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HOMO SUM

By Georg Ebers

Volume 4.

CHAPTER XIII.

The light in the town, which had attracted Paulus, was in Petrus' house, and burnt in Polykarp's room, which formed the whole of a small upper-story, which the senator had constructed for his son over the northern portion of the spacious flat roof of the main building. The young man had arrived about noon with the slaves he had just procured, had learned all that had happened in his absence, and had silently withdrawn into his own room after supper was ended. Here he still lingered over his work.

A bed, a table on and under which lay a multitude of wax-tablets, papyrus-rolls, metal-points, and writing-reeds, with a small bench, on which stood a water-jar and basin, composed the furniture of this room; on its whitewashed walls hung several admirable carvings in relief, and figures of men and animals stood near them in long rows. In one corner, near a stone water-jar, lay a large, damp, shining mass of clay.

Three lamps fastened to stands abundantly lighted this work-room, but chiefly a figure standing on a high trestle, which Polykarp's fingers were industriously moulding.

Phoebicius had called the young sculptor a fop, and not altogether unjustly, for he loved to be well dressed and was choice as to the cut and color of his simple garments, and he rarely neglected to arrange his abundant hair with care, and to anoint it well; and yet it was almost indifferent to him,

whether his appearance pleased other people or no, but he knew nothing nobler than the human form, and an instinct, which he did not attempt to check, impelled him to keep his own person as nice as he liked to see that of his neighbor.

Now at this hour of the night, he wore only a shirt of white woollen stuff, with a deep red border. His locks, usually so well-kept, seemed to stand out from his head separately, and instead of smoothing and confining them, he added to their wild disorder, for, as he worked, he frequently passed his hand through them with a hasty movement. A bat, attracted by the bright light, flew in at the open window—which was screened only at the bottom by a dark curtain—and fluttered round the ceiling; but he did not observe it, for his work absorbed his whole soul and mind. In this eager and passionate occupation, in which every nerve and vein in his being seemed to bear a part, no cry for help would have struck his ear—even a flame breaking out close to him would not have caught his eye. His cheeks glowed, a fine dew of glistening sweat covered his brow, and his very gaze seemed to become more and more firmly riveted to the sculpture as it took form under his hand. Now and again he stepped back from it, and leaned backwards from his hips, raising his hands to the level of his temples, as if to narrow the field of vision; then he went up to the model, and clutched the plastic mass of clay, as though it were the flesh of his enemy.

He was now at work on the flowing hair of the figure before him, which had already taken the outline of a female head, and he flung the bits of clay, which he removed from the back of it, to the ground, as violently as though he were casting them at an antagonist at his feet. Again his finger-tips and modelling-tool were busy with the mouth, nose, cheeks, and eyes, and his own eyes took a softer expression, which gradually grew to be a gaze of ecstatic delight, as the features he was moulding began to agree more and more with the image, which at this time excluded every other from his imagination.

At last, with glowing cheeks, he had finished rounding the soft form of the shoulders, and drew back once more to contemplate the effect of the completed work; a cold shiver seized him, and he felt himself impelled to lift it up, and dash it to the ground with all his force. But he soon mastered this stormy excitement, he pushed his hand through his hair again and again, and posted himself, with a melancholy smile and with folded hands, in front of his creation; sunk deeper and deeper in his contemplation of it, he did not observe that the door behind him was opened, although the flame of his lamps flickered in the draught, and that his mother had entered the work-room, and by no means endeavored to approach him unheard, or to surprise him. In her anxiety for her darling, who had gone through so many bitter experiences during the past day, she had not been able to sleep. Polykarp's room lay above her bedroom, and when his steps over head betrayed that, though it was now near morning, he had not yet gone to rest, she had risen from her bed without waking Petrus, who seemed to be sleeping. She obeyed her motherly impulse to encourage Polykarp with some loving words, and climbing up the narrow stair that led to the roof, she went into his room. Surprised, irresolute, and speechless she stood for some time behind the young man, and looked at the strongly illuminated and beautiful features of the newly-formed bust, which was only too like its well-known prototype. At last she laid her hand on her son's shoulder, and spoke his name. Polykarp stepped back, and looked at his mother in bewilderment, like a man roused from sleep; but she interrupted the stammering speech with which he tried to greet her, by saying, gravely and not without severity, as she pointed to the statue, "What does this mean?"

"What should it mean, mother?" answered Polykarp in a low tone, and shaking his head sadly. "Ask me no more at present, for if you gave me no rest, and even if I tried to explain to you how to-day—this very day—I have felt impelled and driven to make this woman's image, still you could not understand me—no, nor any one else."

"God forbid that I should ever understand it!" cried Dorothea. "'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife,' was the commandment of the Lord on this mountain. And you? You think I could not understand you? Who should understand you then, if not your mother? This I certainly do not comprehend, that a son of Petrus and of mine should have thrown all the teaching and the example of his parents so utterly to the wind. But what you are aiming at with this statue, it seems to me is not hard to guess. As the forbidden-fruit hangs too high for you, you degrade your art, and make to yourself an image that resembles her according to your taste. Simply and plainly it comes to this; as you can no longer see the Gaul's wife in her own person, and yet cannot exist without the sweet presence of the fair one, you make a portrait of clay to make love to, and you will carry on idolatry before it, as once the Jews did before the golden calf and the brazen serpent."

Polykarp submitted to his mother's angry blame in silence, but in painful emotion. Dorothea had never before spoken to him thus, and to hear such words from the very lips which were used to address him with such heart-felt tenderness, gave him unspeakable pain. Hitherto she had always been inclined to make excuses for his weaknesses and little faults, nay, the zeal with which she had observed

and pointed out his merits and performances before strangers as well as before their own family, had often seemed to him embarrassing. And now? She had indeed reason to blame him, for Sirona was the wife of another, she had never even noticed his admiration, and now, they all said, had committed a crime for the sake of a stranger. It must seem both a mad and a sinful thing in the eyes of men that he of all others should sacrifice the best he had—his Art—and how little could Dorothea, who usually endeavored to understand him, comprehend the overpowering impulse which had driven him to his task.

He loved and honored his mother with his whole heart, and feeling that she was doing herself an injustice by her false and low estimate of his proceedings, he interrupted her eager discourse, raising his hands imploringly to her.

"No, mother, no!" he exclaimed. "As truly as God is my helper, it is not so. It is true that I have moulded this head, but not to keep it, and commit the sin of worshipping it, but rather to free myself from the image that stands before my mind's eye by day and by night, in the city and in the desert, whose beauty distracts my mind when I think, and my devotions when I try to pray. To whom is it given to read the soul of man? And is not Sirona's form and face the loveliest image of the Most High? So to represent it, that the whole charm that her presence exercises over me might also be felt by every beholder, is a task that I have set myself ever since her arrival in our house. I had to go back to the capital, and the work I longed to achieve took a clearer form; at every hour I discovered something to change and to improve in the pose of the head, the glance of the eye or the expression of the mouth. But still I lacked courage to put the work in hand, for it seemed too audacious to attempt to give reality to the glorious image in my soul, by the aid of gray clay and pale cold marble; to reproduce it so that the perfect work should delight the eye of sense, no less than the image enshrined in my breast delights my inward eye. At the same time I was not idle, I gained the prize for the model of the lions, and if I have succeeded with the Good Shepherd blessing the flock, which is for the sarcophagus of Comes, and if the master could praise the expression of devoted tenderness in the look of the Redeemer, I know—nay, do not interrupt me, mother, for what I felt was a pure emotion and no sin— I know that it was because I was myself so full of love, that I was enabled to inspire the very stone with love. At last I had no peace, and even without my father's orders I must have returned home; then I saw her again, and found her even more lovely than the image which reigned in my soul. I heard her voice, and her silvery bell-like laughter—and then— and then—. You know very well what I learned yesterday. The unworthy wife of an unworthy husband, the woman Sirona, is gone from me for ever, and I was striving to drive her image from my soul, to annihilate it and dissipate it—but in vain! and by degrees a wonderful stress of creative power came upon me. I hastily placed the lamps, took the clay in my hand, and feature by feature I brought forth with bitter joy the image that is deeply graven in my heart, believing that thus I might be released from the spell. There is the fruit which was ripened in my heart, but there, where it so long has dwelt, I feel a dismal void, and if the husk which so long tenderly enfolded this image were to wither and fall asunder, I should not wonder at it.—To that thing there clings the best part of my life."

"Enough!" exclaimed Dorothea, interrupting her son who stood before her in great agitation and with trembling lips. "God forbid that that mask there should destroy your life and soul. I suffer nothing impure within my house, and you should not in your heart. That which is evil can never more be fair, and however lovely the face there may look to you, it looks quite as repulsive to me when I reflect that it probably smiled still more fascinatingly on some strolling beggar. If the Gaul brings her back I will turn her out of my house, and I will destroy her image with my own hands if you do not break it in pieces on the spot."

Dorothea's eyes were swimming in tears as she spoke these words. She had felt with pride and emotion during her son's speech how noble and high-minded he was, and the idea that this rare and precious treasure should be spoilt or perhaps altogether ruined for the sake of a lost woman, drove her to desperation, and filled her motherly heart with indignation.

