep tone which was powerful and impressive, without being rude or abrupt. "Who art thou that comest so boldly before Attila?"

"I am Leo, the servant of God!" replied the pope, bending his head as he pronounced the almighty name.

"Of what God?" demanded Attila.

"There is but one God," replied Saint Leo; "there is but one God, holy, just, and true; Lord of lords, and King of kings! The lowest of his servants am I!"

"Thou meanest the God of the Christians?" said Attila.

The pope bent his head in reply, and the monarch proceeded. "It is well," he said, "it is well! Now tell me what thou wouldst have with Attila. Why comest thou to me hither, when, but a few short days, and I had come to thee?"

"It is to prevent thy coming that I seek thee," replied the bishop--"it is to prevent thy coming, and to stay the stream of blood that is poured out before thy steps. It is to stay from desolation the beautiful land that thou treadest like a wine-presser beneath thy feet, crushing all that is good and excellent, and leaving nothing but the worthless refuse. It is to adjure thee, by the name of God Most High, to spare his servants, and to turn thee from a land which his holy faith hath sanctified, and the blood of his saints made sacred. I do adjure thee by his name to pause in the course which he has hitherto made victorious, lest he take thy strength from thee, and destroy thee as thou hast destroyed others. Monarch!" he continued, seeing a cloud gathering on the brow of Attila--"monarch! I menace thee not with any human arm. None has ever been able to resist thee successfully; none has ever had power to oppose thee long: but know, oh king! that thou, like all others, art but an instrument in the hands of a mightier monarch. Thou art called the SCOURGE OF GOD, and verily he has used thee for the purposes of his vengeance. With thee hath he wrought destruction, and inflicted punishment upon the faithless and the unrighteous. In his hand thou hast been as the pestilence or the thunderbolt. Thou hast swept away nations. Thou hast smitten down monarchs. Thou hast trodden the palace and the cottage alike, with the sword of the destroying angel in thy hand; but now, in the name of the same God, who sent thee forth to conquer and to slay, I bid thee pause and turn back upon thy way, lest he take thy strength from thee, and reduce thy glory into shame. Remember, oh king! remember that one who, like thee, was mighty; who, like thee, was fierce; who, like thee, was unconquerable by man, trod these same plains but a few brief years ago; and, as a vulture, swept the land with the wing of desolation. Remember how Alaric, the mighty and the strong, marched on at the head of his innumerable hosts, and, like thee, found none to stay him. Remember how he heard the warning to pause, and turn back ere he set his foot within the eternal city. Remember how he neglected the warning; how he despised the words; how he conquered Rome, and died. In all things but in this was he like unto thee! But in this was he unlike, for I know--and feel--and see--as if it were before me in a vision, that thou shalt listen to the word of the servant of God, and sheath the sword, and turn back upon the way. Monarch! I tell thee, and my words shall prove true, that none henceforth for ever shall march against Rome, and place their camp round about it, and subdue it unto their hand, without meeting some terrible reverse; without finding death, or downfall, or dishonour follow, as surely as night follows day. Some shall come against it and take it, and die as soon as they leave it. Some shall assail it, and fall even in the hour of victory. Some shall subdue it, and, after years of glory, shall see the brightness of their fame tarnished with shame, defeat, and overthrow, with long and weary inactivity, and lingering death. But thou shalt listen to the voice of warning; thou shalt fear the name of God, and the word of God's servant, and shall turn thee back, and escape the peril of disobedience."

Bold and striking as his words was the action which, accompanied them; dignified, nay, sublime, was the expression of his countenance. The dark eye filled with the fire of genius, the fine features beaming with the divine light of enthusiasm, the lips trembling with the eloquence of the heart, the arms outstretched in passionate expostulation, the broad chest heaving under its flowing robes with the energy of lofty thoughts, while the full, powerful, melodious voice, clear, rounded, unhesitating, poured forth the stream of words--all, all formed a splendid whole, such as none there present had ever seen before; and the barbarian monarch himself and his fierce chiefs gave ready way to the delusions of imagination, and believed that they beheld an immediate messenger from heaven. Even when he had done, and remained with his firm unquailing gaze fixed upon the face of Attila, with eyes that sunk not to encounter the look at which nations trembled, all those around, though the impression produced by his oratory perhaps faded, still looked upon him as a superior being, still waited for the answer of their own monarch with anxiety, perhaps with apprehension.

But Attila, though struck and admiring, forgot not himself in wonder--that passion of the weak.

From the beginning to the end, while Saint Leo spoke, the mighty monarch fixed upon his countenance the same stern, immovable gaze, under the influence of which every inferior mind gave way, every ordinary heart lost courage. Twice his swarthy brow slightly contracted as the prelate spoke those bold words which Attila's ear was seldom wont to hear; but his face was moved in no other feature: and he made not an effort to stop the orator in the course of his eager and energetic speech. When he had concluded, Attila continued to gaze upon him thoughtfully and intently; but, apparently, neither scornfully nor displeased.

At length he said, "Thou hast spoken like a god; but know that not the gods themselves shall turn back Attila from his course, unless he have the justice he has demanded. Thou art revered, oh Leo! as one of mighty powers--as one inspired, perhaps, by the God whom thou servest, with eloquence above that of mortals; and willingly will Attila hear thee discourse on the matters of thy high calling, as to whether there be more gods than one; as to the nature of the soul of man; the powers that govern him throughout life, and the fate that awaits him beyond the grave. On such matters shalt thou be listened to willingly, nay, more, with reverent ears, as becomes those who hear the words of one touched by the spirit of a god. We will attend to thine exhortations in favour of Rome, to thy warnings in regard to those who conquer it, even to thy menaces against the life of Attila himself. But Attila turns not aside for words! He whom the embattled line of enemies cannot impede is not to be overawed even by a holy man as thou art. He fears not the sword; he avoids not the spear. The twanging of the bowstring makes not his eyelids fall; the shout of the enemy is pleasant on his ear. His battle-horse shall bear him onward whithersoever his fate directs; and if the destiny of Attila lie within the gates of Rome, to Rome herself and to her capital will Attila go to seek it. Death comes but once, and chooses his own time. The sentence is written on high; and so help me Mars and my good sword, as I would not reverse it, were it to be fulfilled to-morrow. My grave is already dug by the hand of destiny, wherever that grave is to be. And what matters it to Attila whether he lie beneath the gray olives of Italy, or the green birch-trees by the Danube?"

He paused a moment, gazing thoughtfully upon the prelate; and a slight smile might have been seen upon the lip of Ardaric, to hear his mighty leader adopting, as he went on in the career of victory, so much of his own doctrine of fatalism.

In a moment Attila proceeded. "Thus much I have spoken," he said. "Looking upon thee as a messenger from the gods, and filled with the spirit of the knowledge of the future, willingly on these points will I discourse with thee at large, seeing that in all the lands I have visited I have never met any one like thee. But if thou comest as an envoy from Valentinian--lord of these lands, but unto me a slave, on whose neck I set my foot--thou must speak of other things if thou wouldst turn me from the path which lies before me. Thou must speak of offerings to atone for the past; of tribute to show his subjection for the future; of the complete satisfaction of all my just demands. Thou must show Attila that the glory and honour of himself and of his people are to be maintained and increased by following the course that thou wouldst have us pursue, ere thou canst hope to stay these myriads on their forward way, or turn the sword of Attila in another direction. Do this. Leave my justice and my honour no plea against him, and I will raise up a wall between you and the desolation of my presence. Your fields shall flourish in the sunshine. Your rivers shall flow with the accustomed wine; the land teem with oil and bread; and ye shall rear your children up in peace, safe from the destroying sword, till the name of Attila be no more than the whisper of the wind through the gorges of some distant mountain." A bright and heavenly smile beamed up over the noble features of Saint Leo, and he replied at once, without pause or hesitation, "Monarch, I will turn thee back!"

There was something so dignified, so majestic, so sublime in the air, the tone, and the manner with which the pontiff pronounced those few words, that Attila himself was visibly struck and surprised. "How so?" demanded he: "how so--how wilt thou turn me back? Wilt thou bring down fire from heaven?"

"I will do more!" replied Saint Leo--"I will give thee such justice that even the heart of a conqueror can demand no more! Thou hast said that thou wilt turn back if I will satisfy thine honour and thy justice. I have offers for thee, which, as a minister of God's word, I declare to be as full and complete satisfaction as ambition itself could demand. Wilt thou hear them now, oh king?"

"No," replied Attila, "I will not. Thou art weary with travel, and hast many years upon thy brow. Attila has kept thee too long already without offering thee bread and rest. This night shalt thou repose in tranquillity and peace. The wine shall flow for thee, and the feast shall be prepared--"

Saint Leo waved his hand, "Fasting and prayer," he cried, "fasting and prayer shall be my companions. Prostrate in the dust, lifting my heart unto the throne of God, humbly calling upon the name of my Saviour, beseeching the Spirit of truth to guide me aright! With fasting and with prayer will I entreat the almighty Disposer of all hearts to soften thine, and change its stern nature into mercy. Be it as thou hast said, oh king! I will seek repose. Those who came with me have need of it; and in the mean time my words have fallen upon an ear that will not lose them lightly. When may I hold further commune with thee?"

"Two hours ere noon to-morrow," replied Attila. "Till then, seek refreshment and repose, and Attila will take counsel as to the very smallest offering which he can receive as a propitiation to

suspend his sword. In the mean time, I give thee unto the care of these my officers. Thou fearest not to rest within the camp of the Huns?"

"I am in the hand of God!" replied Saint Leo, throwing wide his arms and looking up to heaven--"I am in the hand of God! Why should I fear?"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE VISION AND ITS INTERPRETATION.

There were frequent messengers came and went to and from the tent of Attila, and there was movement and agitation in the camp. Round the monarch sat his tributary kings; and various were the different shades of expression which passed over the countenances of those fierce chiefs, as they listened to the words of their leader, and heard all that had befallen since, on the preceding day, the great pontiff of Rome had appeared to stay them in their advance.

"It was but a vision of the night!" said Attila--"it was but some idle dream, and yet it came before me full, tangible, complete. There was no wandering of thought to other things, no confusion of fancies, no breaking off and beginning again; but it was all clear and definite, accurate and minute; and yet it was but a vision, an idle dream, which Attila will heed no more than he would a fanciful cloud wrought into strange forms by the wind that bears it."

"Heed no visions, oh Attila!" said Ardaric--"the only sure vision will be the walls of Rome."

"And yet, oh mighty king!" joined in Onegisus, "one at least here present would fain hear the substance of the dream that disturbed thy slumbers. It has been held by wise men and by priests long versed in sacred things, that dreams come forth from the gods, and are one means of making their will known to men. I at least would fain hear what vision it was that broke the sleep of Attila."

"And I also! and I! and I!" said many voices round as soon as the demand was made; and leaning his broad brow upon his hand, with his eyes fixed thoughtfully upon the table at which he sat, Attila not unwillingly proceeded to speak as they required.

"It seemed to me as if I had slept some hours," he said, "and that I was awakened by a noise, when, looking up, I saw all things around me as I had seen them when I closed mine eyes. There were the hangings of the tent, there the clothing I had put off to rest, there burnt the feeble lamp, there lay the strong sword. Two javelins crossed hung upon my right, and a spear lay near me on the ground. I saw it all as distinctly as ere I closed my eyes that night, when lo! the hangings of the tent were moved, raised up; and, without sound or motion of their limbs, the figures of two men approached my couch. A cloud of light environed them around, hiding in its blaze all things behind it. The lamp grew dim as if it had not been lighted, and in this cloud, borne on to where I lay, the strangers came, clothed in strange robes, simple and unadorned, with hair and beards of snowy whiteness, and the marks of extreme age upon the face of each. One, however, was older than the other, and of coarser features, though there was a fire and eagerness in his large eye which spoke a mighty and energetic spirit, prompt in its emotions and its acts. The younger seemed more calm and of a loftier aspect, and on his countenance were seen the traces of high thoughts, perhaps, too, of some sufferings endured with fortitude, but felt with keen perception. A smile, bland and beautiful, sat on his lips, and there was in his glance that quick yet thoughtful movement which I have seen in men, deep arguers on right and wrong, subtle in their eloquence, and powerful to untie the tangled intricacy of questions remote and difficult. Around them in that cloud of light there shone a greater light, as if it issued forth from them and from their garments; and though they seemed of flesh as we are, yet there was a difference that scarcely can be told, but which rendered their bodies more glorious and pure to the eye than ours. I would fain have stretched out my hand to seize my sword, but I lay as if chained down by adamantine bonds. I would fain have spoken, to demand who dared in such a sort to disturb the sleep of Attila, but my tongue refused its office, and my lips moved without a sound. Approaching, as I have said, without any visible motion of their limbs, but borne forward by some unseen power, they came near, and stood by the side of my couch: there, gazing upon me for a moment, their eyes seemed filled with pity or with sorrow, and at length the younger said, 'Attila! Attila! thou hast fought, and thou hast conquered, and unwittingly, but not unwillingly, thou hast done the will of God! Now turn thee back upon thy way, for thou shalt smite this land no more. Turn thee back upon thy way, and hesitate not, for we are sent to bid thee sheath the sword, lest it fall upon thine own head. Turn thee back, turn thee back, and that speedily, as thou wouldst live and conquer still!' And with that the light grew faint, the figures seemed to dissolve, the cloud passed away; and I was lying in my own tent, with the lamp burning

feebly by my side. It was but a vision, an idle dream, and it is passed! Attila heeds it not. It was but a vision, an unreal vision!"

