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A THORNY PATH

By Georg Ebers

Volume 10.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

The amphitheatre was soon emptied, amid the flare of lightning and the crash and roll of thunder. Caracalla, thinking only of the happy omen of Tarautas's wonderful escape, called out to Melissa, with affectionate anxiety, to fly to shelter as quickly as possible; a chariot was in waiting to convey her to the Serapeum. On this she humbly represented that she would rather be permitted to return under her brother's escort to her father's house, and Caracalla cheerfully acceded. He had business on hand this night, which made it seem desirable to him that she should not be too near him. He should expect her brother presently at the Serapeum.

With his own hand he wrapped her in the caracalla and hood which old Adventus was about to put on his master's shoulders, remarking, as he did so, that he had weathered worse storms in the field.

Melissa thanked him with a blush, and, going close up to her, he whispered: "To-morrow, if Fate grants us gracious answers to the questions I shall put to her presently after this storm—tomorrow the horn of happiness will be filled to overflowing for you and me. The thrifty goddess promises to be lavish to me through you."

Slaves were standing round with lighted lanterns; for the torches in the theatre were all extinguished, and the darkened auditorium lay like an extinct crater, in which a crowd of

indistinguishable figures were moving to and fro. It reminded him of Hades and a troop of descending spirits; but he would not allow anything but what was pleasant to occupy his mind or eye. By a sudden impulse he took a lantern from one of the attendants, held it up above Melissa's head, and gazed long and earnestly into her brightly illuminated face. Then he dropped his hand with a sigh and said, as though speaking in a dream: "Yes, this is life! Now I begin to live."

He lifted the dripping laurel crown from his head, tossed it into the arena, and added to Melissa: "Now, get under shelter at once, sweetheart. I have been able to see you this whole evening, even when the lamps were out; for lightning gives light. Thus even the storm has brought me joy. Sleep well. I shall expect you early, as soon as I have bathed."

Melissa wished him sound slumbers, and he replied, lightly:

"If only all life were a dream, and if to-morrow I might but wake up, no longer the son of Severus, but Alexander; and you, not Melissa, but Roxana, whom you so strongly resemble! To be sure I might find myself the gladiator Tarautas. But, then, who would you be? And your stalwart father, who stands there defying the rain, certainly does not look like a vision, and this storm is not favorable to philosophizing."

He kissed his hand to her, had a dry caracalla thrown over his shoulders, ordered Theocritus to take care of Tarautas and carry him a purse of gold—which he handed to the favorite—and then, pulling the hood over his head, led the way, followed by his impatient courtiers; but not till he had answered Heron, who had come forward to ask him what he thought of the mechanical arts of the Alexandrians, desiring him to postpone that matter till the morrow.

The storm had silenced the music. Only a few stanch trumpeters had remained in their places; and when they saw by the lanterns that Caesar had left the Circus, they sounded a fanfare after him, which followed the ruler of the world with a dull, hoarse echo.

Outside, the streets were still crowded with people pouring out of the amphitheatre. Those of the commoner sort sought shelter under the archways of the building, or else hurried boldly home through the rain. Heron stood waiting at the entrance for his daughter, though the purple-hemmed toga was wet, through and through. But she had, in fact, hurried out while he was pushing forward to speak to Caesar, and in his excitement overlooked everything else. The behavior of his fellow-citizens had annoyed him, and he had an obscure impression that it would be a blunder to claim Caesar's approval of anything they had done; still, he had not self-control enough to suppress the question which had fluttered on his lips all through the performance. At last, in high dudgeon at the inconsiderateness of young people and at the rebuff he had met with—with the prospect, too, of a cold for his pains—he made his way homeward on foot.

To Caracalla the bad weather was for once really an advantage, for it put a stop to the unpleasant demonstrations which the "Green" party had prepared for him on his way home.

Alexander soon found the closed carruca intended for Melissa, and placed her in it as soon as he had helped Euryale into her harmamaxa. He was astonished to find a man inside it, waiting for his sister. This was Diodoros, who, while Alexander was giving his directions to the charioteer, had, under cover of the darkness, sprung into the vehicle from the opposite side. An exclamation of surprise was followed by explanations and excuses, and the three young people, each with a heart full almost to bursting, drove off toward Heron's house. Their conveyance was already rolling over the pavement, while most of the magnates of the town were still waiting for their slaves to find their chariots or litters.

For the lovers this was a very different scene from the terrible one they had just witnessed in the Circus, for, in spite of the narrow space and total darkness in which they sat, and the rain rattling and splashing on the dripping black leather hood which sheltered them, in their hearts they did not lack for sunshine. Caracalla's saying that the lightning, too, was light, proved true more than once in the course of their drive, for the vivid flashes which still followed in quick succession enabled the reunited lovers to exchange many confidences with their eyes, for which it would have been hard to find words. When both parties to a quarrel are conscious of blame, it is more quickly made up than when one only needs forgiveness; and the pair in the carruca were so fully prepared to think the best of each other that there was no need for Alexander's good offices to make them ready and willing to renew their broken pledges. Besides, each had cause to fear for the other; for Diodoros was afraid that the lady Euryale's power was not far-reaching enough to conceal Melissa from Caesar's spies, and Melissa trembled at the thought that the physician might too soon betray to Caesar that she had been betrothed before he had ever seen her, and to whom; for, in that case, Diodoros would be the object of relentless pursuit. So she urged on her lover to embark, if possible, this very night.

Hitherto Alexander had taken no part in the conversation. He could not forget the reception he had met with outside the amphitheatre. Euryale's presence had saved his sister from evil imputations, but

had not helped him; and even his gay spirits could make no head against the consciousness of being regarded by his fellow-citizens as a hired traitor. He had withdrawn to one of the back seats to see the performance; for as soon as the theatre was suddenly lighted up, he had become the object of dark looks and threatening gestures. For the first time in his life he had felt compassion for the criminals torn by wild beasts, and for the wounded gladiators, whose companion in misfortune he vaguely felt himself to be. But, what was worst of all, he could not regard himself as altogether free from the reproach of having accepted a reward for the service he had so thoughtlessly rendered.

Nor did he see the remotest possibility of ever making those whose opinion he cared for understand how it had come to pass that he should have acceded to the desire of the villain in the purple, now that his father, by showing himself to the people in the 'toga pretexta', had set the seal to their basest suspicions. The thought that henceforth he could never hope to feel the grasp of an honest man's hand gnawed at his heart.

The esteem of Diodoros was dear to him, and, when his young comrade spoke to him, he felt at first as though he were doing him an unexpected honor; but then he fell back into the suspicion that this was only for his sister's sake.

The deep sigh that broke from him induced Melissa to speak a few words of comfort, and now the unhappy man's bursting heart overflowed. In eloquent words he described to Diodoros and Melissa all he had felt, and the terrible consequences of his heedless folly, and as he spoke acute regret filled his eyes with tears.

He had pronounced judgment on himself, and expected nothing of his friend but a little pity. But in the darkness Diodoros sought and found his hand, and grasped it fervently; and if Alexander could but have seen his old playfellow's face, he would have perceived that his eyes glistened as he said what he could to encourage him to hope for better days.

Diodoros knew his friend well. He was incapable of falsehood; and his deed, which under a false light so easily assumed an aspect of villainy, had, in fact, been no more than an act of thoughtlessness such as he had himself often lent a hand in. Alexander, however, seemed determined not to hear the comfort offered him by his sister and his friend. A flash of lightning revealed him to them, sitting with a bent head and his hands over his brow; and this gloomy vision of one who so lately had been the gayest of the gay troubled their revived happiness even more than the thought of the danger which, as each knew, threatened the others.

As they passed the Temple of Artemis, which was brightly illuminated, reminding them that they were reaching their destination, Alexander at last looked up and begged the lovers to consider their immediate affairs. His mind had remained clear, and what he said showed that he had not lost sight of his sister's future.

As soon as Melissa should have effected her escape, Caesar would undoubtedly seize, not only her lover, but his father as well. Diodoros must forthwith cross the lake and rouse Polybius and Praxilla, to warn them of the imminent danger, while Alexander undertook to hire a ship for the party. Argutis would await the fugitives in a tavern by the harbor, and conduct them on board the vessel which would be in readiness. Diodoros, who was not yet able to walk far, promised to avail himself of one of the litters waiting outside the Temple of Artemis.

Just before the vehicle stopped, the lovers took leave. They arranged where and how they might have news of each other, and all they said, in brief words and a fervent parting kiss, in this moment, when death or imprisonment might await them, had the solemn purport of a vow.

The swift horses stopped. Alexander hastily leaned over to his friend, kissed him on both cheeks, and whispered:

"Take good care of her; think of me kindly if we should never meet again, and tell the others that wild Alexander has played another fool's trick, at any rate, not a wicked one, however badly it may turn out for him."

For the sake of the charioteer, who, after Melissa's flight, would be certainly cross-examined, Diodoros could make no reply. The carruca rattled off by the way by which it had come; Diodoros vanished in the darkness, and Melissa clasped her hands over her face. She felt as though this were her last parting from her lover, and the sun would never shine on earth again.

