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ARACHNE

By Georg Ebers

Volume 6.

CHAPTER V.

At the third hour after sunrise a distinguished assemblage of people gathered at the landing place east of the Temple of Poseidon in the great harbour of Alexandria.

Its members belonged to the upper classes, for many had come in carriages and litters, and numerous pedestrians were accompanied by slaves bearing in delicately woven baskets and cornucopias a laurel wreath, a papyrus crown, or bright-hued flowers.

The most aristocratic among the gentlemen had gathered on the western side of the great sanctuary, between the cella and the long row of Doric columns which supported the roof of the marble temple.

The Macedonian Council of the city was already represented by several of its members. Among their number was Archias, Daphne's father, a man of middle height and comfortable portliness, from whose well-formed, beardless face looked forth a pair of shrewd eyes, and whose quick movements revealed the slight irritability of his temperament.

Several members of the Council and wealthy merchants surrounded him, while the grammateus Proclus first talked animatedly with other government officials and representatives of the priesthood, and then with Archias. The head of the Museum, who bore the title of "high priest," had also appeared there with several members of this famous centre of the intellectual life of the capital. They shared the

shade of this part of the temple with distinguished masters of sculpture and painting, architecture and poetry, and conversed together with the graceful animation of Greeks endowed with great intellectual gifts.

Among them mingled, distinguishable neither by costume nor language, a number of prominent patrons of art in the great Jewish community. Their principal, the alabarch, was talking eagerly with the philosopher Hegesias and the Rhodian leech Chrysippus; Queen Arsinoe's favourite, whom at Althea's instigation she had sent with Proclus to receive the returning traveller.

Sometimes all gazed toward the mouth of the harbour, where the expected ship must soon pass the recently completed masterpiece of Sostratus, the towering lighthouse, still shining in its marble purity.

Soon many Alexandrians also crowded the large platform in front of the Temple of Poseidon, and the very wide marble staircase leading from it to the landing place.

Beneath the bronze statues of the Dioscuri, at the right and left of the topmost step, had also gathered the magnificent figures of the Phebi and the younger men from the wrestling school of Timagetes, with garlands on their curling locks, as well as many younger artists and pupils of the older masters.

The statues of the gods and goddesses of the sea and their lofty pedestals, standing at the sides of the staircase, cast upon the marble steps, gleaming in the radiance of the morning sun, narrow shadows, which attracted the male and female chorus singers, who, also wearing beautiful garlands, had come to greet the expected arrival with solemn chants.

Several actors were just coming from rehearsal in the theatre of Dionysus, east of the Temple of Poseidon, of which, like all the stages in the city, Proclus was chief manager.

A pretty dancing girl, who hung on the arm of the youngest, extended her hand with a graceful gesture toward the staircase, and asked:

"Whom can they be expecting there? Probably some huge new animal for the Museum which has been caught somewhere for the King, for yonder stiff wearer of a laurel crown, who throws his head back as though he would like to eat the Olympians and take the King for a luncheon into the bargain, is Straton, the denier of the gods, and the little man with the bullethead is the grammarian Zoilus."

"Of course," replied her companion. "But there, too, is Apollodorus, the alabarch of the Jews, and the heavy money-bag Archias—"

"Why look at them!" cried the younger mime. "It's far better worth while to stretch your neck for those farther in front. They are genuine friends of the Muses—the poets Theocritus and Zenodotus."

"The great Athene, Apollo, and all his nine Pierides, have sent their envoys," said the older actor pathetically, "for there, too, are the sculptors Euphranor and Chares, and the godlike builder of the lighthouse, Sostratus in person."

"A handsome man," cried the girl flute-player, "but vain, I tell you, vain—"

"Self-conscious, you ought to say," corrected her companion.

"Certainly," added the older actor, patting his smooth cheeks and chin with a rose he held in his hand. Who can defend himself against the highest merit, self-knowledge? But the person who is to have this reception, by the staff of Dionysus! if modesty flies away from him like the bird from a girl, it ought just look there! The tall, broad-shouldered fellow yonder is Chrysippus, the right hand of Arsinoe, as our grammateus Proclus is her left. So probably some prince is expected."

"The gentlemen of the Museum and the great artists yonder would not stir a foot, far less lose so precious a morning hour, for any mere wearer of a crown or sceptre," protested the other actor; "it must be—"

"That the King or the Queen command it," interrupted the older player.

"Only Arsinoe is represented here. Or do you see any envoy of Ptolemy?"

Perhaps they will yet arrive. If there were ambassadors of the great Roman Senate—"

"Or," added the dancer, "envoys from King Antiochus. But—goose that I am!—then they would not be received here, but in the royal harbour at the Lochias. See if I don't prove to be right! Divine honours are to be paid to some newly attracted hero of the intellect. But—just follow my finger! There—yonder—it comes floating along at the left of the island of Antirrhodus. That may be his galley! Magnificent!

Wonderfully beautiful! Brilliant! Like a swan! No, no, like a swimming peacock! And the silver embroidery on the blue sails! It glitters and sparkles like stars in the azure sky."

Meanwhile the elder actor, shading his eyes with his hand, had been gazing at the harbour, where, amid the innumerable vessels, the expected one, whose sails were just being reefed, was steered by a skilful hand. Now he interrupted the blond beauty with the exclamation: "It is Archias's Proserpina! I know it well." Then, in a declamatory tone, he continued: "I, too, was permitted on the deck of the glittering vessel, lightly rocked by the crimson waves, to reach my welcome goal; as the guest of peerless Archias, I mean. The most magnificent festival in his villa! There was a little performance there in which Mentor and I allowed ourselves to be persuaded to take part. But just see how the beautiful ship uses the narrow passage between the two triremes, as if it had the bloodleech's power of contraction! But to return to the festival of Archias: the oyster ragout served there, the pheasant pasties—"

Here he interrupted himself, exclaiming in surprise: "By the club of Hercules, the Proserpina is to be received with a full chorus! And there is the owner himself descending the stairs! Whom is she bringing?"

"Come! come!" cried the dancing girl to her companion, dragging him after her, "I shall die of curiosity."

The singing and shouting of many voices greeted the actors as they approached the platform of the Temple of Poseidon.

When from this spot the dancer fixed her eyes upon the landing place, she suddenly dropped her companion's arm, exclaiming: "It is the handsome blind sculptor, Hermon, the heir of the wealthy Myrtilus. Do you learn this now for the first time, you jealous Thersites? Hail, hail, divine Hermon! Hail, noble victim of the ungrateful Olympians! Hail to thee, Hermon, and thy immortal works! Hail, hail, hail!"

Meanwhile she waved her handkerchief with frenzied eagerness, as if she could thus force the blind man to see her, and a group of actors whom Proclus, the grammateus of the Dionysian arts, had sent here to receive Hermon worthily, followed her example.

But her cries were drowned by the singing of the chorus and by thousands of shouting voices, while Hermon was embraced by Archias on board the galley, and then, by his guidance, stepped on shore and ascended the staircase of the Temple of Poseidon.

Before the ship entered the harbour, the artist had had a large goblet of unmixed wine given to him, that he might conquer the emotion that had overpowered him.

Though his blind eyes did not show him even the faintest outline of a figure, he felt as if he was flooded with brilliant sunshine.