"It was a strange one though, oh mighty king!" said Onegisus; "and I would fain ask yon holy man who came hither yesterday if he can give the interpretation thereof, and tell who were these that appeared unto thee."

"First let those who slept in the outer tent," said Ardaric, "be closely questioned if any one passed by them in the night."

"I have questioned them already," said Attila--"I have done more: I rose instantly--for my limbs and my mind seemed freed as if from a heavy weight--and drawing back the curtains that divide the tent, I found that no one living could have entered without treading on the sleeping bodies of those of my warriors who lay without. It was but a vision, an idle vision of the night!"

"I put no faith in visions," said Ardaric: "they never visit me. If I dream, 'tis of some empty thing, taking fanciful shapes without regularity or continuance, forgotten as soon as passed. I put no faith in visions."

Attila's brow contracted slightly, but he made no reply; and Valamir, his Gothic tributary, who had hitherto remained thoughtful and silent, now raised his eyes. "Thy vision is a strange one, oh king," he said, "and worthy of some consideration. More, perhaps, than thou thyself art willing to bestow upon it. Yet would I not ask the interpretation of this eloquent man, whose voice was heard so powerfully yesterday; for he of course will see therein a confirmation of his own warnings. There is another in the camp who may be better trusted. Dost thou remember, oh mighty Attila, a holy hermit, who dwelt in the mountains two or three days' journey from Margus, and who--"

"But he is dead," interrupted Attila; "he has been dead two years."

"True," replied Valamir; "but near him there dwelt another hermit, less shrewd and wise, perhaps, but, even more than he was, touched with the fire of the gods. Wild, rash, and fearless, he speaks whatever the spirit prompts, and in such a man's interpretation one may trust his confidence. Among the train who followed hither this high-priest of Rome was the very man, and well acquainted with the manners and the languages of us people of the North. He was wandering yesterday evening through the camp; and I myself saw him preaching boldly strange doctrines of other gods to a large crowd of Huns and Gepidæ. Let him be sent for, and to him let the vision be told. On his interpretation we can better rely."

All voices applauded the proposal, and instantly was it executed. Messengers went forth to find the enthusiast Mizetus, and in a few minutes he stood before Attila and his counsellors. He was silent as the grave while the vision was being told to him; but then--stretching forth his hands, and turning his eyes full upon the countenance of Attila, though not with a fixed and steadfast gaze, but with a wild and rolling glance--he exclaimed, "Is it not simple as the light of day? Is it not open as the summer's sky? Is it not clear as the waters from the rock? What need of interpretation? What need of any one to explain? There is but one God, oh Attila! though thou and these, as slaves of Satan, worship stone, and wood, and iron. That God has been merciful to thee, oh king! and has sent unto thee the apostles of his son, Peter the prince of the apostles, and Paul the chosen by the voice of God! To thee, from another world, he has sent those, through the midst of thy sleeping guards, who, when they lived in this world, passed through the hands of jailers, cast from them the fetters of iron, and walked free through the prison doors of the Roman governor. To thee has he sent them in mercy, to turn thee back from the way of destruction. Listen to their words, tread back thy steps, sheath the sword, open thy heart to the word of God, and thou shalt be safe. If thou doest not this, if thou goest on in rapine and injustice, shedding the blood of the faithful and smiting the people of Christ, lo! I tell thee, when thine errand is accomplished, and the judgments of God wrought out, thou shalt die by some despised death; thine armies shall melt away like snow, the bodies of thy warriors slain shall rot under the summer's sky, and a pestilence shall go forth from their bones to root out those whom the sword has spared. Wo unto you! wo unto your mighty men, for the sword of the Lord is out against you, and he shall scatter you to the uttermost parts of the earth, and shall grind your mouths in the dirt of the earth ye have trodden so proudly, and shall cast ye forth as dead dogs, to be an abomination to the passer-by!"

More than one sword leaped from its sheath at those bold words, but the deep, thunder-like voice of Attila stayed them from smiting the rash enthusiast. "Harm him not, harm him not!" cried the monarch. "By the soul of Attila, he dies who strikes him! Did we not bid him speak? Did we not call for his words? and shall we slay him because they are such as please us not? Stranger," he continued, "thou hast spoken rashly among rash men, nevertheless thou art safe, and mayst depart!"

Mizetus turned to leave the tent; but, ere he went, he raised his hand, and said, in a solemn tone, "I grieve for thee, oh Attila! for thy fate is near!"

"Let it come!" replied Attila--and the enthusiast departed.

"We have spent too much time on this thing," continued the monarch, "let us now turn our

thoughts to more substantial warnings. Ardaric, my friend, as thou hast said, this vision was indeed but an empty dream, and but matter for a moment's speculation; but I have tidings for thee which thou knowest not of, for thy Gepidæ lie high up upon the hill. There are those here, however, who know that between sunset last night and sunrise this morning, the sword of the pestilence smote among the warriors who lie by the side of the river nearly ten thousand men!"

Ardaric started up, and gazed fixedly on the countenance of Attila.

"It is true!" said the monarch; "but this is not all, my friend. A fleet from Constantinople has wafted a new host to our noble enemy Ætius; nor is that all either," he added, raising his voice; "the armies of Marcian have crossed the Danube, and cut to pieces three of our tribes upon the Dacian frontier. Now, friends and counsellors, you know the whole. Tell me what shall be the course of Attila. Shall I go on, and lay Rome in ashes? Shall I pause here, and accept the tribute this priest is prepared to offer? Willing am I to do the first, willing would I be to do it, were I as sure that death would follow within a day as I am that there is a sun behind the clouds that now stretch over the sky."

"Hear what he has to offer, oh mighty king," said Ardaric; "then, if it be enough to satisfy the honour of Attila and save the glory of his warriors, accept the conditions. Let us retire from this pestilential land, and then--"

"What then?" demanded Attila, after waiting for a moment to let the chief conclude his sentence.

"Nay, I know not," replied Ardaric. "Then--let us do whatsoever Attila will."

A brief smile passed like lightning across the countenance of the king. "And then," he said, "and then--to Constantinople! and we shall see who is to live or die; who is to be a monarch, who a slave! The sword of a thousand battles against the broken spear of a weak Roman! Methinks the chances are unequal. Kings of great nations! Friends of Attila! There is no need to ask what are the terms this Roman bishop brings. They are known to me already--revealed to me in no vision, Ardaric, but told to my messenger at my demand. He offers a gift ten times in value all that the East and West have ever given, an annual tribute double that which we received from Theodosius. A future compensation for the dowry of Honoria, and the restitution of all captives and fugitives from the Hunnish nation! Is this sufficient?"

"It is! it is!" replied the chiefs; and a messenger was instantly despatched to summon Saint Leo to the tent of the barbarian monarch.

With the same calm dignity as before, the prelate presented himself before the council of Attila, and in his whole demeanour there was that grand, but simple and unassuming majesty, which commanded the reverence, the respect--almost the love--of men of a different nation, creed, language, manners, habits, thoughts. Attila himself rose at his approach, and, with an air not less in dignity, took him by the hand and placed him by his side.

The pontiff felt that he had touched the heart of the barbarian, and he was more moved at having done so than had the utmost ire of that mighty king--a king who feared no chastisement, acknowledged no laws but his own sense of right, bowed to no superior on earth or in heaven--than had his ire threatened the worst tortures that could be inflicted. Through the reverence with which he had inspired the barbarian monarch he saw, as through a long avenue, a number of sympathies, noble feelings, and generous sentiments, akin to those which dwelt in his own heart; while hope stood half way between, and beckoned to the kindred bands to unite for mighty purposes and grand endeavours. A moment's reflection, however, a moment's glance of the mental eye over the sad but solemn and oracular book of experience, showed him the falsehood of the siren's tale, and made him grieve that the brightest feelings of the human heart, mutually perceived and understood, and which, could they meet and co-operate, would work out the blessing and happiness of thousands, should ever thus be stopped by obstacles insignificant, and totally unseen by those who attempt to pass them, till all their efforts for unanimity and concord are overthrown.

Calmly and clearly, in answer to the questions of the king, he recapitulated the splendid, the degrading offers of Valentinian; and he added, "This, oh king, am I commanded to propose: this am I authorized to promise. The gift is already in thy camp; the tribute shall soon follow; and--as a mediator between thee and them who suffer, standing pure and impartial under the eye of God, who is of no nation and of no country, and respecteth no man for a name--I declare that thou hast now offered unto thee more than thou canst claim aright; more than equity could pronounce against them; more than justice can award unto thy claim. But when unto all this is added the great triumph of clemency, the mighty privilege of showing mercy, the triumphant glory of sparing those thou couldst destroy; so help me Heaven, as I do believe that there is offered unto thee more than even thy conquering sword could win, more than thy highest ambition could desire, more than thy vastest efforts could attain! Is it more glorious to slaughter than to save? Is it more mighty to destroy than to spare? Is it a greater sign of power to cast down than to raise up? He that saves from the slayer is greater than the slayer; he that shields from the destroyer is victorious over the destroyer; and he that raises up does a deed which shall last long after he who casts down is forgotten! Spare then, oh Attila, spare the nations! and if in sparing them thou gainest a triumph over thyself, thou doest that which the noblest of thine enemies has never been

able to do, and raisest to thyself the crowning trophy of thy fame, under which shall be written by the hand of history, '*None but Attila gained the victory over Attila!*'"

Even had he not spoken, the terms he offered would have been accepted; but had they been less than they were, they would have been accepted under the influence of his voice. The gorgeous presents were brought up and displayed before the tent of Attila. The gold and the silver were poured out; the jewels and the cloth of gold were displayed to the eyes of the admiring chiefs who crowded round. But Attila himself looked not on them; his eyes were either thoughtfully lifted to the sky, in that direction wherein lay Rome, or else bent down in deep reflection upon the ground, while traces of emotion, slight indeed in themselves, but still from their unusualness indicative of strong feelings within, might be traced upon his countenance.

When all the gifts were displayed, he turned abruptly to Saint Leo, saying, "Messenger of a mighty God, Attila turns upon his steps. Take what thou wilt of these baubles, either as an offering to thy Deity or as a gift unto thyself!"

"God forbid!" replied the pontiff: "the God I serve--the only God!--dwells not in temples made with hands, and requires no offerings from the sons of men but a pure and contrite spirit, a repentant and an humble heart. As for me, I take no part in the spoils of my brethren, and I leave them to him to whom they were sent, and of whose forbearance they are the price and recompense."

"Thou art the first priest," cried Attila--"thou art the first priest of any god that ever yet I heard of who refused gold and jewels when they were offered to him freely."

"Thou hast known but few Christian priests, my son," replied Saint Leo, mildly. "The priests thou hast known were the servants of those whom we call devils, Mammon; or Plutus, the demon of covetousness; Belial, Lucifer, or Apollo, the god of pride; Moloch or Mars, the demon of bloodshed. The priests of all these and many others, for their several purposes, seek wealth and splendour; but the servants of God, the only true God, seek his glory, and know their own unworthiness. Oh Attila, I leave thee! I came unto thee, knowing that thou hadst a mighty name, and that none upon this earth had been found to conquer thee; that kings, and princes, and warriors of great renown bowed down trembling before thee, and shrunk from the very glance of thine eye; and yet I feared thee not. I go from thee now with my reverence not lessened, but with deep sorrow at my heart, to find nobler qualities in thy nature; qualities which, guiding and directing the inferior ones of courage and military skill, have made thee what thou art; and yet to see that those qualities, like diamonds in some undiscovered mine, lie wasting all their brightness, because they are not known and estimated. The knowledge of one true God, the faith in one redeeming Saviour, are all that is wanting to raise Attila high above living men! I leave those in thy camp who may show thee a light thou hast never yet seen. Listen unto them, oh Attila! listen unto them and be saved! Yet! yet! I trust the mild spirit of the Almighty God will touch thy heart, and turn it into humility and righteousness. Then, mounting from the humbleness of faith, Attila will rise to a pitch of glory no earthly arms can ever win, and stand upon a point where mortal monarch never placed himself without the Spirit of the Lord to raise him up on high."

