

Homo Sum, Volume 5.

Georg Ebers

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HOMO SUM

By Georg Ebers

Volume 5.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Common natures can only be lightly touched by the immeasurable depth of anguish that is experienced by a soul that despairs of itself; but the more heavily the blow of such suffering falls, the more surely does it work with purifying power on him who has to taste of that cup.

Paulus thought no more of the fair, sleeping woman; tortured by acute remorse he lay on the hard stones, feeling that he had striven in vain. When he had taken Hermas' sin and punishment and disgrace upon himself, it had seemed to him that he was treading in the very footsteps of the Saviour. And now?--He felt like one who, while running for a prize, stumbles over a stone and grovels in the sand when he is already close to the goal.

"God sees the will and not the deed," he muttered to himself. "What I did wrong with regard to Sirona--or what I did not do--that matters not. When I leaned over her, I had fallen utterly and entirely into the power of the evil one, and was an ally of the deadliest enemy of Him to whom I had dedicated my life and soul. Of what avail was my flight from the world, and my useless sojourn in the desert? He who always keeps out of the way of the battle can easily boast of being unconquered to the end--but is he therefore a hero? The palm belongs to him who in the midst of the struggles and affairs of the world clings to the heavenward road, and never lets himself be diverted from it; but as for me who walk here alone, a woman and a boy cross my path, and one threatens and the other beckons to me, and I forget my aim and stumble into the bog of iniquity. And so I cannot find--no, here I cannot find what I strive after. But how then--how? Enlighten me, O Lord, and reveal to me what I must do."

Thus thinking he rose, knelt down, and prayed fervently; when at last he came to the 'Amen,' his head was burning, and his tongue parched.

The clouds had parted, though they still hung in black masses in the west; from time to time gleams of lightning shone luridly on the horizon and lighted up the jagged peak of mountain with a flare; the moon had risen, but its waning disk was frequently obscured by dark driving masses of cloud; blinding flashes, tender light, and utter darkness were alternating with bewildering rapidity, when Paulus at last collected himself, and went down to the spring to drink, and to cool his brow in the fresh water. Striding from stone to stone he told himself, that ere

he could begin a new life, he must do penance--some heavy penance; but what was it to be? He was standing at the very margin of the brook, hemmed in by cliffs, and was bending down to it, but before he had moistened his lips he drew back: just because he was so thirsty he resolved to deny himself drink. Hastily, almost vehemently, he turned his back on the spring, and after this little victory over himself, his storm-tossed heart seemed a little calmer. Far, far from hence and from the wilderness and from the Sacred Mountain he felt impelled to fly, and he would gladly have fled then and there to a distance. Whither should he flee? It was all the same, for he was in search of suffering, and suffering, like weeds, grows on every road. And from whom? This question repeated itself again and again as if he had shouted it in the very home of echo, and the answer was not hard to find: "It is from yourself that you would flee. It is your own inmost self that is your enemy; bury yourself in what desert you will, it will pursue you, and it would be easier for you to cut off your shadow than to leave that behind?"

His whole consciousness was absorbed by this sense of impotency, and now, after the stormy excitement of the last few hours, the deepest depression took possession of his mind. Exhausted, unstrung, full of loathing of himself and life, he sank down on a stone, and thought over the occurrences of the last few days with perfect impartiality.

"Of all the fools that ever I met," thought he, "I have gone farthest in folly, and have thereby led things into a state of confusion which I myself could not make straight again, even if I were a sage--which I certainly never shall be any more than a tortoise or a phoenix. I once heard tell of a hermit who, because it is written that we ought to bury the dead, and because he had no corpse, slew a traveller that he might fulfil the commandment: I have acted in exactly the same way, for, in order to spare another man suffering and to bear the sins of another, I have plunged an innocent woman into misery, and made myself indeed a sinner. As soon as it is light I will go down to the oasis and confess to Petrus and Dorothea what I have done. They will punish me, and I will honestly help them, so that nothing of the penance that they may lay upon me may be remitted. The less mercy I show to myself, the more will the Eternal judge show to me."

He rose, considered the position of the stars, and when he perceived that morning was not far off, he prepared to return to Sirona, who was no longer any more to him than an unhappy woman to whom he owed reparation for much evil, when a loud cry of distress in the immediate vicinity fell on his ear.

He mechanically stooped to pick up a stone for a weapon, and listened. He knew every rock in the neighborhood of the spring, and when the strange groan again made itself heard, he knew that it came from a spot which he knew well and where he had often rested, because a large flat stone supported by a stout pillar of granite, stood up far above the surrounding rocks, and afforded protection from the sun, even at noonday, when not a hand's breath of shade was to be found elsewhere.

Perhaps some wounded beast had crept under the rock for shelter from the rain. Paulus went cautiously forward. The groaning sounded louder and more distinct than before, and beyond a doubt it was the voice of a human being.

The anchorite hastily threw away the stone, fell upon his knees, and soon

found on the dry spot of ground under the stone, and in the farthest nook of the retreat, a motionless human form.

"It is most likely a herdsman that has been struck by lightning," thought he, as he felt with his hands the curly head of the sufferer, and the strong arms that now hung down powerless. As he raised the injured man, who still uttered low moans, and supported his head on his broad breast, the sweet perfume of fine ointment was wafted to him from his hair, and a fearful suspicion dawned upon his mind.

"Polykarp!" he cried, while he clasped his hands more tightly round the body of the sufferer who, thus called upon, moved and muttered a few unintelligible words; in a low tone, but still much too clearly for Paulus, for he now knew for certain that he had guessed rightly. With a loud cry of horror he grasped the youth's powerless form, raised him in his arms, and carried him like a child to the margin of the spring where he laid his noble burden down in the moist grass; Polykarp started and opened his eyes.

Morning was already dawning, the light clouds on the eastern horizon were already edged with rosy fringes, and the coming day began to lift the dark veil from the forms and hues of creation.

The young man recognized the anchorite, who with trembling hands was washing the wound at the back of his head, and his eye assumed an angry glare as he called up all his remaining strength and pushed his attendant from him. Paulus did not withdraw, he accepted the blow from his victim as a gift or a greeting, thinking, "Aye, and I only wish you had a dagger in your hand; I would not resist you."

The artist's wound was frightfully wide and deep, but the blood had flowed among his thick curls, and had clotted over the lacerated veins like a thick dressing. The water with which Paulus now washed his head reopened them, and renewed the bleeding, and after the one powerful effort with which Polykarp pushed away his enemy, he fell back senseless in his arms. The wan morning-light added to the pallor of the bloodless countenance that lay with glazed eyes in the anchorite's lap.

"He is dying!" murmured Paulus in deadly anguish and with choking breath, while he looked across the valley and up to the heights, seeking help. The mountain rose in front of him, its majestic mass glowing in the rosy dawn, while light translucent vapor floated round the peak where the Lord had written His laws for His chosen people, and for all peoples, on tables of stone; it seemed to Paulus that he saw the giant form of Moses far, far up on its sublimest height and that from his lips in brazen tones the strictest of all the commandments was thundered down upon him with awful wrath, "Thou shalt not kill!"

Paulus clasped his hands before his face in silent despair, while his victim still lay in his lap. He had closed his eyes, for he dared not look on the youth's pale countenance, and still less dared he look up at the mountain; but the brazen voice from the height did not cease, and sounded louder and louder; half beside himself with excitement, in his inward ear he heard it still, "Thou shalt not kill!" and then again, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife!" a third time, "Thou shalt not commit adultery!" and at last a fourth, "Thou shalt have none other gods but me!"

He that sins against one of those laws is damned; and he--he had broken

them all, broken them while striving to tread the thorny path to a life of blessedness.

Suddenly and wildly he threw his arms up to heaven, and sighing deeply, gazed up at the sacred hill.

What was that? On the topmost peak of Sinai whence the Pharanite sentinels were accustomed to watch the distance, a handkerchief was waving as a signal that the enemy were approaching.

He could not be mistaken, and as in the face of approaching danger he collected himself and recovered his powers of thought and deliberation, his ear distinctly caught the mighty floods of stirring sound that came over the mountain, from the brazen cymbals struck by the watchmen to warn the inhabitants of the oasis, and the anchorites.

Was Hermas returned? Had the Blemmyes outstripped him? From what quarter were the marauding hosts coming on? Could he venture to remain here near his victim, or was it his duty to use his powerful arms in defence of his helpless companions? In agonized doubt he looked down at the youth's pallid features, and deep, sorrowful compassion filled his mind.

How promising was this young tree of humanity that his rough fist had broken off! and these brown curls had only yesterday been stroked by a mother's hand. His eyes filled with tears, and he bent as tenderly as a father might over the pale face, and pressed a gentle kiss on the bloodless lips of the senseless youth. A thrill of joy shot through him, for Polykarp's lips were indeed not cold, he moved his hand, and now--the Lord be praised! he actually opened his eyes.

"And I am not a murderer!" A thousand voices seem to sing with joy in his heart, and then he thought to himself, "First I will carry him down to his parents in the oasis, and then go up to the brethren."

But the brazen signals rang out with renewed power, and the stillness of the holy wilderness was broken here by the clatter of men's voices, there by a blast of trumpets, and there again by stifled cries. It was as if a charm had given life to the rocks and lent their voices; as if noise and clamor were rushing like wild torrents down every gorge and cleft of the mountainside.

"It is too late," sighed the anchorite. "If I only could--if I only knew--"

"Hallo! hallo! holy Paulus!" a shrill woman's voice which seemed to come from high up in the air rang out joyful and triumphant, interrupting the irresolute man's meditations, "Hermas is alive! Hermas is here again! Only look up at the heights. There flies the standard, for he has warned the sentinels. The Blemmyes are coming on, and he sent me to seek you. You must come to the strong tower on the western side of the ravine. Make haste! come at once! Do you hear? He told me to tell you. But the man in your lap--it is--yes, it is--"

"It is your master's son Polykarp," Paulus called back to her. "He is hurt unto death; hurry down to the oasis, and tell the senator, tell Dame Dorothea--"

"I have something else to do now," interrupted the shepherdess. "Hermas

has sent me to warn Gelasius, Psoes, and Dulas, and if I went down into the oasis they would lock me up, and not let me come up the mountain again. What has happened to the poor fellow? But it is all the same: there is something else for you to do besides grieving over a hole in Polykarp's head. Go up to the tower, I tell you, and let him lie--or carry him up with you into your new den, and hand him over to your sweetheart to nurse."