Firmly resolved to carry out her threat she stepped towards the figure, but Polykarp placed himself in her way, raising his arm imploringly to defend it, and saying, "Not to-day—not yet, mother! I will cover it up, and will not look at it again till to-morrow, but once—only once—I must see it again by sunlight."

"So that to-morrow the old madness may revive in you!" cried Dorothea. "Move out of my way or take the hammer yourself."

"You order it, and you are my mother," said Polykarp.

He slowly went up to the chest in which his tools and instruments lay, and bitter tears ran down his cheeks, as he took his heaviest hammer in his hand.

When the sky has shown for many days in summer-blue, and then suddenly the clouds gather for a

storm, when the first silent but fearful flash with its noisy but harmless associate the thunder-clap has terrified the world, a second and third thunder-bolt immediately follow. Since the stormy night of yesterday had broken in on the peaceful, industrious, and monotonous life by the senator's hearth, many things had happened that had filled him and his wife with fresh anxiety.

In other houses it was nothing remarkable that a slave should run away, but in the senator's it was more than twenty years since such a thing had occurred, and yesterday the goat-herd Miriam had disappeared. This was vexatious, but the silent sorrow of his son Polykarp was a greater anxiety to Petrus. It did not please him that the youth, who was usually so vehement, should submit unresistingly and almost indifferently to the Bishop Agapitus, who prohibited his completing his lions. His son's sad gaze, his crushed and broken aspect were still in his mind when at last he went to rest for the night; it was already late, but sleep avoided him even as it had avoided Dorothea. While the mother was thinking of her son's sinful love and the bleeding wound in his young and betrayed heart, the father grieved for Polykarp's baffled hopes of exercising his art on a great work and recalled the saddest, bitterest day of his own youth; for he too had served his apprenticeship under a sculptor in Alexandria, had looked up to the works of the heathen as noble models, and striven to form himself upon them. He had already been permitted by his master to execute designs of his own, and out of the abundance of subjects which offered themselves, he had chosen to model an Ariadne, waiting and longing for the return of Theseus, as a symbolic image of his own soul awaiting its salvation. How this work had filled his mind! how delightful had the hours of labor seemed to him!—when, suddenly, his stern father had come to the city, had seen his work before it was quite finished, and instead of praising it had scorned it; had abused it as a heathen idol, and had commanded Petrus to return home with him immediately, and to remain there, for that his son should be a pious Christian, and a good stone-mason withal—not half a heathen, and a maker of false gods.

Petrus had much loved his art, but he offered no resistance to his father's orders; he followed him back to the oasis, there to superintend the work of the slaves who hewed the stone, to measure granite-blocks for sarcophagi and pillars, and to direct the cutting of them. His father was a man of steel, and he himself a lad of iron, and when he saw himself compelled to yield to his father and to leave his master's workshop, to abandon his cherished and unfinished work and to become an artisan and mail of business, he swore never again to take a piece of clay in his hand, or to wield a chisel. And he kept his word even after his father's death; but his creative instincts and love of art continued to live and work in him, and were transmitted to his two sons.

Antonius was a highly gifted artist, and if Polykarp's master was not mistaken, and if he himself were not misled by fatherly affection, his second son was on the high road to the very first rank in art—to a position reached only by elect spirits.

Petrus knew the models for the Good Shepherd and for the lions, and declared to himself that these last were unsurpassable in truth, power, and majesty. How eagerly must the young artist long to execute them in hard stone, and to see them placed in the honored, though indeed pagan, spot, which was intended for them. And now the bishop forbade him the work, and the poor fellow might well be feeling just as he himself had felt thirty years ago, when he had been commanded to abandon the immature first-fruits of his labor.

Was the bishop indeed right? This and many other questions agitated the sleepless father, and as soon as he heard that his wife had risen from her bed to go to her son, whose footsteps he too could hear overhead, he got up and followed her.

He found the door of the work-room open, and, himself unseen and unheard, he was witness to his wife's vehement speech, and to the lad's justification, while Polykarp's work stood in the full light of the lamps, exactly in front of him.

His gaze was spell-bound to the mass of clay; he looked and looked, and was not weary of looking, and his soul swelled with the same awe-struck sense of devout admiration that it had experienced, when for the first time, in his early youth, he saw with his own eyes the works of the great old Athenian masters in the Caesareum.

And this head was his son's work!

He stood there greatly overcome, his hands clasped together, holding his breath till his mouth was dry, and swallowing his tears to keep them from falling. At the same time he listened with anxious attention, so as not to lose one word of Polykarp's.

"Aye, thus and thus only are great works of art begotten," said he to himself, "and if the Lord had bestowed on me such gifts as on this lad, no father, nay, no god, should have compelled me to leave my Ariadne unfinished. The attitude of the body was not bad I should say—but the head, the face—Aye, the

man who can mould such a likeness as that has his hand and eye guided by the holy spirits of art. He who has done that head will be praised in the latter days together with the great Athenian masters—and he—yes, he, merciful Heaven! he is my own beloved son!"

A blessed sense of rejoicing, such as he had not felt since his early youth, filled his heart, and Dorothea's ardor seemed to him half pitiful and half amusing.

It was not till his duteous son took the hammer in his hand, that he stepped between his wife and the bust, saying kindly:

"There will be time enough to-morrow to destroy the work. Forget the model, my son, now that you have taken advantage of it so successfully. I know of a better mistress for you—Art—to whom belongs everything of beauty that the Most High has created—In Art in all its breadth and fulness, not fettered and narrowed by any Agapitus."

Polykarp flung himself into his father's arms, and the stern man, hardly master of his emotions, kissed the boy's forehead, his eyes, and his cheeks.

CHAPTER XIV.

At noon of the following day the senator went to the women's room, and while he was still on the threshold, he asked his wife—who was busy at the loom:

"Where is Polykarp? I did not find him with Antonius, who is working at the placing of the altar, and I thought I might find him here."

"After going to the church," said Dorothea, "he went up the mountain. Go down to the workshops, Marthana, and see if your brother has come back."

Her daughter obeyed quickly and gladly, for her brother was to her the dearest, and seemed to her to be the best, of men. As soon as the pair were alone together Petrus said, while he held out his hand to his wife with genial affection, "Well, mother—shake hands." Dorothea paused for an instant, looking him in the face, as if to ask him, "Does your pride at last allow you to cease doing me an injustice?" It was a reproach, but in truth not a severe one, or her lips would hardly have trembled so tenderly, as she said.

"You cannot be angry with me any longer, and it is well that all should once more be as it ought."

All certainly had not been "as it ought," for since the husband and wife had met in Polykarp's work-room, they had behaved to each other as if they were strangers. In their bedroom, on the way to church, and at breakfast, they had spoken to each no more than was absolutely necessary, or than was requisite in order to conceal their difference from the servants and children. Up to this time, an understanding had always subsisted between them that had never taken form in words, and yet that had scarcely in a single case been infringed, that neither should ever praise one of their children for anything that the other thought blameworthy, and vice versa.

But in this night, her husband had followed up her severest condemnation by passionately embracing the wrong-doer. Never had she been so stern in any circumstances, while on the other hand her husband, so long as she could remember, had never been so softhearted and tender to his son, and yet she had controlled herself so far, as not to contradict Petrus in Polykarp's presence, and to leave the work-room in silence with her husband.

"When we are once alone together in the bedroom," thought she, "I will represent to him his error as I ought, and he will have to answer for himself."

But she did not carry out this purpose, for she felt that something must be passing in her husband's mind that she did not understand; otherwise how could his grave eyes shine so mildly and kindly, and his stern lips smile so affectionately after all that had occurred when he, lamp in hand, had mounted the narrow stair.

He had often told her that she could read his soul like an open book, but she did not conceal from herself that there were certain sides of that complex structure whose meaning she was incapable of comprehending. And strange to say, she ever and again came upon these incomprehensible phases of

his soul, when the images of the gods, and the idolatrous temples of the heathen, or when their sons' enterprises and work were the matters in hand. And yet Petrus was the son of a pious Christian; but his grandfather had been a Greek heathen, and hence perhaps a certain something wrought in his blood which tormented her, because she could not reconcile it with Agapitus' doctrine, but which she nevertheless dared not attempt to oppose because her taciturn husband never spoke out with so much cheerfulness and frankness as when he might talk of these things with his sons and their friends, who often accompanied them to the oasis. Certainly, it could be nothing sinful that at this particular moment seemed to light up her husband's face, and restore his youth.

"They just are men," said she to herself, "and in many things they have the advantage of us women. The old man looks as he did on his wedding-day! Polykarp is the very image of him, as every one says, and now, looking at the father, and recalling to my mind how the boy looked when he told me how he could not refrain from making Sirona's portrait, I must say that I never saw such a likeness in the whole course of my life."

He bid her a friendly good night, and extinguished the lamp. She would willingly have said a loving word to him, for his contented expression touched and comforted her, but that would just then have been too much after what she had gone through in her son's workroom. In former years it had happened pretty often that, when one of them had caused dissatisfaction to the other, and there had been some quarrel between them, they had gone to rest unreconciled, but the older they grew the more rarely did this occur, and it was now a long time since any shadow had fallen on the perfect serenity of their married life.