"Thou speakest words I do not comprehend," said Attila, turning away.

"God make them clear to thee in his own good time!" replied the bishop, and slowly descended the hill.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SOMETHING WORSE THAN DEATH.

We must now turn again to Ildica! In agony of heart, she sat within her tent with the spirit bowed down and nearly broken, and the bodily frame bent and shaken under the load of grief. Before her stood the messenger of Attila, who bore her the sad tidings of the loss of him she loved. Beside her stood the fair daughter of the dead king Bleda, and the wild enthusiast Mizetus.

Tearless, all tearless was the bright eye of the Dalmatian girl, although through the clear white skin of the temples might be seen the blue veins swelling up like cords with the rushing up of the agonized blood.

The enthusiast kept silence, and gazed on her with a look of deep grief; but from the dark blue eyes of Neva rolled profuse the large heavy tears, and in the sorrow of her own heart she asked

many a question of the messenger regarding all the particulars of the fate of one still too dearly beloved.

"Art thou sure," she demanded, "that the winds and tempests did the work of death? Art thou sure that the commands of Attila, more cruel, more unsparing than the fierce elements, had not their share?"

"I know nothing," replied the messenger, "but that which I was commanded to say. The ship perished, and almost all on board were drowned."

"Almost all!" cried Ildica, starting up, and gazing eagerly in the man's face--"almost all! Then there is yet hope!"

"Alas, no!" replied the messenger. "All who reached the land were slain upon the shore by some wandering bands of warriors!"

"Even so! even so!" cried Ildica; "sent on purpose to destroy him at his landing! Oh, fatal beauty! Thou hast caused the death of him I loved most on earth;" and she cast herself down upon the couch and hid her face in her robe; while from time to time a sharp shudder might be seen to pass over that fair form, as if the anguish of the spirit were destroying its earthly tabernacle.

"Art thou sure that he was in the ship?" demanded Neva, still clinging to a hope.

"Quite sure!" replied the messenger; "presents from the Emperor Marcian--goods marked with the youth's name--his very clothing itself, have been brought into the presence of Attila."

"Of his murderer!" said Neva; "of his murderer!"

The man, who was a Roman fugitive, made no reply; and, after a brief pause, withdrew from the tent.

"What means she, maiden?" demanded Mizetus, turning to Neva; "what means she when she says that her beauty has caused the death of him she loved?"

"Dost thou not comprehend?" cried the girl, gazing at him through her tears; "dost thou not know that Attila himself seeks her love? Canst thou not guess that he took the life of him who was his happier rival?"

"Is it even so?" cried Mizetus; "alas, unhappy maiden! for what art thou reserved?" and, after gazing at her for a moment or two in melancholy thought, he left the tent, and turned his steps towards the royal pavilion of Attila himself.

Where was that pavilion now? No longer on the shores of the wild Benacus, no longer looking over the fertile plains of Italy, but on the slope of the Carpathian mountains, amid the rude but magnificent scenery of the hill country. There were congregated the myriads of the North; there was pitched the camp of a thousand nations, covering every rise, and sweeping down into every valley. But as Mizetus wandered on among them, all were in movement; the Huns, and the Gepidæ, and the Goths, the Heruli and the Alani, were pouring forth slowly on foot, and mounting with a low rushing murmur towards the tent of Attila. As they went one spoke unto the other, and the voice of complaint made itself heard.

"Why call for us now?" cried one.

"We might even now have been revelling in Rome!" said another.

"Has Attila lost his daring?" asked a third.

"Is he to be led by the smooth words of a graybeard in long robes?" demanded a fourth.

And thus they went murmuring on, till, gathering together upon the hill-side, they covered a vast extent, above which again--with a space of many cubits between it and them, kept clear by the officers of the king--towered the pavilion of their mighty chief. During some time the noise of coming feet was heard; but at length all the men of that vast host seemed congregated there: the curtains of the tent were drawn, and Attila stood before them. He gave one slow glance around, and the loudest murmurer in the host cast down his eyes before that dark countenance, as if he feared that the monarch might see the rebellion in his heart, and smite him on the spot. All was hushed as if in death; and then the voice of Attila was heard, spreading round and round, till scarce a man in all that multitude could fail to catch his words.

"Ye have dared to murmur at the will of Attila!" he said "Ye have dared to think that ye knew better than he did! Ye have dared to call his wisdom weakness, because he led you away from Rome, whose treasures were exhausted to buy your absence; and while ye thus complained, ye knew not whither he was leading you! It is time that ye should hear, in order that shame may glow like a burning spot upon your brows. I lead ye to Constantinople, to the city of the Cæsars, to the plunder of the richest capital in the universe! I swear," he continued, drawing his sword, as if moved by some sudden impulse, and holding it up on high before his eyes as he addressed to it his vow--"I swear that I will not leave one blade of grass in Thrace, nor one city standing, nor the

wall of one fortress not cast down, nor one living enemy to oppose my path! This sword will I not sheath till I sheath it in the capital of the East. The feet of my horse shall never pause for more than one rising and setting of the sun, till I tighten the bridle in his mouth on the shores of the Thracian Bosphorus. I go forth to smite and to destroy, and I will make the land like unto one which has never been inhabited. I will cast down everything in my way; and the vulture which follows me, to eat the dead bodies of mine enemies, shall not have to raise his wings when he snuffs their carcasses from afar. Ye have heard the will of Attila! Get ye gone! Sharpen your arrows, but restrain your tongues!"

"Boaster," cried a shrill voice from the crowd, speaking in the Greek tongue, "thou shalt die even in thy pride!" But the crowd had already begun to move, and the noise of their innumerable feet drowned the sounds of that warning voice. The multitude separated slowly; Attila re-entered his tent; and Mizetus, with his hands clasped, and his eyes full of wandering fire, bent down upon the ground, strayed away with a slow irregular pace along the course of a little rivulet that streamed down from the higher hills. He muttered to himself as he went, and little note did he take of the various groups of Huns that passed him.

"Is it not so?" he said, as he wandered on--"is it not clearly so? Is it not the will of Heaven, distinctly revealing unto me the way to save the people of the Lord? Shall this pagan barbarian smite the faithful and the just? Heaven forbid! God has provided a remedy. The Lord has found a means of deliverance! I will do his will! I will work under the guidance of his spirit! I will not delay, no, not an hour, but I will gird up my loins and be doing!"

Long he wandered on, and long he continued thus muttering to himself; but at length he stopped suddenly, and exclaiming, "God strengthen me!" he turned and took his way straight to the tent of Ildica. Her attendants in the outer apartment sought to prevent his entrance; but he said, "I must see the Roman maiden; I come to bring her consolation." And, after some delay and inquiry within, he was admitted. Neva was with her still, and the wife of Ardaric, with some other women of high station among the Huns, were also present, striving to give her consolation; but Ildica, with her eye all tearless and fixed upon the ground, sat in the midst, her hands clasped together, her lip silent, her features motionless, as if she heard not one word of all that was addressed to her.

"Daughter," said Mizetus, in the pure harmonious tongue of her own land--"daughter, listen to me!"

There was something in the sweet tone of the melodious Greek--there was something in it associated with home, and happiness, and early years, and the bright images of joys for ever gone, that seemed to startle her, and for a moment she looked up with a thoughtful gaze upon his countenance; but the next moment she dropped her eyes again, and remained as silent as before.

"Daughter, listen to me," continued the enthusiast, in that wild but elevated tone which will command attention if aught on earth can awaken it--"listen, for I bring thee consolation! I bring thee consolation from on high! It is revealed unto me that thou art reserved for great things, and destined to work the deliverance of people and of nations! It is revealed unto me that by thy hand shall the faithful of the Lord be delivered, and that thou, in thy beauty and in thy wisdom, shall do more than the mighty and the great have been able to accomplish!"

Still Ildica gave no sign of attention. Not a feature in her face was moved, and she remained gazing with the same fixed, meditative look on one spot of the ground, as if utterly absorbed in deep and unbroken thought. The enthusiast paused to see whether she heard or not, and for a moment all was silence. But the next instant, to the surprise of all, the lips of the fair unhappy girl were seen to move; and, as if the Greek accent of Mizetus had touched the thrilling cord of association between her present misery and the moment when misfortunes first began to fall upon her, recalling the dark and painful moment when she left Dalmatia, her voice was heard singing snatches of the song that her mother's slaves had poured forth when they left behind them Aspalathos for ever:--

"We leave you behind us, sweet things of the earth;
Our life is a race to the death from the birth;
We pause not to gather the flowers as they grow,
The goal is before us, and on we must go!

"Fair scenes of our childhood! dear homes of our youth
Memorials of innocence, virtue, and truth!
The land of our birth, the dear mother that bore,
We leave you behind us, we see you no more!

"We leave you behind us, sweet things of the earth
Hopes, joys, and endearments, sport, pleasure, and mirth;
Like a tempest-driven ship, sailing by some bright shore,
Time hurries us onward, we see you no more!"

And when she had done, she looked round her with a smile so terrible at such a moment, that every woman's eye there present, whether they understood the words or not, overflowed with tears.

"Poor maiden!" cried Mizetus, "her heart is fearfully oppressed, her spirit sadly bowed down. Heavy has been the burden that the Lord has given her to bear, but great is the glory he reserves for her. Neither shall the mind break, nor the spirit be crushed under its load; but with time, and with care, and with consolation, this wandering mood shall pass away. Let us now, however, leave her, for the presence of many may irritate rather than sooth. Thou, maiden," he continued, turning to Neva, "thou that seemest to take a deeper interest than the rest, abide with her, and watch over her tenderly. Watch over her! watch over her carefully! for she has yet her appointed task to do."

Thus saying he left the tent, and the women followed, leaving Neva with Ildica alone. The next morning early Mizetus took his way towards the tent of Ildica ere the army began its march; but, as he advanced, a spectacle arrested his progress for a moment, which the Huns themselves in passing gazed on fearfully, but paused not to examine. Down from the tent of Attila to the bank of the rivulet extended a double row--an avenue, in short, of enormous crosses; and nailed upon them, as had been the case in the neighbourhood of Verona, appeared the corpses of at least a thousand of the monarch's own immediate subjects.

Among them were many of those chiefs and officers who had been previously believed to stand high in favour; and, as the various masses of the Huns passed by those sad memorials, the chiefs who had been among those to complain that he had not marched on Rome, and had yet escaped the terrible execution of that night, trembled when they beheld the ghastly spectacle, and thanked the gods that had preserved them.

Mizetus, on the contrary, gazed fearlessly on the proofs of Attila's stern severity, scanned the agonized countenances of the dead, marked the contorted limbs, and murmured as he passed, "More, more blood poured into the cup of vengeance! More to be accounted for! Nor is the day far distant!"

As the enthusiast passed on, Ardaric rode by slowly towards the tent of Attila, gazing with a frowning brow, and a sad but indignant air, upon the bodies of the dead. With a sudden spring forward, Mizetus laid his hand upon his bridle-rein; but Ardaric shook it from his grasp, exclaiming, "Why stoppest thou me in such a spot as this? Get thee hence, madman!"

"Not so mad as he who did this deed!" replied the enthusiast.

"Perhaps not," answered Ardaric; "but the deed is none of mine;" and raising his rein, he rode swiftly on. Mizetus proceeded on his way, and found her he sought sitting nearly as he had left her the day before. He found that she had undergone very little change. She took her food, and suffered her garments to be changed mechanically; but she spoke not, or very seldom, and then with wild and unconnected words, referring to things apparently remote. The enthusiast remained with her long, nor ceased, during all the time of his stay, to pour forth, in language wild but figurative, and with words ready and prompt, the same unconnected and mystical exhortations to which he had given utterance the day before.

He was interrupted by the marching of the army to another station in its advance upon Greece; but, ere he left the tent of Ildica, he saw, well pleased, that he had more than once gained her attention, though but for a moment; and on the following day that attention was more fixedly obtained. The third day she listened to him, though she answered not; and the fourth day she wept for the first time. Thenceforward, though she spoke but seldom, and though, when she did speak, there appeared in her words a difference from the ordinary train of thought, a slight deviation from that clear intellectual path which her mind had ever followed, yet in some degree she resumed her ordinary occupations, suffered herself to be moved on in her litter, calmly, if not cheerfully, and from time to time spoke a few words to Neva, with an effort to show her gratitude and regard.