While the Proserpina was bearing him past the lighthouse, Gras told him that they had now reached the great harbour, and at the same time he heard the shouts, whistles, signals, and varying sounds of the landing place with its crowded shipping, and of the capital.

His blood surged in his veins, and before his mind rose the vision of the corn-flower blue sky, mirrored in the calm surface of the bluest of seas. The pharos built by Sostratus towered in dazzling whiteness above the tide, and before him rose the noble temple buildings, palaces, and porticoes of the city of Alexandria, with which he was familiar, and before and between them statue after statue of marble and bronze, the whole flooded with radiant golden light.

True, darkness sometimes swallowed this wonderful picture, but an effort of the will was sufficient to show it to him again.

"The Temple of Poseidon!" cried Gras. "The Proserpina is to land at the foot of the steps." And now Hermon listened to the sounds from the shore, whose hum and buzz transported him into the midst of the long-missed city of commerce, knowledge, and arts.

Then the captain's shouts of command fell imperiously upon his ears, the strokes of the oars ceased, their blades sank with a loud splash into the water, and at the same instant from the temple steps Hermon was greeted by the solemn notes of the chorus, from whose rhythm his own name rang forth again and again like so many shouts of victory.

He thought his heart would fairly burst through his arched chest, and the passionate violence of its

throbbing did not lessen when Gras exclaimed: "Half Alexandria has assembled to greet you. Ah, if you could only see it! How the kerchiefs are waving! Laurel after laurel in every hand! All the distinguished people in the capital have gathered on the sacred soil of the Temple of Poseidon. There is Archias, too; there are the artists and the famous gentlemen of the Museum, the members of the Ephebi, and the priests of the great gods."

Hermon listened with his hand pressed on his breast, and while doing so the power of his imagination showed the vast, harmoniously noble structure of the many-pillared Temple of Poseidon, surrounded by as many thousands as there were in reality hundreds. From all parts of the sanctuary, even from the tops of the roofs, he beheld laurel branches and kerchiefs waving and tossing, and wreaths flung on the ground before him. If this picture was correct, the whole city was greeting him, headed by the men whom he honoured as great and meritorious, and in front of them all Daphne, with drooping head, full of feminine grace and heart-winning goodness.

While the chorus continued their song, and the welcoming shouts grew louder, the brilliant picture faded away, but in return he felt friendly arms clasp him. First Archias, then Proclus, and after him a succession of fellow-artists—the greatest of all—drew him into a warm embrace.

Finally he felt himself led away, placed his feet as his Uncle Archias whispered directions, and as they gropingly obeyed them ascended the temple steps and stood in utter darkness upon the platform listening to the speeches which so many had prepared.

All the distinguished men in the city expressed their sympathy, their pity, their admiration, their hopes, or sent assurances of them to him. The Rhodian Chrysippus, despatched by the Queen, delivered the wreath which the monarch bestowed, and informed Hermon, with her greetings, that Arsinoe deemed his Demeter worthy of the laurel.

The most famous masters of his art, the great scholars from the Museum, the whole priesthood of Demeter, which included Daphne, the servants of Apollo, his dear Ephebi, the comrades of his physical exercises—all whom he honoured, admired, loved—loaded him with praises and good wishes, as well as the assurance of their pride in numbering him among them.

No form, no colour from the visible world, penetrated the darkness surrounding him, not even the image of the woman he loved. Only his ears enabled him to receive the praises, honours, congratulations lavished here and, though he sometimes thought he had received enough, he again listened willingly and intently when a new speaker addressed him in warm words of eulogy. What share compassion for his unprecedentedly sorrowful fate had in this extravagantly laudatory and cordial greeting, he did not ask; he only felt with a throbbing heart that he now stood upon a summit which he had scarcely ventured to hope ever to attain. His dreams of outward success which had not been realized, because he deemed it treason to his art to deviate from the course which he believed right and best adapted to it, he now, without having yielded to the demands of the old school, heard praised as his well-earned possessions.

He felt as if he breathed the lighter, purer air of the realms of the blessed, and the laurel crown which the Queen's envoy pressed upon his brow, the wreaths which his fellow-artists presented to him by hands no less distinguished than those of the great sculptor Protogenes, and Nicias, the most admired artist after the death of Apelles, seemed, like the wings on the hat and shoes of Hermes, messenger of the gods, to raise him out of himself and into the air.

Darkness surrounded him, yet a bright dazzling light issued from his soul and illuminated his whole being with the warm golden radiance of the sun.

Not even the faintest shadow dimmed it until Soteles, his fellow-student at Rhodes, who sustained him with ardent earnestness in the struggle to prefer truth to beauty, greeted him.

He welcomed him and wished that he might recover his lost sight as warmly as his predecessors. He praised the Demeter, too, but added that this was not the place to say what he missed in her. Yet that she did lack it awakened in him an emotion of pain, for this, Hermon's last work, apparently gave the followers of the ancients a right to number him in their ranks.

His cautious expression of regret must refer to the head of his Demeter. Yet surely it was not his fault that Daphne's features bore the impress of that gentle, winning kindness which he himself and Soteles, imitating him, had often condemned as weak and characterless.

The correctness of his belief was instantly proved to him by the address of gray-haired, highly praised Euphranor, who spoke of the Demeter's countenance with warm admiration. And how ardently the poets Theocritus and Zenodotus extolled his work to the skies!

Amid so much laudation, one faint word of dissatisfaction vanished like a drop of blood that falls into a clear stream.

The welcome concluded with a final chant by the chorus, and continued to echo in Hermon's ears as he entered his uncle's chariot and drove away with him, crowned with laurel and intoxicated as if by fiery wine.

Oh, if he could only have seen his fellow-citizens who so eagerly expressed their good will, their sympathy, their admiration! But the black and coloured mist before his eyes revealed no human figure, not even that of the woman he loved, who, he now learned for the first time from her father, had appeared among the priestesses of Demeter to greet him.

Doubtless he was gladdened by the sound of her voice, the clasp of her hand, the faint fragrance of violets exhaling from her fair hair, which he had often remembered with so much pleasure when alone in Tennis; but the time to devote himself to her fully and completely had not yet come, for what manifold and powerful impressions, how much that was elevating, delightful, and entertaining awaited him immediately!

The Queen's envoy had expressed his mistress's desire to receive the creator of the Demeter, the Ephebi and his fellow-artists had invited him to a festival which they desired to give in his honour, and on the way Archias informed him that many of his wealthy friends in the Macedonian Council expected that he, the honoured hero of the day, would adorn with his presence a banquet in their houses.

What a rich, brilliant life awaited him in spite of his blindness! When he entered his uncle's magnificent city home, and not only all the servants and clients of the family, but also a select party of ladies and gentlemen greeted him with flowers and hundreds of other tokens of affection and appreciation, he gave himself up without reserve to this novel excess of fame and admiration.

Notwithstanding his blindness, he felt, after the burns on his face had healed, thoroughly well, as strong as a giant—nay, more vigorous and capable of enjoyment than ever. What prevented him from revelling to the full in the superabundant gifts which Fate, recently so cruel, now suddenly cast into his lap with lavish kindness?