"Demon!" exclaimed Paulus, taking up a stone.

"Let him be!" repeated Miriam. "I will betray her hiding-place to Phoebicius, if you do not do as Dermas orders you. Now I am off to call the others, and we shall meet again at the tower. And you had better not linger too long with your fair companion--pious Paulus--saintly Paulus!"

And laughing loudly, she sprang away from rock to rock as if borne up by the air.

The Alexandrian looked wrathfully after her; but her advice did not seem to be bad, he lifted the wounded man on his shoulders, and hastily carried him up towards his cave; but before he could reach it he heard steps, and a loud agonized scream, and in a few seconds Sirona was by his side, crying in passionate grief, "It is he, it is he--and oh, to see him thus!--But he must live, for if he were dead your God of Love would be inexorable, pitiless, hard, cruel--it would be--"

She could say no more, for tears choked her voice, and Paulus, without listening to her lamentation, passed quickly on in front of her, entered the cave and laid the unconscious man down on the couch, saying gravely but kindly, as Sirona threw herself on her knees and pressed the young man's powerless hand to her lips, "If indeed you truly love him, cease crying and lamenting. He yesterday got a severe wound on his head; I have washed it, now do you bind it up with care, and keep it constantly cool with fresh water. You know your way to the spring; when he recovers his senses rub his feet, and give him some bread and a few drops of the wine which you will find in the little cellar hard by; there is some oil there too, which you will need for a light.

"I must go up to the brethren, and if I do not return to-morrow, give the poor lad over to his mother to nurse. Only tell her this, that I, Paulus, gave him this wound in a moment of rage, and to forgive me if she can, she and Petrus. And you too forgive me that in which I have sinned against you, and if I should fall in the battle which awaits us, pray that the Lord may not be too hard upon me in the day of judgment, for my sins are great and many."

At this moment the sound of the trumpets sounded even into the deepest recess of the cave. Sirona started. "That is the Roman tuba," she exclaimed. "I know the sound--Phoebicius is coming this way."

"He is doing his duty," replied Paulus. "And still, one thing more. I saw last night a ring on your hand--an onyx."

"There it lies," said Sirona; and she pointed to the farthest corner of the cave, where it lay on the dusty soil.

"Let it remain there," Paulus begged of her; he bent over the senseless man once more to kiss his forehead, raised his hand towards Sirona in sign of blessing, and rushed out into the open air.

CHAPTER XIX.

Two paths led over the mountain from the oasis to the sea; both followed deep and stony gorges, one of which was named the "short cut," because the traveller reached his destination more quickly by that road than by following the better road in the other ravine, which was practicable for beasts of burden. Half-way up the height the "short cut" opened out on a little plateau, whose western side was shut in by a high mass of rock with steep and precipitous flanks. At the top of this rock stood a tower built of rough blocks, in which the anchorites were wont to take refuge when they were threatened with a descent of their foes.

The position of this castle--as the penitents proudly styled their tower--was well-chosen, for from its summit they commanded not only the "short cut" to the oasis, but also the narrow shell-strewn strip of desert which divided the western declivity of the Holy Mountain from the shore, the blue-green waters of the sea, and the distant chain of hills on the African coast.

Whatever approached the tower, whether from afar or from the neighborhood, was at once espied by them, and the side of the rock which was turned to the roadway was so precipitous and smooth that it remained inaccessible even to the natives of the desert, who, with their naked feet and sinewy arms, could climb points which even the wild goat and the jackal made a circuit to avoid. It was more accessible from the other side, and in order to secure that, a very strong wall had been built, which enclosed the level on which the castle stood in the form of a horseshoe, of which the ends abutted on the declivity of the short road. This structure was so roughly and inartistically heaped together that it looked as if formed by nature rather than by the hand of man. The rough and unfinished appearance of this wall-like heap of stones was heightened by the quantity of large and small pieces of granite which were piled on the top of it, and which had been collected by the anchorites, in case of an incursion, to roll and hurl down on the invading robbers. A cistern had been dug out of the rocky soil of the plateau which the wall enclosed, and care was taken to keep it constantly filled with water.

Such precautions were absolutely necessary, for the anchorites were threatened with dangers from two sides. First from the Ishmaelite hordes of Saracens who fell upon them from the east, and secondly from the Blemmyes, the wild inhabitants of the desert country which borders the fertile lands of Egypt and Nubia, and particularly of the barren highlands that part the Red Sea from the Nile valley; they crossed the sea in light skiffs, and then poured over the mountain like a swarm of locusts.

The little stores and savings which the defenceless hermits treasured in their caves had tempted the Blemmyes again and again, in spite of the Roman garrison in Pharan, which usually made its appearance on the scene of their incursion long after they had disappeared with their scanty booty. Not many months since, the raid had been effected in which old Stephanus had been wounded by an arrow, and there was every reason to hope that the wild marauders would not return very soon, for Phoebicius, the commander of the Roman maniple in the oasis, was swift and vigorous in his office, and though he had not succeeded in protecting the

anchorites from all damage, he had followed up the Blemmyes, who fled at his approach, and cut them off from rejoining their boats. A battle took place between the barbarians and the Romans, not far from the coast on the desert tract dividing the hills from the sea, which resulted in the total annihilation of the wild tribes and gave ground to hope that such a lesson might serve as a warning to the sons of the desert. But if hitherto the more easily quelled promptings of covetousness had led them to cross the sea, they were now animated by the most sacred of all duties, by the law which required them to avenge the blood of their fathers and brothers, and they dared to plan a fresh incursion in which they should put forth all their resources. They were at the same time obliged to exercise the greatest caution, and collected their forces of young men in the valleys that lay hidden in the long range of coast-hills.

The passage of the narrow arm of the sea that parted them from Arabia Petraea, was to be effected in the first dark night; the sun, this evening, had set behind heavy storm-clouds that had discharged themselves in violent rain and had obscured the light of the waning moon. So they drew their boats and rafts down to the sea, and, unobserved by the sentinels on the mountain who had taken shelter from the storm under their little penthouses, they would have reached the opposite shore, the mountain, and perhaps even the oasis, if some one had not warned the anchorites--and that some one was Hermas.

Obedient to the commands of Paulus, the lad had appropriated three of his friend's gold pieces, had provided himself with a bow and arrows and some bread, and then, after muttering a farewell to his father who was asleep in his cave, he set out for Raithu. Happy in the sense of his strength and manhood, proud of the task which had been set him and which he deemed worthy of a future soldier, and cheerfully ready to fulfil it even at the cost of his life, he hastened forward in the bright moonlight. He quitted the path at the spot where, to render the ascent possible even to the vigorous desert-travellers, it took a zigzag line, and clambered from rock to rock, up and down in a direct line; when he came to a level spot he flew on as if pursuers were at his heels. After sunrise he refreshed himself with a morsel of food, and then hurried on again, not heeding the heat of noon, nor that of the soft sand in which his foot sank as he followed the line of the sea-coast.

Thus passionately hurrying onwards he thought neither of Sirona nor of his past life--only of the hills on the farther shore and of the Blemmyes--how he should best surprise them, and, when he had learnt their plans, how he might recross the sea and return to his own people. At last, as he got more and more weary, as the heat of the sun grew more oppressive, and as the blood rushed more painfully to his heart and began to throb more rapidly in his temples, he lost all power of thought, and that which dwelt in his mind was no more than a dumb longing to reach his destination as soon as possible.

It was the third afternoon when he saw from afar the palms of Raithu, and hurried on with revived strength. Before the sun had set he had informed the anchorite, to whom Paulus had directed him, that the Alexandrian declined their call, and was minded to remain on the Holy Mountain.

Then Hermas proceeded to the little harbor, to bargain with the fishermen of the place for the boat which he needed. While he was talking with an old Amalekite boatman, who, with his black-eyed sons, was arranging his nets, two riders came at a quick pace towards the bay in which a large

merchant-ship lay at anchor, surrounded by little barks. The fisherman pointed to it.

"It is waiting for the caravan from Petra," he said. "There, on the dromedary, is the emperor's great warrior who commands the Romans in Pharan."

Hermas saw Phoebicius for the first time, and as he rode up towards him and the fisherman he started; if he had followed his first impulse, he would have turned and have taken to flight, but his clear eyes had met the dull and searching glance of the centurion, and, blushing at his own weakness, he stood still with his arms crossed, and proudly and defiantly awaited the Gaul who with his companion came straight up to him.

Talib had previously seen the youth by his father's side; he recognized him and asked how long he had been there, and if he had come direct from the mountain. Hermas answered him as was becoming, and understood at once that it was not he that the centurion was seeking.

Perfectly reassured and not without curiosity he looked at the new-comer, and a smile curled his lips as he observed that the lean old man, exhausted by his long and hurried ride, could scarcely hold himself on his beast, and at the same time it struck him that this pitiable old man was the husband of the blooming and youthful Sirona. Far from feeling any remorse for his intrusion into this man's house, he yielded entirely to the audacious humor with which his aspect filled him, and when Phoebicius himself asked him as to whether he had not met on his way with a fair-haired woman and a limping greyhound, he replied, repressing his laughter with difficulty:

"Aye, indeed! I did see such a woman and her dog, but I do not think it was lame."

"Where did you see her?" asked Phoebicius hastily. Hermas colored, for he was obliged to tell an untruth, and it might be that he would do Sirona an injury by giving false information. He therefore ventured to give no decided answer, but enquired, "Has the woman committed some crime that you are pursuing her?"

"A great one!" replied Talib, "she is my lord's wife, and--"

What she has done wrong concerns me alone,' said Phoebicius, sharply interrupting his companion. "I hope this fellow saw better than you who took the crying woman with a child, from Aila, for Sirona. What is your name, boy?"

"Hermas," answered the lad. "And who are you, pray?"

The Gaul's lips were parted for an angry reply, but he suppressed it and said, "I am the emperor's centurion, and I ask you, what did the woman look like whom you saw, and where did you meet her?"