It was now near midnight. The slaves had heard the approach of the chariot, and received them as heartily as ever, but in obedience to Heron's orders they added the most respectful bows to their usual well-meant welcome. Since their master had shown himself to Dido, in the afternoon, with braggart dignity, as a Roman magnate, she had felt as though the age of miracles had come, and nothing was

impossible. Splendid visions of future grandeur awaiting the whole family, including herself and Argutis, had not ceased to haunt her; but as to the empress, something seemed to have gone wrong, for why had the girl wet eyes and so sad a face? What was all this long whispering with Argutis? But it was no concern of hers, after all, and she would know all in good time, no doubt. "What the masters plot to-day the slaves hear next week," was a favorite saying of the Gauls, and she had often proved its truth.

But the cool way in which Melissa received the felicitations which the old woman poured out in honor of the future empress, and her tear-reddened eyes, seemed at any rate quite comprehensible. The child was thinking, no doubt, of her handsome Diodoros. Among the splendors of the palace she would soon forget. And how truly magnificent were the dress and jewels in which the damsel had appeared in the amphitheatre!

"How they must have hailed her!" thought the old woman when she had helped Melissa to exchange her dress for a simpler robe, and the girl sat down to write. "If only the mistress had lived to see this day! And all the other women must have been bursting with envy. Eternal gods! But, after all, who knows whether the good luck we envy others is great or small? Why, even in this house, which the gods have filled to the roof with gifts and favors, misfortune has crept in through the key hole. Poor Philip!

"Still, if all goes well with the girl. Things have befallen her such as rarely come to any one, and yet no more than her due. The fairest and best will be the greatest and wealthiest in the empire."

And she clutched the amulets and the cross which hung round her arm and throat, and muttered a hasty prayer for her darling.

Argutis, for his part, did not know what to think of it all. He, if any one, rejoiced in the good fortune of his master and Melissa; but Heron's promotion to the rank of praetor had been too sudden, and Heron demeaned himself too strangely in his purple-bordered toga. It was to be hoped that this new and unexpected honor had not turned his brain! And the state in which his master's eldest son remained caused him the greatest anxiety. Instead of rejoicing in the honors of his family, he had at his first interview with his father flown into a violent rage; and though he, Argutis, had not understood what they were saying, he perceived that they were in vehement altercation, and that Heron had turned away in great wrath. And then—he remembered it with horror, and could hardly tell what he had seen to Alexander and Melissa in a reasonable and respectful manner—Philip had sprung out of bed, had dressed himself without help, even to his shoes, and scarcely had his father set out in his litter before Philip had come into the kitchen. He looked like one risen from the grave, and his voice was hollow as he told the slaves that he meant to go to the Circus to see for himself that justice was done. But Argutis felt his heart sink within him when the philosopher desired him to fetch the pipe his father used to teach the birds to whistle, and at the same time took up the sharp kitchen knife with which Argutis slaughtered the sheep.

The young man then turned to go, but even on the threshold he had stumbled over the straps of his sandals which dragged unfastened, and Argutis had had to lead him, almost to carry him in from the garden, for a violent fit of coughing had left him quite exhausted. The effort of pulling at the heavy oars on board the galley had been too much for his weak chest. Argutis and Dido had carried him to bed, and he had soon fallen into a deep sleep, from which he had not waked since.

And now what were these two plotting? They were writing; and not on wax tablets, but with reed pens on papyrus, as though it were a matter of importance.

All this gave the slave much to think about, and the faithful soul did not know whether to weep for joy or grief when Alexander told him, with a gravity which frightened him in this light-hearted youth, that, partly as the reward of his faithful service and partly to put him in a position to aid them all in a crisis of peculiar difficulty, he gave him his freedom. His father had long since intended to do this, and the deed was already drawn out. Here was the document; and he knew that, even as a freedman, Argutis would continue to serve them as faithfully as ever. With this he gave the slave his manumission, which he was in any case to have received within a month, at the end of thirty years' service, and Argutis took it with tears of joy, not unmixed with grief and anxiety, while only a few hours since it would have been enough to make him the happiest of mortals.

While he kissed their hands and stammered out words of gratitude, his uncultured but upright spirit told him that he had been blind ever to have rejoiced for a moment at the news that Melissa had been chosen to be empress. All that he had seen during the last half-hour had convinced him, as surely as if he had been told it in words, that his beloved young mistress scorned her imperial suitor, and firmly intended to evade him—how, Argutis could not guess. And, recognizing this, a spirit of adventure and daring stirred him also. This was a struggle of the weak against the strong; and to him, who had spent his life as one of the oppressed, nothing could be more tempting than to help on the side of the weak.

Argutis now undertook with ardent zeal to get Diodoros and his parents safely on board the ship he was to engage, and to explain to Heron, as soon as he should have read the letter which Alexander was now writing, that, unless he could escape at once with Philip, he was lost. Finally, he promised that the epistle to Caesar, which Melissa was composing, should reach his hands on the morrow.

He could now receive his letter of freedom with gladness, and consented to dress up in Heron's garments; for, as a slave, he would have been forbidden to conclude a bargain with a ship's captain or any one else.

All this was done in hot haste, for Caesar was awaiting Alexander, and Euryale expected Melissa. The ready zeal of the old man, free for the first time to act on his own responsibility in matters which would have been too much for many a free-born man, but to which he felt quite equal, had an encouraging effect even on the oppressed hearts of the other two. They knew now that, even if death should be their lot, Argutis would be faithful to their father and sick brother, and the slave at once showed his ingenuity and shrewdness; for, while the young people were vainly trying to think of a hiding-place for Heron and Philip, he suggested a spot which would hardly be discovered even by the sharpest spies.

Glaukias, the sculptor, who had already fled, was Heron's tenant. His work-room, a barn-like structure, stood in the little vegetable-garden which the gem-cutter had inherited from his father-in-law, and none but Heron and the slave knew that, under the flooring, instead of a cellar, there was a vast reservoir connected with the ancient aqueducts constructed by Vespasian. Many years since Argutis had helped his master to construct a trap-door to the entrance to these underground passages, of which the existence had remained unknown even to Glaukias during all the years he had inhabited the place. It was here that Heron kept his gold, not taking his children even into his confidence; and only a few months ago Argutis had been down with him and had found the old reservoir dry, airy, and quite habitable. The gem-cutter would be quite content to conceal himself where his treasure was, and the garden and work-room were only distant a few hundred paces from his own home. To get Philip there without being seen was to Argutis a mere trifle. Alexander, too, old Dido, and, if needful, Diodoros, could all be concealed there. But for Melissa, neither he nor Alexander thought it sufficiently secure.

As she took leave of him the young girl once more charged the newly freed man to greet her father from her a thousand times, to beseech his forgiveness of her for the bitter grief she must cause him, and to assure him of her affection.

"Tell him," she added, as the tears streamed down her cheeks, "that I feel as if I were going to my death. But, come what may, I am always his dutiful child, always ready to sacrifice anything—excepting only the man to whom, with my father's consent, I pledged my heart. Tell him that for love of him I might have been ready even to give my hand to the blood-stained Caesar, but that Fate—and perhaps the manes of her we loved, and who is dead—have ordered it otherwise."

She then went into the room where her mother had closed her eyes. After a short prayer by that bed, which still stood there, she hastened to Philip's room. He lay sleeping heavily; she bent over him and kissed the too high brow, which looked as though even in sleep the brain within were still busy over some difficult and painful question.

Her way led her once more through her father's work-room, and she had already crossed it when she hastily turned back to look once more—for the last time—at the little table where she had sat for so many years, busy with her needle, in modest contentment by the artist's side, dreaming with waking eyes, and considering what she, with her small resources and great love, could do that would be of use to those she loved, or relieve them if they were in trouble. Then, as though she knew that she was bidding a last farewell to all the pleasant companionship of her youth, she looked at the birds, long since gone to roost in their cages. In spite of his recent curule honors Heron had not forgotten them, and, before quitting the house to display himself to the populace in the 'toga pretexa', he had as usual carefully covered them up. And now, as Melissa lifted the cloth from the starling's cage, and the bird muttered more gently than usual, and perhaps in its sleep, the cry, "Olympias!" a shudder ran through her; and, as she stepped out into the road by Alexander's side, she said, dejectedly:

"Everything is coming to an end! Well, and so it may; for what has come over us all in these few days? Before Caesar came, what were you—what was Philip? In my own heart what peace reigned!

"And my father? There is one comfort, at any rate; even as praetor he has not forgotten his birds, and he will find feathered friends go where he may.

"But I—And it is for my sake that he must hide like a criminal!"

But here Alexander vehemently broke in: "It was not you, it was I who brought all this misery on us!"

And he went on to accuse himself so bitterly that Melissa regretted having alluded to the misfortunes of their family, and did her best to inspire him with courage.