Yet many flattering and pleasant things as he had experienced that day, he was far from feeling satiety. On entering the hall of the men in his uncle's dwelling, the names of famous men and proud beauties had been repeated to him. Formerly they had taken little notice of him, yet now even the most renowned received him like an Olympian victor.

What did all these vain women really care for him? Yet their favour was part of the triumph whose celebration he must permit to-day. His heart held but one being for whom it yearned, and with whom thus far he had been able only to exchange a few tender greetings.

The time for a long conversation had not yet arrived, but he asked Thyone to lead him to her and, while she listened anxiously, described with feverish animation the incidents of the last few days. But he soon lowered his voice to assure her that he had not ceased to think of her even for a single hour, and the feeling of happiness which, in spite of his misfortune, had filled and lent wings to his soul, was not least due to the knowledge of being near her again.

And her presence really benefited him almost as much as he had anticipated during the hours of solitary yearning in Tennis; he felt it a great favour of Fate to be permitted to strive to possess her, felt even during the delirium of this reception that he loved her. What a tremendous longing to clasp her at once in his arms as his betrothed bride overwhelmed him; but her father's opposition to the union of his only child with a blind man must first be conquered, and the great agitation in his soul, as well as the tumult around him, seemed like a mockery of the quiet happiness which hovered before him when he thought of his marriage with Daphne. Not until everything was calmer would the time come to woo her. Until then both must be satisfied with knowing from each other's lips their mutual love, and he thought he perceived in the tone of her voice the deep emotion of her heart.

Perhaps this had prevented Daphne's expressing her congratulations upon the success of his Demeter as eagerly and fully as he had expected. Painfully disturbed by her reserve, he had just attempted to induce her to give a less superficial opinion of his work, when the curtains of the dining room parted—the music of flutes, singing, and pleasant odours greeted him and the guests. Archias summoned them to breakfast, and a band of beautiful boys, with flowers and garlands of ivy, obeyed the command to crown them.

Then Thyone approached the newly united pair and, after exchanging a few words with Daphne, whispered in an agitated voice to the blind sculptor, over whose breast a brown-locked young slave was just twining a garland of roses: "Poverty no longer stands between you and the object of your love; is it

Nemesis who even now still seals your lips?"

Hermon stretched out his hand to draw her nearer to him and murmur softly that her counsel had aided him to break the power of the terrible goddess, but he grasped the empty air. At the same time the deep voice of his love's father, whose opposition threatened to cloud his new happiness, singing, flute-playing, and the laughter of fair women greeted him and, only half master of his own will, he assented, by a slight bend of the head, to the matron's question. A light shiver ran through his frame with the speed of lightning, and the Epicurean's maxim that fear and cold are companions darted through his brain. But what should he fear? He had endured severe trials, it is true, for the sake of remaining faithful to truth in art and life; but who probably ever reached the age of manhood without once deviating from it? Besides, he was surely aware that, had he been obliged to answer Thyone in words, he would not have been guilty of the falsehood. His reply had consisted of a slight motion of the head, and it negatived nothing; it was merely intended to defer for a short time the thing he most desired.

Yet the rash answer weighed heavily on his mind; but it could no longer be recalled that day, and was believed, for Thyone whispered, "We shall succeed in reconciling the terrible being."

Again the light tremour ran through him, but it lasted only an instant; for Chryzilla, the representative of the dead mistress of the house, whose duty it was to assign the guests their places, called to Hermon, "The beautiful Glycera does you the honour of choosing you for a neighbour" and, before the sentence was finished, Archias himself seized his arm and led him to the cushions at the side of the much-courted beauty.

The guests began the banquet in a very joyous mood.

Greek gaiety, and the quick intellect and keen wit of the Alexandrians, combined with the choicest viands of the luxurious capital, where the wines and dainties of all the countries of the Mediterranean found sellers and buyers, and the cook's vocation was developed into a fine art, to spice this banquet with a hundred charms for the mind and senses. To-day the principal place in this distinguished circle of famous men, great and wealthy nobles, beautiful and aristocratic women, was awarded to the blind sculptor. He was pledged by every one who had admired his Demeter, who compassionated his sad fate, or who desired to be agreeable to him or his host.

Every kind remark about his person, his blindness, and his masterpiece was repeated to him and, after the wine and the effort to attract Daphne's attention and shine in the presence of his beautiful neighbour had heated and winged his thoughts, he found an apt reply to each noteworthy word.

When the dessert was finally eaten, and after sunset, in the brilliant light of the lamps and candles, greater attention was paid to the mixing vessels, all remained silent to listen to his fervid speech.

Glycera had asked him, at the beginning of the banquet, to tell her about the attack in Tennis. Now he yielded to her wish that he should repeat the captivating tale to the others, and the spirits of the wine helped him to perform the task with such animation that his hearers listened to his description in breathless suspense, and many eyes rested on the handsome face of the great blind artist as if spellbound.

When he paused, loud applause rewarded him, and as it reached him from every part of the spacious room, his deep, resonant voice put him in communication even with the more distant guests, and he might have been taken for the symposiarch or director of the banquet.

This conspicuous position of the feted artist did not please every one, and a rhetorician, famed for his sharp tongue, whispered to his neighbour, one of Hermon's older fellow-artists, "What his eyes have lost seems to benefit his tongue." The sculptor answered: "At any rate, the impetuous young artist might succeed better in proving himself, by its assistance, a good entertainer, than in creating more mediocre masterpieces like the Demeter."

Similar remarks were made on other cushions; but when the philosopher Hegesias asked the famous sculptor Euphranor what he thought of Hermon's Demeter, the kindly old man answered, "I should laud this noble work as a memorable event, even if it did not mark the end, as well as the beginning, of its highly gifted creator's new career."

Nothing of this kind was uttered near Hermon. Everything that reached him expressed delight, admiration, sympathy, and hope. At dessert the beautiful Glycera divided her apple, whispering as she gave him one half, "Let the fruit tell you what the eyes can no longer reveal, you poor and yet so abundantly rich darling of the gods."

He murmured in reply that his happiness would awake the envy of the immortals if, in addition, he

were permitted to feast upon the sight of her beauty.

Had he been able to see himself, Hermon, who, as a genuine Greek, was accustomed to moderate his feelings in intercourse with others, would have endeavoured to express the emotions of joy which filled his heart with more reserve, and to excel his companions at the festival less recklessly.

His enthusiastic delight carried many away with him; others, especially Daphne, were filled with anxious forebodings by his conduct, and others still with grave displeasure.

Among the latter was the famous leech Erasistratus, who shared Archias's cushions, and had been solicited by the latter to try to restore his blind nephew's sight. But the kindly physician, who gladly aided even the poorest sufferer, curtly and positively refused. To devote his time and skill to a blind man who, under the severest of visitations, lulled himself so contentedly in happiness, he considered unjust to others who desired recovery more ardently.

"When the intoxication of this unbridled strength passes away, and is followed by a different mood," remarked the merchant, "we will talk of this matter again," and the confident tone of his deep voice gave the simple sentence such significance that the learned leech held out his hand, saying: "Only where deep, earnest longing for recovery fills the sufferer's mind will the gods aid the physician. We will wait for the change which you predict, Archias!"