The soldier's fierce looks, and his captain's words showed Hermas that the fugitive woman had nothing good to expect if she were caught, and as he was not in the least inclined to assist her pursuers he hastily replied, giving the reins to his audacity, "I at any rate did not meet the person whom you seek; the woman I saw is certainly not this man's wife, for she might very well be his granddaughter. She had gold hair, and a rosy face, and the greyhound that followed her was called lambe."

"Where did you meet her?" shrieked the centurion.

"In the fishing-village at the foot of the mountain," replied Hermas.
"She got into a boat, and away it went!"

"Towards the north?" asked the Gaul.

"I think so," replied Hermas, "but I do not know, for I was in a hurry, and could not look after her."

"Then we will try to take her in Klysma," cried Phoebicius to the Amalekite. "If only there were horses in this accursed desert!"

"It is four days' journey," said Talib considering. "And beyond Elim there is no water before the Wells of Moses. Certainly if we could get good dromedaries--"

"And if," interrupted Hermas, "it were not better that you, my lord centurion, should not go so far from the oasis. For over there they say that the Blemmyes are gathering, and I myself am going across as a spy so soon as it is dark."

Phoebicius looked down gloomily considering the matter. The news had reached him too that the sons of the desert were preparing for a new incursion, and he cried to Talib angrily but decidedly, as he turned his back upon Hermas, "You must ride alone to Klysma, and try to capture her. I cannot and will not neglect my duty for the sake of the wretched woman."

Hermas looked after him as he went away, and laughed out loud when he saw him disappear into his inn. He hired a boat from the old man for his passage across the sea for one of the gold pieces given him by Paulus, and lying down on the nets he refreshed himself by a deep sleep of some hours' duration. When the moon rose he was roused in obedience to his orders, and helped the boy who accompanied him, and who understood the management of the sails and rudder, to push the boat, which was laid up on the sand, down into the sea. Soon he was flying over the smooth and glistening waters before a light wind, and he felt as fresh and strong in spirit as a young eagle that has just left the nest, and spreads its mighty wings for the first time. He could have shouted in his new and delicious sense of freedom, and the boy at the stern shook his head in astonishment when he saw Hermas wield the oars he had entrusted to him, unskilfully it is true, but with mighty strokes.

"The wind is in our favor," he called out to the anchorite as he hauled round the sail with the rope in his hand, "we shall get on without your working so hard. You may save your strength."

"There is plenty of it, and I need not be stingy of it," answered Hermas, and he bent forward for another powerful stroke.

About half-way he took a rest, and admired the reflection of the moon in the bright mirror of the water, and he could not but think of Petrus' court-yard that had shone in the same silvery light when he had climbed up to Sirona's window. The image of the fair, whitearmed woman recurred to his mind, and a melancholy longing began to creep over him.

He sighed softly, again and yet again; but as his breast heaved for the

third bitter sigh, he remembered the object of his journey and his broken fetters, and with eager arrogance he struck the oar flat on to the water so that it spurted high up, and sprinkled the boat and him with a shower of wet and twinkling diamond drops. He began to work the oars again, reflecting as he did so, that he had something better to do than to think of a woman. Indeed, he found it easy to forget Sirona completely, for in the next few days he went through every excitement of a warrior's life.

Scarcely two hours after his start from Raithu he was standing on the soil of another continent, and, after finding a hiding-place for his boat, he slipped off among the hills to watch the movements of the Blemmyes. The very first day he went up to the valley in which they were gathering; on the second, after being many times seen and pursued, he succeeded in seizing a warrior who had been sent out to reconnoitre, and in carrying him off with him; he bound him, and by heavy threats learned many things from him.

The number of their collected enemies was great, but Hermas had hopes of outstripping them, for his prisoner revealed to him the spot where their boats, drawn up on shore, lay hidden under sand and stones.

As soon as it was dusk, the anchorite in his boat went towards the place of embarkation, and when the Blemmyes, in the darkness of midnight, drew their first bark into the water, Hermas sailed off ahead of the enemy, landed in much danger below the western declivity of the mountain, and hastened up towards Sinai to warn the Pharanite watchmen on the beacon.

He gained the top of the difficult peak before sunrise, roused the lazy sentinels who had left their posts, and before they were able to mount guard, to hoist the flags or to begin to sound the brazen cymbals, he had hurried on down the valley to his father's cave.

Since his disappearance Miriam had incessantly hovered round Stephanus' dwelling, and had fetched fresh water for the old man every morning, noon and evening, even after a new nurse, who was clumsier and more peevish, had taken Paulus' place. She lived on roots, and on the bread the sick man gave her, and at night she lay down to sleep in a deep dry cleft of the rock that she had long known well. She quitted her hard bed before daybreak to refill the old man's pitcher, and to chatter to him about Hermas.

She was a willing servant to Stephanus because as often as she went to him, she could hear his son's name from his lips, and he rejoiced at her coming because she always gave him the opportunity of talking of Hermas.

For many weeks the sick man had been so accustomed to let himself be waited on that he accepted the shepherdess's good offices as a matter of course, and she never attempted to account to herself for her readiness to serve him. Stephanus would have suffered in dispensing with her, and to her, her visits to the well and her conversations with the old man had become a need, nay a necessity, for she still was ignorant whether Hermas was yet alive, or whether Phoebicius had killed him in consequence of her betrayal. Perhaps all that Stephanus told her of his son's journey of investigation was an invention of Paulus to spare the sick man, and accustom him gradually to the loss of his child; and yet she was only too willing to believe that Hermas still lived, and she quitted the neighborhood of the cave as late as possible, and filled the sick man's water-jar before the sun was up, only because she said to herself that the fugitive on his return would seek no one else so soon as his father.

She had not one really quiet moment, for if a falling stone, an approaching footstep, or the cry of a beast broke the stillness of the desert she at once hid herself, and listened with a beating heart; much less from fear of Petrus her master, from whom she had run away, than in the expectation of hearing the step of the man whom she had betrayed into the hand of his enemy, and for whom she nevertheless painfully longed day and night.

As often as she lingered by the spring she wetted her stubborn hair to smooth it, and washed her face with as much zeal as if she thought she should succeed in washing the dark hue out of her skin. And all this she did for him, that on his return she might charm him as much as the white woman in the oasis, whom she hated as fiercely as she loved him passionately.

During the heavy storm of last night a torrent from the mountain-height had shed itself into her retreat and had driven her out of it. Wet through, shelterless, tormented by remorse, fear and longing, she had clambered from stone to stone, and sought refuge and peace under first one rock and then another; thus she had been attracted by the glimmer of light that shone out of the new dwelling of the pious Paulus; she had seen and recognized the Alexandrian, but he had not observed her as he cowered on the ground near his hearth deeply sunk in thought.

She knew now where the excommunicated man dwelt after whom Stephanus often asked, and she had gathered from the old man's lamentations and dark hints, that Paulus too had been ensnared and brought to ruin by her enemy.

As the morning-star began to pale Miriam went up to Stephanus' cave; her heart was full of tears, and yet she was unable to pour out her need and suffering in a soothing flood of weeping; she was wholly possessed with a wild desire to sink down on the earth there and die, and to be released by death from her relentless, driving torment. But it was still too early to disturb the old man--and yet--she must hear a human voice, one word--even if it were a hard word--from the lips of a human being; for the bewildering feeling of distraction which confused her mind, and the misery of abandonment that crushed her heart, were all too cruelly painful to be borne.

She was standing by the entrance to the cave when, high above her head, she heard the falling of stones and the cry of a human voice. She started and listened with out-stretched neck and strung sinews, motionless. Then she broke suddenly into a loud and piercing shout of joy, and flinging up her arms she flew up the mountain towards a traveller who came swiftly down to meet her.

"Hermas! Hermas!" she shouted, and all the sunny delight of her heart was reflected in her cry so clearly and purely that the sympathetic chords in the young man's soul echoed the sound, and he hailed her with joyful welcome.

He had never before greeted her thus, and the tone of his voice revived her poor crushed heart like a restorative draught offered by a tender hand to the lips of the dying. Exquisite delight, and a glow of gratitude such as she had never before felt flooded her soul, and as he was so good to her she longed to show him that she had something to offer in return for the gift of friendship which he offered her. So the first

thing she said to him was, "I have staid constantly near your father, and have brought him water early and late, as much as he needed."

She blushed as she thus for the first time praised herself to him, but Hermas exclaimed, "That is a good girl! and I will not forget it. You are a wild, silly thing, but I believe that you are to be relied on by those to whom you feel kindly."

"Only try me," cried Miriam holding out her hand to him. He took it, and as they went on together he said:

"Do you hear the brass? I have warned the watchmen up there; the Blemmyes are coming. Is Paulus with my father?"

"No, but I know where he is."

"Then you must call him," said the young man. "Him first and then Gelasius, and Psoes, and Dulas, and any more of the penitents that you can find. They must all go to the castle by the ravine. Now I will go to my father; you hurry on and show that you are to be trusted." As he spoke he put his arm round her waist, but she slipped shyly away, and calling out, "I will take them all the message," she hurried off.

In front of the cave where she had hoped to meet with Paulus she found Sirona; she did not stop with her, but contented herself with laughing wildly and calling out words of abuse.

Guided by the idea that she should find the Alexandrian at the nearest well, she went on and called him, then hurrying on from cave to cave she delivered her message in Hermas' name, happy to serve him.

CHAPTER XX.

They were all collected behind the rough wall on the edge of the ravine—the strange men who had turned their back on life with all its joys and pails, its duties and its delights, on the community and family to which they belonged, and had fled to the desert, there to strive for a prize above and beyond this life, when they had of their own free-will renounced all other effort. In the voiceless desert, far from the enticing echoes of the world, it might be easy to kill every sensual impulse, to throw off the fetters of the world, and so bring that humanity, which was bound to the dust through sin and the flesh, nearer to the pure and incorporate being of the Divinity.

All these men were Christians, and, like the Saviour who had freely taken torments upon Himself to become the Redeemer, they too sought through the purifying power of suffering to free themselves from the dross of their impure human nature, and by severe penance to contribute their share of atonement for their own guilt, and for that of all their race. No fear of persecution had driven them into the desert—nothing but the hope of gaining the hardest of victories.