Three years ago, on the occasion of the marriage of their eldest son, they had been standing together, looking up at the starry sky, when Petrus had come close up to her, and had said, "How calmly and peacefully the wanderers up there follow their roads without jostling or touching one another! As I walked home alone from the quarries by their friendly light, I thought of many things. Perhaps there was once a time when the stars rushed wildly about in confusion, crossing each other's path, while many a star flew in pieces at the impact. Then the Lord created man, and love came into the world and filled the heavens and the earth, and he commanded the stars to be our light by night; then each began to respect the path of the other, and the stars more rarely came into collision till even the smallest and swiftest kept to its own path and its own period, and the shining host above grew to be as harmonious as it is numberless. Love and a common purpose worked this marvel, for he who loves another, will do him no injury, and he who is bound to perfect a work with the help of another, will not hinder nor delay him. We two have long since found the right road, and if at any time one of us is inclined to cross the path of the other, we are held back by love and by our common duty, namely to shed a pure light on the path of our children."

Dorothea had never forgotten these words, and they came into her mind now again when Petrus held out his hand to her so warmly; as she laid hers in it, she said:

"For the sake of dear peace, well and good—but one thing I cannot leave unsaid. Soft-hearted weakness is not usually your defect, but you will utterly spoil Polykarp."

"Leave him, let us leave him as he is," cried Petrus, kissing his wife's brow. "It is strange how we have exchanged parts! Yesterday you were exhorting me to mildness towards the lad, and to-day—"

"To-day I am severer than you," interrupted Dorothea. "Who, indeed, could guess that an old graybeard would derogate from the duties of his office as father and as judge for the sake of a woman's smiling face in clay—as Esau sold his birthright for a mess of pottage?"

"And to whom would it occur," asked Petrus, taking up his wife's tone, "that so tender a mother as you would condemn her favorite son, because he labored to earn peace for his soul by a deed—by a work for which his master might envy him?"

"I have indeed observed," interrupted Dorothea, that Sirona's image has bewitched you, and you speak as if the boy had achieved some great miracle. I do not know much about modelling and sculpture, and I will not contradict you, but if the fair-haired creature's face were less pretty, and if Polykarp had not executed any thing remarkable, would it have made the smallest difference in what he has done and felt wrong? Certainly not. But that is just like men, they care only for success."

"And with perfect justice," answered Petrus, "if the success is attained, not in mere child's play, but by a severe struggle. 'To him, that hath, shall more be given,' says the scripture, and he who has a soul more richly graced than others have—he who is helped by good spirits—he shall be forgiven many things that even a mild judge would be unwilling to pardon in a man of poor gifts, who torments and exerts himself and yet brings nothing to perfection. Be kind to the boy again. Do you know what prospect lies before you through him? You yourself in your life have done much good, and spoken much

wisdom, and I, and the children, and the people in this place, will never forget it all. But I can promise you the gratitude of the best and noblest who now live or who will live in centuries to come—for that you are the mother of Polykarp!"

"And people say," cried Dorothea, "that every mother has four eyes for her children's merits. If that is true, then fathers no doubt have ten, and you as many as Argus, of whom the heathen legend speaks—But there comes Polykarp."

Petrus went forward to meet his son, and gave him his hand, but in quite a different manner to what he had formerly shown; at least it seemed to Dorothea that her husband received the youth, no longer as his father and master, but as a friend greets a friend who is his equal in privileges and judgment. When Polykarp turned to greet her also she colored all over, for the thought flashed through her mind that her son, when he thought of the past night, must regard her as unjust or foolish; but she soon recovered her own calm equanimity, for Polykarp was the same as ever, and she read in his eyes that he felt towards her the same as yesterday and as ever.

"Love," thought she, "is not extinguished by injustice, as fire is by water. It blazes up brighter or less bright, no doubt, according to the way the wind blows, but it cannot be wholly smothered—least of all by death."

Polykarp had been up the mountain, and Dorothea was quite satisfied when he related what had led him thither. He had long since planned the execution of a statue of Moses, and when his father had left him, he could not get the tall and dignified figure of the old man out of his mind. He felt that he had found the right model for his work. He must, he would forget—and he knew, that he could only succeed if he found a task which might promise to give some new occupation to his bereaved soul. Still, he had seen the form of the mighty man of God which he proposed to model, only in vague outline before his mind's eye, and he had been prompted to go to a spot whither many pilgrims resorted, and which was known as the Place of Communion, because it was there that the Lord had spoken to Moses. There Polykarp had spent some time, for there, if anywhere—there, where the Law-giver himself had stood, must he find right inspiration.

"And you have accomplished your end?" asked his father.

Polykarp shook his head.

"If you go often enough to the sacred spot, it will come to you," said Dorothea. "The beginning is always the chief difficulty; only begin at once to model your father's head."

"I have already begun it," replied Polykarp, "but I am still tired from last night."

"You look pale, and have dark lines under your eyes," said Dorothea anxiously. "Go up stairs and he down to rest. I will follow you and bring you a beaker of old wine."

"That will not hurt him," said Petrus, thinking as he spoke—"A draught of Lethe would serve him even better."

When, an hour later, the senator sought his son in his work-room, he found him sleeping, and the wine stood untouched on the table. Petrus softly laid his hand on his son's forehead and found it cool and free from fever. Then he went quietly up to the portrait of Sirona, raised the cloth with which it was covered, and stood before it a long time sunk in thought. At last he drew back, covered it up again, and examined the models which stood on a shelf fastened to the wall.

A small female figure particularly fixed his attention, and he was taking it admiringly in his hand when Polykarp awoke.

"That is the image of the goddess of fate—that is a Tyche," said Petrus.

"Do not be angry with me, father," entreated Polykarp. "You know, the figure of a Tyche is to stand in the hand of the statue of the Caesar that is intended for the new city of Constantine, and so I have tried to represent the goddess. The drapery and pose of the arms, I think, have succeeded, but I failed in the head." Petrus, who had listened to him with attention, glanced involuntarily at the head of Sirona, and Polykarp followed his eyes surprised and almost startled.

The father and son had understood each other, and Polykarp said, "I had already thought of that."

Then he sighed bitterly, and said to himself, "Yes and verily, she is the goddess of my fate." But he dared not utter this aloud.

But Petrus had heard him sigh, and said, "Let that pass. This head smiles with sweet fascination, and

the countenance of the goddess that rules the actions even of the immortals, should be stern and grave."

Polykarp could contain himself no longer.

"Yes, father," he exclaimed. "Fate is terrible—and yet I will represent the goddess with a smiling mouth, for that which is most terrible in her is, that she rules not by stern laws, but smiles while she makes us her sport."

CHAPTER XV.

It was a splendid morning; not a cloud dimmed the sky which spread high above desert, mountain, and oasis, like an arched tent of uniform deep- blue silk. How delicious it is to breathe the pure, light, aromatic air on the heights, before the rays of the sun acquire their mid-day power, and the shadows of the heated porphyry cliffs, growing shorter and shorter, at last wholly disappear!

With what delight did Sirona inhale this pure atmosphere, when after a long night—the fourth that she had passed in the anchorite's dismal cave—she stepped out into the air. Paulus sat by the hearth, and was so busily engaged with some carving, that he did not observe her approach.

"Kind good man!" thought Sirona, as she perceived a steaming pot on the fire, and the palm-branches which the Alexandrian had fastened up by the entrance to the cave, to screen her from the mounting sun. She knew the way without a guide to the spring from which Paulus had brought her water at their first meeting, and she now slipped away, and went down to it with a pretty little pitcher of burnt clay in her hand. Paulus did indeed see her, but he made as though he neither, saw nor heard, for he knew she was going there to wash herself, and to dress and smarten herself as well as might be—for was she not a woman! When she returned, she looked not less fresh and charming than on that morning when she had been seen and watched by Hermas. True, her heart was sore, true, she was perplexed and miserable, but sleep and rest had long since effaced from her healthy, youthful, and elastic frame all traces left by that fearful day of flight; and fate, which often means best by us when it shows us a hostile face, had sent her a minor anxiety to divert her from her graver cares.

Her greyhound was very ill, and it seemed that in the ill-treatment it had experienced, not only its leg had been broken, but that it had suffered some internal injury. The brisk, lively little creature fell down powerless when ever it tried to stand, and when she took it up to nurse it comfortably in her lap, it whined pitifully, and looked up at her sorrowfully, and as if complaining to her. It would take neither food nor drink; its cool little nose was hot; and when she left the cave, Iambe lay panting on the fine woollen coverlet which Paulus had spread upon the bed, unable even to look after her.

Before taking the dog the water she had fetched in the graceful jar— which was another gift from her hospitable friend—she went up to Paulus and greeted him kindly. He looked up from his work, thanked her, and a few minutes later, when she came out of the cave again, asked her, "How is the poor little creature?"

Sirona shrugged her shoulders, and said sadly, "She has drunk nothing, and does not even know me, and pants as rapidly as last evening—if I were to lose the poor little beast!—"

She could say no more for emotion, but Paulus shook his head.

"It is sinful," he said, "to grieve so for a beast devoid of reason."

"Iambe is not devoid of reason," replied Sirona. "And even if she were, what have I left if she dies? She grew up in my father's house, where all loved me; I had her first when she was only a few days old, and I brought her up on milk on a little bit of sponge. Many a time, when I heard the little thing whining for food, have I got out of bed at night with bare feet; and so she came to cling to me like a child, and could not do without me. No one can know how another feels about such things. My father used to tell us of a spider that beautified the life of a prisoner, and what is a dirty dumb creature like that to my clever, graceful little dog! I have lost my home, and here every one believes the worst of me, although I have done no one any harm, and no one, no one loves me but Iambe."