As soon as Caesar should have left the city and she had evaded his pursuit, the citizens would be easily persuaded of his innocence. They would see then how little she had cared for the splendor and wealth of empire; why, he himself knew how quickly everything was forgotten in Alexandria. His art, too, would be a comfort to him, and if he only had the chance of making his way in his career he would have no difficulty in winning Agatha. He would have her on his side, and Diodoros, and the lady Euryale.

But to all these kind speeches the young man only sadly shook his head. How could he, despised and contemned, dare to aspire to the daughter of such a man as Zeno? He ended with a deep sigh; and Melissa, whose heart grew heavier as they approached the Serapeum through the side streets, still forced herself to express her confidence as though the lady Euryale's protection had relieved her of every anxiety. It was so difficult to appear calm and cheerful that more than once she had to wipe her eyes; still, their eager talk shortened the way, and she stood still, surprised to find herself so near her destination, when Alexander showed her the chain which was stretched across the end of the street of Hermes to close in the great square in front of the Serapeum.

The storm had passed away and the rain had ceased; the sky was clear and cloudless, and the moon poured its silvery light in lavish splendor, as though revived, on the temple and on the statues round the square. Here they must part, for they saw that it was impossible that they should cross the open space together.

It was almost deserted, for the populace were not allowed to go there. Of the hundreds of tents which till lately had covered it, only those of the seventh cohort of the praetorian guard remained; for these, having to protect the person of the emperor, had not been quartered in the town. If Alexander and Melissa had crossed this vast square, where it was now as light as clay, they would certainly have been seen, and Melissa would have brought not herself only but her protectress also into the greatest danger.

She still had so much on her mind that she wanted to say to her brother, especially with regard to her father's welfare; and then—what a leavetaking was this when, as her gloomy forebodings told her, they were parting never to meet again! But Euryale must have been long and anxiously waiting for her, and Alexander, too, was very late for his appointment.

It was impossible to let the girl cross the square alone, for it was guarded by soldiers. If she could but reach the side of the sanctuary where she was expected, and where the road was in the shadow of the riding-school opposite, all would be well, and it seemed as though there was no alternative but for Alexander to lead his sister through by-ways to her destination. They had just made up their minds to this inevitable waste of time, when a young woman was seen coming toward them from one of the tents with a swift, light step, winged with gladness. Alexander suddenly released his sister's hand, and saying:

"She will escort you," he advanced to meet her. This was the wife of Martialis, who had charge of the villa at Kanopus, and whose acquaintance the artist had made when he was studying the Galatea in the merchant's country-house for the portrait of Korinna. Alexander had made friends with the soldier's wife in his winning, lively way, and she was delighted to meet him again, and quite willing to escort his sister across the square, and hold her tongue about it. So, after a short grasp of the hand, and a fervent last appeal to her brother, "Never for a moment let us forget one another, and always remember our mother!" Melissa followed her companion.

This evening the woman had sought her husband to tell him that she and her mother had got safely out of the Circus, and to thank him for the entertainment, of which the splendor, in spite of the various disturbances and interruption, had filled their hearts and minds.

The first words she spoke to the girl led to the question as to whether she, too, had been at the Circus; and when Melissa said yes, but that she had been too frightened and horrified to see much, the chattering little woman began to describe it all.

Quite the best view, she declared, had been obtained from the third tier of places. Caesar's bride, too, had been pointed out to her. Poor thing! She would pay dearly for the splendor of the purple. No one could dispute Caracalla's taste, however, for the girl was lovely beyond description; and as she spoke she paused to look at Melissa, for she fancied she resembled Caesar's sweetheart. But she went on again quicker than before, remarking that Melissa was not so tall, and that the other was more brilliant looking, as be seemed an emperor's bride.

At this Melissa drew her kerchief more closely over her face; but it was a comfort to her when the soldier's wife, after describing to her what she herself had worn, added that Caracalla's choice had fallen on a modest and well-conducted maiden, for, if she had not been, the high-priest's wife would never have been so kind to her. And the lady Euryale was sister-in-law to the master she herself served, and she had known her all her life.

Then, when Melissa, to change the subject, asked why the public were forbidden to approach the Serapeum, her companion told her that since his return from the Circus Caesar had been devoting himself to astrology, soothsaying, and other abstruse matters, and that the noise of the city disturbed him. He was very learned in such things, and if she only had time she could have told Melissa wonderful things. Thus conversing, they crossed the square, and when it lay behind them and they were under the shadow of the stadium, Melissa thanked her lively companion for her escort, while she, on her part, declared that it had been a pleasure to do the friendly painter a service.

The western side of the immense temple stood quite detached from the town. There were on that side but few bronze doors, and these, which were opened only to the inhabitants of the building, had long since been locked for the night and needed no guard. As the inhabitants were forbidden to cross the space dividing the stadium from the Serapeum, all was perfectly still. Dark shadows lay on the road, and the high structures which shut it in like cliffs seemed to tower to the sky. The lonely girl's heart beat fast with fears as she stole along, close under the wall, from which a warm vapor breathed on her after the recent rain. The black circles which seemed to stare at her like dark, hollow eye-sockets from the wall of the stadium, were the windows of the stables.

If a runaway slave, an escaped wild beast, or a robber were to rush out upon her! The owls swept across over her head on silent wings, and bats flitted to and fro, from one building to the other, almost touching the frightened girl. Her terrors increased at every step, and the wall which she must follow to the end was so long—so endlessly long!

Supposing, too, that the lady Euryale had been tired of waiting and had given her up! There would then be nothing for it but to make her way back to the town past the guards, or to enter the temple through the great gates—where that dreadful man was—and where she would at once be recognized! Then there could be no escape, none—and she must, yes, she must evade her dreadful suitor. Every thought of Diodoros cried, "You must!"—even at the cost of her young life, of which, indeed, she saw the imminent end nearer and nearer with every step. She knew not whither her flight might take her, but a voice within declared that it would be to an early grave.

Only a narrow strip of sky was visible between the tall buildings, but, as she looked up to the heavens, she perceived that it was two hours past midnight. She hurried on, but presently checked her pace again. From the square, three trumpet-calls, one after another, rang through the silence of the night. What could these signals mean at so unwonted an hour?

There could be but one explanation—Caesar had again condemned some hapless wretch to death, and he was being led to execution. When Vindex and his nephew were beheaded, three trumpet-calls had sounded; her brother had told her so.

And now, before her inward eye, rose the crowd of victims to Caracalla's thirst for blood. She fancied that Plautilla, whom her imperial consort had murdered, was beckoning her to follow her to an early grave. The terrors of the night were too much for her; and, as when a child, at play with her brothers, she flew on as fast as her feet would carry her. She fled as though she were pursued, her long dress hampering her steps, along by the temple wall, till her gaze, fixed on her left, fell on the spot which had been designated to her.

Here she stopped, out of breath; and, while she was identifying the landmarks which she had impressed on her memory to guide her to the right doorway, the temple wall seemed to open before her as if by a charm, and a kind voice called her name, and then exclaimed, "At last!" and in a moment she had grasped Euryale's hand and was drawn into the building.

Here, as if at the touch of a magician's wand, all fear and horror vanished; and, although she still panted for breath, she would at once have explained to her beloved protectress what it was that had prompted her to run so fast, but that Euryale interrupted her, exclaiming: "Only make haste! No one must see that block of porphyry turn on its pin. It is invisible from the outside, and closes the passage by which the mystics and adepts find their way to the mysteries after dedication. All who know of it are sworn to secrecy."

With this she led the way into a dark vestibule adjoining the temple, and in a few moments the great block of stone which had admitted them had turned into its place again. Those who passed by, even in broad sunshine, could not distinguish it from all the other blocks of which the ground-floor of the

edifice was built.

CHAPTER XXIX.

While the lady Euryale preceded her young charge with a lamp up a narrow, dark staircase, Alexander waited in one of the audience-rooms till the emperor should call him. The high-priest of Serapis, several soothsayers of the temple, Aristides, the new head of the night-watch, and other "friends" of the monarch had accompanied him thus far. But admittance to the innermost apartments had not been permitted, for Caracalla had ordered the magician Serapion to call up spirits before him, and was having the future declared to him in the presence of the prefect of the praetorians and a few other trusty followers.

The deputation of citizens, who had come to apologize to Caesar for the annoying occurrences in the Circus, had been told to wait till the exorcisms were over. Alexander would have preferred to hold aloof from the others, but no one here seemed to think ill of him for his thoughtless behavior. On the contrary, the courtiers pressed round him—the brother of the future empress-with the greatest assiduity: the high-priest inquired after his brother Philip; and Seleukus, the merchant, who had come with the deputation, addressed many flattering remarks to him on his sister's beauty. Some of the Roman senators whose advances he had received coldly enough at first, now took up his whole attention, and described to him the works of art and the paintings in the new baths of Caracalla; they advised him to offer himself as a candidate for the ornamentation of some of the unfinished rooms with frescoes, and led him to expect their support. In short, they behaved toward the young man as if he might command their services, in spite of their gray hairs. But Alexander saw through their purpose.

Their discourse ceased suddenly, for voices were audible in the emperor's apartments, and they all listened with outstretched necks and bated breath if they might catch a word or two.