Thus passed the time till ten days after the sad news of Theodore's death had reached her ear, when, as they marched along, and she lay in her open litter, carried in the rear of the army, suddenly Attila himself appeared, and drew up his horse beside her. He gazed upon her with an eye in which there shone some pity, and he asked, "How goes it with thee, beautiful Ildica?"

"As well as may be, mighty monarch," she replied, looking firmly upon him without a trace of fear.

"Thou art better than I expected," said Attila, apparently surprised at her calmness.

"I am better than I had hoped or feared," she answered; "but hope and fear are over, oh monarch!"

"Not so," replied Attila; "there is still, I trust, much joy for thee on earth;" and, thus saying, he rode on.

On the evening of that day, when the tents were pitched, Ildica, as pale as marble, was seated in her own; and leaning on the pillows of the couch, while Neva sat beside and held her hand, she listened to the old man Mizetus, who, standing on the other side, read from an open book, and commented as he went.

At length he closed the pages, and, gazing full upon her, he exclaimed, "Such is thy lot! Such

is the will of Heaven! Such is thy destiny! and great shall be thy reward! Though thou hast suffered, and still shall suffer, till the work be accomplished, thy sufferings shall be forgotten in the exceeding great joy of thy recompense! Such, such, I tell thee, is to be thy fate!"

"I am ready!" replied Ildica, solemnly--"I am prepared! Let it come!"

Mizetus added a few words more; but, ere he could conclude the sentence, one of her attendants entered, and announced that a messenger from Attila awaited her without. Her cheek and lips turned paler still, but she answered calmly and at once, "Give him admission!"

"Beautiful maiden," said the messenger, when he stood before her, "Attila greets thee well, and calls thee his beloved. He says that grief has had its due, and that joy must have its day; and he bids my poor tongue announce to thee that Attila has chosen thee for the envied station of his bride. To-morrow the army halts the whole day, and at the hour of sunset, ere Attila sits down with his warriors to the banquet, his bridal shall be solemnized with thee by the priests of his faith and of thine! What answer shall I bear the king?"

Ildica heard him with apparent calmness; but Neva felt the fingers of her beautiful hand clasp tight with agonized emotion on her own.

The fair girl's lips moved, but no sound issued forth. Another struggle, they moved again, and her voice was heard!

"Who shall resist the will of the king?" she said, and bowing her head, she suffered the messenger to depart. The curtain of the tent fell behind him; and starting up, she fell at the feet of Mizetus. Then clasping the old man's knees with her arms, she exclaimed, "No vow! No vow! I can take no vow! Save me from that!"

"Fear not," replied the hermit--"fear not, my daughter! Thou shalt take no vow. Be but a passive instrument in the hands of God!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BRIDAL OF ATTILA.

On an eminence rising above the banks of the river, near which the vast army of the Huns pitched its camp on the ensuing night, was found a splendid pavilion, with workmen still labouring hard to complete it, when the vanguard of the army reached its ground. Ere Attila himself arrived, the whole was finished; and a palace of richly-ornamented woodwork, mingled and decorated with hangings of crimson and gold, waited his approach.

The mood of the monarch, however, was not placable; and the workmen whom he had sent forward to prepare his abode received no token of his thanks or approbation, notwithstanding the skill and zeal which they had displayed. Those who had accompanied him on the way had found good cause to mark his discontented humour; and Ardaric and Valamir, and even Onegisus himself, had seized the first opportunity of withdrawing themselves from the side of one who treated all with indignity, which their free spirits could but ill bear. The cause of this harsh rumour might be, it was whispered, that Ardaric had ventured remonstrances, and Valamir had seconded them, which were displeasing to the ear of Attila; but never before, in his most passionate moods, had he given way to such intemperance of language as he had that day displayed towards two of his noblest and most disinterested supporters. An hour after their arrival, however, they received a summons to attend the bridal and the banquet of the mighty king; and to the pavilion on the hill they took their way, clothed in the most splendid robes that the camp could supply.

In a vast hall, decorated by crimson hangings, which many a tributary land had combined to furnish, stood Attila himself, already surrounded by a multitude of his officers and chiefs. To the astonishment of every one there present, however, the monarch of the Huns appeared not now in the plain garment of his Scythian ancestors. For the first time in his life, gold, and jewels, and vestures of silk covered the powerful limbs of the mighty conqueror. The heavy iron sword which never before had left his side was now no longer there. All the rude weapons of war were carefully excluded from his dress; and jewels of inestimable value bound his haughty brow.

In the same hall, at the farther end, was raised a temporary altar, festooned with green leaves and the few autumnal flowers which the country round could supply. Elevated upon that altar was seen the ponderous sword of the Scythian Mars, famous in the history of Attila's reign, from

the singular manner in which it had been found. Beside it stood a number of the Scythian priests; and the steps which led to it were thickly strewn with leaves of the wild laurel and the hemlock.

The countenance of Attila himself was now cleared of the clouds which had obscured it; but still, the joy with which it beamed as plainly testified the change which his nature had lately undergone as the frowns that had hung upon it before. In former days, the countenance of Attila had been a stranger to both frowns and smiles. The stern passions which moved him then had wrought and struggled within the secret chambers of his breast alone, and no light emotions had seemed to affect his outward bearing. Now he was moved by many things; and, in spite of all his efforts to seem what he had been, the emotions of his heart thrilled through his bodily frame, and made themselves seen upon the surface.

"Where are the Christian priests?" demanded the voice of the monarch, as soon as he had spoken a few words to Valamir and Ardaric, in a tone evidently intended to soften the harsh impression produced by his ill-humour of the morning--"where are the Christian priests?"

"None have been found in the camp, oh mighty king," said Edicon, coming forward. "I have inquired in every quarter, and none have been found."

"None!" exclaimed Attila; "none! Where is that rash priest Mizetus; he who by a few empty words provoked the wrath of so many mighty chiefs. I have seen him since in the camp. I saw him no later than yesterday. Let him be sent for; and tell the bride that Attila waits her coming, as the spring-earth waits for the rising of the morning sun."

The messengers departed; and then came a pause, dead and silent, and painful to all but those common spirits who saw nothing in the scene they were called to behold but the common festivity of a day. Ardaric and Valamir gazed upon each other, but they spoke not, till some casual movement caused a murmur to run through the hall. Then, in a low voice, the latter asked the former, "What, think you, will be the result?"

"I know not," answered Ardaric; "but, from what I hear, she is not unwilling. Yet, from some chance words dropped in my wife's presence, either her mind wanders as that of one deprived of reason, or else deeper thoughts than we know of are at work within her brain. But lo, they come!"

As he spoke the door of the hall was thrown open, and a bevy of fair young girls, strewing the way with flowers, entered the hall, and wound round towards the altar. Following them, and leaning on the arm of Neva, appeared the Dalmatian bride, clothed in robes of white.

No fear, no agitation was in her step; but firmly and easily she moved along the hall, beauty and grace shining like a glory from every limb and every feature. Neva was far more moved than Ildica; but the countenances of both were paler than the Parian stone; while from those fair, colourless faces beamed forth the beautiful eyes of each--the deep, devoted, dark-blue eyes of Neva, the large, lustrous, liquid eyes of Ildica, shining like brilliant lamps from out a marble tomb.

They took but one gaze around the hall as they entered; but that gaze had a different effect upon each. With Neva it seemed to bewilder and confound: she dropped her eyes again instantly, and advanced with a wavering and uncertain step. The gaze of Ildica was firm and calm; though, as she beheld the scene of barbaric splendour that surrounded her, her brow slightly contracted; her eye flashed for an instant with a wilder, perhaps a brighter fire. Slowly she turned her gaze towards the altar; and, without noticing any one in the hall, approached deliberately the spot where the sacrifice of herself was to be completed.

A number of matrons followed; and behind them again came the hermit Mizetus, clad in the same wild robes which he wore in the desert and on the mountain. Attila turned to approach the altar; but the hermit advanced towards him, saying boldly, "Thou hast sent for me. I am here. What wouldst thou with me!"

"I have sent for thee," replied Attila, "to perform between me and that maiden the nuptial ceremonies, according to the customs of her people and the rites of her faith."

"I am no priest, oh Attila!" answered the enthusiast. "I am one touched by the finger of God, and set apart to speak terrible warnings and foretell great events. But I have neither power to loose nor to bind, to take up nor to cast down. No ceremonies can I perform; for I am no priest according to any human law. But what needst thou think of priests or ceremonies?" he continued, seeing Attila stand thoughtfully before him. "Let the ceremony be performed according to thine own will. Is not the will of Attila superior to all law?"

"Thou sayest right," answered Attila, advancing to the altar. "It is!" And placing himself by the side of the altar opposite to Ildica, he said, "Let the rites proceed! Oh beautiful Ildica, are you willing?"

Ildica raised her eyes, large, calm, liquid, shining as fountains of living light. She gazed on him for a moment, and then, "I adjure thee, oh Attila!" she cried, "to tell me truth! Is he dead?"

"He is!" replied Attila, emphatically.

"Art thou certain--quite certain?" demanded Ildica, still gazing in his face.

"As certain as if my hand had slain him," replied Attila.

"Ha!" said Ildica. "Even so!"

"What sayest thou?" demanded Attila.

"That the will of the king is law." And she cast down her eyes to the ground.

"Most beautiful and best beloved!" exclaimed Attila, taking her hand with a look of eager passion. "Let the rites proceed."

They did proceed; and the strange and fanciful ceremonies of the pagan nuptials were begun and ended between Attila and Ildica!

Still, during the whole of that ceremony, the fair unhappy girl uttered not one word; but, passive before the heathen altar, she stood like the victim so often brought there to be sacrificed. Her lips moved not; her voice was heard not; and, without either consent or denial, she became the bride of that dark and mighty king.

The priests ceased; the ceremony was over; and she still stood silent before the altar, with her hand lying in that of Attila. And those who stood by and saw, never forgot the sight of those small, white, taper fingers resting in that broad powerful hand. At length she lifted up her eyes, as if seeking for the heaven; and then her lips moved for a moment, as if in prayer.

As was the custom, the women of the highest note there present surrounded her, and led her away to a banquet prepared for her alone. Ildica ate one cake of bread, and drank one cup of wine, and then sought the chamber reserved for her. They would have led her in, and stayed with her to adorn her; but she paused at the door, and bade them leave her. They hesitated, and urged the custom of the land. But she raised her head proudly, saying, "I am a Roman even here! But what to you is more, I am the bride of Attila, and I command you, leave me! I must spend the intervening time in prayer," she added, in a milder tone; and, ceasing to urge her further, the women left her to her own thoughts; and every one betook them to their homes again.

In the mean while Attila led his chiefs to the banquet; but, as they went, Ardaric and Valamir walked side by side, and spoke together in a low tone over the scene just past.

"I comprehend it not," said Ardaric; "I understand it not. The memory of old affection is clearly strong in her heart; neither do I think that she forgets her country, nor believe that she is one to wed either for fear or for ambition! If there should be some higher purpose in her bosom, Valamir? If she should meditate some mighty deed?--a deed which, since Attila is no longer Attila, many a brave man in the camp has pondered on as the last hope of many here--a deed which, since safety has been banished from our tents, and the swords of our friends have been drawn at midnight against ourselves, may even have crossed my mind and thine?"

"Hush!" said Valamir; "Onegisus watches us. Let us sit at separate tables; but humour him to the full; and, as he has now forgot his ancient temperance, let him drink deep. It matters not to us whether drunkenness disgrace him on this night of pageantry or not. Cross him not, I beseech thee, Ardaric! Thou hast had warning enough this day that Attila hears counsel no longer, even when given for the protection of his own honour."

Seated at the banquet, the same scenes, or very similar ones, took place, which we have dwelt upon before. The same, in all respects, except in the conduct of the chief actor therein. The rude poet sang the glowing tale of mighty deeds and great warriors in the long-gone past; the jester excited the roar of ribald laughter; the wine flowed plenteously; the chiefs drank deep; but Attila, no longer calm and grave, followed each impulse of the moment--now gave way to some hasty wrath, now joined in the peal of merriment; and still, in the deep wine-cup, provoked the emulation of his warriors.