The guests did not disperse until late, and the best satisfied of all was the grammateus Proclus, who had taken advantage of the rich merchant's happy mood, and his own warm intercession in behalf of his nephew's work, to persuade Archias to advance Queen Arsinoe a large sum of money for an enterprise whose object he still carefully concealed.

The highly honoured blind artist spent the night under his uncle's roof.

CHAPTER VI.

Hermon rose from his couch the next morning alert and ready for new pleasures.

He had scarcely left the bath when envoys from the Ephebi and the younger artists invited him to the festivities which they had arranged in his honour. He joyously accepted, and also promised messengers from many of Archias's friends, who wished to have the famous blind sculptor among their guests, to be present at their banquets.

He still felt as if he were intoxicated, and found neither disposition nor time for quiet reflection. His great strength, fettered as it were by his loss of sight, now also began to stir. Fate itself withheld him from the labour which he loved, yet in return it offered him a wealth of varying pleasure, whose stimulating power he had learned the day before. He still relished the draught from the beaker of homage proffered by his fellow-citizens; nay, it seemed as if it could not lose its sweetness for a long time.

He joined the ladies before noon, and his newly awakened feeling of joy beamed upon them scarcely less radiantly than yesterday. Though Thyone might wonder that a man pursued by Nemesis could allow himself to be borne along so thoughtlessly by the stream of pleasure, Daphne certainly did not grudge him the festal season which, when it had passed, could never return to the blind artist. When it was over, he would yearn for the quiet happiness at her side, which gazed at him like the calm eyes of the woman he loved. With her he would cast anchor for the remainder of his life; but first must come the period when he enjoyed the compensation now awarded to him for such severe sufferings.

His heart was full of joy as he greeted Daphne and the Lady Thyone, whom he found with her; but his warm description of the happy emotion which had overpowered him at the abundant honours lavished upon him was interrupted by Archias.

In his usual quick, brisk manner, he asked whether Hermon wished to occupy the beautiful villa with the magnificent garden on Lake Mareotis, inherited from Myrtilus, which could scarcely be reached in a vehicle from the Brucheium in less than an hour, or the house situated in the centre of the city, and Hermon promptly decided in favour of the latter.

His uncle, and probably the ladies also, had expected the contrary. Their silence showed this plainly enough, and Hermon therefore added in a tone of explanation that later the villa would perhaps suit his condition better, but now he thought it would be a mistake to retire to the quiet which half the city was conspiring to disturb. No one contradicted him, and he left the women's apartment with a slight feeling of vexation, which, however, was soon jested away by the gay friends who sought him.

When he removed to the city house the next day, he had not yet found time for a serious talk with Daphne. His uncle, who had managed the estate of Myrtilus, and wished to give Hermon an account of his inheritance, was refused by the blind artist, who assured him that he knew Archias had greatly increased rather than diminished his property, and thanked him sincerely and warmly. In the convenient and spacious city house the young sculptor very soon thought he had good reason to be satisfied with his choice.

Most of his friends were busy artists, and what loss of time every visit to the remote villa would have imposed upon them, what haste he himself would have been obliged to use to reach home from the bath, where he often spent many hours, from the wrestling school, from the meetings of fashionable people in the Paneum gardens, and at sunset by the seashore on the royal highway in the Brucheium. All these places were very far from the villa. It would have required whole hours, too, to reach a famous cookshop in the Canopus, at whose table he liked to assemble beloved guests or revel with his friends. The theatre, the Odeum, most of the public buildings, as well as the houses of his best friends, and especially the beautiful Glycera, were easily reached from his city home, and, among the temples, that of Demeter, which he often visited to pray, offer sacrifices, and rejoice in the power of attraction which his statue of the goddess exerted upon the multitude. It stood at the back of the cella in a place accessible to the priesthood alone, visible only through the open doors, upon a pedestal which his fellow-artists pronounced rather too high. Yet his offer to have it made smaller was not accepted, because had it been lower the devout supplicants who stood there to pray could not have raised their eyes to it.

It was not only at the festivals of the dead that he went to the Greek cemetery, where he had had a magnificent monument erected for his dead mother. If his head ached after a nocturnal carouse, or the disagreeable alarming chill stole over him which he had felt for the first time when he falsely answered Thyone that he was still under the ban of Nemesis, he went to the family monuments, supplied them with gifts, had sacrifices offered to the souls of the beloved dead, and in this way sometimes regained a portion of his lost peace of mind.

The banquet in the evening always dispelled whatever still oppressed him on his return home from these visits, for, though months had elapsed since his brilliant reception, he was still numbered, especially in artist circles, with the most honoured men; he, the blind man, no longer stood in any one's way; conversation gained energy and meaning through the vivacity of his fervid intellect, which seemed actually deepened by his blindness when questions concerning art were at issue, and from a modest fellow-struggler he had become a patron bestowing orders.

The sculptor Soteles, who had followed his footsteps since the apprenticeship in Rhodes, was intrusted with the erection of the monument to Myrtilus in Tennis, and another highly gifted young sculptor, who pursued his former course, with the execution of the one to his mother.

From a third he ordered a large new mixing vessel of chased silver for the society of Ephebi, whose members had lauded him, at the magnificent festival given in his honour, with genuine youthful fervour.

In the designs for these works his rich and bold gift of invention and the power of his imagination proved their full value, and even his older fellow-artists followed him with sincere admiration when, in spite of his darkened eyes, he brought before them distinctly, and often even with the charcoal or wax tablet in his hand, what he had in mind. What magnificent things might not this man have created had he retained his sight, what masterpieces might not have been expected! and his former works, which had been condemned as unlovely, offensive, and exaggerated, were now loudly admired; nay, the furious Maenads struggling on the ground and the Street Boy Eating Figs, which were no longer his property, were sold at high prices. No meeting of artists was complete without Hermon, and the great self-possession which success and wealth bestowed, besides his remarkable talent and the energy peculiar to him, soon aided him to great influence among the members of his profession; nay, he would speedily have reached the head of their leaders had not the passionate impetuosity of his warlike nature led the more cautious to seek to restrain the powerful enthusiast.

Archias's wealthy friends had no such apprehension. To them the lauded blind artist was not much more than a costly dish certain to please their guests; yet this, too, was no trifle in social circles which spent small fortunes for a rare fish.

At the banquets of these princes of commerce he often met Daphne, still more frequently the beautiful Glycera, whose husband, an old ship-owner of regal wealth, was pleased to see famous men harnessed to his young wife's chariot of victory. Hermon's heart had little to do with the flirtation to which Glycera encouraged him at every new meeting, and the Thracian Althea only served to train his intellect to sharp debates. But in this manner he so admirably fulfilled her desire to attract attention that she more than once pointed out to the Queen, her relative, the remarkably handsome blind man whose acquaintance she had made on a night of mad revel during the last Dionysia but one. Althea even thought it necessary to win him, in whom she saw the future son-in-law of the wealthy Archias, for through the gramineateus Proclus the merchant had been persuaded to advance the King's wife hundreds of talents, and Arsinoe cherished plans which threatened to consume other large sums.

Thyrone watched Hermon's conduct with increasing indignation, while Daphne perceived that these women had no more power to estrange her lover from her than the bedizened beauties who were never absent from the artists' festivals. How totally different was his intercourse with her! His love and respect were hers alone; yet she saw in him a soul-sick man, and persistently rejected Philotas, who wooed her with the same zeal as before, and the other suitors who were striving to win the wealthy heiress. She had confessed her feelings to her father, her best friend, and persuaded him to have patience a little longer, and wait for the change which he himself expected in his nephew.