Alexander only regretted not having either charcoal or tablets at hand, that he might fix their intent faces on the wood; but at last he stood up, for the door was opened and the emperor entered from the tablinum, accompanied by the magician who had shown Caesar several spirits of the departed. In the middle of the demonstration, at Caracalla's desire, the beheaded Papinian had appeared in answer to Serapion's call. Invisible hands replaced his severed head upon his shoulders, and, having greeted his sovereign, he promised him good fortune. Last of all great Alexander had appeared, and assured the emperor in verse, and with many a flowery phrase, that the soul of Roxana had chosen the form of Melissa to dwell in. Caracalla would enjoy the greatest happiness through her, as long as she was not alienated from him by love for another man. Should this happen, Roxana would be destroyed and her whole race with her, but Caesar's glory and greatness would reach its highest point. The monarch need have no misgivings in continuing to live out his (Alexander's) life. The spirit of his godlike father Severus watched over him, and had given him a counselor in the person of Macrinus, in whose mortal body the soul of Scipio Africanus had awakened to a new life.

With this, the apparition, which, like the others, had shown itself as a colored picture moving to and fro upon the darkened wall of the tablinum, vanished. The voice of the great Macedonian sounded hollow and unearthly, but what he said had interested the emperor deeply and raised his spirits.

However, his wish to see more spirits had remained unsatisfied. The magician, who remained upon his knees with uplifted hands while the apparitions were visible, declared that the forces he was obliged to employ in exercising his magic power over the spirits had exhausted him. His fine, bearded face was deathly pale, and his tall form trembled and shook. His assistants had silently disappeared. They had kept themselves and their great scrolls concealed behind a curtain. Serapion explained that they were his pupils, whose office it was to support his incantations by efficient formulas.

Caracalla dismissed him graciously, then turning to the assembled company, he gave with much affability a detailed account of the wonders he had seen and heard.

"A marvelous man, this Serapion," he exclaimed to the high-priest Timotheus—"a master in his art. What he said before proceeding to the incantations is convincing, and explains much to me. According to him, magic holds the same relation to religion as power to love, as the command to the request. Power! What magic effect it has in real life? We have seen its influence upon the spirits, and who among the children of men can resist it? To it I owe my greatest results, and hope to be still further indebted. Even reluctant love must bow to it."

He gave a self-satisfied laugh, and continued: "As the pious worshiper of the gods can move the heavenly ones by prayer and sacrifice, so—the wondrous man declared—the magician can force them by means of his secret lore to do his will. Therefore, he who knows and can call the gods and spirits by the right name, him they must obey, as the slave his master. The sages who served the Pharaohs in the gray dawn of time succeeded in fathoming the mystery of these names given to the everlasting ones at their birth, and their wisdom has come down to him through the generations as a priceless secret. But it is not sufficient to murmur the name to one's self, or be able to write it down. Every syllable has its special meaning like every member of the human frame. It depends, too, on how it is pronounced and where the emphasis lies; and this true name, containing in itself the spiritual essence of the immortals, and the outward sign of their presence, is different again from the names by which they are known among men.

"Could I have any suspicion—and here Serapion addressed himself to me— which god he forced to obey him when he uttered the words, 'Abar Barbarie Eloce Sabaoth Pachnuphis,' and more like it! I have only remembered the first few words. But, he continued, it was not enough to be able to pronounce these words. The heavenly spirits would submit only to those mortals who shared in some of their highest characteristics. Before the Magian dared to call them, he must purify his soul from all sensual taint, and sanctify his body by long and severe fasting. When the Magian succeeded, as he had done in these days, in rendering himself impervious to the allurements of the senses, and in making his soul, as far as was humanly possible, independent of the body, only then had he attained to that degree of godliness which entitled him to have intercourse with the heavenly ones and the entire spirit-world as with his equals, and to subdue them to his will.

"He exerted his power, and we saw with our bodily eyes that the spirits came to his call. But we discovered that it was not done by words alone. What a noble-looking man he is! And the mortifications that he practices—these, too, are heroic deeds! The cavilers in the Museum might take example from him. Serapion performed an action and a difficult one. They waste their time over words, miserable words! They will prove to you by convincing argument that yonder lion is a rabbit. The Magian waved his hands and the king of beasts cringed before him. Like the worthies of the Museum, every one in this city is merely a mouth on two legs. Where but here would the Christians—I know their doctrines—have invented that term for their sublime teacher—The Word become flesh? I have heard nothing here," he turned to the deputation, "but words and again words—from you, who humbly assure me of your love and reverence; from those who think that their insignificant persons may slip through my fingers and escape me, paltry, would-be witty words, dipped in poison and gall. In the Circus, even, they aimed words at me. The Magian alone dared to offer me deeds, and he succeeded wonderfully; he is a marvelous man!"

"What he showed you," said the high-priest, "was no more than what the sorcerers achieved, as the old writings tell us, under the builders of the Pyramids. Our astrologers, who traced out for you the path of the stars—"

"They, too," interrupted Caesar, bowing slightly to the astrologers, "have something better to show than words. As I owe to the Magian an agreeable hour, so I thank you, my friends, for a happy one."

This remark had reference to the information which had been brought to Caesar, during a pause in the incantations, that the stars predicted great happiness for him in his union with Melissa, and that this prediction was well-founded, was proved by the constellations which the chief astrologer showed and explained to him.

While Caracalla was receiving the thanks of the astrologers, he caught sight of Alexander, and at once graciously inquired how Melissa had got back to her father's house. He then asked, laughingly, if the wits of Alexandria were going to treat him to another offering like the one on his arrival. The youth, who had determined in the Circus to risk his life, if need be, in order to clear himself of the taint of suspicion, judged that the moment had come to make good the mistake which had robbed him of his fellow-citizens' esteem.

The presence of so many witnesses strengthened his courage; and fully expecting that, like the consul Vindex, his speech would cost him his head, he drew himself up and answered gravely, "It is true, great Caesar, that in a weak moment and without considering the results, I repeated some of those witticisms to you—"

"I commanded, and you had to obey," retorted Caesar, and added, coldly, "But what does this mean?"

"It means," began Alexander—who already saw the sword of execution leap from its scabbard—with pathetic dignity, which astonished the emperor as coming from him, "it means that I herewith declare before you, and my Alexandrian fellow-citizens here present, that I bitterly repent my indiscretion; nay,

I curse it, since I heard from your own lips how their ready wit has set you against the sons of my beloved native city."

"Ah, indeed! Hence these tears?" interposed Caesar, adopting a well-known Latin phrase. He nodded to the painter, and continued, in a tone of amused superiority: "Go on performing as an orator, if you like; only moderate the tragic tone, which does not become you, and make it short, for before the sun rises we all—these worthy citizens and myself—desire to be in bed."

Blushes and pallor alternated on the young man's face. Sentence of death would have been more welcome to him than this supercilious check to a hazardous attempt, which he had looked upon as daring and heroic. Among the Romans he caught sight of some laughing faces, and hurt, humiliated, confused, scarcely capable of speaking a word, and yet moved by the desire to justify himself, he stammered out: "I have—I meant to assure —No, I am no spy! May my tongue wither before I—You can, of course—It is in your power to take my life!"

"Most certainly it is," interposed Caracalla, and his tone was more contemptuous than angry. He could see how deeply excited the artist was, and to save him—Melissa's brother—from committing a folly which he would be obliged to punish, he went on with gracious consideration: "But I much prefer to see you live and wield the brush for a long time to come. You are dismissed."

The young man bent his head, and then turned his back upon the emperor, for he felt that he was threatened now with what, to an Alexandrian, was the most unbearable fate—to appear ridiculous before so many.

Caracalla allowed him to go, but, as he stepped across the threshold, he called after him: "Tomorrow, then, with your sister, after the bath! Tell her the stars and the spirits are propitious to our union."

Caesar then beckoned to the chief of the nightwatch, and, having laid the blame of the unpleasant occurrences in the Circus on his carelessness, cut the frightened officer short when he proposed to take every one prisoner whom the lictors had marked among the noisy.

"Not yet! On no account to-morrow," Caracalla ordered. "Mark each one carefully. Keep your eyes open at the next performance. Put down the names of the disaffected. Take care that the rope hangs about the neck of the guilty. The time to draw it tight will come presently. When they think themselves safe, the cowardly show their true faces. Wait till I give the signal—certainly not in the next few days; then seize upon them, and let none escape!"

Caesar had given these orders with smiling lips. He wanted first to make Melissa his, and, like a shepherd, to revel with her in the sweetness of their love. No moment of this time should be darkened for him by the tears and prayers of his bride. When she should hear, later on, of her husband's bloody vengeance upon his enemies, she would have to accept it as an accomplished fact; and means, no doubt, would be found to soothe her indignation.