It was when the night waxed late, and the banquet was nearly over, that Zercon, the negro jester, who had already played his part in the hall for the amusement of the guests, entered again, bearing in his hands an enormous cup of gold, richly gemmed at the rim and on the handles. The shape was beautiful; the workmanship splendid; the jewels of inestimable value; and, as he approached the seat of Attila, the eyes of the monarch, already inflamed with wine, gazed on the magnificent vessel with eyes of wonder and admiration. Kneeling before him, Zercon placed the cup in his hand, saying, "Behold, oh mighty king, a present just arrived from a dear friend and well-wisher of Attila. Thy messengers have just returned from the M[oe]sian frontier, and bear thee this jewelled cantharus from Eugenius, bishop of Margus. Happily has it come to grace thy bridal night."

Attila took the cup, and gazed upon it, repeating thoughtfully, "From Eugenius, bishop of Margus!--the boy's uncle! I will use it some other night."

"Nay, oh mighty king!" said Zercon, "no night like this; for in it you may pledge yourself to avenge the wrongs of him who sent it."

"What wrongs?" cried Attila, turning upon him fiercely. "I know of no wrongs that he has suffered."

"It comes," replied Zercon, in a deep tone, "from the dead to the living! from the impotent to the mighty! Eugenius has been put to death, by command of Marcian, for admitting the Huns to the Roman territory; and thy messengers have but escaped with life and this cup, which he had just given them for thee, as a pledge of his friendship."

Attila's countenance grew as dark as night. "Take the cup," he cried, to one of his officers; "take the cup and let it be purified with fire. Then bring it to me."

The attendant took the cup, and held it over a lighted torch in the midst of the hall. Then, after passing it through water, he brought it to the monarch, who filled it to the brim: and, rising from his seat, exclaimed, "Pledge me, kings and mighty leaders! Pledge me, in our last cup this night, death to the slave Marcian, who has dared to slay the friend of Attila!" and he drank off the wine at once.

He had not spared the cup throughout the night; and now that deep draught had a visible effect. He felt it himself; and, setting down the cup, leaned his head upon his hand for a moment; then suddenly rose, and, bending slightly to his guests, quitted the hall with an unsteady step. Several of his chief attendants followed, but they returned the moment after; and many of the leaders rose and left the hall, conversing in low voices on the varied events lately passed. Others remained, and protracted the debauch; but by the first hour after midnight the pavilion of the king was void of its guests, and all had returned to silence.

Among the first that left the hall were Ardaric and Valamir; and, as they passed through the camp of the sleeping Huns, they paused for a moment beside one of the tents in which a light was burning, and from which might be heard the voice of lamentation.

"Hark! Her slaves weeping over her unhappy fate!" said Ardaric.

"What! did she not take them with her?" demanded Valamir.

"Not one," replied Ardaric; "not one, I hear. Neva, dead Bleda's daughter, who dwells in our tents with my own children, reported that she went alone; and none has been with her so much as Neva! She went alone, Valamir: she went alone to her abhorred task, whatever that task may be! Let us early to-morrow to Attila, and let us go together. My heart is not at rest!"

Within the tent by which they stood were, as Ardaric conjectured, the slaves and attendants of Ildica, weeping for their mistress, who had gone forth alone, solitary, unaided, unbefriended, in that awful hour of trial; and had gone so by her own choice. Collected in the outer chamber of the tent she had occupied, they mourned as for her funeral; but in the inner chamber of that tent were others who mourned not less, but whose mourning was mingled with a strange agitation which was neither hope nor fear.

By the light of a lamp, holding high a wooden cross, stood the hermit Mizetus, and at his feet knelt the fair girl Neva, raising her eyes to the symbol of a new faith which the enthusiast had lately planted in her heart. Dark and obscure as was his own knowledge of the truth, clouded by a bewildered brain and distorted by wild fancies, he had still been able to show her a glimmering of the light which was afterward to shine upon her more fully. Both were pale and haggard, and moved by the anticipation of great and terrible events; and as they passed there the long hours of that dreadful night, the young, fair, lovely maiden kneeling at the feet of that old ascetic, the tears poured down her cheeks in torrents; the sobs burst struggling from her young kind bosom; and often the agony and apprehension of her heart convulsed her form as if in the grasp of death.

"Fear not, fear not, my daughter!" would the hermit exclaim. "Fear not for her! fear not for us! There is a mightier power than any on the earth to shield us! There is a greater arm than ever drew mortal sword to defend us! Even were we in the gates of death itself, I would bid thee fear not; for God has broken the bonds of the grave asunder, and provided a ransom to deliver us from hell itself!" Thus did he speak through the livelong night, and thus did he try to give her consolation and support; still bidding her not to fear, till at length he said, "Fear not, maiden! fear not! Lo, the night is past, and the morning is come; and after the darkness in which we walk upon this earth shall come the light of a brighter day! Fear not! fear not! I say unto you, fear not!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DEATH OF THE MIGHTY.

All was quiet amid the splendour of the pavilion of Attila. Not a sound was heard within its walls, though the light of day had made the long morning shadows short, and the squadrons of Huns had for some hours been moving in the plains below. Ellac and his forces had gone forth with the dawn of day to occupy the new ground appointed for the evening halt: and two or three hundred thousand men had followed some hours after. The heavier cavalry of the Gepidæ and Ostrogoths hung like dark clouds upon the sloping hills between which the river wandered; but while the Huns themselves continued to march on under their several leaders, according to the commands they had received upon the preceding evening, the forces of the two great auxiliary nations remained stationary, waiting the orders of their several kings.

Ardaric and Valamir, followed by a large train of their chief nobles, had ridden at an early hour to the pavilion of their great leader to felicitate Attila on his nuptials; and now they waited with Onegisus and Edicon, in an inner apartment of the pavilion, which served as an antechamber to that in which the mighty king reposed. They had remained there several hours; and while Ardaric spoke in a louder tone with Onegisus, Valamir conferred with Edicon apart. Doubt and anxiety, however, were now beginning to cloud the countenances of all; and some of the inferior attendants from time to time looked in, to see if the kings had yet been admitted to the presence of their chief.

"This is very strange!" said Ardaric, at length: "what may it mean?"

"It will soon be noon!" said Valamir; "and it is more than strange that he who through life has risen daily with the morning light should show himself thus tardy."

"It were well to wake him," said Onegisus.

"Ay, if he may be wakened," muttered Ardaric, drawing back the curtain which hung over an ornamented door of woodwork. "But what is here?"

Each started forward at his sudden exclamation, and beheld, welling from underneath the door, like water from the shelf of a rock, and dabbling the rushes with which the floor was strewn, a stream of dark gore, which had been concealed by the curtain. They gazed upon it, and then in one another's faces for a moment; and no one found a voice till Onegisus, turning suddenly as if to leave the chamber, exclaimed, "I will call the attendants! We must force the door!"

"On your life, Onegisus!" cried Ardaric, seizing him in his powerful grasp, and drawing his sword--"you stir not hence! We must deal with this deed alone. Valamir, you are with me. Edicon, I can trust in you; guard yonder doorway!"

"What would the noble Ardaric?" cried Onegisus: "why grasp you me so tight, oh king! I seek not to oppose your will; for if I judge by yon dark blood aright, there is none in all this camp greater than Ardaric. What would the mighty king with his servant?"

"I would nothing that is wrong, Onegisus!" replied Ardaric, freeing him from his grasp, as soon as he saw that Edicon had placed himself before the door which led to the outer halls; "I seek nothing that is wrong! I covet not the greatness that thou talkest of! I demand no pre-eminence! Valamir, my friend, are we not equal in all things? or, if there be a difference, thou art superior to me in calm considerate wisdom, and no way inferior to me either in power or right. What I seek, Onegisus, is this--only this! that we who are here present may investigate this deed alone, and take counsel together upon whatever exigency we may find before us. Thou art a man of wisdom and of courage, and true ever to thy word. Swear to me that thou wilt bear a part in whatsoever we determine in regard to the deed that is past; that thou wilt join in whatever report we make regarding the dark secrets of yon silent chamber; or we must find means to silence thy tongue, lest it sow dissension among the host, and give us over to the power of the enemy!"

"Willingly will I swear what you require, oh noble Ardaric!" replied Onegisus, "so far as regards the present deed; but if dissensions come--and I see that thy fears and mine look the same way--I will not pledge myself to take any given part. I will act freely as my judgment shall dictate when the time shall arrive. Rather than do otherwise, I would bid you plunge your swords into my bosom even now, and let me die before the doorway of my murdered master!"

"Onegisus," replied Ardaric, in a solemn and melancholy tone, "we know not yet what has befallen, but the oath that thou hast pledged is enough. None loved Attila better than Ardaric while Attila remained himself; but we all feel that Attila has been unjust! Now let us seek admittance here!" and he struck upon the door with his clinched hand, exclaiming, "Ho! does Attila sleep? What ho! within there! The sun stands high at noon!"

There was no answer! All was as silent as the grave!

There was an awful pause, while each looked anxiously in the face of the other. But then was heard a sound in the outer chambers, and voices in high dispute; the tone of a stranger, though speaking the Hunnish language well, demanding entrance; and the tongues of the attendants refusing him admittance. Then again were words spoken in the well-known voice of Theodore, the son of Paulinus, "Out of my way! By the God of battles, I will cleave thee to the jaws! Out of

my way, I say! Be it on thine own head, then, fool! Thou strivest with a madman! Down!"

Then came a heavy fall.

"Give him admittance, give him admittance," cried Ardaric and Valamir in a breath: "oppose him not, Edicon! Poor youth, he will find himself already avenged;" but, as he spoke, the door burst open, and Theodore, with his naked sword all bloody in his hand, rushed in.

"Stand all without," cried Edicon, putting back those who were following to seize him. "Leave us to deal with him. The king has not yet come forth!" and closing the door upon them, he drew across it the massive wooden bar that hung beside it.

"Oh Ardaric, Ardaric!" cried Theodore, "hast thou betrayed me too?"

"No, on my life, dear youth," cried the King of the Gepidæ, catching him in his powerful arms--"we thought thee dead--thou earnest not at the time!"

"How could I come?" cried Theodore--"waylaid on every shore, tossed by the tempest, turned back, delayed--how could I come? But unhand me, Ardaric, I am mad with injury and revenge; and I will in to yonder false, faithless tyrant, and die for my revenge!"

"Theodore," said Ardaric, holding him still with his left hand, but pointing with the other to the stream of blood which flowed from beneath the door of Attila's chamber, "either the hand of some god, or her own, has avenged thee and thy poor Ildica already!"

Theodore gazed on it for a moment, and an awful glow of satisfaction rose in his countenance. Then darting forward from the grasp of Ardaric, he laid his hand upon the door and attempted to open it. It resisted, and, setting his powerful shoulder against it, he shook it with all his strength. Again he shook it to and fro! The fastenings within gave way, and it burst open with a loud and sudden crash. Theodore took a step forward, and then paused, while all the others rushed in.

The light streamed down from windows near the roof, and passing through the silken curtains, which both served for ornament and to exclude the air of night, poured softened into the chamber. It was an awful scene on which that calm, solemn light fell tranquilly.

There, on the floor, scarcely two paces from the door, clothed in the same splendid robes which for the first and last time in his life he had worn; with the jewelled circle on his brow, the blazing diamonds on his broad chest and in his sandals, lay the dark and fearful monarch of the Huns, the victor of a thousand fields, the mighty conqueror of unnumbered nations! Mighty no more! Awful still! but awful in death, and from a small spot on the silken vesture which covered that breast, wherein for so many years had lain the fate of empires and the destiny of a world, proceeded the dark stream of blood, thick and clotted, but not yet dried up, which had once throbbled in that lion heart, and now had left it cold and vacant. The ground around was flooded with the stream of gore; his vesture was soaked and dabbled in it; but it was clear that he had fallen at once, without an effort or a struggle; for there he lay, as calm as if in sleep, with even a smile of joyous triumph on his lip, as he had entered that fatal bridal chamber, which was to be unto him the hall of death.

It was an awful sight; but still more awful, still more terrible was the object on which the eye rested when it was raised from Attila. A few cubits beyond him, in a seat wherein she had evidently waited his coming, sat Ildica, the beautiful Dalmatian bride. On a table beside her stood a lamp, just dying out; on her knee rested her right hand, with her fair delicate fingers clasped tight round the hilt of a small dagger, from the point of which some drops of blood had fallen upon her snowy garments; her other hand grasped tight the arm of the chair. One of the shining tresses of her long dark hair had dropped from the pin that held it, and fallen upon her bosom; but in all else her dress was as she had appeared at the altar. Her cheek, her brow, her neck, were clear and pale as alabaster. The only crimson left was in her lips.