All the anchorites who had been summoned to the tower were Egyptians and Syrians, and among the former particularly there were many who, being already inured to abstinence and penance in the service of the old gods in their own country, now as Christians had selected as the scene of

their pious exercises the very spot where the Lord must have revealed Himself to his elect.

At a later date not merely Sinai itself but the whole tract of Arabia Petraea--through which, as it was said, the Jews at their exodus under Moses had wandered--was peopled with ascetics of like mind, who gave to their settlements the names of the resting-places of the chosen people, as mentioned in the Scriptures; but as yet there was no connection between the individual penitents, no order ruled their lives; they might still be counted by tens, though ere long they numbered hundreds and thousands.

The threat of danger had brought all these contemners of the world and of life in stormy haste to the shelter of the tower, in spite of their readiness to die. Only old Kosmas, who had withdrawn to the desert with his wife--she had found a grave there--had remained in his cave, and had declared to Gelasius, who shared his cave and who had urged him to flight, that he was content in whatever place or whatever hour the Lord should call him, and that it was in God's hands to decide whether old age or an arrow-shot should open to him the gates of heaven.

It was quite otherwise with the rest of the anchorites, who rushed through the narrow door of the watchtower and into its inner room till it was filled to overflowing, and Paulus, who in the presence of danger had fully recovered his equanimity, was obliged to refuse admission to a new-comer in order to preserve the closely packed and trembling crowd from injury.

No murrain passes from beast to beast, no mildew from fruit to fruit with such rapidity as fear spreads from man to man. Those who had been driven by the sharpest lashings of terror had run the fastest, and reached the castle first. They had received those who followed them with lamentation and outcries, and it was a pitiable sight to see how the terrified crowd, in the midst of their loud declarations of resignation to God's guidance and their pious prayers, wrung their hands, and at the same time how painfully anxious each one was to hide the little property he had saved first from the disapproval of his companions, and then from the covetousness of the approaching enemy.

With Paulus came Sergius and Jeremias to whom, on the way, he had spoken words of encouragement. All three did their utmost to revive the confidence of the terrified men, and when the Alexandrian reminded them how zealously each of them only a few weeks since had helped to roll the blocks and stones from the wall, and down the precipice, so as to crush and slay the advancing enemy the feeling was strong in many of them that, as he had already proved himself worthy in defence, it was due to him now to make him their leader.

The number of the men who rushed out of the tower was increasing, and when Hermas appeared with his father on his back and followed by Miriam, and when Paulus exhorted his companions to be edified by this pathetic picture of filial love, curiosity tempted even the last loiterers in the tower out into the open space.

The Alexandrian sprang over the wall, went up to Stephanus, lifted him from the shoulders of the panting youth and, taking him on his own, carried him towards the tower; but the old warrior refused to enter the place of refuge, and begged his friend to lay him down by the wall. Paulus obeyed his wish and then went with Hermas to the top of the tower

to spy the distance from thence.

As soon as he had quitted him, Stephanus turned to the anchorites who stood near him, saying, "These stones are loose, and though my strength is indeed small still it is great enough to send one of them over with a push. If it comes to a battle my old soldier's eyes, dim as they are now, may with the help of yours see many things that may be useful to you young ones. Above all things, if the game is to be a hot one for the robbers, one must command here whom the others will obey."

"It shall be you, father," interrupted Salathiel the Syrian. "You have served in Caesar's army, and you proved your courage and knowledge of war in the last raid. You shall command us."

Stephanus sadly shook his head and replied, "My voice is become too weak and low since this wound in my breast and my long illness. Not even those who stand nearest to me would understand me in the noise of battle. Let Paulus be your captain, for he is strong, cautious and brave."

Many of the anchorites had long looked upon the Alexandrian as their best stay; for many years he had enjoyed the respect of all and on a thousand occasions had given proof of his strength and presence of mind, but at this proposal they looked at each other in surprise, doubt and disapproval.

Stephanus saw what was passing in their minds.

"It is true he has erred gravely," he said. "And before God he is the least of the least among us; but in animal strength and indomitable courage he is superior to you all. Which of you would be willing to take his place, if you reject his guidance."

"Orion the Saite," cried one of the anchorites, "is tall and strong. If he would--"

But Orion eagerly excused himself from assuming the dangerous office, and when Andreas and Joseph also refused with no less decision the leadership that was offered them, Stephanus said:

"You see there is no choice left us but to be, the Alexandrian to command us here so long as the robbers threaten us, and no longer. There he comes--shall I ask him?"

A murmur of consent, though by no means of satisfaction, answered the old man, and Paulus, quite carried away by his eagerness to stake his life and blood for the protection of the weak, and fevered with a soldier's ardor, accepted Stephanus' commission as a matter of course, and set to work like a general to organize the helpless wearers of sheepskin.

Some he sent to the top of the tower to keep watch, others he charged with the transport of the stones; to a third party he entrusted the duty of hurling pieces of rock and blocks of stone down into the abyss in the moment of danger; he requested the weaker brethren to assemble themselves together, to pray for the others and to sing hymns of praise, and he concerted signs and passwords with all; he was now here, now there, and his energy and confidence infused themselves even into the faint-hearted.

In the midst of these arrangements Hermas took leave of him and of his father, for he heard the Roman war-trumpets and the drums of the young

manhood of Pharan, as they marched through the short cut to meet the enemy. He knew where the main strength of the Blemmyes lay and communicated this knowledge to the Centurion Phoebicius and the captain of the Pharanites. The Gaul put a few short questions to Hermas, whom he recognized immediately, for since he had met him at the harbor of Raithu he could not forget his eyes, which reminded him of those of Glycera; and after receiving his hasty and decided answers he issued rapid and prudent orders.

A third of the Pharanites were to march forward against the enemy, drumming and trumpeting, and then retreat as far as the watch-tower as the enemy approached over the plain. If the Blemmyes allowed themselves to be tempted thither, a second third of the warriors of the oasis, that could easily be in ambush in a cross-valley, were to fall on their left flank, while Phoebicius and his maniple--hidden behind the rock on which the castle stood--would suddenly rush out and so decide the battle. The last third of the Pharanites had orders to destroy the ships of the invaders under the command of Hermas, who knew the spot where they had landed.

In the worst case the centurion and his men could retreat into the castle, and there defend themselves till the warriors of the nearest seaports--whither messengers were already on their way--should come to the rescue.

The Gaul's orders were immediately obeyed, and Hermas walked at the head of the division entrusted to him, as proud and as self-possessed as any of Caesar's veterans leading his legion into the field. He carried a bow and arrows at his back, and in his hand a battleaxe that he had bought at Raithu.

Miriam attempted to follow the troops he was leading, but he observed her, and called out, "Go up to the fort, child, to my father." And the shepherdess obeyed without hesitation.

The anchorites had all crowded to the edge of the precipice, they looked at the division of the forces, and signed and shouted down. They had hoped that some part of the fighting men would be joined to them for their defence, but, as they soon learned, they had hoped in vain. Stephanus, whose feeble sight could not reach so far as the plain at the foot of the declivity, made Paulus report to him all that was going on there, and with the keen insight of a soldier he comprehended the centurion's plan. The troop led by Hermas passed by below the tower, and the youth waved and shouted a greeting up to his father. Stephanus, whose hearing remained sharper than his sight, recognized his son's voice and took leave of him with tender and loving words in as loud a voice as he could command. Paulus collected all the overflow of the old man's heart in one sentence, and called out his blessings through his two hands as a speaking-trumpet, after his friend's son as he departed to battle. Hermas understood; but deeply as he was touched by this farewell he answered only by dumb signs. A father can find a hundred words of blessing sooner than a son can find one of thanks.

As the youth disappeared behind the rocks, Paulus said, "He marches on like an experienced soldier, and the others follow him as sheep follow a ram. But hark!--Certainly--the foremost division of the Pharanites and the enemy have met. The outcry comes nearer and nearer."

"Then all will be well," cried Stephanus excitedly. "If they only take

the bait and let themselves be drawn on to the plateau I think they are lost. From here we can watch the whole progress of the battle, and if our side are driven back it may easily happen that they will throw themselves into the castle. Now not a pebble must be thrown in vain, for if our tower becomes the central point of the struggle the defenders will need stones to fling."

These words were heard by several of the anchorites, and as now the war-cries and the noise of the fight came nearer and nearer, and one and another repeated to each other that their place of refuge would, become the centre of the combat, the frightened penitents quitted the posts assigned to them by Paulus, ran hither and thither in spite of the Alexandrian's severe prohibition, and most of them at last joined the company of the old and feeble, whose psalms grew more and more lamentable as danger pressed closer upon them.

Loudest of all was the wailing of the Saite Orion who cried with uplifted hands, "What wilt Thou of us miserable creatures, O Lord? When Moses left Thy chosen people on this very spot for only forty days, they at once fell away from Thee; and we, we without any leader have spent all our life in Thy service, and have given up all that can rejoice the heart, and have taken every kind of suffering upon us to please Thee! and now these hideous heathen are surging round us again, and will kill us. Is this the reward of victory for our striving and our long wrestling?"

The rest joined in the lamentation of the Saite, but Paulus stepped into their midst, blamed them for their cowardice, and with warm and urgent speech implored them to return to their posts so that the wall might be guarded at least on the eastern and more accessible side, and that the castle might not fall an easy prey into the hands of an enemy from whom no quarter was to be expected. Some of the anchorites were already proceeding to obey the Alexandrian's injunction, when a fearful cry, the war-cry of the Blemmyes who were in pursuit of the Pharanites, rose from the foot of their rock of refuge.

They crowded together again in terror; Salathiel the Syrian, had ventured to the edge of the abyss, and had looked over old Stephanus' shoulder down into the hollow, and when he rushed back to his companions, crying in terror, "Our men are flying!"

Gelasius shrieked aloud, beat his breast, and tore his rough black hair, crying out:

"O Lord God, what wilt Thou of us? Is it vain then to strive after righteousness and virtue that Thou givest us over unto death, and dost not fight for us? If we are overcome by the heathen, ungodliness and brute force will boast themselves as though they had won the victory over righteousness and truth!"

Paulus had turned from the lamenting hermits, perplexed and beside himself, and stood with Stephanus watching the fight.