Those who after the insulting occurrences in the Circus had expected to see Caesar raging and storming, were hurried from one surprise to another; for even after his conversation with the night-watch he looked cheerful and contented, and exclaimed: "It is long since you have seen me thus! My own mirror will ask itself if it has not changed owners. It is to be hoped it may have cause to accustom itself to reflect me as a happy man as often as I look in it. The two highest joys of life are before me, and I know not what would be left for me to desire if only Philostratus were here to share the coming days with me."

The grave senator Cassius Dio here stepped forward and observed that there were advantages in their amiable friend's withdrawal from the turmoil of court life. His Life of Apollonius, to which all the world was looking forward, would come all the sooner to a close.

"If only that I might talk to him of the man of Tyana," cried the emperor, "I wish his biographer were here to-day. To possess little and require nothing is the wish of the sage; and I can well imagine circumstances in which one who has enjoyed power and riches to satiety should consider himself blessed as a simple countryman following out the precept of Horace, 'procul negotiis,' plowing his fields and gathering the fruit of his own trees. According to Apollonius, the wise man must also be poor, and, though the citizens of his state are permitted to acquire treasures, the wealthy are looked upon as dishonorable. There is some sense in this paradox, for the possessions that are to be obtained with money are but vulgar joys. I know by experience what it is that purifies the soul, that lifts it up and makes it truly blessed. It does not come of power or riches. Whoso has known it, he to whom it has been revealed—"

He stopped short, surprised at himself; then laughed as he shook his head and exclaimed, "Behold, the tragedy hero in the purple with one foot in an idyl!" and wished the assembled company pleasant

slumbers for the short remains of the night.

He gave his hand to a few favored ones; but, as he clasped that of the proconsul Julius Paulinus, who, with unheard-of audacity, had put on mourning garments for his brother-in-law Vindex, beheaded that day, Caesar's countenance grew dark, and, turning his back upon them all, he walked rapidly away. Scarcely had he disappeared when the mourning proconsul exclaimed in his dry manner, as if speaking to himself:

"The idyl is to begin. Would it might be the satyr-play that closes the bloodiest of tragedies!"

"Caesar has not been himself to-day," said the favorite Theocritus; and the senator Cassius Dio whispered to Paulinus, "And therefore he was more bearable to look at."

Old Adventus gazed in astonishment as Arjuna, the emperor's Indian body-slave, disrobed him; for, though Caracalla had entered the apartment with a dark and threatening brow, while his sandals were being unfastened, he laughed to himself, and cried to his old servant with beaming eyes, "To-morrow!" and the chamberlain called down a blessing on the morrow, and on her who was destined to fill the coming years with sunshine for mighty Caesar.

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Caracalla, generally an early riser, slept this time longer than on other days. He had retired very late to rest, and the chamberlain therefore put off waking him, especially as he had been troubled by evil dreams, in spite of his happy frame of mind when he sought his couch. When at last he rose he first inquired about the weather, and expressed his satisfaction when he heard that the sun had risen with burning rays, but was now veiled in threatening clouds.

His first visit led him to the court of sacrifice. The offerings had fallen out most favorably, and he rejoiced at the fresh and healthy appearance of the bullocks' hearts and livers which the augurs showed him. In the stomach of one of the oxen they had found a flint arrow-head, and, on showing it to Caracalla, he laughed, and observed to the high-priest Timotheus: "A shaft from Eros's quiver! A hint from the god to offer him a sacrifice on this happy day."

After his bath he caused himself to be arrayed with peculiar care, and then gave orders for the admittance, first, of the prefect of the praetorians, and then of Melissa, for whom a mass of gorgeous flowers stood ready.

But Macrinus was not to be found, although Caesar had commanded him yesterday to give in his report before doing anything else. He had twice come to the antechamber, but had gone away again shortly before, and had not yet returned.

Determined to let nothing damp his spirits, Caesar merely shrugged his shoulders, and gave orders to admit the maiden, and—should they have accompanied her—her father and brother. But neither Melissa nor the men had appeared as yet, though Caracalla distinctly remembered having commanded all three to visit him after the bath, which he had taken several hours later than usual.

Vexed, and yet endeavoring to keep his temper, he went to the window. The sky was overcast, and a sharp wind from the sea drove the first rain-drops in his face.

In the wide square at his feet a spectacle presented itself which would have delighted him at another time, when in better spirits.

The younger men of the city—as many as were of Greek extraction—were trooping in. They were divided into companies, according to the wrestling-schools or the Circus and other societies to which they belonged. The youths marched apart from the married men, and one could see that they came gladly, and hoped for much enjoyment from the events of the day. Some of the others looked less delighted. They were unaccustomed to obey the orders of a despot, and many were ill-pleased to lose a whole day from their work or business. But no one was permitted to absent himself; for, when the chief citizens had invited the emperor to visit their wrestling-schools, he replied that he preferred to inspect the entire male youths of Alexandria in the Stadium. This was situated close by his residence in the Serapeum, and in this great space a spectacle would be afforded to him at one glance, which he could otherwise only enjoy by journeying laboriously from one gymnasium to another. He loved the strong effects produced by great masses; and being on the race-course, the wrestlers and boxers, the runners and discus-throwers, could give proof of their strength, dexterity, and endurance.

It occurred to him at the moment that among these youths and men there might be some of the descendants of the warriors who, under the command of the great Alexander, had conquered the world. Here, then, was an opportunity of gathering round him—rejuvenated and, so to speak, born anew—

those troops who, under the guidance of the man whose mission on earth he was destined to accomplish, had won such deathless victories. That was a pleasure he had every right to permit himself, and he wished to show to Melissa the re-created military forces of him to whom, in a former existence, as Roxana, she had been so dear.

Quick as ever to suit the deed to the word, he at once ordered the head citizens to assemble the youth of Alexandria on the morning of the day in question, and to form them into a Macedonian phalanx. He wished to inspect them in the stadium, and they were now marching thither.

He had ordered helmets, shields, and lances to be made after well-known Macedonian patterns and to be distributed to the new Hellenic legion. Later on they might be intrusted with the guarding of the city, should there be a Parthian war; and he required the attendance of the Alexandrian garrison.

The inspection of this Greek regiment would be certain to give pleasure to Melissa. He expected, too, to see Alexander among them. When once his beloved shared the purple with him, he could raise her brother to the command of this chosen phalanx.

Troop after troop streamed on to the course, and he thought he had seldom seen anything finer than these slender youths, marching along with elastic step, and garlands in their black, brown, or golden locks.

When the young noblemen who belonged to the school of Timagetes filed past him, he took such delight in the beauty of their heads, the wonderful symmetry of their limbs strengthened by athletic games, and the supple grace of most of them, that he felt as if some magic spell had carried him back to the golden age of Greece and the days of the Olympian games in the Altis.

What could be keeping Melissa? This sight would assuredly please her, and for once he would be able to say something flattering about her people. One might easily overlook a good deal from such splendid youths.

Carried away by his admiration he waved his scarf to them, which being remarked by the gymnasiarch, who with his two assistants—herculean athletes—walked in front, was answered by him with a loud "Hail, Caesar!"

The youths who followed him imitated his example, and the troop that came after them returned his greeting loud and heartily. The young voices could be heard from afar, and the news soon spread to the last ranks of the first division to whom these greetings were addressed. But, among the men who already were masters of households of their own, there were many who deemed it shameful and unworthy to raise their voices in greeting to the tyrant whose heavy hand had oppressed them more than once; and a group of young men belonging to the party of the "Greens," who ran their own horses, had the fatal audacity to agree among themselves that they would leave Caesar's greeting unanswered. A many-headed crowd is like a row of strings which sound together as soon as the note is struck to which they are all attuned; and so each one now felt sure that his acclamation would only increase the insolence of this fratricide, this bloodstained monster, this oppressor and enemy of the citizens. The succeeding ranks of "Greens" followed the example, and from the midst of a troop of young married men, members in the gymnasium of the society of the Dioscuri, one foolhardy spirit had the reckless temerity to blow a shrill, far-sounding whistle between his fingers.

He found no imitators, but the insulting sound reached the emperor's ear, and seemed to him like the signal-call of Fate; for, before it had died away, the clouds broke, and a stream of brilliant sunshine spread over the race-course and the assembled multitude. The cloudy day that was to have brought happiness to Caesar had been suddenly transformed by the sun of Africa into a bright one; and the radiant light which cheered the hearts of others seemed to him to be a message from above to warn him that, instead of the highest bliss, this day would bring him disappointment and misfortune. He said nothing of this, for there was no one there in whom it would be any relief to confide, or of whose sympathy he could be sure. But those who watched him as he retired from the window saw plainly that the idyl, which he had promised them should begin to-day, would assuredly not do so for the next few hours at least, unless some miracle should occur. No, he would have to wait awhile for the pastoral joys he had promised himself. And it seemed as if, instead of the satyr-play of which old Julius Paulinus had spoken, that fatal whistle had given the signal for another act in Caracalla's terrible life-tragedy.

The "friends" of the emperor looked at him anxiously as, with furrowed brow, he asked, impatiently: "Macrinus not here yet?"

Theocritus and others who had looked with envy upon Melissa and her relatives, and with distrust

upon her union with the emperor, now heartily wished the girl back again.