Some have written that she was weeping, but they lied! She wept not. Not a drop of moisture was in her eye, though its liquid light, pure and unquenched, beamed there as bright as ever. But those dark lustrous eyes, as if the whole world had vanished from her thoughts, as if for her the whole universe, except one dark and fearful object, was annihilated, were fixed immoveable on the corpse of that mighty king, whom no warrior had been found to conquer, but who had fallen in the hour of joy, intemperance, and in consummate injustice, by her own weak, delicate hand.

The blows of Ardaric upon the door, the sound of his voice, the crashing of the shivered fastenings, the tread of many feet in that awful chamber, had not roused her, even in the slightest degree, from that deep trance of overpowering thought. Her ear seemed deafened, her eye blind, her lips dumb, her whole form turned into stone, by the gorgon aspect of the just but terrible deed which her own hand and mighty resolution had achieved.

Well might she so remain; for the stern and resolute men who now stood before her, accustomed as they were to blood and slaughter in all the fiercest forms, prepared, too, as they were for the sight of death, were, nevertheless, overawed by that still, solemn, fearful scene, and stood for a space gazing silently, as if they, also, were petrified with the objects they beheld.

The first who raised his eyes from Attila was he to whom that dim chamber contained an

object dearer far than any other thing on earth; and, gazing for a moment upon her, he exclaimed, "Oh, Ildica! oh beloved! thou hast been true to me, indeed!"

The counter-charm was spoken; the beloved tones were heard. Ildica raised her eyes, started from her seat, gazed wildly upon him, and, with a loud, piercing shriek, fell senseless at his feet.

Theodore threw his arm round her, caught her from the ground, and pressing her tight to his bosom, placed himself opposite to the chieftains who had entered with him. Then raising the drawn sword, which still remained in his hand, towards the sky, he exclaimed, "Almighty God, I thank thee even for this day! Ardaric, Valamir, Onegisus, Edicon, call in your warriors! call them in, and let them slay us together, for this deed which she has done, and in which I glory! Had her hand not done it, mine should have striven to do it. Call them in, and let them mingle our blood together. Thrilled with the same emotions through life, and faithful unto death, that blood may well flow forth at the same moment; and still will it keep apart from that of Attila! Call them in! call them in! or, if ye be generous, plunge your own swords in our bosoms! Lo, here I drop my weapon, and offer you my throat!"

"Onegisus," said Ardaric, "Attila has died in doing an injustice. What sayest thou?"

Onegisus paused, and looked down, while many emotions were evidently contending in his breast. At length he raised his eyes to Ardaric, and said, "It must not be known that Attila died by the hand of a woman?"

"Wisely bethought!" cried Ardaric. "The shame would travel through the whole world! Let it be given forth that Attila has slain himself. See, she has dropped the dagger. Let it be laid beside him."

"Not so," said Valamir; "that were a still greater shame! Let it be said that he died from the bursting of his mighty heart after the intemperance of last night's revel: and that we found him suffocated in his blood, and the bride--as all may see her carried forth--in a dead swoon from terror."

"But what shall be her fate?" demanded Onegisus; "what shall be her doom hereafter?"

"Onegisus," replied Ardaric, solemnly, "thou hast a wife whom thou lovest! thou hast a daughter dear unto thine heart! Look upon yon fair girl, and think she is thy child. Remember the terrible cause that she has had; remember that her mind, as all of us have seen, has wandered since the tale of this youth's death; remember all that thou wouldst remember were she thy child, and then say what shall be her doom!"

Onegisus turned away his head: and stretching forth his right hand, "Let her go free!" he said; "let her go free! But if it come to Ellac's ears, fearful will be the consequences."

"Fearful to those who fear him," replied Ardaric, his lip curling with scorn. "She shall go safe. Valamir, Edicon, what say ye?"

"Let her go safe," replied Edicon.

"She has done a great deed of sovereign justice," replied Valamir, more boldly. "Let him blame her who will. I give her mighty honour! Let her go safe!"

"All are agreed!" cried Ardaric. "Edicon, my friend, call up to the antechamber my train and that of Valamir, and let her be carried instantly hence; not to her own tent though, but to mine, under the care of my wife. I can trust thee, Edicon, from what passed between us yesterday--I can trust thee. Take this ring! Bid my squadrons come down hither with all speed!"

"And my brave Goths," added Valamir, "shall glide down and interpose between us and the Huns. Theodore, stay thou with us. Valamir and Ardaric pledge their hands to thee for thy safety and the safety of thy bride."

Theodore stood as one dumb; for life was a thing which had passed from his thoughts and his hopes, and he had only longed to die with her he loved Eagerly, however, did he grasp the hands of Ardaric and Valamir, and willingly did he intrust the fair inanimate form of that unhappy but heroic girl to the noble friends who had interposed to save them both. Borne upon a couch from that fatal chamber, he beheld her carried forth towards the tents of Ardaric; and in a few minutes after, the faithfulness of Edicon to his trust was displayed by the rapid movement of the Gepidæ down towards the pavilion. Dark and powerful, the squadrons swept around, while the Goths of Valamir marched on likewise, and cut off the spot where the corpse of the mighty king reposed from the great body of the Hunnish cavalry. Nor was their appearance too soon; for all, by this time, within the pavilion and without, was a scene of clamour and confusion, which might well have ended in bloodshed had not the two monarchs possessed power at hand to enforce obedience to their commands.

The decease of Attila was already known, and consternation was spreading among the ranks of the Huns. The report, too, was not wanting that he had met a violent death; but those only were admitted to view the body upon whom the chiefs who had first seen it could depend; and the word of Onegisus satisfied the great mass of the people. Messengers, however, were despatched

to Ellac, and the other children of the dead monarch, with all speed, by the chiefs of the Huns who had remained behind; but Ardaric and Valamir took every precaution in order to meet in arms, should it be needful, either the natural thirst for vengeance of the young monarch, or the first outbursts of characteristic insolence which his newly-acquired power might call forth.

Instant preparations also were made for rendering back unto the bosom of the earth the clay of that mighty being who had so long proved its scourge; and the commands of the two great chieftains enjoined that all which barbarian splendour could effect should be done to give magnificence to the interment of Attila.

Ere nightfall the messengers reached the camp of Ellac; and, had they found him there, he might have returned in time to discover the manner of his father's death; but Ellac had gone forth with a large train to enjoy one of the favourite sports of the Huns, a torchlight hunting in the neighbouring forests; and he returned not to his tents till the dawn of the following day. Ere midday, however, he had reached the pavilion where all that remained of Attila reposed; but, by that time, the body was enclosed in a triple coffin, of iron, of silver, and of gold; and if he then entertained a suspicion, which he probably did, the aspect of the united Gepidæ and Goths taught him to restrain any expression that might bring on the struggle which all men saw must ultimately come, before he had rendered himself certain of the support of all the tribes of Huns, and prepared all the resources of his nation.

That support was doubtful; those resources were by him untried. Ellac stood beneath the crimson tent under which they had laid the body of Attila, and gazed upon the golden coffin of his mighty father; but no voice hailed him successor to his power!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PARTING FOR EVER.

A second, a third day had passed, and it was night; and, kneeling humbly before a small black cross, with tears continually streaming from her eyes, was that fair girl whose unhappy fate had led her from the sweet tranquillity of the domestic home--the home which love, and fancy, and hope had taught her to prize as the brightest lot on earth--to scenes of strife, and turbulence, and toil, to cares unceasing, and to acts which, purchased by the agony of her own spirit and the blasting of her own hopes, had changed the fate and wrought the deliverance of a world.

It was night; and she wept and prayed alone. An hour more, and she was to be borne, guarded in safety by a strong band of warriors, from a camp where, with the light of the ensuing morning, a ceremony was to be performed which might well end in general bloodshed: and she wept and prayed in silence; wept the blighting of her dearest wishes; wept her own fate and the fate of him she loved; prayed forgiveness for an act she had been taught to consider righteous, and holy, and sanctified, but for which her own heart smote her, even though by it she had won her own deliverance. She prayed forgiveness for that act, heroic, mighty, beneficial as it was; and while the whole Christian world raised up the thankful hands, and praised God for their deliverance, she besought his pardon for the deed that had achieved it.

Solemn and sad was the scene presented by that tent, as there, still exquisite in beauty, she knelt before the cross; and the solitary lamp, casting its full light upon her, showed those graceful lines and lovely features too truly expressive of utter despair. After a while, she strove to dry the fountain of her tears; those tears, bitter as they were, had been a relief to her overloaded heart. She thought she heard a sound, and rose from before the cross. It was but to be caught in the arms of him she loved.

He pressed her to his bosom; and for a moment she lay there, while joy ecstatic--joy worth years of suffering--thrilled through her heart, and took away all power to speak, to think, or to resolve.

The next instant, however, she started up, and struggled from his arms, exclaiming wildly, "Touch me not! Touch me not! Oh, Theodore, touch me not! I am unworthy that thou shouldst touch me."

Theodore paused and gazed upon her, and over his face their gathered the cloud of uncertainty and apprehension. A doubt, a suspicion, horrible, fiery, agonizing, maddening, rushed through his brain, and he exclaimed, "Oh, God! is it possible? Have I then lost my Ildica--my pure, my holy, my beloved!"

Written on his countenance, she saw the dreadful thought that crossed his mind; she heard it in the deep despair that shook his voice. "No, no!" she cried, lifting her eyes towards the sky; "no, no! As there is a God in heaven--as there is redemption for all sins--I am thine, thine only, thine faithfully, thine in every thought, in heart, mind, body! thine alone!"

"Then come to my arms!" cried Theodore; "come to my arms, and be my own for ever, brightest, dearest, most beautiful, and most beloved!"

"Oh, no, no, Theodore!" she answered, sadly; "oh, no, no! never can I be thine except in spirit and in love. This hand has lain in the hand of the barbarian. This hand has been died in the blood of his heart. This hand never, never can be given to thee in wedlock, pure, and noble, and virtuous as thou art."

"Nay, nay, Ildica," he said, twining his arms round her, and pressing her closer to his bosom--"nay nay; but hear me. Sit down here by your own Theodore, your brother, your lover, your promised husband."

She sobbed violently, and her tears deluged his bosom. "Listen to me, my Ildica," he continued, seating himself with her on the side of the couch, and still pressing her to his heart. "Is my happiness nothing to Ildica, that now, when fate at length unites us, her hand should sever the dear bond for ever?" Her only answers were sobs. "Hear me," he said--"hear me, Ildica. Thou hast done an act for which all nations bless thee. Nor wert thou to blame for any part therein. Thou hadst no other way to save thyself from a fate far more terrible. Thou thoughtest that I was dead! Flight was impossible, resistance vain!"

"Listen to *me*, Theodore," she said, raising her head and looking on his face more calmly, but still sadly and gloomily--"listen to me, and thou shalt see that I know, and have calculated, and pressed forth the honey from each excuse, for the act that I have committed. I will tell thee all--I can tell thee all--for my reason and my memory are now clear, and I can look back upon the past as upon a picture, wherein I can see my own image acting a part involuntarily in mighty and awful deeds. Listen to me, then, beloved; and while I lie here and repose, for the last time in life, upon that dear resting-place whereon I had hoped to cradle all my after years, I will tell thee all, all the dark thoughts and sad memories of the past. Thou hast heard how my mother died, and how a violent and a raging sickness deprived me for long of sense. Never after that, Theodore--never, after I awoke and found myself alone in all the world, thee absent, my mother gone, Ammian, Eudochia far away--Never do I think that my mind regained its tone. It was as a bow which the strong arm of misfortune had stretched too far; and though it sprang back in a degree, it never became straight and powerful as before. Then came all the horrid visions of the barbarian's love; but under all those trials I struggled, as my Theodore might have seen and approved. Amid them all there is not one memory that lies heavy at my heart. I bore up with fortitude: I resisted with courage: I pleaded, as I fancied, with success. But then at length, as hope, bright hope was rising up, and telling me that a week, a day, an hour might bring thee to me, suddenly, and without preparation, they told me that thou wert dead. They left me to believe that thou hadst been murdered by command of him who sought my love. Oh God! I can scarcely think of it even now," she continued, clasping her hand upon her forehead.