The Blemmyes had come in great numbers, and their attack, before which the Pharanites were to have retired as a feint, fell with such force upon the foremost division that they and their comrades, who had rushed to their aid on the plateau, were unable to resist it, and were driven back as far as the spot where the ravine narrowed.

"Things are not as they should be," said Stephanus. "And the cowardly band, like a drove of cattle," cried Paulus in a fury, "leave the walls unprotected, and blaspheme God instead of watching or fighting."

The anchorites noticed his gestures, which were indeed those of a desperate man, and Sergius exclaimed: "Are we then wholly abandoned? Why does not the thorn-bush light its fires, and destroy the evil-doers with its flames? Why is the thunder silent, and where are the lightnings that played round the peak of Sinai?"

"Why does not darkness fall upon us to affright the heathen? Why does not the earth open her mouth to swallow them up like the company of Korah?"

"The Might of God," cried Dulas, "tarries too long. The Lord must set our piety in a doubtful light, for He treats us as though we were unworthy of all care."

"And that you are!" exclaimed Paulus, who had heard the last words, and who was dragging rather than leading the feeble Stephanus to the unguarded eastern wall. "That you are, for instead of resisting His enemies you blaspheme God, and disgrace yourself by your miserable cowardice. Look at this sick old man who is prepared to defend you, and obey my orders without a murmur, or, by the holy martyrs, I will drag you to your posts by your hair and ears, and will--"

But he ceased speaking, for his threats were interrupted by a powerful voice which called his name from the foot of the wall.

"That is Agapitus," exclaimed Stephanus. "Lead me to the wall, and set me down there."

Before Paulus could accede to his friend's wish the tall form of the bishop was standing by his side. Agapitus the Cappadocian had in his youth been a warrior; he had hardly passed the limits of middle age, and was a vigilant captain of his congregation. When all the youth of Pharan had gone forth to meet the Blemmyes, he had no peace in the oasis, and, after enjoining on the presbyters and deacons that they should pray in the church for the fighting men with the women and the men who remained behind, he himself, accompanied by a guide and two acolytes, had gone up the mountain to witness the battle.

To the other priests and his wife who sought to detain him, he had answered, "Where the flock is there should the shepherd be!"

Unseen and unheard he had gained the castle-wall and had been a witness to Paulus' vehement speech. He now stood opposite the Alexandrian with rolling eyes, and threateningly lifted his powerful hand as he called out to him:

"And dare an outcast speak thus to his brethren? Will the champion of Satan give orders to the soldiers of the Lord? It would indeed be a joy to you if by your strong arm you could win back the good name that your soul, crippled by sin and guilt, has flung away. Come on, my friends! the Lord is with us and will help us."

Paulus had let the bishop's words pass over him in silence, and raised his hands like the other anchorites when Agapitus stepped into their midst, and uttered a short and urgent prayer.

After the "Amen" the bishop pointed out, like a general, to each man, even to the feeble and aged, his place by the wall or behind the stones for throwing, and then cried out with a clear ringing voice that sounded above all other noise, "Show to-day that you are indeed soldiers of the Most High."

Not one rebelled, and when man by man each had placed himself at his post, he went to the precipice and looked attentively down at the fight that was raging below.

The Pharanites were now opposing the attack of the Blemmyes with success, for Phoebicius, rushing forward with his men from their ambush, had fallen upon the compact mass of the sons of the desert in flank and, spreading death and ruin, had divided them into two bodies. The well-trained and well-armed Romans seemed to have an easy task with their naked opponents, who, in a hand to hand fight, could not avail themselves of either their arrows or their spears. But the Blemmyes had learned to use their strength in frequent battles with the imperial troops, and so soon as they perceived that they were no match for their enemies in pitched battle, their leaders set up a strange shrill cry, their ranks dissolved, and they dispersed in all directions, like a heap of feathers strewn by a gust of wind.

Agapitus took the hasty disappearance of the enemy for wild flight, he sighed deeply and thankfully and turned to go down to the field of battle, and to speak consolation to his wounded fellow-Christians.

But in the castle itself he found opportunity for exercising his pious office, for before him stood the shepherdess whom he had already observed on his arrival and she said with much embarrassment, but clearly and quickly, "Old Stephanus there, my lord bishop--Hermas' father for whom I carry water-bids me ask you to come to him; for his wound has reopened and he thinks his end is near."

Agapitus immediately obeyed this call; he went with hasty steps towards the sick man, whose wound Paulus and Orion had already bound up, and greeted him with a familiarity that he was far from showing to the other penitents. He had long known the former name and the fate of Stephanus, and it was by his advice that Hermas had been obliged to join the deputation sent to Alexandria, for Agapitus was of opinion that no one ought to flee from the battle of life without having first taken some part in it.

Stephanus put out his hand to the bishop who sat down beside him, signed to the bystanders to leave them alone, and listened attentively to the feeble words of the sufferer. When he had ceased speaking, Agapitus said:

"I praise the Lord with you for having permitted your lost wife to find the ways that lead to Him, and your son will be--as you were once--a valiant man of war. Your earthly house is set in order, but are you prepared for the other, the everlasting mansion?"

"For eighteen years I have done penance, and prayed, and borne great sufferings," answered the sick man. "The world lies far behind me, and I hope I am walking in the path that leads to heaven."

"So do I hope for you and for your soul," said the bishop. "That which it is hardest to endure has fallen to your lot in this world, but have

you striven to forgive those who did you the bitterest wrong, and can you pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive them that sin against us?" Do you remember the words, 'If ye forgive men their trespasses your heavenly father will also forgive you?'"

"Not only have I pardoned Glycera," answered Stephanus, "but I have taken her again into my heart of hearts; but the man who basely seduced her, the wretch, who although I had done him a thousand benefits, betrayed me, robbed me and dishonored me, I wish him--"

"Forgive him," cried Agapitus, "as you would be forgiven."

"I have striven these eighteen years to bless my enemy," replied Stephanus, "and I will still continue to strive--"

Up to this moment the bishop had devoted his whole attention to the sick anchorite, but he was now called on all sides at once, and Gelasius, who was standing by the declivity with some other anchorites, called out to him, "Father--save us--the heathen there are climbing up the rocks."

Agapitus signed a blessing over Stephanus and then turned away from him, saying earnestly once more, "Forgive, and heaven is open to you."

Many wounded and dead lay on the plain, and the Pharanites were retreating into the ravine, for the Blemmyes had not indeed fled, but had only dispersed themselves, and then had climbed up the rocks which hemmed in the level ground and shot their arrows at their enemies from thence.

"Where are the Romans?" Agapitus eagerly enquired of Orion.

"They are withdrawing into the gorge through which the road leads up here," answered the Saite. "But look! only look at these heathen! The Lord be merciful to us! they are climbing up the cliffs like woodpeckers up a tree."

"The stones, fly to the stones!" cried Agapitus with flashing eyes to the anchorites that stood by. "What is going on behind the wall there? Do you hear? Yes that is the Roman tuba. Courage, brethren! the emperor's soldiers are guarding the weakest side of the castle. But look here at the naked figures in the cleft. Bring the blocks here; set your shoulders stoutly to it, Orion! one more push, Salathiel! There it goes, it crashes down if only it does not stick in the rift! No! thank God, it has bounded off--that was a leap! Well done--there were six enemies of the Lord destroyed at once."

"I see three more yonder," cried Orion. "Come here, Damianus, and help me."

The man he called rushed forward with several others, and the first success raised the courage of the anchorites so rapidly and wonderfully that the bishop soon found it difficult to restrain their zeal, and to persuade them to be sparing with the precious missiles.

While, under the direction of Agapitus stone after stone was hurled clattering over the steep precipice down upon the Blemmyes, Paulus sat by the sick man, looking at the ground.

"You are not helping them?" asked Stephanus. "Agapitus is right," replied the Alexandrian. "I have much to expiate, and fighting brings

enjoyment. How great enjoyment I can understand by the torture it is to me to sit still. The bishop blessed you affectionately."

"I am near the goal," sighed Stephanus, "and he promises me the joys of heaven if I only forgive him who stole my wife from me. He is forgiven--yes, all is forgiven him, and may everything that he undertakes turn to good; yea, and nothing turn to evil--only feel how my heart throbs, it is rallying its strength once more before it utterly ceases to beat. When it is all over repeat to Hermas everything that I have told you, and bless him a thousand, thousand times in my name and his mother's; but never, never tell him that in an hour of weakness she ran away with that villain--that man, that miserable man I mean--whom I forgive. Give Hermas this ring, and with it the letter that you will find under the dry herbs on the couch in my cave; they will secure him a reception from his uncle, who will also procure him a place in the army, for my brother is in high favor with Caesar. Only listen how Agapitus urges on our men; they are fighting bravely there; that is the Roman tuba. Attend to me--the maniple will occupy the castle and shoot down on the heathen from hence; when they come carry me into the tower. I am weak and would fain collect my thoughts, and pray once more that I may find strength to forgive the man not with my lips only."

Down there see--there come the Romans," cried Paulus interrupting him. "Here, up here!" he called down to the men, "The steps are more to the left."

"Here we are," answered a sharp voice. "You stay there, you people, on that projection of rock, and keep your eye on the castle. If any danger threatens call me with the trumpet. I will climb up, and from the top of the tower there I can see where the dogs come from."

During this speech Stephanus had looked down and listened; when a few minutes later the Gaul reached the wall and called out to the men inside, "Is there no one there who will give me a hand?" he turned to Paulus, saying, "Lift me up and support me--quick!"

With an agility that astonished the Alexandrian, Stephanus stood upon his feet, leaned over the wall towards the centurion--who had climbed as far as the outer foot of it, looked him in the face with eager attention, shuddered violently, and repressing his feelings with the utmost effort offered him his lean hand to help him.

"Servianus!" cried the centurion, who was greatly shocked by such a meeting and in such a place, and who, struggling painfully for composure, stared first at the old man and then at Paulus.

Not one of the three succeeded in uttering a word; but Stephanus' eyes were fixed on the Gaul's features, and the longer he looked at him the hollower grew his cheeks and the paler his lips; at the same time he still held out his hand to the other, perhaps in token of forgiveness.