But the prefect Macrinus came not; and while the emperor, having sent messengers to fetch Melissa, turned with darkly boding brow to his station overlooking the brightly lighted race-course, still hoping the augury would prove false, and the sunny day turn yet in his favor, Macrinus was in the full belief that the gate of greatness and power was opening to him. Superstitious as the emperor himself and every one else of his time, he was to-day more firmly persuaded than ever of the existence of men whose mysterious wisdom gave them powers to which even he must bend—the hard-headed man who had raised himself from the lowest to the highest station, next to the Caesar himself.

In past nights the Magian Serapion had caused him to see and hear much that was incomprehensible. He believed in the powers exerted by that remarkable man over spirits, and his ability to work miracles, for he had proved in the most startling manner that he had perfect control even over such a determined mind as that of the prefect. The evening before, the magician had bidden Macrinus come to him at the third hour after sunrise of the next day, which he had unhesitatingly promised to do. But the emperor had risen later than usual this morning, and the prefect might expect to be called to his master at any moment. In spite of this, and although his absence threatened to rouse Caesar to fury, and everything pointed to the necessity of his remaining within call, Macrinus, drawn by an irresistible craving, had followed the invitation, which sounded more like a command. This, indeed, had seemed to him decisive; for, as the seer ruled over his stern spirit, albeit he was alive, even so must the spirits of the departed do his bidding. His every interest urged him now to believe in the prophecy made to him by Serapion, to-day for the third time, which foretold that he, the prefect, should mount the throne of the Caesars, clad in the purple of Caracalla. But it was not alone to repeat this prophecy that the seer had called Macrinus to him, but to inform him that the future empress was betrothed to a young Alexandrian, and that the tender intercourse between the lovers had not been interrupted during Caracalla's courtship. This had come to Serapion's ears yesterday afternoon, through his adroit assistant Kastor, and he had taken advantage of the information to prepare Caesar during the night for the faithlessness of his chosen bride.

The Magian assured the prefect that what the spirit of the great Macedonian had hinted at yesterday had since been confirmed by the demons in his service. It would now be easy for Macrinus to possibly hinder Melissa, who might have been all-powerful, from coming between him and the great goal which the spirits had set before him.

Serapion then repeated the prophecy, which came with such convincing power from the bearded lips of the sage that the prudent statesman cast his last doubts from him, and, exclaiming, "I believe your words, and shall press forward now in spite of every danger!" he grasped the prophet's hand in farewell.

Up to this point Macrinus, the son of a poor cobbler, who had had difficulty in rearing his children at all, had received these prophetic utterances with cool deliberation, and had ventured no step nearer to the exalted aim which had been offered to his ambition. In all good faith he had done his best to perform the duties of his office as an obedient servant to his master and the state. This had all changed now, and, firmly resolved to risk the struggle for the purple, he returned to the emperor's apartments.

Macrinus had no reason to expect a favorable reception when he entered the tablinum, but his great purpose upheld his courage. He, the upstart, was well aware that Fortune requires her favorites to keep their eyes open and their hands active. He therefore took care to obtain a full account of what had happened from his confidential friend the senator Antigonus, a soldier of mean birth, who had gained favor with Caesar by a daring piece of horsemanship. Antigonus closed his report with the impudent whistle of the Greek athlete; he dwelt chiefly on his astonishment at Melissa's absence. This gave food for thought to the prefect, too; but before entering the tablinum he was stopped by the freedman Epagathos, who handed over to him a scroll which had been given to him for the emperor. The messenger had disappeared directly afterward, and could not be overtaken. Might it not endanger the life of the reader by exhaling a poisonous perfume?

"Nothing is impossible here," answered the prefect. "Ours it is to watch over the safety of our godlike master."

This letter was that which Melissa had intrusted to the slave Argutis for Caesar, and with unwarrantable boldness the prefect and Epagathos now opened it and ran rapidly over its contents. They then agreed to keep this strange missive from the emperor till Macrinus should send to ask whether the youths were assembled in their full number on the race-course. They judged it necessary to prepare Caesar in some sort, to prevent a fresh attack of illness.

Caracalla was standing near a pillar at the window whence he might see without being seen. That whistle still shrilled in his ears. But another idea occupied him so intensely that he had not yet thought

of wiping out the insult with blood.

What could be delaying Melissa and her father and brother?

The painter ought to have joined the other Macedonian youths on the race-course, and Caracalla was engaged in looking out for him, stretching forward every time he caught sight of some curly head that rose above the others.

There was a bitter taste in his mouth, and at every fresh disappointment his rebellious, tortured heart beat faster; and yet the idea that Melissa might have dared to flee from him never entered his mind.

The high-priest of Serapis had informed him that his wife had seen nothing of her as yet. Then it suddenly occurred to him that she might have been wet through by the rain yesterday and now lay shaken by fever, and that this must keep her father away, too; a supposition which cheered the egoist more than it pained him, and with a sigh of relief he turned once more to the window.

How haughtily these boys carried their heads; their fleet, elastic feet skimmed over the ground; how daringly they showed off the strength and dexterity that almost seemed their birthright! This reminded him that, prematurely aged as he was by the wild excesses of his younger years, with his ill-set broken leg and his thin locks, he must make a lamentable contrast to these others of his own age; and he said to himself that perhaps the whistle had come from the lips of one of the strongest and handsomest, who had not considered him worth greeting.

And yet he was not weaker than any single individual down there; aye, and if he chose he could crush them all together, as he would the glow-worm creeping on that window-sill. With one quick squeeze of his fingers he put an end to the pretty little insect, and at that moment he heard voices behind him.

Had his beloved come at last?

No, it was only the prefect. He should have been there long ago, if he were obedient to his sovereign's commands. Macrinus was therefore a convenient object on which to vent his anger. How mean was the face of this long-legged upstart, with its small eyes, sharp nose, and furrowed brow! Could the beautiful Diadumenianus really be his son? No matter! The boy, the apple of his father's eye, was in his power, and was a surety for the old man's loyalty. After all, Macrinus was a capable, serviceable officer, and easier to deal with than the Romans of the old noble families.

Notwithstanding these considerations, Caracalla addressed the prefect as harshly as if he had been a disobedient slave, but Macrinus received the flood of abuse with patience and humility. When the emperor reproached him with never being at hand when he was wanted, he replied submissively that it was just because he found he could be of service to Caesar that he had dared to absent himself. The refractory young brood down there were being kept well in hand, and it was entirely owing to his effectual measures that they had contented themselves with that one whistle. Later on it would be their duty to punish such audacity and high-treason with the utmost rigor.

The emperor gazed in astonishment at the counselor, who till now had ever advised him to use moderation, and only yesterday had begged him to ascribe much to Alexandrian manners, which in Rome would have had to be treated with severity. Had the insolence of these unruly citizens be come unbearable even to this prudent, merciful man?

Yes, that must be it; and the grudge that Macrinus now showed against the Alexandrians hastened the pardon which Caesar silently accorded him.

Caracalla even said to himself that he had underrated the prefect's intellect, for his eyes flashed and glowed like fire, notwithstanding their smallness, and lending a force to his ignoble face which Caracalla had never noticed before. Had Caesar no premonition that in the last few hours this man had grown to be such another as himself?—for in his unyielding mind the firm resolve had been strengthened to hesitate at nothing—not even at the death of as many as might come between him and his high aim, the throne.

Macrinus knew enough of human nature to observe the miserable disquietude that had seized upon the emperor at his bride's continued absence, but he took good care not to refer to the subject. When Caracalla, however, could no longer conceal his anxiety, and asked after her himself, the prefect gave the appointed sign to Epagathos, who then handed Melissa's freshly re-sealed letter to his master.

"Let me open it, great Caesar," entreated Macrinus. "Even Homer called Egypt the land of poison."

But the emperor did not heed him. No one had told him, and he had never in his life received a letter

in a woman's hand, except from his mother; and yet he knew that this delicate little roll had come from a woman— from Melissa.

It was closed with a silken thread, and the seal with which Epagathos had replaced the one they had broken. If Caracalla tore it open, the papyrus and the writing might be damaged. He called impatiently for a knife, and the body physician, who had just entered with other courtiers, handed him his.

"Back again?" asked Caracalla as the physician drew the blade from its sheath.

"At break of day, on somewhat unsteady legs," was the jovial answer. Caracalla took the knife from him, cut the silk, hastily broke the seal, and began to read.

Till now his hands had performed their office steadily, but suddenly they began to tremble, and while he ran his eye over Melissa's refusal—there were but a few lines—his knees shook, and a sharp, low cry burst from him, like no sound that lies by nature in the throat of man. Rent in two pieces, the strip of papyrus fluttered to the ground.

The prefect caught the despot, who, seized with giddiness, stretched out his hands as if seeking a support. The physician hurriedly brought out the drug which Galenus had advised him to use in such cases, and which he always carried with him, and then, pointing to the letter, asked the prefect:

"In the name of all the gods, from whom?"

"From the gem-cutter's fair daughter," replied Macrinus, with a contemptuous shrug.