"But I know of one who loves every one with a divine and equal love," interrupted Paulus.

"I do not care for such a one," answered Sirona. "Iambe follows no one but me; what good can a love

do me that I must share with all the world! But you mean the crucified God of the Christians? He is good and pitiful, so says Dame Dorothea; but he is dead—I cannot see him, nor hear him, and, certainly, I cannot long for one who only shows me grace. I want one to whom I can count for something, and to whose life and happiness I am indispensable."

A scarcely perceptible shudder thrilled through the Alexandrian as she spoke these words, and he thought, as he glanced at her face and figure with a mingled expression of regret and admiration, "Satan, before he fell, was the fairest among the pure spirits, and he still has power over this woman. She is still far from being ripe for salvation, and yet she has a gentle heart, and even if she has erred, she is not lost."

Sirona's eyes had met his, and she said with a sigh, "You look at me so compassionately—if only Iambe were well, and if I succeeded in reaching Alexandria, my destiny would perhaps take a turn for the better."

Paulus had risen while she spoke, and had taken the pot from the hearth; he now offered it to his guest, saying:

"For the present we will trust to this broth to compensate to you for the delights of the capital; I am glad that you relish it. But tell me now, have you seriously considered what danger may threaten a beautiful, young, and unprotected woman in the wicked city of the Greeks? Would it not be better that you should submit to the consequences of your guilt, and return to Phoebicius, to whom unfortunately you belong?"

Sirona, at these words, had set down the vessel out of which she was eating, and rising in passionate haste, she exclaimed:

"That shall never, never be!—And when I was sitting up there half-dead, and took your step for that of Phoebicius, the gods showed me a way to escape from him, and from you or anyone who would drag me back to him. When I fled to the edge of the abyss, I was raving and crazed, but what I then would have done in my madness, I would do now in cold blood—as surely as I hope to see my own people in Arelas once more! What was I once, and to what have I come through Phoebicius! Life was to me a sunny garden with golden trellises and shady trees and waters as bright as crystal, with rosy flowers and singing birds; and he, he has darkened its light, and fouled its springs, and broken down its flowers. All now seems dumb and colorless, and if the abyss is my grave, no one will miss me nor mourn for me."

"Poor woman!" said Paulus. "Your husband then showed you very little love."

"Love," laughed Sirona, "Phoebicius and love! Only yesterday I told you, how cruelly he used to torture me after his feasts, when he was drunk or when he recovered from one of his swoons. But one thing he did to me, one thing which broke the last thread of a tie between us. No one yet has ever heard a word of it from me; not even Dorothea, who often blamed me when I let slip a hard word against my husband. It was well for her to talk—if I had found a husband like Petrus I might perhaps have been like Dorothea. It is a marvel, which I myself do not understand, that I did not grow wicked with such a man, a man who—why should I conceal it— who, when we were at Rome, because he was in debt, and because he hoped to get promotion through his legate Quintillus, sold me—me—to him. He himself brought the old man—who had often followed me about—into his house, but our hostess, a good woman, had overheard the matter, and betrayed it all to me. It is so base, so vile—it seems to blacken my soul only to think of it! The legate got little enough in return for his sesterces, but Phoebicius did not restore his wages of sin, and his rage against me knew no bounds when he was transferred to the oasis at the instigation of his betrayed chief. Now you know all, and never advise me again to return to that man to whom my misfortune has bound me.

"Only listen how the poor little beast in there is whining. It wants to come to me, and has not the strength to move."

Paulus looked after her sympathetically as she disappeared under the opening in the rock, and he awaited her return with folded arms. He could not see into the cave, for the space in which the bed stood was closed at the end by the narrow passage which formed the entrance, and which joined it at an angle as the handle of a scythe joins the blade. She remained a long time, and he could hear now and then a tender word with which she tried to comfort the suffering creature. Suddenly he was startled by a loud and bitter cry from Sirona; no doubt, the poor woman's affectionate little companion was dead, and in the dim twilight of the cave she had seen its dulled eye, and felt the stiffness of death overspreading and paralyzing its slender limbs. He dared not go into the cavern, but he felt his eyes fill with tears, and he would willingly have spoken some word of consolation to her.

At last she came out, her eyes red with weeping. Paulus had guessed rightly for she held the body of

little Iambe in her arms.

"How sorry I am," said Paulus, "the poor little creature was so pretty."

Sirona nodded, sat down, and unfastened the prettily embroidered band from the dog's neck, saying half to herself, and half to Paulus, "My little Agnes worked this collar. I myself had taught her to sew, and this was the first piece of work that was all her own." She held the collar up to the anchorite. "This clasp is of real silver," she went on, "and my father himself gave it to me. He was fond of the poor little dog too. Now it will never leap and spring again, poor thing."

She looked sadly down at the dead dog. Then she collected herself, and said hurriedly, "Now I will go away from here. Nothing—nothing keeps me any longer in this wilderness, for the senator's house, where I have spent many happy hours, and where everyone was fond of me, is closed against me, and must ever be so long as he lives there. If you have not been kind to me only to do me harm in the end, let me go today, and help me to reach Alexandria."

"Not to-day, in any case not to-day," replied Paulus. "First I must find out when a vessel sails for Klysmas or for Berenike, and then I have many other things to see to for you. You owe me an answer to my question, as to what you expect to do and to find in Alexandria. Poor child—the younger and the fairer you are—"

"I know all you would say to me," interrupted Sirona. "Wherever I have been, I have attracted the eyes of men, and when I have read in their looks that I pleased them, it has greatly pleased me—why should I deny it? Many a one has spoken fair words to me or given me flowers, and sent old women to my house to win me for them, but even if one has happened to please me better than another, still I have never found it hard to send them home again as was fitting."

"Till Hermas laid his love at your feet," said Paulus. "He is a bold lad—"

"A pretty, inexperienced boy," said Sirona, "neither more nor less. It was a heedless thing, no doubt, to admit him to my rooms, but no vestal need be ashamed to own to such favor as I showed him. I am innocent, and I will remain so that I may stand in my father's presence without a blush when I have earned money enough in the capital for the long journey."

Paulus looked in her face astonished and almost horrified.

Then he had in fact taken on himself guilt which did not exist, and perhaps the senator would have been slower to condemn Sirona, if it had not been for his falsely acknowledging it. He stood before her, feeling like a child that would fain put together some object of artistic workmanship, and who has broken it to pieces for want of skill. At the same time he could not doubt a word that she said, for the voice within him had long since plainly told him that this woman was no common criminal.

For some time he was at a loss for words; at last he said timidly:

"What do you purpose doing in Alexandria?"

"Polykarp says, that all good work finds a purchaser there," she answered. "And I can weave particularly well, and embroider with gold-thread. Perhaps I may find shelter under some roof where there are children, and I would willingly attend to them during the day. In my free time and at night I could work at my frame, and when I have scraped enough together I shall soon find a ship that will carry me to Gaul, to my own people. Do you not see that I cannot go back to Phoebicius, and can you help me?"

"Most willingly, and better perhaps than you fancy," said Paulus. "I cannot explain this to you just now; but you need not request me, but may rather feel that you have a good right to demand of me that I should rescue you."

She looked at him in surprised enquiry, and he continued:

"First let me carry away the little dog, and bury it down there. I will put a stone over the grave, that you may know where it lies. It must be so, the body cannot be here any longer. Take the thing, which lies there. I had tried before to cut it out for you, for you complained yesterday that your hair was all in a tangle because you had not a comb, so I tried to carve you one out of bone. There were none at the shop in the oasis, and I am myself only a wild creature of the wilderness, a sorry, foolish animal, and do not use one.

"Was that a stone that fell? Aye, certainly, I hear a man's step; go quickly into the cave and do not stir till I call you."

Sirona withdrew into her rock-dwelling, and Paulus took the body of the dog in his arms to conceal it from the man who was approaching. He looked round, undecided, and seeking a hiding-place for it, but two sharp eyes had already detected him and his small burden from the height above him; before he had found a suitable place, stones were rolling and crashing down from the cliff to the right of the cavern, and at the same time a man came springing down with rash boldness from rock to rock, and without heeding the warning voice of the anchorite, flung himself down the slope, straight in front of him, exclaiming, while he struggled for breath and his face was hot with hatred and excitement:

"That—I know it well—that is Sirona's greyhound—where is its mistress? Tell me this instant, where is Sirona—I must and will know."

Paulus had frequently seen, from the penitent's room in the church, the senator and his family in their places near the altar, and he was much astonished to recognize in the daring leaper, who rushed upon him like a mad man with dishevelled hair and fiery eyes, Polykarp, Petrus' second son.

The anchorite found it difficult to preserve his calm, and composed demeanor, for since he had been aware that he had accused Sirona falsely of a heavy sin, while at the same time he had equally falsely confessed himself the partner of her misdeed, he felt an anxiety that amounted to anguish, and a leaden oppression checked the rapidity of his thoughts. He at first stammered out a few unintelligible words, but his opponent was in fearful earnest with his question; he seized the collar of the anchorite's coarse garment with terrible violence, and cried in a husky voice, "Where did you find the dog? Where is—?"