This had not been difficult, for Archias loved Hermon, in spite of the many anxieties he had caused him, as if he were his own son and, knowing his daughter, he was aware that she could be happy with the man who possessed her heart though he was deprived of sight.

The fame which Hermon had won by great genius and ability had gratified him more than he expressed, and he could not contradict Daphne when she asserted that, in spite of the aimless life of pleasure to which he devoted himself, he had remained the kind-hearted, noble man he had always been.

In fact, he used, unasked and secretly, a considerable portion of his large revenues to relieve the distress of the poor and suffering. Archias learned this as the steward of his nephew's property, and when to do good he made new demands upon him, he gladly fulfilled them; only he constantly admonished the blind man to think of his own severe sufferings and his cure. Daphne did the same, and he willingly obeyed her advice; for, loudly and recklessly as he pursued pleasure in social circles, he showed himself tenderly devoted to her when he found her alone in her father's house. Then, as in better days, he opened his heart to her naturally and modestly and, though he refrained from vows of love, he showed her that he did not cease to seek with her, and her alone, what his noisy pleasures denied. Then he also found the old tone of affection, and of late he came more frequently, and what he confided to no one else implied to her, at least by hints.

Satiety and dissatisfaction were beginning to appear, and what he had attempted to do for the cure of his eyes had hitherto been futile. The remedies of the oculists to whom he had been directed by Daphne herself had proved ineffectual. The great physician Erasistratus, from whom he first sought help, had refrained, at her entreaty and her father's, from refusing to aid him, but indignantly sent him away when he persisted in the declaration that it would be impossible for him to remain for months secluded from all society and subsist for weeks on scanty fare.

He would submit even to that, he assured Daphne, after she represented to him what he was losing by such lack of resignation, when the time of rest had come for which he longed, but from which many things still withheld him. Yesterday the King had invited him to the palace for the first time, and to decline such an honour was impossible.

In fact, he had long wished for this summons, because he had been informed that no representative of the sovereign had been present at his reception. Only his wife Arsinoe had honoured him by a wreath and congratulations. This lack of interest on the part of the King had wounded him, and the absence of an invitation from the royal connoisseur had cast a shadow into the midst of many a mirthful hour. He had doubtless been aware what great and important affairs of state were claiming the conscientious sovereign just at this time, and how almost unbearable his restless, unloving spouse was rendering his domestic life; yet Hermon thought Ptolemy might have spared a short time for an event in the art life of the city, as his Demeter had been called hundreds of times.

Now the long-desired command to appear before the sovereign had finally reached him, and, in the secure belief that it would bring fresh recognition and rare honours, he entered the royal palace.

Proclus, who neglected no opportunity of serving the nephew of the rich man whose aid he constantly required for the Queen's finances, was his guide, and described the decoration of the inner apartments of the royal residence. Their unostentatious simplicity showed the refined taste of their royal occupant. There was no lack of marble and other rare kinds of stone, and the numerous bas-reliefs which covered

the walls like the most superb tapestry were worthy of special attention. In the oblong apartment through which the blind man was guided these marble pictures represented in magnificent work scenes from the campaigns in which Ptolemy, the King's father, had participated as Alexander's general. Others showed Athene, Apollo, the Muses, and Hermes, surrounding or hastening toward the throne of the same monarch, and others again Greek poets and philosophers. Magnificent coloured mosaic pictures covered the floor and many flat spaces above door and windows, but gold and silver had been sparingly used.

Masterpieces of painting and sculpture were the ornaments of the room. In the antechamber, where Hermon waited for the King, Proclus mentioned one of the finest statues of Alexander by Lysippus, and an exquisite Eros by Praxiteles.

The period of waiting, however, became so long to the spoiled artist that he anticipated the monarch's appearance with painful discomfort, and the result of the few minutes which Ptolemy II devoted to his reception was far behind the hopes he had fixed upon them.

In former days he had often seen the narrow-shouldered man of barely medium height who, to secure his own safety, had had two brothers killed and sent another into exile, but now ruled Egypt shrewdly and prudently, and developed the prosperity of Alexandria with equal energy and foresight.

Now, for the first time, Hermon heard him speak. He could not deny that his voice was unusually pleasant in tone, yet it unmistakably issued from the lips of a sufferer.

The brief questions with which he received the blind artist were kindly, and as natural as though addressing an equal, and every remark made in connection with Hermon's answers revealed a very quick and keen intellect.

He had seen the Demeter, and praised the conception of the goddess because it corresponded with her nature. The sanctity which, as it were, pervaded the figure of the divine woman pleased him, because it made the supplicants in the temple feel that they were in the presence of a being who was elevated far above them in superhuman majesty.

"True," he added, "your Demeter is by no means a powerful helper in time of need. She is a goddess such as Epicurus imagines the immortals. Without interfering with human destiny, she stands above it in sublime grandeur and typical dignity. You belong, if I see correctly, to the Epicureans?"

"No," replied Hermon. "Like my lord and King, I, too, number myself among the pupils of the wise Straton."

"Indeed?" asked Ptolemy in a drawling tone, at the same time casting a glance of astonishment at the blind man's powerful figure and well-formed, intellectual face. Then he went on eagerly: "I shall scarcely be wrong in the inference that you, the creator of the Fig-eater, had experienced a far-reaching mental change before your unfortunate loss of sight?"

"I had to struggle hard," replied Hermon, "but I probably owe the success of the Demeter to the circumstance that I found a model whose mind and nature correspond with those of the goddess to a rare degree."

The monarch shook his fair head, and protested in a tone of positive superior knowledge: "As to the model, however well selected it may be, it was not well chosen for this work, far less for you. I have watched your battle against beauty in behalf of truth, and rejoiced, though I often saw you and your little band of young disciples shoot beyond the mark. You brought something new, whose foundation seemed to me sound, and on which further additions might be erected. When the excrescences fell off, I thought, this Hermon, his shadow Soteles, and the others who follow him will perhaps open new paths to the declining art which is constantly going back to former days. Our time will become the point of departure of a new art. But for that very reason, let me confess it, I regret to see you fall back from your bold advance. You now claim for your work that it cleaves strictly to Nature, because the model is taken from life itself. It does not become me to doubt this, yet the stamp of divinity which your Demeter bears is found in no mortal woman. Understand me correctly! This is certainly no departure from the truth, for the ideal often deserves this lofty name better than anything the visible world offers to the eye; but hitherto you have done honour to another truth. If I comprehend your art aright, its essence is opposed to the addition of superhuman dignity and beauty, with which you, or the model you used, strove to ennoble and deify your Demeter. Admirably as you succeeded in doing so, it forces your work out of the sphere of reality, whose boundary I never before saw you cross by a single inch. Whether this occurred unconsciously to you in an hour of mental ecstasy, or whether you felt that you still lacked the means to represent the divine, and therefore returned to the older methods, I do not venture to decide. But at the first examination of your work I was conscious of one thing: It means for you a revolution, a

rupture with your former aspirations; and as—I willingly confess it—you had been marvellously successful, it would have driven you, had your sight been spared, out of your own course and into the arms of the ancients, perhaps to your material profit, but scarcely to the advantage of art, which needs a renewal of its vital energies."