So passed a long minute. Then Phoebicius recollected that he had climbed the wall in the emperor's service, and stamping with impatience at himself he took the old man's hand in a hasty grasp. But scarcely had Stephanus felt the touch of the Gaul's fingers when he started as struck by lightning, and flung himself with a hoarse cry on his enemy who was hanging on the edge of the wall.

Paulus gazed in horror at the frightful scene, and cried aloud with

fervent unction, "Let him go--forgive that heaven may forgive you."

"Heaven! what is heaven, what is forgiveness!" screamed the old man. "He shall be damned." Before the Alexandrian could hinder him, the loose stone over which the enemies were wrestling in breathless combat gave way, and both were hurled into the abyss with the falling rock.

Paulus groaned from the lowest depth of his breast and murmured while the tears ran down his cheeks, "He too has fought the fight, and he too has striven in vain."

CHAPTER XXI.

The fight was ended; the sun as it went to its rest behind the Holy Mountain had lighted many corpses of Blemmyes, and now the stars shone down on the oasis from the clear sky.

Hymns of praise sounded out of the church, and near it, under the hill against which it was built, torches were blazing and threw their ruddy light on a row of biers, on which under green palm-branches lay the heroes who had fallen in the battle against the Blemmyes. Now the hymn ceased, the gates of the house of God opened and Agapitus led his followers towards the dead. The congregation gathered in a half-circle round their peaceful brethren, and heard the blessing that their pastor pronounced over the noble victims who had shed their blood in fighting the heathen. When it was ended those who in life had been their nearest and dearest went up to the dead, and many tears fell into the sand from the eye of a mother or a wife, many a sigh went up to heaven from a father's breast. Next to the bier, on which old Stephanus was resting, stood another and a smaller one, and between the two Hermas knelt and wept. He raised his face, for a deep and kindly voice spoke his name.

"Petrus," said the lad, clasping the hand that the senator held out to him, "I felt forced and driven out into the world, and away from my father--and now he is gone for ever how gladly I would have been kept by him."

"He died a noble death, in battle for those he loved," said the senator consolingly,

"Paulus was near him when he fell," replied Hermas. "My father fell from the wall while defending the tower; but look here this girl--poor child--who used to keep your goats, died like a heroine. Poor, wild Miriam, how kind I would be to you if only you were alive now!"

Hermas as he spoke stroked the arm of the shepherdess, pressed a kiss on her small, cold hand, and softly folded it with the other across her bosom.

"How did the girl get into the battle with the men?" asked Petrus. "But you can tell me that in my own house. Come and be our guest as long as it pleases you, and until you go forth into the world; thanks are due to you from us all."

Hermas blushed and modestly declined the praises which were showered on him on all sides as the savior of the oasis. When the wailing women

appeared he knelt once more at the head of his father's bier, cast a last loving look at Miriam's peaceful face, and then followed his host.

The man and boy crossed the court together. Hermas involuntarily glanced up at the window where more than once he had seen Sirona, and said, as he pointed to the centurion's house, "He too fell."

Petrus nodded and opened the door of his house. In the hall, which was lighted up, Dorothea came hastily to meet him, asking, "No news yet of Polykarp?"

Her husband shook his head, and she added, "How indeed is it possible? He will write at the soonest from Klysma or perhaps even from Alexandria."

"That is just what I think," replied Petrus, looking down to the ground. Then he turned to Hermas and introduced him to his wife.

Dorothea received the young man with warm sympathy; she had heard that his father had fallen in the fight, and how nobly he too had distinguished himself. Supper was ready, and Hermas was invited to share it. The mistress gave her daughter a sign to make preparations for their guest, but Petrus detained Marthana, and said, "Hermas may fill Antonius' place; he has still something to do with some of the workmen. Where are Jethro and the house-slaves?"

"They have already eaten," said Dorothea.

The husband and wife looked at each other, and Petrus said with a melancholy smile, "I believe they are up on the mountain."

Dorothea wiped a tear from her eye as she replied, "They will meet Antonius there. If only they could find Polykarp! And yet I honestly say--not merely to comfort you--it is most probable that he has not met with any accident in the mountain gorges, but has gone to Alexandria to escape the memories that follow him here at every step--Was not that the gate?"

She rose quickly and looked into the court, while Petrus, who had followed her, did the same, saying with a deep sigh, as he turned to Marthana--who, while she offered meat and bread to Hermas was watching her parents--"It was only the slave Anubis."

For some time a painful silence reigned round the large table, to-day so sparsely furnished with guests.

At last Petrus turned to his guest and said, "You were to tell me how the shepherdess Miriam lost her life in the struggle. She had run away from our house--"

"Up the mountain," added Hermas. "She supplied my poor father with water like a daughter."

"You see, mother," interrupted Marthana, "she was not bad-hearted--I always said so."

"This morning," continued Hermas, nodding in sad assent to the maiden, "she followed my father to the castle, and immediately after his fall, Paulus told me, she rushed away from it, but only to seek me and to bring

me the sad news. We had known each other a long time, for years she had watered her goats at our well, and while I was still quite a boy and she a little girl, she would listen for hours when I played on my willow pipe the songs which Paulus had taught me. As long as I played she was perfectly quiet, and when I ceased she wanted to hear more and still more, until I had too much of it and went away. Then she would grow angry, and if I would not do her will she would scold me with bad words. But she always came again, and as I had no other companion and she was the only creature who cared to listen to me, I was very well-content that she should prefer our well to all the others. Then we grew older and I began to be afraid of her, for she would talk in such a godless way--and she even died a heathen. Paulus, who once overheard us, warned me against her, and as I had long thrown away the pipe and hunted beasts with my bow and arrow whenever my father would let me, I was with her for shorter intervals when I went to the well to draw water, and we became more and more strangers; indeed, I could be quite hard to her. Only once after I came back from the capital something happened--but that I need not tell you. The poor child was so unhappy at being a slave and no doubt had first seen the light in a free-house.

"She was fond of me, more than a sister is of a brother--and when my father was dead she felt that I ought not to learn the news from any one but herself. She had seen which way I had gone with the Pharanites and followed me up, and she soon found me, for she had the eyes of a gazelle and the ears of a startled bird. It was not this time difficult to find me, for when she sought me we were fighting with the Blemmyes in the green hollow that leads from the mountain to the sea. They roared with fury like wild beasts, for before we could get to the sea the fishermen in the little town below had discovered their boats, which they had hidden under sand and stones, and had carried them off to their harbor. The boy from Raithu who accompanied me, had by my orders kept them in sight, and had led the fishermen to the hiding-place. The watchmen whom they had left with the boats had fled, and had reached their companions who were fighting round the castle; and at least two hundred of them had been sent back to the shore to recover possession of the boats and to punish the fishermen. This troop met us in the green valley, and there we fell to fighting.

"The Blemmyes outnumbered us; they soon surrounded us before and behind, on the right side and on the left, for they jumped and climbed from rock to rock like mountain goats and then shot down their reed-arrows from above. Three or four touched me, and one pierced my hair and remained hanging in it with the feather at the end of the shaft.

"How the battle went elsewhere I cannot tell you, for the blood mounted to my head, and I was only conscious that I myself snorted and shouted like a madman and wrestled with the heathen now here and now there, and more than once lifted my axe to cleave a skull. At the same time I saw a part of our men turn to fly, and I called them back with furious words; then they turned round and followed me again.

"Once, in the midst of the struggle, I saw Miriam too, clinging pale and trembling to a rock and looking on at the fight. I shouted to her to leave the spot, and go back to my father, but she stood still and shook her head with a gesture--a gesture so full of pity and anguish--I shall never forget it. With hands and eyes she signed to me that my father was dead, and I understood; at least I understood that some dreadful misfortune had happened. I had no time for reflection, for before I could gain any certain information by word of mouth, a captain of the

heathen had seized me, and we came to a life and death struggle before Miriam's very eyes. My opponent was strong, but I showed the girl--who had often taunted me for being a weakling because I obeyed my father in everything--that I need yield to no one. I could not have borne to be vanquished before her and I flung the heathen to the ground and slew him with my axe. I was only vaguely conscious of her presence, for during my severe struggle I could see nothing but my adversary. But suddenly I heard a loud scream, and Miriam sank bleeding close before me. While I was kneeling over his comrade one of the Blemmyes had crept up to me, and had flung his lance at me from a few paces off. But Miriam--Miriam--"

"She saved you at the cost of her own life," said Petrus completing the lad's sentence, for at the recollection of the occurrence his voice had failed and his eyes overflowed with tears.

Hermas nodded assent, and then added softly: "She threw up her arms and called my name as the spear struck her. The eldest son of Obedianus punished the heathen that had done it, and I supported her as she fell dying and took her curly head on my knees and spoke her name; she opened her eyes once more, and spoke mine softly and with indescribable tenderness. I had never thought that wild Miriam could speak so sweetly, I was overcome with terrible grief, and kissed her eyes and her lips. She looked at me once more with a long, wide-open, blissful gaze, and then she was dead."

"She was a heathen," said Dorothea, drying her eyes, "but for such a death the Lord will forgive her much."

"I loved her dearly," said Marthana, "and will lay my sweetest flowers on her grave. May I cut some sprays from your blooming myrtle for a wreath?"

"To-morrow, to-morrow, my child," replied Dorothea. "Now go to rest; it is already very late."

"Only let me stay till Antonius and Jethro come back," begged the girl.

"I would willingly help you to find your son," said Hermas, "and if you wish I will go to Raithu and Klysmas, and enquire among the fishermen. Had the centurion--" and as he spoke the young soldier looked down in some embarrassment, "had the centurion found his fugitive wife of whom he was in pursuit with Talib, the Amalekite, before he died?"

"Sirona has not yet reappeared," replied Petrus, and perhaps--but just now you mentioned the name of Paulus, who was so dear to you and your father. Do you know that it was he who so shamelessly ruined the domestic peace of the centurion?"

"Paulus!" cried Hermas. "How can you believe it?"

"Phoebicius found his sheepskin in his wife's room," replied Petrus gravely. "And the impudent Alexandrian recognized it as his own before us all and allowed the Gaul to punish him. He committed the disgraceful deed the very evening that you were sent off to gain intelligence."