But suddenly he left go his hold of the Alexandrian, looked at him from head to foot, and said softly and slowly:

"Can it be possible? Are you Paulus, the Alexandrian?"

The anchorite nodded assent. Polykarp laughed loud and bitterly, pressed his hand to his forehead, and exclaimed in a tone of the deepest disgust and contempt:

"And is it so, indeed! and such a repulsive ape too! But I will not believe that she even held out a hand to you, for the mere sight of you makes me dirty." Paulus felt his heart beating like a hammer within his breast; and there was a singing and roaring in his ears. When once more Polykarp threatened him with his fist he involuntarily took the posture of an athlete in a wrestling match, he stretched out his arms to try to get a good hold of his adversary, and said in a hollow, deep tone of angry warning, "Stand back, or something will happen to you that will not be good for your bones."

The speaker was indeed Paulus—and yet—not Paulus; it was Menander, the pride of the Palaestra, who had never let pass a word of his comrades that did not altogether please him. And yet yesterday in the oasis he had quietly submitted to far worse insults than Polykarp had offered him, and had accepted them with contented cheerfulness. Whence then to-day this wild sensitiveness and eager desire to fight?

When, two days since, he had gone to his old cave to fetch the last of his hidden gold pieces, he had wished to greet old Stephanus, but the Egyptian attendant had scared him off like an evil spirit with angry curses, and had thrown stones after him. In the oasis he had attempted to enter the church in spite of the bishop's prohibition, there to put up a prayer; for he thought that the antechamber, where the spring was and in which penitents were wont to tarry, would certainly not be closed even to him; but the acolytes had driven him away with abusive words, and the door-keeper, who a short time since had trusted him with the key, spit in his face, and yet he had not found it difficult to turn his back on his persecutors without anger or complaint.

At the counter of the dealer of whom he had bought the woollen coverlet, the little jug, and many other things for Sirona, a priest had passed by, had pointed to his money, and had said, "Satan takes care of his own."

Paulus had answered him nothing, had returned to his charge with an uplifted and grateful heart, and had heartily rejoiced once more in the exalted and encouraging consciousness that he was enduring disgrace and suffering for another in humble imitation of Christ. What was it then that made him so acutely sensitive with regard to Polykarp, and once more snapped those threads, which long years of self-denial had twined into fetters for his impatient spirit? Was it that to the man, who mortified his flesh in order to free his soul from its bonds it seemed a lighter matter to be contemned as a sinner, hated of God, than to let his person and his manly dignity be treated with contempt? Was he thinking of the fair listener in the cave, who was a witness to his humiliation? Had his wrath blazed up because he saw in Polykarp, not so much an exasperated fellow-believer, as merely a man who with bold scorn had put himself in the path of another man?

The lad and the gray-bearded athlete stood face to face like mortal enemies ready for the fight, and

Polykarp did not waver, although he, like most Christian youths, had been forbidden to take part in the wrestling-games in the Palaestra, and though he knew that he had to deal with a strong and practised antagonist.

He himself was indeed no weakling, and his stormy indignation added to his desire to measure himself against the hated seducer.

"Come on—come on!" he cried; his eyes flashing, and leaning forward with his neck out-stretched and ready on his part for the struggle. "Grip hold! you were a gladiator, or something of the kind, before you put on that filthy dress that you might break into houses at night, and go unpunished. Make this sacred spot an arena, and if you succeed in making an end of me I will thank you, for what made life worth having to me, you have already ruined whether or no. Only come on. Or perhaps you think it easier to ruin the life of a woman than to measure your strength against her defender? Clutch hold, I say, clutch hold, or—"

"Or you will fall upon me," said Paulus, whose arms had dropped by his side during the youth's address. He spoke in a quite altered tone of indifference. "Throw yourself upon me, and do with me what you will; I will not prevent you. Here I shall stand, and I will not fight, for you have so far hit the truth—this holy place is not an arena. But the Gaulish lady belongs neither to you nor to me, and who gives you a claim—?"

"Who gives me a right over her?" interrupted Polykarp, stepping close up to his questioner with sparkling eyes. "He who permits the worshipper to speak of his God. Sirona is mine, as the sun and moon and stars are mine, because they shed a beautiful light on my murky path. My life is mine—and she was the life of my life, and therefore I say boldly, and would say, if there were twenty such as Phoebicius here, she belongs to me. And because I regarded her as my own, and so regard her still, I hate you and fling my scorn in your teeth—you are like a hungry sheep that has got into the gardener's flower-bed, and stolen from the stem the wonderful, lovely flower that he has nurtured with care, and that only blooms once in a hundred years—like a cat that has sneaked into some marble hall, and that to satisfy its greed has strangled some rare and splendid bird that a traveller has brought from a distant land. But you! you hypocritical robber, who disregard your own body with beastly pride, and sacrifice it to low brutality—what should you know of the magic charm of beauty—that daughter of heaven, that can touch even thoughtless children, and before which the gods themselves do homage! I have a right to Sirona; for hide her where you will—or even if the centurion were to find her, and to fetter her to himself with chains and rivets of brass— still that which makes her the noblest work of the Most High—the image of her beauty—lives in no one, in no one as it lives in me. This hand has never even touched your victim—and yet God has given Sirona to no man as he has given her wholly to me, for to no man can she be what she is to me, and no man can love her as I do! She has the nature of an angel, and the heart of a child; she is without spot, and as pure as the diamond, or the swan's breast, or the morning-dew in the bosom of a rose. And though she had let you into her house a thousand times, and though my father even, and my own mother, and every one, every one pointed at her and condemned her, I would never cease to believe in her purity. It is you who have brought her to shame; it is you—"

"I kept silence while all condemned her," said Paulus with warmth, "for I believed that she was guilty, just as you believe that I am, just as every one that is bound by no ties of love is more ready to believe evil than good, Now I know, aye, know for certain, that we did the poor woman an injustice. If the splendor of the lovely dream, that you call Sirona, has been clouded by my fault—"

"Clouded? And by you?" laughed Polykarp. "Can the toad that plunges into the sea, cloud its shining blue, can the black bat that flits across the night, cloud the pure light of the full-moon?"

An emotion of rage again shot through the anchorite's heart, but he was by this time on his guard against himself, and he only said bitterly, and with hardly-won composure:

"And how was it then with the flower, and with the bird, that were destroyed by beasts without understanding? I fancy you meant no absent third person by that beast, and yet now you declare that it is not within my power even to throw a shadow over your day-star! You see you contradict yourself in your anger, and the son of a wise man, who himself has not long since left the school of rhetoric, should try to avoid that. You might regard me with less hostility, for I will not offend you; nay, I will repay your evil words with good—perhaps the very best indeed that you ever heard in your life. Sirona is a worthy and innocent woman, and at the time when Phoebicius came out to seek her, I had never even set eyes upon her nor had my ears ever heard a word pass her lips."

At these words Polykarp's threatening manner changed, and feeling at once incapable of understanding the matter, and anxious to believe, he eagerly exclaimed:

"But yet the sheepskin was yours, and you let yourself be thrashed by Phoebicius without defending yourself."

"So filthy an ape," said Paulus, imitating Polykarp's voice, "needs many blows, and that day I could not venture to defend myself because— because—But that is no concern of yours. You must subdue your curiosity for a few days longer, and then it may easily happen that the man whose very aspect makes you feel dirty—the bat, the toad—"

"Let that pass now," cried Polykarp. "Perhaps the excitement which the sight of you stirred up in my bruised and wounded heart, led me to use unseemly language. Now, indeed, I see that your matted hair sits round a well featured countenance. Forgive my violent and unjust attack. I was beside myself, and I opened my whole soul to you, and now that you know how it is with me, once more I ask you, where is Sirona?"

Polykarp looked Paulus in the face with anxious and urgent entreaty, pointing to the dog as much as to say, "You must know, for here is the evidence."

The Alexandrian hesitated to answer; he glanced by chance at the entrance of the cave, and seeing the gleam of Sirona's white robe behind the palm-branches, he said to himself that if Polykarp lingered much longer, he could not fail to discover her—a consummation to be avoided.

There were many reasons which might have made him resolve to stand in the way of a meeting between the lady and the young man, but not one of them occurred to him, and though he did not even dream that a feeling akin to jealousy had begun to influence him, still he was conscious that it was his lively repugnance to seeing the two sink into each other's arms before his very eyes, that prompted him to turn shortly round, to take up the body of the little dog, and to say to the enquirer:

"It is true, I do know where she is hiding, and when the time comes you shall know it too. Now I must bury the animal, and if you will you can help me."

Without waiting for any objection on Polykarp's part, he hurried from stone to stone up to the plateau on the precipitous edge of which he had first seen Sirona. The younger man followed him breathlessly, and only joined him when he had already begun to dig out the earth with his hands at the foot of a cliff. Polykarp was now standing close to the anchorite, and repeated his question with vehement eagerness, but Paulus did not look up from his work, and only said, digging faster and faster:

"Come to this place again to-morrow, and then it may perhaps be possible that I should tell you."

"You think to put me off with that," cried the lad. "Then you are mistaken in me, and if you cheat me with your honest-sounding words, I will—"

But he did not end his threat, for a clear longing cry distinctly broke the silence of the deserted mountain: "Polykarp—Polykarp." It sounded nearer and nearer, and the words had a magic effect on him for whose ear they were intended.