"Let me assure you, my lord," Hermon protested, "that had I remained able to continue to create, the success of the Demeter would never, never have rendered me faithless to the conviction and method of creation which I believed right; nay, before losing my sight, my whole soul was absorbed in a new work which would have permitted me to remain wholly and completely within the bounds of reality."

"The Arachne?" asked the King.

"Yes, my lord," cried Hermon ardently. "With its completion I expected to render the greatest service, not only to myself, but to the cause of truth."

Here Ptolemy interrupted with icy coldness: "Yet you were certainly wrong; at least, if the Thracian Althea, who is the personification of falsehood, had continued to be the model." Then he changed his tone, and with the exclamation: "You are protected from the needs of life, unless your rich uncle throws his property into the most insatiable of gulfs. May Straton's philosophy help you better to sustain your courage in the darkness which surrounds you than it has aided me to bear other trials!" he left the room.

Thus ended the artist's conversation with the King, from which Hermon had expected such great results and, deeply agitated, he ordered the driver of his horses to take him to Daphne. She was the only person to whom he could confide what disappointment this interview had caused him.

Others had previously reproached him, as the King had just done, with having, in the Demeter, become faithless to his artistic past. How false and foolish this was! Many a remark from the critics would have been better suited to Myrtilus's work than to his. Yet his fear in Tennis had not been true. Only Daphne's sweet face did not suit his more vigorous method of emphasizing distinctions.

What a many-hued chameleon was the verdict upon works of plastic art! Once—on his return to the capital—thousands had united in the same one, and now how widely they differed again!

His earlier works, which were now lauded to the skies, had formerly invited censure and vehement attacks.

What would he not have given for the possibility of seeing his admired work once more!

As his way led past the Temple of Demeter, he stopped near it and was guided to the sanctuary.

It was filled with worshippers, and when, in his resolute manner, he told the curator and the officiating priest that he wished to enter the cella, and asked for a ladder to feel the goddess, he was most positively refused.

What he requested seemed a profanation of the sacred image, and it would not do to disturb the devout throng. His desire to lower the pedestal could not be gratified.

The high priest who came forward upheld his subordinates and, after a short dispute, Hermon left the sanctuary with his wish unfulfilled.

Never had he so keenly lamented his lost vision as during the remainder of the drive, and when Daphne received him he described with passionate lamentation how terribly blindness embittered his life, and declared himself ready to submit to the severest suffering to regain his sight.

She earnestly entreated him to apply to the great physician Erasistratus again, and Hermon willingly consented. He had promised to attend a banquet given that day by the wealthy ship-owner Archon. The feast lasted until early morning, but toward noon Hermon again appeared in his uncle's house, and met Daphne full of joyous confidence, as if he were completely transformed.

While at Archon's table he had determined to place his cure in the hands of higher powers. This was the will of Fate; for the guest whose cushion he shared was Silanus, the host's son, and the first thing he learned from him was the news that he was going the next day, with several friends, to the oracle of Amon in the Libyan Desert, to ask it what should be done for his mother, who had been for several years an invalid whom no physician could help. He had heard from many quarters that the counsel of the god, who had greeted Alexander the Great as his son, was infallible.

Then Hermon had been most urgently pressed by the young man to accompany him. Every comfort would be provided. One of his father's fine ships would convey them to Paraetionium, where tents,

saddle horses, and guides for the short land journey would be ready.

So he had promised to go with Silanus, and his decision was warmly approved by his uncle, Daphne, and the gray-haired Pelusinian couple. Perhaps the god would show the blind man the right path to recovery. He would always be able to call the skill of the Alexandrian leeches to his aid.

Soon after Hermon went on board Archon's splendidly equipped vessel and, instead of a tiresome journey, began a new and riotous period of festivity.

Lavish provision had been made for gay companions of both sexes, merry entertainment by means of dancing, music, and song, well filled dishes and mixing vessels, and life during the ride through the coast and desert regions was not less jovial and luxurious than on the ship.

It seemed to the blind man like one vast banquet in the dark, interrupted only by sleep.

The hope of counsel from the gods cheered the depressed mood which had weighed upon him for several weeks, and rich young Silanus praised the lucky fate which had enabled him to find a travelling companion whose intellect and wit charmed him and the others, and often detained them over the wine until late into the night.

Here, too, Hermon felt himself the most distinguished person, the animating and attracting power, until it was said that the voyage was over, and the company pitched their tents in the famous oasis near the Temple of Amon.

The musicians and dancers, with due regard to propriety, had been left behind in the seaport of Paraetonium. Yet the young travellers were sufficiently gay while Silanus and Hermon waited for admission to the place of the oracle. A week after their arrival it was opened to them, yet the words repeated to them by the priest satisfied neither Hermon nor Archon's son, for the oracle advised the latter to bring his mother herself to the oasis by the land road if she earnestly desired recovery, while to Hermon was shouted the ambiguous saying:

"Only night and darkness spring from the rank marsh of pleasure;
Morning and day rise brightly from the starving sand."

Could Silanus's mother, who was unable to move, endure the desert journey? And what was the meaning of the sand, from which morning and day—which was probably the fresh enjoyment of the light—were to rise for Hermon? The sentence of the oracle weighed heavily upon him, as well as on Archon's son, who loved his mother, and the homeward journey became to the blind man by no means a cheerful but rather a very troubled dream.

Thoughtful, very disturbed, dissatisfied with himself, and resolved to turn his back upon the dreary life of pleasure which for so long a time had allowed him no rest, and now disgusted him, he kept aloof from his travelling companions, and rejoiced when, at Alexandria, he was led ashore in the harbour of Eunostus.

CHAPTER VII.

Hermon entered his house with drooping head.

Here he was informed that the grammateus of the Dionysian artists had already called twice to speak to him concerning an important matter. When he came from the bath, Proclus visited him again. His errand was to invite him to a banquet which was to take place that evening at his residence in a wing of the royal palace.

But Hermon was not in the mood to share a joyous revel, and he frankly said so, although immediately after his return he had accepted the invitation to the festival which the whole fellowship of artists would give the following day in honour of the seventieth birthday of the old sculptor Euphranor. The grammateus alluded to this, and most positively insisted that he could not release him; for he came not only by his own wish, but in obedience to the command of Queen Arsinoe, who desired to tell the creator of the Demeter how highly she esteemed his work and his art. She would appear herself at dessert, and the banquet must therefore begin at an unusually early hour. He, Proclus, was to have the high honour of including the royal lady among his guests solely on Hermon's account, and his refusal would be an insult to the Queen.

So the artist found himself obliged to relinquish his opposition. He did this reluctantly; but the Queen's attention to him and his art flattered his vanity and, if he was to abandon the intoxicating and barren life of pleasure, it could scarcely be done more worthily than at a festival where the King's consort intended to distinguish him in person.

The banquet was to begin in a few hours, yet he could not let the day pass without seeing Daphne and telling her the words of the oracle. He longed, with ardent yearning, for the sound of her voice, and still more to unburden his sorely troubled soul to her.

Oh, if only his Myrtilus still walked among the living! How totally different, in spite of his lost vision, would his life have been!