"And Phoebicius flogged him?" cried Hermas beside himself. "And the poor fellow bore this disgrace and your blame, and all--all for my sake. Now I understand what he meant! I met him after the battle and he told me that my father was dead. When he parted from me, he said he was of

all sinners the greatest, and that I should hear it said down in the oasis. But I know better; he is great-hearted and good, and I will not bear that he should be disgraced and slandered for my sake." Hermas had sprung up with these words, and as he met the astonished gaze of his hosts, he tried to collect himself, and said:

"Paulus never even saw Sirona, and I repeat it, if there is a man who may boast of being good and pure and quite without sin, it is he. For me, and to save me from punishment and my father from sorrow, he owned a sin that he never committed. Such a deed is just like him--the brave--faithful friend! But such shameful suspicion and disgrace shall not weigh upon him a moment longer!"

"You are speaking to an older man," said Petrus angrily interrupting the youth's vehement speech. "Your friend acknowledged with his own lips--"

"Then he told a lie out of pure goodness," Hermas insisted. "The sheepskin that the Gaul found was mine. I had gone to Sirona, while her husband was sacrificing to Mithras, to fetch some wine for my father, and she allowed me to try on the centurion's armor; when he unexpectedly returned I leaped out into the street and forgot that luckless sheepskin. Paulus met me as I fled, and said he would set it all right, and sent me away--to take my place and save my father a great trouble. Look at me as severely as you will, Dorothea, but it was only in thoughtless folly that I slipped into the Gaul's house that evening, and by the memory of my father--of whom heaven has this day bereft me--I swear that Sirona only amused herself with me as with a boy, a child, and even refused to let me kiss her beautiful golden hair. As surely as I hope to become a warrior, and as surely as my father's spirit hears what I say, the guilt that Paulus took upon himself was never committed at all, and when you condemned Sirona you did an injustice, for she never broke her faith to her husband for me, nor still less for Paulus."

Petrus and Dorothea exchanged a meaning glance, and Dorothea said:

"Why have we to learn all this from the lips of a stranger? It sounds very extraordinary, and yet how simple! Aye, husband, it would have become us better to guess something of this than to doubt Sirona. From the first it certainly seemed to me impossible that that handsome woman, for whom quite different people had troubled themselves should err for this queer beggar--"

"What cruel injustice has fallen on the poor man!" cried Petrus. "If he had boasted of some noble deed, we should indeed have been less ready to give him credence."

"We are suffering heavy punishment," sighed Dorothea, "and my heart is bleeding. Why did you not come to us, Hermas, if you wanted wine? How much suffering would have been spared if you had!"

The lad looked down, and was silent; but soon he recollected himself, and said eagerly:

"Let me go and seek the hapless Paulus; I return you thanks for your kindness but I cannot bear to stay here any longer. I must go back to the mountain."

The senator and his wife did not detain him, and when the court-yard gate had closed upon him a great stillness reigned in Petrus' sitting-room.

Dorothea leaned far back in her seat and sat looking in her lap while the tears rolled over her cheeks; Marthana held her hand and stroked it, and the senator stepped to the window and sighed deeply as he looked down into the dark court. Sorrow lay on all their hearts like a heavy leaden burden. All was still in the spacious room, only now and then a loud, long-drawn cry of the wailing women rang through the quiet night and reached them through the open window; it was a heavy hour, rich in vain, but silent self-accusation, in anxiety, and short prayers; poor in hope or consolation.

Presently Petrus heaved a deep sigh, and Dorothea rose to go up to him and to say to him some sincere word of affection; but just then the dogs in the yard barked, and the agonized father said softly--in deep dejection, and prepared for the worst:

"Most likely it is they."

The deaconess pressed his hand in hers, but drew back when a light tap was heard at the court-yard gate. "It is not Jethro and Antonius," said Petrus, "they have a key."

Marthana had gone up to him, and she clung to him as he leaned far out of the window and called to whoever it was that had tapped:

"Who is that knocking?"

The dogs barked so loud that neither the senator nor the women were able to hear the answer which seemed to be returned.

"Listen to Argus," said Dorothea, "he never howls like that, but when you come home or one of us, or when he is pleased."

Petrus laid his finger on his lips and sounded a clear, shrill whistle, and as the dogs, obedient to this signal, were silent, he once more called out, "Whoever you may be, say plainly who you are, that I may open the gate."

They were kept waiting some few minutes for the answer, and the senator was on the point of repeating his enquiry, when a gentle voice timidly came from the gate to the window, saying, "It is I, Petrus, the fugitive Sirona." Hardly had the words tremulously pierced the silence, when Marthana broke from her father, whose hand was resting on her shoulder, and flew out of the door, down the steps and out to the gate.

"Sirona; poor, dear Sirona," cried the girl as she pushed back the bolt; as soon as she had opened the door and Sirona had entered the court, she threw herself on her neck, and kissed and stroked her as if she were her long lost sister found again; then, without allowing her to speak, she seized her hand and drew her--in spite of the slight resistance she offered--with many affectionate exclamations up the steps and into the sitting-room. Petrus and Dorothea met her on the threshold, and the latter pressed her to her heart, kissed her forehead and said, "Poor woman; we know now that we have done you an injustice, and will try to make it good." The senator too went up to her, took her hand and added his greetings to those of his wife, for he knew not whether she had as yet heard of her husband's end.

Sirona could not find a word in reply. She had expected to be expelled as a castaway when she came down the mountain, losing her way in the

darkness. Her sandals were cut by the sharp rocks, and hung in strips to her bleeding feet, her beautiful hair was tumbled by the night-wind, and her white robe looked like a ragged beggar's garment, for she had torn it to make bandages for Polykarp's wound.

Some hours had already passed since she had left her patient--her heart full of dread for him and of anxiety as to the hard reception she might meet with from his parents.

How her hand shook with fear of Petrus and Dorothea as she raised the brazen knocker of the senator's door, and now--a father, a mother, a sister opened their arms to her, and an affectionate home smiled upon her. Her heart and soul overflowed with boundless emotion and unlimited thankfulness, and weeping loudly, she pressed her clasped hands to her breast.

But she spared only a few moments for the enjoyment of these feelings of delight, for there was no happiness for her without Polykarp, and it was for his sake that she had undertaken this perilous night-journey. Marthana had tenderly approached her, but she gently put her aside, saying, "Not just now, dear girl. I have already wasted an hour, for I lost my way in the ravines. Get ready Petrus to come back to the mountain with me at once, for--but do not be startled Dorothea, Paulus says that the worst danger is over, and if Polykarp--"

"For God's sake, do you know where he is?" cried Dorothea, and her cheeks crimsoned while Petrus turned pale, and, interrupting her, asked in breathless anxiety, "Where is Polykarp, and what has happened to him?"

"Prepare yourself to hear bad news," said Sirona, looking at the pair with mournful anxiety as if to crave their pardon for the evil tidings she was obliged to bring. "Polykarp had a fall on a sharp stone and so wounded his head. Paulus brought him to me this morning before he set out against the Blemmyes, that I might nurse him. I have incessantly cooled his wound, and towards mid-day he opened his eyes and knew me again, and said you would be anxious about him. After sundown he went to sleep, but he is not wholly free from fever, and as soon as Paulus came in I set out to quiet your anxiety and to entreat you to give me a cooling potion, that I may return to him with it at once." The deepest sorrow sounded in Sirona's accents as she told her story, and tears had started to her eyes as she related to the parents what had befallen their son. Petrus and Dorothea listened as to a singer, who, dressed indeed in robes of mourning, nevertheless sings a lay of return and hope to a harp wreathed with flowers.

Quick, quick, Marthana," cried Dorothea eagerly and with sparkling eyes, before Sirona had ended. "Quick, the basket with the bandages. I will mix the fever-draught myself." Petrus went up to the Gaulish woman.

"It is really no worse than you represent?" he asked in a low voice. "He is alive? and Paulus--"

"Paulus says," interrupted Sirona, "that with good nursing the sick man will be well in a few weeks."

"And you can lead me to him?"

"Oh, alas! alas!" Sirona cried, striking her hand against her forehead. "I shall never succeed in finding my way back, for I noticed no way--"

marks! But stay--Before us a penitent from Memphis, who has been dead a few weeks--"

"Old Serapion?" asked Petrus.

"That was his name," exclaimed Sirona. "Do you know his cave?"

"How should I?" replied Petrus. "But perhaps Agapitus--"

"The spring where I got the water to cool Polykarp's wound, Paulus calls the partridge's-spring."

"The partridge's-spring," repeated the senator, "I know that." With a deep sigh he took his staff, and called to Dorothea, "Do you prepare the draught, the bandages, torches, and your good litter, while I knock at our neighbor Magadon's door, and ask him to lend us slaves."

"Let me go with you," said Marthana. "No, no; you stay here with your mother."

"And do you think that I can wait here?" asked Dorothea. "I am going with you."

"There is much here for you to do," replied Petrus evasively, "and we must climb the hill quickly."

"I should certainly delay you," sighed the mother, "but take the girl with you; she has a light and lucky hand."

"If you think it best," said the senator, and he left the room.

While the mother and daughter prepared everything for the night-expedition, and came and went, they found time to put many questions and say many affectionate words to Sirona. Marthana, even without interrupting her work, set food and drink for the weary woman on the table by which she had sunk on a seat; but she hardly moistened her lips.

When the young girl showed her the basket that she had filled with medicine and linen bandages, with wine and pure water, Sirona said, "Now lend me a pair of your strongest sandals, for mine are all torn, and I cannot follow the men without shoes, for the stones are sharp, and cut into the flesh."

Marthana now perceived for the first time the blood on her friend's feet, she quickly took the lamp from the table and placed it on the pavement, exclaiming, as she knelt down in front of Sirona and took her slender white feet in her hand to look at the wounds on the soles, "Good heavens! here are three deep cuts!"

In a moment she had a basin at hand, and was carefully bathing the wounds in Sirona's feet; while she was wrapping the injured foot in strips of linen Dorothea came up to them.

"I would," she said, "that Polykarp were only here now, this roll would suffice to bind you both." A faint flush overspread Sirona's cheeks, but Dorothea was suddenly conscious of what she had said, and Marthana gently pressed her friend's hand.