"From her?" cried the physician, indignantly. From that light Phryne, who kissed and embraced my rich host's son down there in his sick-room?

"At this the emperor, who had not lost consciousness for one moment, started as if stung by a serpent, and sprang at the physician's throat screaming while he threatened to strangle him:

"What was that? What did you say? Cursed babblers! The truth, villain, and the whole truth, if you love your life!"

The half-choked man, ever prone to talking, had no reason for concealing from Caesar what he had seen with his own eyes, and had subsequently heard in the Serapeum and at the table of Polybius.

When life was at stake a promise to a freedman could be of no account, so he gave free rein to his tongue, and answered the questions Caracalla hoarsely put to him without reserve, and—being a man used to the ways of a court—with insinuations that were doubly welcome to a judge so eager for damning evidence.

Yesterday, the day before, and the day before that—every day on which Melissa had pretended to feel the mysterious ties that bound her heart to his, every day that she had feigned love and led him on to woo her, she had—as he now learned—granted to another what she had refused to him with such stern discretion. Her prayer for him, the sympathy she said she felt, the maidenly sensibility which had charmed him in her—all, all had been lies, deceit, sham, in order to attain an object. And that old man and the brothers to serve whom she had dared to approach him—they all knew the cruel game she was playing with him and his heart's love. The lips that had lured him into the vilest trap with lying words had kissed another. He seemed to hear the Alexandrians laughing at the forsaken bridegroom, to see them pointing the finger of derision at the man whom cunning woman had deceived even before marriage. What a feast for their ribald wit!

And yet—he would have willingly borne it all, and more, for the certainty that she had really loved him once; that her heart had been his, if only for one short hour.

On those shreds of papyrus scattered over the floor she confessed she was not able to accede to his wishes, because she had already given her faith to another before she ever saw Caracalla. It was true she had felt herself drawn to him as to no other but her betrothed; and had he been content to let her be near him as a faithful servant and sicknurse, then indeed . . . In short, he was informed in so many words that every tie that bound her to him must be broken in favor of another, and the hypocritical regret with which she sought to cover up the hard facts only made him doubly indignant.

Lies, lies—even in this letter nothing but lies and heartless dissimulation!

How it stabbed his heart! But he possessed the power to wound her in return. Wild beasts should tear her fair body limb from limb, as she had torn his soul in this hour.

One wish alone filled his heart—to see her whom he had loved above all others, to whom he had

revealed his inmost soul, for whose sake he had amended his actions as he had never done for his own mother—to see her lying in the dust before him, and to inflict upon her such tortures as no mortal had ever endured before. And not only she, but all whom she loved and who were her accomplices, should atone for the torment of this hour. The time of reckoning had come, and every evil instinct of his nature mingled its exulting voice with the anguished cries of his bleeding heart.

The prefect knew his master well, and watched his every expression while apparently listening to the voluble physician, but in reality absorbed in a train of thought. By the twitching of his eyelids, the sharply outlined red patches on his cheeks, the quivering nostrils, and the deep furrows between his eyes, he must be revolving some frightful plan in his mind.

Yesterday, had he found him in this condition, Macrinus would have endeavored by every means in his power to calm his wrath; but to-day, if Caesar had set the world in flames, he would only have added fuel to the fire, for who could more surely upset the firmly established power of this emperor and son of emperors as Caracalla himself? The people of Rome had endured unimaginable sufferings at his hands; but the cup was full, and, judging from Caesar's looks, he would cause it to overflow this day. Then the rising flood which tore the son of an idolized father from the throne, might possibly bear him, the child of lowliness and poverty, into the palace.

But Macrinus remained silent. No word from him should change the tenor of the emperor's thoughts. The plan he was thinking out must be allowed to ripen to its full horror. The lowering, uncertain glance that Caracalla cast round the tablinum at the close of the physician's narrative showed that the prefect's reticence was an unnecessary precaution.

Caesar's mind and tongue still seemed paralyzed; but at that moment something occurred which recalled him to himself and brought firmness to his wandering gaze.

There was a sudden disturbance in the antechamber, with a confused sound of cries and shouting. Those friends of Caesar who wore swords drew them, and Caracalla, who was unarmed, called to Antigonus to give him his.

"A revolt?" he asked Macrinus with flashing eyes, and as if he wished the answer to be in the affirmative; but the prefect had hastened to the door with drawn sword. Before he reached it, it was thrown open, and Julius Asper, the legate, burst into the tablinum as if beside himself, crying: "Cursed den of murderers! An attempt on your life, great Caesar; but we have him fast!"

"Assassination!" interrupted Caracalla with furious joy. "That was the only thing left undone! Bring the murderer! But first"—and he addressed himself to Aristides—"close the city gates and the harbor. Not a man, not a ship must be let through without being searched. The vessels that have weighed anchor since daybreak must be followed and brought back. Mounted Numidians under efficient officers must scour the high-roads as soon as the gate-keepers have been examined. Every house must be open to your men, every temple, every refuge. Seize Heron, the gem-cutter, his daughter, and his two sons. Also—Diodoros is the young villain's name?—him, his parents, and everybody connected with them! The physician knows where they are to be found. Alive, do you hear?— not dead! I will have them alive! I give you till midnight! Your head, if you let the jade and her brothers escape!"

With drooping head the unhappy officer departed. On the threshold he was met by Martialis, the praetorian centurion. After him, his hands bound behind his back, walked the criminal. A deep flush overspread his handsome face, his eyes glowed under the too lofty brow with the fierce light of fever, his waving locks stood out in wild confusion round his head, while the finely cut upper lip with its disdainful curl seemed the very seat of scorn and bitterest contempt. Every feature wore that same expression, and not a trace of fear or regret. But his panting breast betrayed to the physician's first glance that they had here to deal with a sick man in raging fever.

They had already torn off his mantle and discovered beneath its folds the sharp-edged butcher's knife which plainly betrayed his intentions. He had penetrated to the first antechamber when a soldier of the Germanic body-guard laid hold on him. Martialis had him by the girdle now, and the emperor looked sharply and mistrustfully at the praetorian, as he asked if it were he who had captured the assassin.

The centurion replied that he had not. Ingiomarus, the German, had noticed the knife; he, Martialis, was here only in right of his privilege as a praetorian to bring such prisoners before great Caesar.

Caracalla bent a searching gaze upon the soldier; for he thought he recognized in him the man who had aroused his envy and whose happiness he had once greatly desired to damp, when against orders he had received his wife and child in the camp. Recollections rose in his mind that drove the hot blood to his cheek, and he cried, disdainfully:

"I might have guessed it! What can be expected beyond the letter of their service from one who so

neglects his duties? Did you not disport yourself with lewd women in the camp before my very eyes, setting at naught the well-known rules? Hands off the prisoner! This is your last day as praetorian and in Alexandria. As soon as the harbor is opened— to-morrow, I expect—you go on board the ship that carries reinforcements to Edessa. A winter on the Pontus will cool your lascivious blood."

This attack was so rapid and so unexpected to the somewhat dull-witted centurion, that he failed at first to grasp its full significance. He only understood that he was to be banished again from the loved ones he had so long been deprived of. But when he recovered sufficiently to excuse himself by declaring that it was his own wife and children who had visited him, Caesar cut him short by commanding him to report his change of service at once to the tribune of the legion.

The centurion bowed in silence and obeyed. Caracalla then went up to the prisoner, and dragging him, weakly resisting, from the dark back ground of the room to the window, he asked with a sneer:

"And what are assassins like in Alexandria? Ah, ha! this is not the face of a hired cut-throat! Only thus do they look whose sharp wit I will answer with still sharper steel."

"For that answer at least you are not wont to be at a loss," came contemptuously from the lips of the prisoner.

The emperor winced as if he had been struck, and then exclaimed

"You may thank your bound hands that I do not instantly return you the answer you seem to expect of me."

Then turning to his courtiers, he asked if any of them could give him information as to the name and history of the assassin; but no one appeared to know him. Even Timotheus, the priest of Serapis, who as head of the Museum had so often delighted in the piercing intellect of this youth, and had prophesied a great future for him, was silent, and looked at him with troubled gaze.

It was the prisoner himself who satisfied Caesar's curiosity. Glancing round the circle of courtiers, and casting a grateful look at his priestly patron, he said:

"It would be asking too much of your Roman table-companions that they should know a philosopher. You may spare yourself the question, Caesar. I came here that you might make my acquaintance. My name is Philippus, and I am son to Heron, the gem-cutter."

"Her brother!" screamed Caracalla, as he rushed at him, and thrusting his hand into the neck of the sick youth's chiton—who already could scarcely stand upon his feet—he shook him violently, crying, with a scoffing look at the high-priest:

"And is this the ornament of the Museum, the free-thinker, the profound skeptic Philippus?"

He stopped suddenly, and his eyes flashed as if a new light had burst upon him; he dropped his hand from the prisoner's robe, and bending his head close to the other, he whispered in his ear, "You have come from Melissa?"