With his head erect and trembling in every limb, the young man listened eagerly. Then he cried out, "It is her voice! I am coming, Sirona, I am coming." And without paying any heed to the anchorite, he was on the point of hurrying off to meet her. But Paulus placed himself close in front of him, and said sternly: "You stay here."

"Out of my way," shouted Polykarp beside himself. "She is calling to me out of the hole where you are keeping her—you slanderer—you cowardly liar! Out of the way I say! You will not? Then defend yourself, you hideous toad, or I will tread you down, if my foot does not fear to be soiled with your poison."

Up to this moment Paulus had stood before the young man with out-stretched arms, motionless, but immovable as an oak-tree; now Polykarp first hit him. This blow shattered the anchorite's patience, and, no longer master of himself, he exclaimed, "You shall answer to me for this!" and before a third and fourth call had come from Sirona's lips, he had grasped the artist's slender body, and with a mighty swing he flung him backwards over his own broad and powerful shoulders on to the stony ground.

After this mad act he stood over his victim with out-stretched legs, folded arms, and rolling eyes, as if rooted to the earth. He waited till Polykarp had picked himself up, and, without looking round, but pressing his hands to the back of his head, had tottered away like a drunken man.

Paulus looked after him till he disappeared over the cliff at the edge of the level ground; but he did not see how Polykarp fell senseless to the ground with a stifled cry, not far from the very spring whence his enemy had fetched the water to refresh Sirona's parched lips.

CHAPTER XVI.

"She will attract the attention of Damianus or Salathiel or one of the others up there," thought Paulus as he heard Sirona's call once more, and, following her voice, he went hastily and excitedly down the mountainside.

"We shall have peace for to-day at any rate from that audacious fellow," muttered he to himself, "and perhaps to-morrow too, for his blue bruises will be a greeting from me. But how difficult it is to forget what we have once known! The grip, with which I flung him, I learned—how long ago?—from the chief-gymnast at Delphi. My marrow is not yet quite dried up, and that I will prove to the boy with these fists, if he comes back with three or four of the same mettle."

But Paulus had not long to indulge in such wild thoughts, for on the way to the cave he met Sirona. "Where is Polykarp?" she called out from afar.

"I have sent him home," he answered. "And he obeyed you?" she asked again.

"I gave him striking reasons for doing so," he replied quickly.

"But he will return?"

"He has learned enough up here for to-day. We have now to think of your journey to Alexandria."

"But it seems to me," replied Sirona, blushing, "that I am safely hidden in your cave, and just now you yourself said—"

"I warned you against the dangers of the expedition," interrupted Paulus. "But since that it has occurred to me that I know of a shelter, and of a safe protector for you. There, we are at home again. Now go into the cave, for very probably some one may have heard you calling, and if other anchorites were to discover you here, they would compel me to take you back to your husband."

"I will go directly," sighed Sirona, "but first explain to me—for I heard all that you said to each other—" and she colored, "how it happened that Phoebicius took Hermas' sheepskin for yours, and why you let him beat you without giving any explanation."

"Because my back is even broader than that great fellow's," replied the Alexandrian quickly. "I will tell you all about it in some quiet hour, perhaps on our journey to Klysmā. Now go into the cave, or you may spoil everything. I know too what you lack most since you heard the fair words of the senator's son."

"Well—what?" asked Sirona.

"A mirror!" laughed Paulus.

"How much you are mistaken!" said Sirona; and she thought to herself, "The woman that Polykarp looks at as he does at me, does not need a mirror."

An old Jewish merchant lived in the fishing-town on the western declivity of the mountain; he shipped the charcoal for Egypt, which was made in the valleys of the peninsula by burning the sajal acacia, and he had formerly supplied fuel for the drying-room of the papyrus-factory of Paulus' father. He now had a business connection with his brother, and Paulus himself had had dealings with him. He was prudent and wealthy, and whenever he met the anchorite, he blamed him for his flight from the world, and implored him to put his hospitality to the test, and to command his resources and means as if they were his own.

This man was now to find a boat, and to provide the means of flight for Sirona. The longer Paulus thought it over, the more indispensable it seemed to him that he should himself accompany the Gaulish lady to Alexandria, and in his own person find her a safe shelter. He knew that he was free to dispose of his brother's enormous fortune—half of which in fact was his—as though it were all his own, and he began to rejoice in his possessions for the first time for many years. Soon he was occupied in thinking of the furnishing of the house, which he intended to assign to the fair Sirona. At first he thought of a simple citizen's dwelling, but by degrees he began to picture the house intended for her as fitted with shining gold, white and colored marble, many-colored Syrian carpets, nay even with vain works of the heathen, with statues, and a luxurious bath. In increasing unrest he wandered from rock to rock, and many times as he went up and down he paused in front of the cave where Sirona was. Once he saw her light robe, and its conspicuous gleam led him to the reflection, that it would be imprudent to conduct her to the humble fishing-village in that dress. If he meant to conceal her traces from the search of

Phoebicius and Polykarp, he must first provide her with a simple dress, and a veil that should hide her shining hair and fair face, which even in the capital could find no match.

The Amalekite, from whom he had twice bought some goat's-milk for her, lived in a but which Paulus could easily reach. He still possessed a few drachmas, and with these he could purchase what he needed from the wife and daughter of the goatherd. Although the sky was now covered with mist and a hot sweltering south-wind had risen, he prepared to start at once. The sun was no longer visible though its scorching heat could be felt, but Paulus paid no heed to this sign of an approaching storm.

Hastily, and with so little attention that he confused one object with another in the little store-cellar, he laid some bread, a knife, and some dates in front of the entrance to the cave, called out to his guest that he should soon return, and hurried at a rapid pace up the mountain.

Sirona answered him with a gentle word of farewell, and did not even look round after him, for she was glad to be alone, and so soon as the sound of his step had died away she gave herself up once more to the overwhelming torrent of new and deep feelings which had flooded her soul ever since she had heard Polykarp's ardent hymn of love.

Paulus, in the last few hours, was Menander again, but the lonely woman in the cavern—the cause of this transformation—the wife of Phoebicius, had undergone an even greater change than he. She was still Sirona, and yet not Sirona.

When the anchorite had commanded her to retire into the cave she had obeyed him willingly, nay, she would have withdrawn even without his desire, and have sought for solitude; for she felt that something mighty, hitherto unknown to her, and incomprehensible even to herself, was passing in her soul, and that a nameless but potent something had grown up in her heart, had struggled free, and had found life and motion; a something that was strange, and yet precious to her, frightening, and yet sweet, a pain, and yet unspeakably delightful. An emotion such as she had never before known had mastered her, and she felt, since hearing Polykarp's speech, as if a new and purer blood was flowing rapidly through her veins. Every nerve quivered like the leaves of the poplars in her former home when the wind blows down to meet the Rhone, and she found it difficult to follow what Paulus said, and still more so to find the right answer to his questions.

As soon as she was alone she sat down on her bed, rested her elbows on her knees, and her head in her hand, and the growing and surging flood of her passion broke out in an abundant stream of warm tears.

She had never wept so before; no anguish, no bitterness was infused into the sweet refreshing dew of those tears. Fair flowers of never dreamed of splendor and beauty blossomed in the heart of the weeping woman, and when at length her tears ceased, there was a great silence, but also a great glory within her and around her. She was like a man who has grown up in an under-ground-room, where no light of day can ever shine, and who at last is allowed to look at the blue heavens, at the splendor of the sun, at the myriad flowers and leaves in the green woods, and on the meadows.

She was wretched, and yet a happy woman.

"That is love!" were the words that her heart sang in triumph, and as her memory looked back on the admirers who had approached her in Arelas when she was still little more than a child, and afterwards in Rome, with tender words and looks, they all appeared like phantom forms carrying feeble tapers, whose light paled pitifully, for Polykarp had now come on the scene, bearing the very sun itself in his hands.

"They—and he," she murmured to herself, and she beheld as it were a balance, and on one of the scales lay the homage which in her vain fancy she had so coveted. It was of no more weight than chaff, and its whole mass was like a heap of straw, which flew up as soon as Polykarp laid his love—a hundredweight of pure gold, in the other scale.

"And if all the nations and kings of the earth brought their treasures together," thought she, "and laid them at my feet, they could not make me as rich as he has made me, and if all the stars were fused into one, the vast globe of light which they would form could not shine so brightly as the joy that fills my soul. Come now what may, I will never complain after that hour of delight."

Then she thought over each of her former meetings with Polykarp, and remembered that he had never spoken to her of love. What must it not have cost him to control himself thus; and a great triumphant joy filled her heart at the thought that she was pure, and not unworthy of him, and an unutterable sense of gratitude rose up in her soul. The love she bore this man seemed to take wings, and it spread itself over the common life and aspect of the world, and rose to a spirit of devotion. With a deep sigh she raised her eyes and hands to heaven, and in her longing to prove her love to every

living being, nay to every created thing, her spirit sought the mighty and beneficent Power to whom she owed such exalted happiness.

In her youth her father had kept her very strictly, but still he had allowed her to go through the streets of the town with her young companions, wreathed with flowers, and all dressed in their best, in the procession of maidens at the feast of Venus of Arelas, to whom all the women of her native town were wont to turn with prayers and sacrifices when their hearts were touched by love.