When the bandage was securely fixed, Sirona attempted to walk, but she

succeeded so badly that Petrus, who now came back with his friend Magadon and his sons, and several slaves, found it necessary to strictly forbid her to accompany them. He felt sure of finding his son without her, for one of Magadon's people had often carried bread and oil to old Serapion and knew his cave.

Before the senator and his daughter left the room he whispered a few words to his wife, and together they went up to Sirona.

"Do you know," he asked, "what has happened to your husband?"

"Sirona nodded. "I heard it from Paulus," she answered. "Now I am quite alone in the world."

"Not so," replied Petrus. "You will find shelter and love under our roof as if it were your father's, so long as it suits you to stay with us. You need not thank us--we are deeply in your debt. Farewell till we meet again wife. I would Polykarp were safe here, and that you had seen his wound. Come, Marthana, the minutes are precious."

When Dorothea and Sirona were alone, the deaconess said, "Now I will go and make up a bed for you, for you must be very tired."

"No, no!" begged Sirona. "I will wait and watch with you, for I certainly could not sleep till I know how it is with him." She spoke so warmly and eagerly that the deaconess gratefully offered her hand to her young friend. Then she said, "I will leave you alone for a few minutes, for my heart is so full of anxiety that I must needs go and pray for help for him, and for courage and strength for myself."

"Take me with you," entreated Sirona in a low tone. "In my need I opened my heart to your good and loving God, and I will never more pray to any other. The mere thought of Him strengthened and comforted me, and now, if ever, in this hour I need His merciful support."

"My child, my daughter!" cried the deaconess, deeply moved; she bent over Sirona, kissed her forehead and her lips, and led her by the hand into her quiet sleeping-room.

"This is the place where I most love to pray," she said, "although there is here no image and no altar. My God is everywhere present and in every place I can find Him."

The two women knelt down side by side, and both besought the same God for the same mercies--not for themselves, but for another; and both in their sorrow could give thanks--Sirona, because in Dorothea she had found a mother, and Dorothea, because in Sirona she had found a dear and loving daughter.

CHAPTER XXII.

Paulus was sitting in front of the cave that had sheltered Polykarp and Sirona, and he watched the torches whose light lessened as the bearers went farther and farther towards the valley. They lighted the way for the wounded sculptor, who was being borne home to the oasis, lying in his mother's easy litter, and accompanied by his father and his sister.

"Yet an hour," thought the anchorite, "and the mother will have her son again, yet a week and Polykarp will rise from his bed, yet a year and he will remember nothing of yesterday but a scar--and perhaps a kiss that he pressed on the Gaulish woman's rosy lips. I shall find it harder to forget. The ladder which for so many years I had labored to construct, on which I thought to scale heaven, and which looked to me so lofty and so safe, there it lies broken to pieces, and the hand that struck it down was my own weakness. It would almost seem as if this weakness of mine had more power than what we call moral strength for that which it took the one years to build up, was wrecked by the other in a moment. In weakness only am I a giant."

Paulus shivered at these words, for he was cold. Early in that morning when he had taken upon himself Hermas' guilt he had abjured wearing his sheepskin; now his body, accustomed to the warm wrap, suffered severely, and his blood coursed with fevered haste through his veins since the efforts, night-watches, and excitement of the last few days. He drew his little coat close around him with a shiver and muttered, "I feel like a sheep that has been shorn in midwinter, and my head burns as if I were a baker and had to draw the bread out of the oven; a child might knock me down, and my eyes are heavy. I have not even the energy to collect my thoughts for a prayer, of which I am in such sore need. My goal is undoubtedly the right one, but so soon as I seem to be nearing it, my weakness snatches it from me, as the wind swept back the fruit-laden boughs which Tantalus, parched with thirst, tried to grasp. I fled from the world to this mountain, and the world has pursued me and has flung its snares round my feet. I must seek a lonelier waste in which I may be alone--quite alone with my God and myself. There, perhaps I may find the way I seek, if indeed the fact that the creature that I call "I," in which the whole world with all its agitations in little finds room--and which will accompany me even there--does not once again frustrate all my labor. He who takes his Self with him into the desert, is not alone."

Paulus sighed deeply and then pursued his reflections: "How puffed up with pride I was after I had tasted the Gaul's rods in place of Hermas, and then I was like a drunken man who falls down stairs step by step. And poor Stephanus too had a fall when he was so near the goal! He failed in strength to forgive, and the senator who has just now left me, and whose innocent son I had so badly hurt, when we parted forgivingly gave me his hand. I could see that he did forgive me with all his heart, and this Petrus stands in the midst of life, and is busy early and late with mere worldly affairs."

For a time he looked thoughtfully before him, and then he went on in his soliloquy, "What was the story that old Serapion used to tell? In the Thebaid there dwelt a penitent who thought he led a perfectly saintly life and far transcended all his companions in stern virtue. Once he dreamed that there was in Alexandria a man even more perfect than himself; Phabis was his name, and he was a shoemaker, dwelling in the White road near the harbor of Kibotos. The anchorite at once went to the capital and found the shoemaker, and when he asked him, 'How do you serve the Lord? How do you conduct your life?' Phabis looked at him in astonishment. 'I? well, my Saviour! I work early and late, and provide for my family, and pray morning and evening in few words for the whole city.' Petrus, it seems to me, is such an one as Phabis; but many roads lead to God, and we--and I--"

Again a cold shiver interrupted his meditation, and as morning approached

the cold was so keen that he endeavored to light a fire. While he was painfully blowing the charcoal Hermas came up to him.

He had learned from Polykarp's escort where Paulus was to be found, and as he stood opposite his friend he grasped his hand, stroked his rough hair and thanked him with deep and tender emotion for the great sacrifice he had made for him when he had taken upon himself the dishonoring punishment of his fault.

Paulus declined all pity or thanks, and spoke to Hermas of his father and of his future, until it was light, and the young man prepared to go down to the oasis to pay the last honors to the dead. To his entreaty that he would accompany him, Paulus only answered:

"No--no; not now, not now; for if I were to mix with men now I should fly asunder like a rotten wineskin full of fermenting wine; a swarm of bees is buzzing in my head, and an ant-hill is growing in my bosom. Go now and leave me alone."

After the funeral ceremony Hermas took an affectionate leave of Agapitus, Petrus, and Dorothea, and then returned to the Alexandrian, with whom he went to the cave where he had so long lived with his dead father.

There Paulus delivered to him his father's letter to his uncle, and spoke to him more lovingly than he had ever done before. At night they both lay down on their beds, but neither of them found rest or sleep.

From time to time Paulus murmured in a low voice, but in tones of keen anguish, "In vain--all in vain--" and again, "I seek, I seek--but who can show me the way?"

They both rose before daybreak; Hermas went once more down to the well, knelt down near it, and felt as though he were bidding farewell to his father and Miriam.

Memories of every kind rose up in his soul, and so mighty is the glorifying power of love that the miserable, brown-skinned shepherdess Miriam seemed to him a thousand-fold more beautiful than that splendid woman who filled the soul of a great artist with delight.

Shortly after sunrise Paulus conducted him to the fishing-port, and to the Israelite friend who managed the business of his father's house; he caused him to be bountifully supplied with gold and accompanied him to the ship laden with charcoal, that was to convey him to Klysma.

The parting was very painful to him, and when Hermas saw his eyes full of tears and felt his hands tremble, he said, "Do not be troubled about me, Paulus; we shall meet again, and I will never forget you and my father."

"And your mother," added the anchorite. "I shall miss you sorely, but trouble is the very thing I look for. He who succeeds in making the sorrows of the whole world his own--he whose soul is touched by a sorrow at every breath he draws--he indeed must long for the call of the Redeemer."

Hermas fell weeping on his neck and started to feel how burning the anchorite's lips were as he pressed them to his forehead.

At last the sailors drew in the ropes; Paulus turned once more to the

youth. "You are going your own way now," he said. "Do not forget the Holy Mountain, and hear this: Of all sins three are most deadly: To serve false gods, to covet your neighbor's wife, and to raise your hands to kill; keep yourself from them. And of all virtues two are the least conspicuous, and at the same time the greatest: Truthfulness and humility; practise these. Of all consolations these two are the best: The consciousness of wishing the right however much we may err and stumble through human weakness, and prayer."

Once more he embraced the departing youth, then he went across the sand of the shore back to the mountain without looking round.

Hermas looked after him for a long time greatly distressed, for his strong friend tottered like a drunken man, and often pressed his hand to his head which was no doubt as burning as his lips.

The young warrior never again saw the Holy Mountain or Paulus, but after he himself had won fame and distinction in the army he met again with Petrus' son, Polykarp, whom the emperor had sent for to Byzantium with great honor, and in whose house the Gaulish woman Sirona presided as a true and loving wife and mother.

After his parting from Hermas, Paulus disappeared. The other anchorites long sought him in vain, as well as bishop Agapitus, who had learned from Petrus that the Alexandrian had been punished and expelled in innocence, and who desired to offer him pardon and consolation in his own person. At last, ten days after, Orion the Saite found him in a remote cave. The angel of death had called him only a few hours before while in the act of prayer, for he was scarcely cold. He was kneeling with his forehead against the rocky wall and his emaciated hands were closely clasped over Magdalena's ring. When his companions had laid him on his bier his noble, gentle features wore a pure and transfiguring smile.

The news of his death flew with wonderful rapidity through the oasis and the fishing-town, and far and wide to the caves of the anchorites, and even to the huts of the Amalekite shepherds. The procession that followed him to his last resting-place stretched to an invisible distance; in front of all walked Agapitus with the elders and deacons, and behind them Petrus with his wife and family, to which Sirona now belonged. Polykarp, who was now recovering, laid a palm-branch in token of reconciliation on his grave, which was visited as a sacred spot by the many whose needs he had alleviated in secret, and before long by all the penitents from far and wide.

Petrus erected a monument over his grave, on which Polykarp incised the words which Paulus' trembling fingers had traced just before his death with a piece of charcoal on the wall of his cave:

"Pray for me, a miserable man--for I was a man."

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

He out of the battle can easily boast of being unconquered
Pray for me, a miserable man--for I was a man

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