"Not from her," the other answered quickly, the flush deepening on his face, "but in the name of that most unhappy, most pitiable maiden, and as the representative of her noble Macedonian house, which you would defile with shame and infamy; in the name of the inhabitants of this city, whom you despoil and tread under foot; in the interests of the whole world, which you disgrace!"

Trembling with fury Caracalla broke in:

"Who would choose you for their ambassador, miserable wretch?"

To which the philosopher replied with haughty calm:

"Think not so lightly of one who looks forward with longing to that of which you have an abject fear."

"Of death, do you mean?" asked Caracalla, sneering, for his wrath had given place to astonishment.

And Philip answered: "Yes, Death—with whom I have sworn friendship, and who should be ten times blessed to me if he would but atone for my clumsiness and rid the world of such a monster!"

The emperor, still spell-bound by the unheard-of audacity of the youth before him, now felt moved to keep step with the philosopher, whom few could equal in sharpness of wit; and, controlling the raging fury of his blood, he cried, in a tone of superiority:

"So that is the boasted logic of the Museum? Death is your dearest desire, and yet you would give it

to your enemy?"

"Quite right," replied Philip, his lip curling with scorn. "For there is something which to the philosopher stands higher than logic. It is a stranger to you, but you know it perhaps by name—it is called justice."

These words, and the contemptuous tone in which they were spoken, burst the flood-gates of Caracalla's painfully restrained passion; his voice rose harsh and loud, till the lion growled angrily and dragged at his chain, while his master flung hasty words of fury in the face of his enemy:

"We shall soon see, my cunning fencer with words, whether I know how to follow your advice, and how sternly I can exercise that virtue denied to me by an assassin. Will any one accuse me now of injustice if I punish the accursed brood that has grown up in this den of iniquity with all the rigor that it deserves? Yes, glare at me with those great, burning eyes! Alexandrian eyes, promising all and granting nothing—persuading him who trusts in them to believe in innocence and chastity, truth and affection. But let him look closer, and he finds nothing but deep corruption, foul cunning, despicable self-seeking, and atrocious faithlessness!

"And everything else in this city is like those eyes! Where are there so many gods and priests, where do they sacrifice so often, where do they fast and apply themselves so assiduously to repentance and the cleansing of the soul? And yet, where does vice display itself so freely and so unchecked? This Alexandria—in her youth as dissolute as she was fair—what is she now but an old hag? Now that she is toothless, now that wrinkles disfigure her face, she has turned pious, that, like the wolf in sheep's clothing, she may revenge herself by malice for the loss of joy and of the admiration of her lovers! I can find no more striking comparison than this; for, even as hags find a hideous pleasure in empty chatter and spiteful slanderings, so she, once so beautiful and renowned, has sunk deeper and deeper in the mire, and can not endure to see anything that has achieved greatness or glory without maliciously bespattering it with poison.

"Justice!—yes, I will exercise justice, oh, sublime and virtuous hero, going forth to murder—a dagger hidden in your bosom! I thank you for that lesson!

"Pride of the Museum!—you lead me to the source whence all your corruption flows. It is that famous nursery of learning where you, too, were bred up. There, yes, there they cherish the heresy that makes the gods into puppets of straw, and the majesty of the throne into an owl for pert and insignificant birds to peck at. Thence comes the doctrine that teaches men and women to laugh at virtue and to break their word. There, where in other days noble minds, protected by the overshadowing favor of princes, followed out great ideas, they now teach nothing but words—empty, useless words. I saw and said that yesterday, and now I know it for certain—every poison shaft that your malice has aimed at me was forged in the Museum."

He paused for breath, and then continued, with a contemptuous laugh:

"If the justice which you rate higher than logic were to take its course, nothing would be juster than to make an end this day of this hot-bed of corruption. But your unlearned fellow-citizens shall taste of my justice, too. You yourself will be prevented by the beasts in the Circus from looking on at the effect your warning words have produced. But as yet you are alive, and you shall hear what the experiences are which make the severest measures the highest justice.

"What did I hope to find, and what have I really found? I heard the Alexandrians praised for their hospitality—for the ardor with which they pursue learning—for the great proficiency of their astronomers—for the piety which has raised so many altars and invented so many doctrines; and, lastly, for the beauty and fine wit of their women.

"And this hospitality! All that I have known of it is a flood of malicious abuse and knavish scoffing, which penetrated even to the gates of this temple, my dwelling. I came here as emperor, and treason pursued me wherever I went—even into my own apartments; for there you stand, whom a barbarian had to hinder from stabbing me with the knife of the assassin. And your learning? You have heard my opinion of the Museum. And the astrologers of this renowned observatory? The very opposite of all they promised me has come to pass.

"Religion? The people, of whom you know as little from the musty volumes of the Museum as of 'Ultima Thule'—the people indeed practice it. The old gods are necessary to them. They are the bread of life to them. But instead of those you have offered them sour, unripe fruit, with a glittering rind—from your own garden, of your own growing. The fruit of trees is a gift from Nature, and all that she brings forth has some good in it; but what you offer to the world is hollow and poisonous. Your rhetoric gives it an attractive exterior, and that, too, comes from the Museum. There they are shrewd enough to create

new gods, which start up out of the earth like mushrooms. If it should only occur to them, they would raise murder to the dignity of god of gods, and you to be his high-priest."

"That would be your office," interposed the philosopher.

"You shall see," returned the emperor, laughing shrilly, "and the witlings of the Museum with you! You use the knife; but hear the words of the master: The teeth of wild beasts and their claws are weapons not to be despised. Your father and brother, and she who taught me what to think of the virtue and faith of Alexandrian women, shall tell you this in Hades. Soon shall every one of those follow you thither who forgot, even by a glance of the eye, that I was Caesar and a guest of this city! After the next performance in the Circus the offenders shall tell you in the other world how I administer justice. No later than the day after to-morrow, I imagine, you may meet there with several companions from the Museum. There will be enough to clap applause at the disputations!" Caracalla ended his vehement speech with a jeering laugh, and looked round eagerly for applause from the "friends" for whose benefit his last words had been spoken; and it was offered so energetically as to drown the philosopher's reply.

But Caracalla heard it, and when the noise subsided he asked his condemned victim:

"What did you mean by your exclamation, 'And yet I would that death might spare me'?"

"In order, if that should come true," returned the philosopher quickly, his voice trembling with indignation, "that I might be a witness of the grim mockery with which the all-requiting gods will destroy you, their defender."

"The gods!" laughed the emperor. "My respect for your logic grows less and less. You, the skeptic, expect the deeds of a mortal man from the gods whose existence you deny!"

Then cried Philip, and his great eyes burning with hatred and indignation sought the emperor's: "Till this hour I was sure of nothing, and therefore uncertain of the existence of a god; but now I believe firmly that Nature, by whom everything is carried out according to everlasting, immutable laws, and who casts out and destroys anything that threatens to bring discord into the harmonious workings of all her parts, would of her own accord bring forth a god, if there be not one already, who should crush you, the destroyer of life and peace, in his all-powerful hand!"

Here his wild outburst of indignation was brought to an abrupt close, for a furious blow from Caracalla's fist sent his enfeebled enemy staggering back against the wall near the window.

Mad with rage, Caracalla shrieked hoarsely

"To the beasts with him! No, not to the beasts—to the torture! He and his sister! The punishment I have bethought me of—scum of the earth—"

But the wild despair of the other, in whose breast hatred and fever burned with equal strength, now reached the highest pitch. Like a hunted deer which stays its flight for a moment to find an outlet or to turn upon his pursuers, he gazed wildly round him, and before the emperor could finish his threat; leaning against the pillar of the window as if prepared to receive his death-blow, he interrupted Caracalla:

"If your dull wit can invent no death to satisfy your cruelty, the blood-hound Zminis can aid you. You are a worthy couple. Curses on you!...."

"At him!" yelled the emperor to Macrinus and the legate, for no substitute had appeared for the centurion he had dismissed.

But while the nobles advanced warily upon the madman, and Macrinus called to the Germanic body-guard in the anteroom, Philip had turned like lightning and disappeared through the window.

The legates and Caesar came too late to hold him back, and from below came cries of: "Crushed!—dead! . . . What crime has he committed? . . . They cast him down! . . . He can not have done it himself . . . Impossible! . . . His arms are bound. . . A new manner of death invented specially for the Alexandrians!"

Then another whistle sounded, and the shout, "Down with the tyrant!"

But no second cry followed. The place was too full of soldiers and lictors.

"Caracalla heard it all. He turned back into the room, wiped the perspiration from his brow, and said in a voice of studied unconcern, yet with horrible harshness:

"He deserved his death-ten times over. However, I have to thank him for a good suggestion. I had forgotten the Egyptian Zminis. If he is still alive, Macrinus, take him from his dungeon and bring him

here. But quickly—in a chariot! Let him come just as he is. I can make use of him now."

The prefect bowed assent, and by the rapidity with which he departed he betrayed how willingly he carried out this order of his master's.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Possess little and require nothing

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A THORNY PATH — VOLUME 10 ***

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