Now she tried to pray to Venus, but again and again the wanton jests of the men who were used to accompany the maidens came into her mind, and memories of how she herself had eagerly listened for the only too frequent cries of admiration, and had enticed the silent with a glance, or thanked the more clamorous with a smile. To-day certainly she had no mind for such sport, and she recollected the stern words which had fallen from Dorothea's lips on the worship of Venus, when she had once told her how well the natives of Arelas knew how to keep their feasts.

And Polykarp, whose heart was nevertheless so full of love, he no doubt thought like his mother, and she pictured him as she had frequently seen him following his parents by the side of his sister Marthana—often hand in hand with her—as they went to church. The senator's son had always had a kindly glance for her, excepting when he was one of this procession to the temple of the God of whom they said that He was love itself, and whose votaries indeed were not poor in love; for in Petrus' house, if anywhere, all hearts were united by a tender affection. It then occurred to her that Paulus had just now advised her to turn to the crucified God of the Christians, who was full of an equal and divine love to all men. To him Polykarp also prayed—was praying perhaps this very hour; and if she now did the same her prayers would ascend together with his, and so she might be in some sort one with that beloved friend, from whom everything else conspired to part her.

She knelt down and folded her hands, as she had so often seen Christians do, and she reflected on the torments that the poor Man, who hung with pierced hands on the cross, had so meekly endured, though He suffered innocently; she felt the deepest pity for Him, and softly said to herself, as she raised her eyes to the low roof of her cave-dwelling:

"Thou poor good Son of God, Thou knowest what it is when all men condemn us unjustly, and surely, Thou canst understand when I say to Thee how sore my poor heart is! And they say too, that of all hearts Thine is the most loving, and so thou wilt know how it is that, in spite of all my misery, it still seems to me that I am a happy woman. The very breath of a God must be rapture, and that Thou too must have learned when they tortured and mocked Thee, for Thou hast suffered out of love. They say, that Thou wast wholly pure and perfectly sinless. Now I—I have committed many follies, but not a sin—a real sin—no, indeed, I have not; and Thou must know it, for Thou art a God, and knowest the past, and canst read hearts. And, indeed, I also would fain remain innocent, and yet how can that be when I cannot help being devoted to Polykarp, and yet I am another man's wife. But am I indeed the true and lawful wife of that horrible wretch who sold me to another? He is as far from my heart—as far as if I had never seen him with these eyes. And yet—believe me—I wish him no ill, and I will be quite content, if only I need never go back to him.

"When I was a child, I was afraid of frogs; my brothers and sisters knew it, and once my brother Licinius laid a large one, that he had caught, on my bare neck. I started, and shuddered, and screamed out loud, for it was so hideously cold and damp—I cannot express it. And that is exactly how I have always felt since those days in Rome whenever Phoebicius touched me, and yet I dared not scream when he did.

"But Polykarp! oh! would that he were here, and might only grasp my hand. He said I was his own, and yet I have never encouraged him. But now! if a danger threatened him or a sorrow, and if by any means I could save him from it, indeed—indeed—though I never could bear pain well, and am afraid of death, I would let them nail me to a cross for him, as Thou wast crucified for us all.

"But then he must know that I had died for him, and if he looked into my dying eyes with his strange, deep gaze, I would tell him that it is to him that I owe a love so great that it is a thing altogether different and higher than any love I have ever before seen. And a feeling that is so far above all measure of what ordinary mortals experience, it seems to me, must be divine. Can such love be wrong? I know not; but Thou knowest, and Thou, whom they name the Good Shepherd, lead Thou us— each apart from the other, if it be best so for him—but yet, if it be possible, unite us once more, if it be only for one single hour. If only he could know that I am not wicked, and that poor Sirona would willingly belong to him, and to no other, then I would be ready to die. O Thou good, kind Shepherd, take me too into Thy flock, and guide me."

Thus prayed Sirona, and before her fancy there floated the image of a lovely and loving youthful form; she had seen the original in the model for Polykarp's noble work, and she had not forgotten the

exquisite details of the face. It seemed to her as well known and familiar as if she had known—what in fact she could not even guess—that she herself had had some share in the success of the work.

The love which unites two hearts is like the ocean of Homer which encircles both halves of the earth. It flows and rolls on. Where shall we seek its source—here or there—who can tell?

It was Dame Dorothea who in her motherly pride had led the Gaulish lady into her son's workshop. Sirona thought of her and her husband and her house, where over the door a motto was carved in the stone which she had seen every morning from her sleeping-room. She could not read Greek, but Polykarp's sister, Marthana, had more than once told her what it meant. "Commit thy way to the Lord, and put thy trust in Him," ran the inscription, and she repeated it to herself again and again, and then drew fancy-pictures of the future in smiling day-dreams, which by degrees assumed sharper outlines and brighter colors.

She saw herself united to Polykarp, and as the daughter of Petrus and Dorothea, at home in the senator's house; she had a right now to the children who loved her, and who were so dear to her; she helped the deaconess in all her labors, and won praise, and looks of approval. She had learned to use her hands in her father's house and now she could show what she could do; Polykarp even gazed at her with surprise and admiration, and said that she was as clever as she was beautiful, and promised to become a second Dorothea. She went with him into his workshop, and there arranged all the things that lay about in confusion, and dusted it, while he followed her every movement with his gaze, and at last stood before her, his arms wide—wide open to clasp her.

She started, and pressed her hands over her eyes, and flung herself loving and beloved on his breast, and would have thrown her arms round his neck, while her hot tears flowed—but the sweet vision was suddenly shattered, for a swift flash of light pierced the gloom of the cavern, and immediately after she heard the heavy roll of the thunder-clap, dulled by the rocky walls of her dwelling.

Completely recalled to actuality she listened for a moment, and then stepped to the entrance of the cave. It was already dusk, and heavy rain-drops were falling from the dark clouds which seemed to shroud the mountain peaks in a vast veil of black crape. Paulus was nowhere to be seen, but there stood the food he had prepared for her. She had eaten nothing since her breakfast, and she now tried to drink the milk, but it had curdled and was not fit to use; a small bit of bread and a few dates quite satisfied her.

As the lightning and thunder began to follow each other more and more quickly, and the darkness fast grew deeper, a great fear fell upon her; she pushed the food on one side, and looked up to the mountain where the peaks were now wholly veiled in night, now seemed afloat in a sea of flame, and more distinctly visible than by daylight. Again and again a forked flash like a saw-blade of fire cut through the black curtain of cloud with terrific swiftness, again and again the thunder sounded like a blast of trumpets through the silent wilderness, and multiplied itself, clattering, growling, roaring, and echoing from rock to rock. Light and sound at last seemed to be hurled from Heaven together, and the very rock in which her cave was formed quaked.

Crushed and trembling she drew back into the inmost depth of her rocky chamber, starting at each flash that illumined the darkness.

At length they occurred at longer intervals, the thunder lost its appalling fury, and as the wind drove the storm farther and farther to the southwards, at last it wholly died away.

CHAPTER XVII.

It was quite dark in Sirona's cavern, fearfully dark, and the blacker grew the night which shrouded her, the more her terror increased. From time to time she shut her eyes as tightly as she could, for she fancied she could see a crimson glare, and she longed for light in that hour as a drowning man longs for the shore. Dark forebodings of every kind oppressed her soul.

What if Paulus had abandoned her, and had left her to her fate? Or if Polykarp should have been searching for her on the mountain in this storm, and in the darkness should have fallen into some abyss, or have been struck by the lightning? Suppose the mass of rock that overhung the entrance to the cave should have been loosened in the storm, and should fall, and bar her exit to the open air? Then she would be buried alive, and she must perish alone, without seeing him whom she loved once more,

or telling him that she had not been unworthy of his trust in her.

Cruelly tormented by such thoughts as these, she dragged herself up and felt her way out into the air and wind, for she could no longer hold out in the gloomy solitude and fearful darkness. She had hardly reached the mouth of the cave, when she heard steps approaching her lurking place, and again she shrank back. Who was it that could venture in this pitch-dark night to climb from rock to rock? Was it Paulus returning? Was it he—was it Polykarp seeking her? She felt intoxicated; she pressed her hands to her heart, and longed to cry out, but she dared not, and her tongue refused its office. She listened with the tension of terror to the sound of the steps which came straight towards her nearer and nearer, then the wanderer perceived the faint gleam of her white dress, and called out to her. It was Paulus.

She drew a deep breath of relief when she recognized his voice, and answered his call.

"In such weather as this," said the anchorite, "it is better to be within than without, it seems to me, for it is not particularly pleasant out here, so far as I have found."

"But it has been frightful here inside the cave too," Sirona answered, "I have been so dreadfully frightened, I was so lonely in the horrible darkness. If only I had had my little dog with me, it would at least have been a living being."

"I have made haste as well as I could," interrupted Paulus. "The paths are not so smooth here as the Kanopic road in Alexandria, and as I have not three necks like Cerberus, who lies at the feet of Serapis, it would have been wiser of me to return to you a little more leisurely. The storm-bird has swallowed up all the stars as if they were flies, and the poor old mountain is so grieved at it, that streams of tears are everywhere flowing over his stony cheeks. It is wet even here. Now go back into the cave, and let me lay this that I have got here for you in my arms, in the dry passage. I bring you good news; to-morrow evening, when it is growing dusk, we start. I have found out a vessel which will convey us to Klysmā, and from thence I myself will conduct you to Alexandria. In the sheepskin here you will find the dress and veil of an Amalekite woman, and if your traces are to be kept hidden from Phoebicius, you must accommodate yourself to this disguise; for if the people down there were to see you as I saw you to-day, they would think that Aphrodite herself had risen from the sea, and the report of the fair-haired beauty that had appeared among them would soon spread even to the oasis."