But, after a moment, she went on, with a deep sigh--"Well, there fell upon me a cloud; I walked amid those around me as one walking in a mist. I saw little, I knew little, of all that surrounded me. Brief snatches of what was said I understood. People came and disappeared like figures in a thick fog, and voices sounded in mine ear as of distant persons, that one sees not, heard talking in a dark night. But among those voices was one," and her voice rose, "which taught me a lesson of high daring, which showed me holy authority for a deed of blood, which called upon me night and day to deliver the earth from her scourge, the nations from their destroyer, the people of God from their oppressor and their enemy. Night and day that voice told me that I was the appointed, the chosen of the Lord, to do his will upon his adversary. It told me that for this I had been made hopeless and rendered desolate: for this I had been cast into the hands of the barbarians: for this had the infidel king been made to cast the eyes of passion upon me. Oh Theodore! that voice but strengthened ideas which I had already conceived; it but nerved my heart to deeds that I had already contemplated. I had promised my mother that, in the time of trial, I would act as one of my ancestors would have acted: I had promised my own heart that I would die sooner than suffer the love of any but thyself. There was, as thou hast said, no escape; there was no resistance. I was called to the sacrifice of the bridal by a command, not an invitation; and I went in the strength of madness and despair to slay the slayer of my father, my husband, and my people; to cut short deeds of blood by one as dark and terrible; and to prevent the accomplishment of that fearful vow which he had made, to lay the Eastern world in ashes, and to leave not a blade of grass or a living soul between the Danube and the Hellespont. Three fearful lots were laid before me, to choose which I would. They were--to abhor myself for ever as the slave of Attila's foul passions--to slay myself to escape him--or to slay him, and, though my certain death should follow, thus free the Christian world, and deliver the nations from the sword of the destroyer. I chose, oh Theodore, the bolder and the mightier deed: I chose that which I believed was justified in self-defence, which was beneficial to the human race, which I had been told was pleasing unto God. I chose it with an unshrinking heart, a keen eye, and a steady hand. But remember, oh remember, that I vowed no vow; that I promised no promise unto him; that I stood passive, while they muttered, and they sacrificed, and never, never gave the hand he took. Remember, that at that very altar where he sealed his own fate, when solemnly adjured to tell the truth, he swore to me that thou wert dead, and lost to me for ever. I had no choice, I had no hope, I had no safety!

But when he fell and lay before me, the dark blood spouting from his stricken side, and the quivering heel smiting the ground in the agonies of death, the justification passed away; the terrible thing that I had done absorbed all thought, and feeling, and sensation. Then immediately you rushed in. No, it could not be immediately, though it seemed so unto me; but what passed I know not, till your voice called me for a moment to recollection; and joy, and horror, and despair cast me senseless again."

Theodore pressed her tenderly to his bosom. "And does not this show," he said--"does not all this show that thou shouldst be dearer than ever to my heart? Does not this show that thou, whose every feeling through life has been given to me, should, through my future days, be the object of all my love, and care, and tenderness? Yes, yes, my Ildica; my bosom shall be thy resting-place, my arms thy shield, my heart thy sanctuary, my ear the willing listener to every sorrow and to every care, my voice the soother of thy griefs, the consolation for all that is painful in memory. Theodore will devote his life unto thee; his every thought, his every hope, his every wish--"

"Forbear, forbear, Theodore," she cried; "for Ildica's life must be given up to God. From this day forth no hour shall fly--but those in which He sends his blessed sleep to allay the fiery memories of the past--without some prayer for pardon, without some petition for light in this world of darkness, without some act of penitence, of adoration, of thanksgiving. What I have told thee, Theodore, should make thee know that in this I can never change; that I have thought deeply over all that is past; and with restored reason and a clear intellect, there is but one place for me on earth--the calm and tranquil cell in some solitary sisterhood, where I may devote, as far as love for thee will let me, all my thoughts to God. Oh, Theodore, be contented! In those thoughts thou wilt share enough. Thou, thou alone art my object upon earth, round which still cling the garlands of sweet flowers that fond hope and young affection twined in the days gone by. Oh, Theodore! those flowers are all immortals: the dew of memory shall preserve them still, as bright as when first we wreathed them in the golden past. Their sweet odour shall still endure to perfume the very latest hours of life; and let us hope--ay, let us hope, that, with a garland in our hand, a garland of those same immortal flowers of love, we may meet ere long in heaven! Oh, Theodore! that life may have been terrible, painful, disastrous, but never can be useless, that makes us look forward with hope and joy to a better being and a nobler state." She gazed upward for a moment, then cast herself upon his bosom and wept.

He held her to his heart in silence, for there was a sacredness in her sorrow, an elevation in her purpose, which he dared not combat at that moment, though the hope of changing it was not extinct. Gladly, however, did he hear her, after a long pause given to the bursting forth of that deep emotion--gladly did he hear her revert to a less painful, a less agitating theme. "Eudochia," she said--"Eudochia and Ammian; tell me, Theodore, are they well and happy?"

"I left them so, beloved," he replied, "and trust they are so still; but that is long ago, for I have been delayed by every disaster that can befall the traveller on his way. Tempest and shipwreck, storm and enemies, the darkness of sixteen days upon the wide sea, a host of insidious foes lining the shore, obstacles which the might of man could not overcome, tortured, impeded, delayed me; and I am here with scarce ten of all my followers left alive, and with my own life a miracle even unto myself. When I left my sister and thy brother, however, they were well and happy; she full of smiles and hopes; and he, though graver--calmer I should say, than he was, yet, looking thoughtful happiness whenever he gazed on his own dear bride. They are both happy--most happy; and we may be so too. Yes, yes, my Ildica, brighter thoughts will come: I will see thee this night depart towards our own land with joy and thankfulness; and will follow thee with a more rapid pace ere two days be over. We have none but each other left, my Ildica, to cling to in the world; and our prayers, our thanksgiving, our adoration, will rise as gratefully to the heavenly throne, from two united hearts, thankful for mutual love and mutual happiness, as from two separate beings, torn asunder when they loved the most, and ending in solitary misery a life that has already known some sorrows."

She shook her head and murmured, "It cannot be!"

But Theodore would not believe aught but the voice of hope; and he pressed her closer to his heart. "Hark!" he said, after a moment; "there is the litter and the train of horsemen that accompany thee! Ardaric has fully provided for our safety till we reach the borders of our own land."

There was the sound of a step in the outer tent, and the curtain which divided it was raised. So often had misfortune stricken her, so continually had the wave of evil tidings been poured upon her ear, that, even at that slight sound, Ildica started, crept closer to the breast of her lover, and gazed forward with a frightened glance upon the moving curtain. The form that appeared, however, was not one to inspire fear; it was that of Neva, now pale as Ildica herself, but scarcely less lovely. She was covered with a mantle of furs, and a hood of fine sable was drawn partly over her head.

On seeing Theodore with Ildica, she paused and hesitated; and either the lamp, flickering with the wind of the moving curtain, cast for a moment a red light upon her countenance, or else the blood mounted up into her cheek, and then, rushing back again, left it as pale as before.

"Ildica, dear Ildica," she said, again advancing, "all is ready!"

Ildica's fortitude returned. It was only in anticipation she was timid. "And must I part with thee, too, dear Neva?" she said; "with thee, to whom all my consolation during the last sad month is owing? Must I part with thee, too--and for ever?"

"No, Ildica, no," answered Neva. "I go with thee, wherever thou goest. Whatever be thy fate, dear sister of my heart, sister in misfortune and disappointed hopes, with thee will I go, if it be to the uttermost parts of the earth. Thy lot I will share, thy sorrows I will sooth, till I see thee at length rewarded with happiness; and then, as a distant gazer upon a beautiful scene, I will look on from afar, and thank God for the brightness of the evening."

Ildica cast her arms around her and melted into tears; and then, suddenly raising her head, she gazed upon the lovely countenance of Bleda's daughter, and turned, as if with the inspiration of sudden hope, towards Theodore. "Oh, Theodore, Theodore!" she exclaimed; "thou mayst be happy yet."

He seemed to gather her meaning in a moment. "Hush!" he exclaimed, in a tone almost rendered stern by the very vehemence of his feelings. "Hush, hush, Ildica--by the sacred purity of thine own heart--hush!"

He cast his arms around her, and pressed her to his bosom; and then, knowing how valuable every moment of that night might be, he gently drew her onward towards the litter which stood without, surrounded by a large body of the barbarian horsemen. Ardaric was there, but he gazed on Theodore and Ildica in silence; and the young Roman, raising her in his arms, placed her himself in the double litter. He assisted Neva to follow and seat herself by Ildica's side. "Farewell, Neva!" he said; "gentle, excellent girl, farewell!--Theodore will ever love you as a brother. Ildica, my bride, my promised, my beloved, farewell! Ere two days be over, I will follow thee on thy way."

She suffered him to embrace her again as she lay on the litter, and she returned the embrace. But, as her cheek lay on his shoulders, she murmured, "Farewell, beloved of my youth! beloved shalt thou still be, even unto death; but hope no vain hopes, Theodore; Ildica is vowed unto prayer and unto repentance. Farewell for ever!"

The litter moved on; the dull sound of the horses' feet was heard upon the grass; the last horsemen filed away over the hills; the sounds of the departing force grew fainter and more faint; the noises of the several camps around rose louder on the ear; and Ardaric laid his hand upon Theodore's arm, saying, "They are gone! Let us to counsel, my friend."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE END OF A SAD HISTORY.

It was a fair autumn day, and the mighty clouds which swept from time to time over the deep blue sky served not to lessen, but rather to increase the brightness of the face of nature. In the centre of the plain which lay between two wide sloping hills was erected a tent of crimson silk, the awnings of which, festooned on high, exposed to view, raised on a low platform, a coffin of burnished gold.^[6]

The space around, for the distance of two bowshots on every side, was kept clear; but beyond the limits of that open ground, in one wide-spreading ring, extended the dusky line of barbarian warriors, whose hands had carried desolation into the heart of so many sunshiny and prosperous lands. Deep was the phalanx of those dark warriors, as, each mounted on his battle-steed, they sat in grim array around the body of their king. The whole plain was occupied by their multitude; and while the soldiers and chiefs themselves thus formed in regular order a living amphitheatre below, the women, the children, and the slaves swept up the hills around and gazed upon the awful spectacle.

After the first confusion incident to giving form and array to such a vast body of men had subsided, the sad and solemn occasion of their meeting, the important and terrible events that were likely to ensue, kept even the rude barbarians hushed around; and though the dull stamping of the horses, unconscious of the cause of halt, raised a murmuring sound, the human voice was not heard throughout that mighty host, or, at most, a low whisper rustled through the ranks.

At length two groups separated themselves from either side, and, advancing for a short space into the arena, dismounted from their horses, and approached the tent on foot. On the one side appeared Ellac, the son of the dead king, and three of his brethren, of whom Ernac, the youngest,

was one; while Onegisus and Orestes, a favourite officer of Attila's, accompanied them towards the tent. On the other hand appeared Ardaric and Valamir, Theodore and Edicon, with two inferior chiefs of tributary nations.

All were unarmed, as had been before agreed; and with branches of oak in their hands, they one by one entered the tent, and laid the leafy offering on the bier of Attila. His children and the two Hunnish chieftains stood on the one side of the coffin, and the two kings with their companions on the other; and, after gazing for a time on the gold that covered the ashes of the mighty king, they raised their eyes to each other, and it was evident that but little love existed between those who were there face to face.

There came an uneasy pause; and then Ardaric, breaking silence, said, "Are we not here, oh Ellac! to celebrate the funeral of that mighty king who for so many years has led us on to battle and to victory? If so, let us plight our hands unto each other, that, for two days, all subjects of debate which may arise, either between me and thee, or between the nation of the Huns and the confederate nations which for so long have borne them company in war, shall be laid aside, and that we shall live together for those two days as friends and brethren united in common love and reverence for the mighty dead."

Ellac gazed at him with a fierceness that he could scarce subdue; and, after a violent struggle with himself, replied, "So shall it be, oh Ardaric! when thou hast satisfied me of one thing. Ere I clasp the hand of any man in amity, even if that amity be to last but for two days, I will know whether the hand offered to me be pure from my father's blood. Of late thou hast been heard to murmur at the will of the king--to condemn his actions--to say that he was changed--to declare the executions that his will ordained, unjust: ay, and, meddling even in his domestic life, to oppose, till his own wrath was excited, his taking to his bed a pitiful Dalmatian girl."

Theodore's hand grasped for the hilt of his sword; but, fortunately, the weapon was away.

"On the day of my father's death," continued Ellac, "comes back yonder Roman, the affianced husband of this slight womanly toy, wherewith Attila chose to solace his hours of idleness. Thou and some few others are together in the antechamber of the king when the viper he has nourished in his bosom returns. The king is found drowned in his blood. All this is strange, oh Ardaric!"