Daphne was now the only one whom he could put in his place.

Since his return from the oracle, the fear that the rescued Demeter might yet be the work of Myrtilus had again mastered him. However loudly outward circumstances might oppose this, he now felt, with a certainty which surprised him, that this work was not his own. The approval, as well as the doubts, which it aroused in others strengthened his opinion, although even now he could not succeed in bringing it into harmony with the facts. How deep had been the intoxication in which he had so long reeled from one day to the next, since it had succeeded in keeping every doubt of the authorship of this work far from him!

Now he must obtain certainty, and Daphne could help him to it; for, as a priestess of Demeter, she possessed the right to procure him access to the cella and get permission for him to climb the lofty pedestal and feel the statue with his fingers, whose sense of touch had become much keener.

He would frankly inform her of his fear, and her truthful nature would find the doubt that gnawed his heart as unendurable as he himself.

It would have been a grave crime to woo her before he was relieved of this uncertainty, and he would utter the decisive words that very day, and ask her whether her love was great enough to share the joys and sorrows of life with him, the blind man, who perhaps must also divest himself of a false fame.

Time pressed.

He called at Archias's house with a wreath on his head and in festal robes; but Daphne was in the temple, whither old Philippus and Thyone had gone, and his uncle was attending a late session of the Council.

He would have liked to follow Daphne to the sanctuary, but the late hour forbade it, and he therefore only charged Gras to tell his young mistress that he was going to Proclus's banquet, and would return early the next morning to discuss a most important subject with her.

Then he went directly to the neighbouring palace. The Queen might have appeared already, and it would not do to keep her waiting.

He was aware that she lived at variance with her husband, but how could he have suspected that she cherished the more than bold design of hurling the sovereign from his throne and seizing the Egyptian crown herself.

Proclus and Althea were among the conspirators who supported Arsinoe, and the Queen thought it would be an easy matter to win over to her cause and herself the handsome sculptor, whom she remembered at the last Dionysia.

The wealthy blind artist, so highly esteemed among the members of his profession, might become valuable to the conspiracy, for she knew what enthusiastic devotion the Alexandrian artists felt for the King, and everything depended upon forming a party in her own favour among them. This task was to fall to Hermon, and also another, still more important one; for he, his nephew and future son-in-law, if any one, could persuade the wealthy Archias to lend the plot his valuable aid. Hitherto the merchant had been induced, it is true, to advance large sums of money to the Queen, but the loyal devotion which he showed to her royal husband had rendered it impossible to give him even a hint of the conspiracy. Althea, however, declared that the blind man's marriage to Daphne was only a question of time, and Proclus added that the easily excited nephew would show himself more pliant than the uncle if Arsinoe exerted upon him the irresistible charm of her personality.

When Hermon entered the residence of the grammateus in the palace, the guests had already assembled. The Queen was not to appear until after the feast, when the mixing jars were filled. The place by Hermon's side, which Althea had chosen for herself, would then be given up to Arsinoe.

The sovereign was as unaccustomed to the society of a blind artist as Hermon was to that of a queen, and both eagerly anticipated the approaching meeting.

Yet it was difficult for Hermon to turn a bright face toward his companion. The sources of anxiety and grief which had previously burdened his mind would not vanish, even under the roof of the royal palace.

Althea's presence reminded him of Tennis, Ledscha, and Nemesis, who for so long a time seemed to have suspended her persecution, but since he had returned from the abode of the oracle was again asserting the old right to him. During many a sleepless hour of the night he had once more heard the rolling of her terrible wheel.

Even before the journey to the oasis of Amon, everything life could offer him, the idle rake, in his perpetual darkness, had seemed shallow and scarcely worth stretching out his hand for it.

True, an interesting conversation still had power to charm him, but often during its continuance the full consciousness of his misfortune forced itself upon his mind; for the majority of the subjects discussed by the artists came to them through the medium of sight, and referred to new creations of architecture, sculpture, and painting, from whose enjoyment his blindness debarred him.

When returning home from a banquet, if his way lay through the city, he was reminded of the superb buildings, marble terraces and fountains, statues and porticoes, which had formerly satiated his eyes with delight, and must now be illumined with a brilliant radiance by the morning sunbeams, though a hostile fate shut them out from his eyes, starving and thirsting for beautiful forms.

But it had seemed to him still harder to bear that his blinded eyes refused to show him the most beautiful of all beautiful things, the human form, when he lingered among the Ephebi or the spectators of a festal procession, or visited the gymnasium, the theatre, the Aphrodisium, or the Paneum gardens, where the beautiful women met at sunset.

The Queen was to appear immediately, and when she took her place near him his blindness would again deprive him of the sight of her delicately cut features, prevent his returning the glances from her sparkling eyes, and admiring the noble outlines of her thinly veiled figure.

Would his troubled spirit at least permit him to enjoy and enter without restraint into the play of her quick wit?

Perhaps her arrival would relieve him from the discomfort which oppressed him here.

A stranger, out of his own sphere, he felt chilled among these closely united men and women, to whom no tie bound him save the presence of the same host.

He was not acquainted with a single individual except the mythographer Crates, who for several months had been one of the members of the Museum, and who had attached himself to Hermon at Straton's lectures.

The artist was surprised to find this man in such a circle, but he learned from Althea that the young member of the Museum was a relative of Proclus, and a suitor of the beautiful Nico, one of the Queen's ladies in waiting, who was among the guests.

Crates had really been invited in order to win him over to the Queen's cause; but charming fair-haired Nico had been commissioned by the conspirators to persuade him to sing Arsinoe's praises among his professional associates.

The rest of the men present stood in close connection with Arsinoe, and were fellow-conspirators against her husband's throne and life. The ladies whom Proclus had invited were all confidants of Arsinoe, the wives and daughters of his other guests. All were members of the highest class of society, and their manners showed the entire freedom from restraint that existed in the Queen's immediate circle. Althea profited by the advantage of being Hermon's only acquaintance here. So, when he took his place on the cushion at her side, she greeted him familiarly and cordially, as she had treated him for a long time, wherever they met, and in a low voice told him, sometimes in a kindly tone, sometimes with biting sarcasm, the names and characters of the other guests.

The most aristocratic was Amyntas, who stood highest of all in the Queen's favour because he had good reason to hate the other Arsinoe, the sister of the King. His son had been this royal dame's first husband, and she had deserted him to marry Lysimachus, the aged King of Thrace.

The Rhodian Chrysippus, her leech and trusted counsellor, also possessed great influence over the Queen.

"The noble lady," whispered Althea, "needs the faithful devotion of every well-disposed subject, for perhaps you have already learned how cruelly the King embitters the life of the mother of his three children. Many a caprice can be forgiven the suffering Ptolemy, who recently expressed a wish that he could change places with the common workmen whom he saw eating their meal with a good appetite, and who is now tortured by the gout; yet he watches the hapless woman with the jealousy of a tiger, though he himself is openly faithless to her. What is the Queen to him, since the widow of Lysimachus returned from Thrace—no, from Cassandra, Ephesus, and sacred Samothrace, or whatever other places there are which would no longer tolerate the murderess?"

"The King's sister—the object of his love?" cried Hermon incredulously.
"She must be forty years old now."