"But it seems to me that I am well hidden here," replied Sirona. "I am afraid of a sea-voyage, and even if we succeeded in reaching Alexandria without impediment, still I do not know—"

"It shall be my business to provide for you there." Paulus interrupted with a decision that was almost boastful, and that somewhat disturbed Sirona. "You know the fable of the ass in the lion's skin, but there are lions who wear the skin of an ass on their shoulders—or of a sheep, it comes to the same thing. Yesterday you were speaking of the splendid palaces of the citizens, and lauding the happiness of their owners. You shall dwell in one of those marble houses, and rule it as its mistress, and it shall be my care to procure you slaves, and litter-bearers, and a carriage with four mules. Do not doubt my word, for I am promising nothing that I cannot perform. The rain is ceasing, and I will try to light a fire. You want nothing more to eat? Well then, I will wish you good-night. The rest will all do to-morrow."

Sirona had listened in astonishment to the anchorite's promises.

How often had she envied those who possessed all that her strange protector now promised her—and now it had not the smallest charm for her; and, fully determined in any case not to follow Paulus, whom she began to distrust, she replied, as she coldly returned his greeting, "There are many hours yet before tomorrow evening in which we can discuss everything."

While Paulus was with great difficulty rekindling the fire, she was once more alone, and again she began to be alarmed in the dark cavern.

She called the Alexandrian. "The darkness terrifies me so," she said. "You still had some oil in the jug this morning; perhaps you may be able to contrive a little lamp for me; it is so fearful to stay here in the dark."

Paulus at once took a shard, tore a strip from his tattered coat, twisted it together, and laid it for a wick in the greasy fluid, lighted it at the slowly reviving fire, and putting this more than simple light in Sirona's hand, he said, "It will serve its purpose; in Alexandria I will see that you have lamps which give more light, and which are made by a better artist."

Sirona placed the lamp in a hollow in the rocky wall at the head of her bed, and then lay down to rest. Light scares away wild beasts and fear too from the resting-place of man, and it kept terrifying thoughts far away from the Gaulish woman.

She contemplated her situation clearly and calmly, and quite decided that she would neither quit the cave, nor entrust herself to the anchorite, till she had once more seen and spoken to Polykarp. He no doubt knew where to seek her, and certainly, she thought, he would by this time have returned, if the storm and the starless night had not rendered it an impossibility to come up the mountain from the oasis.

"To-morrow I shall see him again, and then I will open my heart to him, and he shall read my soul like a book, and on every page, and in every line he will find his own name. And I will tell him too that I have prayed to his 'Good Shepherd,' and how much good it has done me, and that I will be a Christian like his sister Marthana and his mother. Dorothea will be glad indeed when she hears it, and she at any rate cannot have thought that I was wicked, for she always loved me, and the children—the children—"

The bright crowd of merry faces came smiling in upon her fancy, and her thoughts passed insensibly into dreams; kindly sleep touched her heart with its gentle hand, and its breath swept every shadow of trouble from her soul. She slept, smiling and untroubled as a child whose eyes some guardian angel softly kisses, while her strange protector now turned the flickering wood on the damp hearth and with a reddening face blew up the dying charcoal-fire, and again walked restlessly up and down, and paused each time he passed the entrance to the cave, to throw a longing glance at the light which shone out from Sirona's sleeping-room.

Since the moment when he had flung Polykarp to the ground, Paulus had not succeeded in recovering his self-command; not for a moment had he regretted the deed, for the reflection had never occurred to him, that a fall on the stony soil of the Sacred Mountain, which was as hard as iron, must hurt more than a fall on the sand of the arena.

"The impudent fellow," thought he, "richly deserved what he got. Who gave him a better right over Sirona than he, Paulus himself, had—he who had saved her life, and had taken it upon himself to protect her?" Her great beauty had charmed him from the first moment of their meeting, but no impure thought stirred his heart as he gazed at her with delight, and listened with emotion to her childlike talk. It was the hot torrent of Polykarp's words that had first thrown the spark into his soul, which jealousy and the dread of having to abandon Sirona to another, had soon fanned into a consuming flame. He would not give up this woman, he would continue to care for her every need, she should owe everything to him, and to him only. And so, without reserve, he devoted himself body and soul to the preparations for her flight. The hot breath of the storm, the thunder and lightning, torrents of rain, and blackness of night could not delay him, while he leaped from rock to rock, feeling his way-soaked through, weary and in peril; he thought only of her, and of how he could most safely carry her to Alexandria, and then surround her with all that could charm a woman's taste. Nothing—nothing did he desire for himself, and all that he dreamed of and planned turned only and exclusively on the pleasure which he might afford her. When he had prepared and lighted the lamp for her he saw her again, and was startled at the beauty of the face that the trembling flame revealed. He could observe her a few seconds only, and then she had vanished, and he must remain alone in the darkness and the rain. He walked restlessly up and down, and an agonizing longing once more to see her face lighted up by the pale flame, and the white arm that she had held out to take the lamp, grew more and more strong in him and accelerated the pulses of his throbbing heart. As often as he passed the cave, and observed the glimmer of light that came from her room, he felt prompted and urged to slip in, and to gaze on her once more. He never once thought of prayer and scourging, his old means of grace, he sought rather for a reason that might serve him as an excuse if he went in, and it struck him that it was cold, and that a sheepskin was lying in the cavern. He would fetch it, in spite of his vow never to wear a sheepskin again; and supposing he were thus enabled to see her, what next?

When he had stepped across the threshold, an inward voice warned him to return, and told him that he must be treading the path of unrighteousness, for that he was stealing in on tiptoe like a thief; but the excuse was ready at once. "That is for fear of waking her, if she is asleep."

And now all further reflection was silenced for he had already reached the spot where, at the end of the rocky passage, the cave widened into her sleeping-room; there she lay on her hard couch, sunk in slumber and enchantingly fair.

A deep gloom reigned around, and the feeble light of the little lamp lighted up only a small portion of the dismal chamber but the head, throat, and arms that it illuminated seemed to shine with a light of their own that enhanced and consecrated the light of the feeble flame. Paulus fell breathless on his knees, and fixed his eyes with growing eagerness on the graceful form of the sleeper.

Sirona was dreaming; her head, veiled in her golden hair, rested on a high pillow of herbs, and her delicately rosy face was turned up to the vault of the cave; her half-closed lips moved gently, and now she moved her bent arm and her white hand, on which the light of the lamp fell, and which rested half on her forehead and half on her shining hair.

"Is she saying anything?" asked Paulus of himself, and he pressed his brow against a projection of the rock as tightly as if he would stem the rapid rush of his blood that it might not overwhelm his bewildered brain.

Again she moved her lips. Had she indeed spoken? Had she perhaps called him?

That could not be, for she still slept; but he wished to believe it—and he would believe it, and he stole nearer to her and nearer, and bent over her, and listened—while his own strength failed him even to draw a breath—listened to the soft regular breathing that heaved her bosom. No longer master of himself he touched her white arm with his bearded lips and she drew it back in her sleep, then his gaze fell on her parted lips and the pearly teeth that shone between them, and a mad longing to kiss them came irresistibly over him. He bent trembling over her, and was on the point of gratifying his impulse when, as if startled by a sudden apparition, he drew back, and raised his eyes from the rosy lips to the hand that rested on the sleeper's brow.

The lamplight played on a golden ring on Sirona's finger, and shone brightly on an onyx on which was engraved an image of Tyche, the tutelary goddess of Antioch, with a sphere upon her head, and bearing Amalthea's horn in her hand.

A new and strange emotion took possession of the anchorite at the sight of this stone. With trembling hands he felt in the breast of his torn garment, and presently drew forth a small iron crucifix and the ring that he had taken from the cold hand of Hermas' mother. In the golden circlet was set an onyx, on which precisely the same device was visible as that on Sirona's hand. The string with its precious jewel fell from his grasp, he clutched his matted hair with both hands, groaned deeply, and repeated again and again, as though to crave forgiveness, the name of "Magdalen."

Then he called Sirona in a loud voice, and as she awoke excessively startled, he asked her in urgent tones: "Who gave you that ring?"

"It was a present from Phoebicius," replied she. "He said he had had it given to him many years since in Antioch, and that it had been engraved by a great artist. But I do not want it any more, and if you like to have it you may."

"Throw it away!" exclaimed Paulus, "it will bring you nothing but misfortune." Then he collected himself, went out into the air with his head sunk on his breast, and there, throwing himself down on the wet stones by the hearth, he cried out:

"Magdalen! dearest and purest! You, when you ceased to be Glycera, became a saintly martyr, and found the road to heaven; I too had my day of Damascus—of revelation and conversion—and I dared to call myself by the name of Paulus—and now—now?"

Plunged in despair he beat his forehead, groaning out,
"All, all in vain!"

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Can such love be wrong?

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HOMO SUM — VOLUME 04 ***

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