"Ellac," replied Ardaric, sternly and solemnly, "darest thou to accuse me of the murder of thy father, or of sharing in any way in his death? Ardaric was the friend of Attila, but the enemy of those faults which, alas! were growing but too thick upon him. But I tell thee, Ellac, that perchance the thought of slaying Attila might be more familiar to the heart of his own son than to the breast of Ardaric! Silence! and hear me," he continued, in a voice of thunder, seeing that Ellac was about to interrupt him--"silence! and hear me to an end; then answer! I know thine inmost thoughts, oh Ellac! But here I swear," and he laid his broad hand upon the coffin, "by the immortal gods, and by the blood of Attila! that neither I nor mine, nor one here present with me, is guilty of the death of the mighty king--contrived, or aided, or executed his murder. Now, oh Ellac, if thou art still unsatisfied, let this triple coffin be opened, and thou and I will separately place our hands upon the heart of Attila, calling on him to show who most conspired, longed for, thought of, planned the death of that great king. Then shall we see at whose touch his blood will soonest flow!"

Ellac turned away his head--"It is enough," he said; "thine oath will satisfy me!"

A bitter and indignant smile curled the lip of Valamir at his reply. "Since thou art satisfied, Ellac," he said, "pledge us thine hand that here, meeting in peace, at the funeral of thy father, we his friends, the companions of his toils, the sharers in his successes, may in peace also offer to his ashes the honours due to the mightiest monarch, the greatest conqueror, the most heroic warrior that earth has ever seen or shall see! Pledge us thy hand, that for this day and the next, peace, and amity, and good faith shall reign between the Huns and the nations we command, and let every question which may cause dispute or division be postponed till those days have passed."

Ellac hesitated: "Yonder is the grave," he said at length, pointing to a deep pit and a high mound of earth which had been cast up to form it. "Yonder is the grave. Thou knowest, Ardaric, that the blood of slaves and captives must be shed, as a sacrifice, on the spot where rest the bones of Attila. Thou wouldst not send the spirit of the mighty king upon its long journey through the realms of night with no attendant shades around it. I claim a sacrifice; and as the first who follows the great monarch to the pastures of the dead, I claim the bride that he had wedded on his night of death; I claim her he had made his own in the sight of heaven and earth, to follow him whithersoever the gods shall appoint him to go!"

"Out on thee, fiend!" cried Theodore; "out on thee, unjust and barbarous man! Lover of blood, faithless, false, and insolent; no bride of Attila's was she; no sacrifice shall she be to the demon of thy mighty father--to the manes of him who, had he been as pitiful and as contemptible as his son, would never--"

"Hush, hush!" cried Ardaric, laying his hand upon his arm--"hush, hush, Theodore! Provoke not quarrel now! Ellac, what thou demandest is impossible. Were she even here in the camp, my honour, and the glorious name of Attila himself, would demand that she whose hand had lain in

his should be held sacred, so long as Ardaric had a sword to wield in her defence. But she is far hence. Long, long miles separate us from her; and ere thou or thine could reach her, she would be safe in her own land. If thou wilt swear peace, why well! but seek not to delay us longer with vain and idle pretexts!"

"Pretexts!" exclaimed Ellac, furiously; "proud leader, who art thou, to talk to me of pretexts? Who is king here on the Pannonian soil, that thou shouldst beard me thus?"

"Beard thee!" cried Ardaric, with a scornful laugh. "Who is king here! why, beardless boy, Ardaric is king as well as thou art! Thy father's friend, but not his servant; his ally, not his subject, serving him well and truly from love and admiration; but owing him nothing, no, not an ounce of gold! Speakest thou to me as if thou wert Attila? Poor worm! know thyself better; and if thou wouldst know who is king, three days hence I will give thee an answer--ay, such an answer as the world shall never forget--written with steel, in characters of blood. But let us now have peace! If thou wilt now swear to deal faithfully with us, say so at once. If not, lo, we mount our horses, and we draw our swords. But upon thee and thine be the shame and the disgrace of dishonouring thy father's ashes. We offer thee peace to perform the rites due to the ashes of the mighty king--take it or refuse it, now, and at a word."

Onegisus caught the arm of Ellac as he was about to reply, and whispered with him eagerly for several minutes. Ellac looked down sullenly on the ground for a moment, and then, raising his eyes, replied, "Peace! let it be peace for those two days! I swear to keep it inviolate by the ashes of my father, and by the eternal gods. But after that, oh Ardaric, will come the trial between thee and me. The hosts that have conquered under Attila shall not be divided under his son. Let our strength be tried, and if thou canst break the chain that I will put about thy neck, thou shalt drag Ellac after thee. Three days hence, at the third hour after sunrise, I will wait for thee in the plains beside the river Netad, where late I pitched my tents on the day of my father's death. There shalt thou find me, and if thou comest not to me I will seek thee, and I will bow thy proud head to the dust. As for yon paltry Roman, if he come with thee, he shall find the fate that he deserves. Perhaps he may not die--his blood is too like water to be worth the spilling. Shorn, mutilated, cropped, and his flesh marked with the burning steel, he shall stand among the slaves of Ellac, and wash the vessels from his master's table."

"Ellac," answered Theodore, calmly, "Ellac, I will come! and if the god of battles abandon me not now, I will give unto thee a better fate than that which thou wouldst grant to me. On the third day hence look thou well unto the dawning sun, for if I live thou never shalt see it rise again. For these two days, however, let us all swear peace!"

"We swear! we swear!" they cried, and laid their hands upon the bier of Attila.

* * * * *

The dark squadrons began to move, a thousand horsemen at a time; and with a slow and solemn pace they approached the tent where lay the body of the mighty king, wheeling round it once, with still decreasing speed, as if reluctant to pass for the last time before him who had so often led them on to victory. Ever as they went, with downcast looks, they sung to a wild and melancholy air the song of the departed great.

When each squadron had performed its round, it took its place once more in the vast circle, and another succeeded and performed the same sad rite, till at length, when the sun's course had waned to less than an hour of light, the whole had completed the task. Then ten of the greatest chieftains lifted the golden coffin, and, placing it on their crossed spears, bore it towards the grave.

As they advanced, the circle of the Huns, rendered skilful in such an evolution by their practice in hunting, grew smaller and smaller, pressing into a narrower ring; and forth from among them were driven a crowd of pale and ghastly wretches, who knew the fatal hour of their immolation nigh, and yet, with vain and fruitless hopes, looked round for impossible escape. That iron ring was at length narrowed to less than a bowshot in diameter; and some hundred or more of the chief warriors pushing their horses forward, drove the trembling slaves on to the brink of the pit.

The golden coffin was slowly lowered down into the grave. Those who were behind pressed onward to behold. The swords of the nearest warriors leaped from their sheaths, waved above the heads of the victims, and a loud and fearful shriek rang up to the offended sky. Jewels, and gold, and precious stones were showered in from all hands among the blood and writhing bodies that half filled up that horrible tomb. Then piled they in the cold gray soil, till it rose in a mound high above the rest of the land. They covered it with the turf they had removed. Night fell, and all was done.

* * * * *

An old man stood upon a hill and gazed, and though arrows fell at his feet, still he looked forth

upon a widespread grassy plain, where two mighty hosts had been contending, from the third hour after the dawn of day till the fourth hour following noon. They had met, myriads upon myriads; but now thin and scanty was the field, and few and weary were the combatants; but still that old man gazed, and still his voice murmured forth, "Lord God Almighty, thou dealest righteously! The slayers of all men are slain by their own swords!"

At length, where flowed a rivulet on to the neighbouring river, those two dark armies seemed separated for a space, and rolled, like two thunder-clouds ready to meet, at a little distance from either bank: then, like lightning from those clouds, sprang forth two gallant men, borne on towards each other by their fiery chargers, as swiftly and unwearied as if throughout that day there had neither been fatigue nor strife. The one was habited as a Roman, and his steed, plunging in the stream, bore him to the other bank ere his adversary could reach it. They met; their swords waved in the air; the eyes of the beholders were dazzled; but, in a moment after, the barbarian was seen bending to his saddle-bow. A second deep stroke descended on his neck, and, falling headlong, he rolled, a corpse, upon the plain!

The Gepidæ poured across the stream: the Huns fled in disarray; slaughter and destruction hung upon their rear, and the mighty fabric of Attila's empire was at an end for ever.

* * * * *

Nearly thirty years after, when the empire of the West was at an end, and the empire of the East revived for a time with a show of false prosperity, a powerful man, clothed in the splendid arms of a pretorian prefect, wandered up one of the low hills which border the Illyrian shore. He was led by a woman, on whose fair countenance remained the traces of splendid beauty; and whose deep blue eyes still retained an expression of deep, devoted tenderness, though that tenderness was now given to the highest object of human feelings. She was clothed in the habit of a recluse, such as was then common, and the way they took was towards the cemetery of a solitary nunnery. The guards of the prefect remained below, but he himself was admitted by a special favour; and, passing through the little wicket gate into the calm and silent spot where reposed the ashes of the holy and the pure, they came, after a few steps, to a grave covered with fresh turf.

"She lies there!" said Neva--and Theodore cast himself down upon the grave of Ildica, and wept!

FOOTNOTES

[Footnote 1](#): The armies of Attila were always followed, we are told, by an immense number of spare horses, besides those which bore his warriors and those which were attached to the wagons.

[Footnote 2](#): Such I believe to be the real history of this famous contest. We derive all our knowledge of the particulars from the Goths and Romans, as the Huns were not historians, or, at least, did not write their own version of the events in which they were engaged. Even in the present age, when both parties do not scruple to render their pretensions to success on such occasions permanent, how often do we see a battle lost claimed by the loser as a battle won! and, of course, it is more likely to have been so when there was no check found in a counter statement. The historians, however, suffer one or two important facts to appear, which prevent us from believing that Ætius and Theodoric obtained a victory over Attila on the present occasion. In the first place, it is clear that the immense Roman and Gothic army dispersed itself immediately after the battle in which Theodoric was killed. Reasons have been assigned for this proceeding, which are in themselves improbable and unsatisfactory; but which, when coupled with the fact that Attila afterward sacked Langres and Besançon, and with the strong reasons which exist for believing that Ætius himself retreated at once into the Lyonnaise, render the victory of the Romans somewhat more than doubtful. It seems to me very clear that the battle may have had an indecisive termination, but that Ætius, finding that the Goths and Franks could not be induced to try the fortunes of another day against Attila, retreated himself in haste towards Italy; while Attila, whose loss had been very great, proceeded by a new road towards his own land, ravaging the country, and taking several very important towns in his way. The very words of Jornandes admit that Attila was but little depressed by the event of the battle, and imply that his after-march was still as in a career of victory. Nor is there the slightest proof, that I have been able to discover, that Ætius, as some have declared, followed the monarch of the

Huns even at a distance.

If such were the way that the Romans and Goths employed a victory, they must have been moderate and generous indeed; and, under such circumstances, it might be doubtful whether they did not treat their enemies more mildly than their friends. The character of Ætius is represented by his panegyrists on the present occasion (probably to screen him from the disgrace of defeat) in a very singular and not creditable point of view. He cheated both the Goths and Franks, we are told, in order to get rid of them; and then, when left alone with Attila, escorted his great enemy quietly out of Gaul, sufferi2796ng him to sack and destroy what cities he pleased as he went. Is this reasonable? Is this probable?

[Footnote 3](#): After writing the above song, a friend suggested to me that it bore a resemblance to some other verses of which we could both recall a part, but not the whole. We could neither remember the author's name, nor where they were printed; but I have since found that the poem alluded to is by Mrs. Hemans; and the author of Conti, a work full of interest, enthusiasm, and high feeling, lately pointed out to me that the stanzas are printed among the minor poems following "The forest Sanctuary." They commence, "Bring flowers!" and in two or three of the stanzas there is much similarity with the above.

[Footnote 4](#): The march of the armies of Attila in all his expeditions is very doubtfully displayed by ancient historians; but that in his advance into Italy he took and sacked the city of Augusta Vindelicorum, or Augsburg, is clear, previous to the capture of Aquileia, and therefore that he must have traversed some part of the Julian or Rhætian Alps is equally certain. Any one who casts his eye upon the map will see that his direct way into Italy, from Vindelicia, was by the passes of the Tyrol; and any one who is acquainted with the nature of the country will, if he take into consideration that the army of Attila consisted entirely of cavalry, conclude that the Brenner was the pass by which he conducted his myriads towards the plains of Lombardy.

[Footnote 5](#): Milan.

[Footnote 6](#): Let it be understood that such particulars are not imaginary Attila was buried with the rites here described.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ATTILA: A ROMANCE. VOL. II ***

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