"Very true," Althea assented. "But we are in Egypt, where marriages between brothers and sisters are pleasing to gods and men; and besides, we make our own moral laws here. Her age! We women are only as old as we look, and the leeches and tiring women of this beauty of forty practise arts which give her the appearance of twenty-five, yet perhaps the King values her intellect more than her person, and the wisdom of a hundred serpents is certainly united in this woman's head. She will make our poor Queen suffer unless real friends guard her from the worst. The three most trustworthy ones are here: Amyntas, the leech Chrysippus, and the admirable Proclus. Let us hope that you will make this three-leaved clover the luck-promising four-leaved one. Your uncle, too, has often with praiseworthy generosity helped Arsinoe in many an embarrassment. Only make the acquaintance of this beautiful royal lady, and the last drop of your blood will not seem too precious to shed for her! Besides— Proclus told me so in confidence—you have little favour to expect from the King. How long he kept you waiting for the first word concerning a work which justly transported the whole city with delight! When he did finally summon you, he said things which must have wounded you."

"That is going too far," replied Hermon.

"Then he kept back his real opinion," Althea protested. "Had I not made it a rule to maintain absolute silence concerning everything I hear in conversation from those with whom I am closely associated—"

Here she was interrupted by Chrysippus, who asked if Althea had told her neighbour about his Rhodian eye-salve.

He winked at her and made a significant gesture as he spoke, and then informed the blind artist how graciously Arsinoe had remembered him when she heard of the remedy by whose aid many a wonderful cure of blind eyes had been made in Rhodes. The royal lady had inquired about him and his sufferings with almost sisterly interest, and Althea eagerly confirmed the statement.

Hermon listened to the pair in silence.

He had not been able to see them, it is true, yet he had perceived their design as if the loss of sight had sharpened his mental vision. He imagined that he could see the favourite and Althea nudge each other with sneering gestures, and believed that their sole purpose was to render him—he knew not for what object—the obedient tool of the Queen, who had probably also succeeded in persuading his usually cautious uncle to render her great services.

The remembrance of Arsinoe's undignified conduct at the Dionysia, and the shameful stories of her which he had heard returned to his mind. At the same time he saw Daphne rise before him in her aristocratic dignity and kindly goodness, and a smile of satisfaction hovered around his lips as he said to himself: "The spider Althea again! But, in spite of my blindness, I will be caught neither in her net nor in the Queen's. They are the last to bar the way which leads to Daphne and real happiness."

The Rhodian was just beginning to praise Arsinoe also as a special friend and connoisseur of the sculptor's art when Crates, Hermon's fellow-student, asked the blind artist, in behalf of his beautiful companion, why his Demeter was placed upon a pedestal which, to others as well as himself, seemed too high for the size of the statue.

Hermon replied that he had heard several make this criticism, but the priests of the goddess refused to take it into account.

Here he hesitated, for, like a blow from an invisible hand, the thought darted through his mind that perhaps, on the morrow, he would see himself compelled before the whole world to cast aside the crown of fame which he owed to the statue on the lofty pedestal. He did not have even the remotest idea of continuing to deck himself with false renown if his dread was realized; yet he doubtless imagined how this whole aristocratic circle, with the Queen, Althea, and Proclus at its head, would turn with reckless haste from the hapless man who had led them into such a shameful error.

Yet what mattered it, even if these miserable people considered themselves deceived and pointed the finger of scorn at him? Better people would thereby be robbed of the right to accuse him of faithlessness to himself. This thought darted through his heated brain like a flash of lightning, and when, in spite of his silence, the conversation was continued and Althea told the others that only Hermon's blindness had prevented the creation of a work which could have been confidently expected far to surpass the Demeter, since it seemed to have been exactly suited to his special talent, he answered his beautiful companion's remark curtly and absently.

She perceived this with annoyance and perplexity.

A woman who yearns for the regard of all men, and makes love a toy, easily lessens the demands she imposes upon individuals. Only, even though love has wholly disappeared, she still claims consideration, and Althea did not wish to lose Hermon's regard.

When Amyntas, the head of the conspirators, attracted the attention of the company by malicious remarks about the King's sister, the Thracian laid her hand on the blind artist's arm, whispering: "Has the image of the Arachne which, at Tennis, charmed you even in the presence of the angry Zeus, completely vanished from your memory? How indifferent you look! But I tell you"—her deep blue eyes flashed as she spoke—"that so long as you were still a genuine creating artist the case was different. Even while putting the last touches of the file to the Demeter, for which Archias's devout daughter posed as your model, another whom you could not banish from your mind filled your imagination. Though so loud a denial is written on your face, I persist in my conviction, and that no idle delusion ensnares me I can prove!"

Hermon raised his sightless eyes to her inquiringly, but she went on with eager positiveness: "Or, if you did not think of the weaver while carving the goddess, how did you happen to engrave a spider on the ribbon twined around the ears of grain in Demeter's hand? Not the smallest detail of a work produced by the hand of a valued friend escapes my notice, and I perceived it before the Demeter came to the temple and the lofty pedestal. Now I would scarcely be able to discover it in the dusky cella, yet at that time I took pleasure in the sight of the ugly insect, not only because it is cleverly done, but because it reminded me of something"—here she lowered her voice still more—"that pleased me, though probably it would seem less flattering to the daughter of Archias, who perhaps is better suited to act as guide to the blind. How bewildered you look! Eternal gods! Many things are forgotten after long months have passed, but it will be easy for me to sharpen your memory. 'At the time Hermon had just finished the Demeter,' the spider called to me, 'he scratched me on the gold.' But at that very time—yes, my handsome friend, I can reckon accurately—you had met me, Althea, in Tennis, I had brought the spider-woman before your eyes. Was it really nothing but foolish vanity that led me to the conviction that you were thinking of me also when you engraved on the ribbon the despised spider- for which, however, I always felt a certain regard—with the delicate web beneath its slender legs?"

Hitherto Hermon had listened to every word in silence, labouring for breath. He was transported as if by magic to the hour of his return from Pelusium; he saw himself enter Myrtilus's studio and watch his friend scratch something, he did not know what, upon the ribbon which fastened the bunch of golden grain. It was—nay, it could have been nothing else—that very spider. The honoured work was not his, but his dead friend's. How the exchange had occurred he could not now understand, but to disbelieve that it had taken place would have been madness or self- deception.

Now he also understood the doubts of Soteles and the King. Not he—Myrtilus, and he alone, was the creator of the much-lauded Demeter!

This conviction raised a hundred-pound weight from his soul.

What was applause! What was recognition! What were fame and laurel wreaths! He desired clearness and truth for himself and all the world and, as if frantic, he suddenly sprang from his cushions, shouting to the startled guests: "I myself and this whole great city were deceived! The Demeter is not mine, not the work of Hermon! The dead Myrtilus created it!"

Then pressing his hand to his brow, he called his student friend to his side, and, as the scholar anxiously laid his arm on his shoulder, whispered: "Away, away from here! Only let me get out of doors into the open air!"

Crates, bewildered and prepared for the worst, obeyed his wish; but Althea and the other guests left behind felt more and more impressed by the suddenly awakened conviction that the hapless blind man had now also become the victim of madness.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Aimless life of pleasure

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ARACHNE — VOLUME 06 ***

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