

ГЕНРИК СЕНКЕВИЧ

LET US
FOLLOW HIM

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Let us follow Him

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	7
CHAPTER III	9
CHAPTER IV	11
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	12

Henryk Sienkiewicz

Let us follow Him

CHAPTER I

Caius Septimius Cinna was a Roman Patrician. He had spent his youth in the legions and in severe camp-life. Later he returned to Rome to enjoy glory, luxury, and a great though somewhat shattered fortune. He used and abused at that time everything which the gigantic city could offer.

His nights were spent at feasts in lordly suburban villas; his days in sword practice with fencers, in discussions with rhetors at the baths, where disputes were held, and where the scandal of the city and the world was related, in circuses, at races, at the struggles of gladiators, or among Greek musicians, Thracian soothsayers, and wonderful dancing-girls from the islands of the Archipelago. He inherited from the renowned Lucullus, a relative on the mother's side, a love for exquisite dishes. At his table were served Grecian wines, Neapolitan oysters, Numidian mice, and locust fat preserved in honey from Pontus.

Whatever Rome possessed Cinna must have, beginning with fish of the Red Sea, and ending with white ptarmigans from the banks of the Borysthenes (Dnieper). He made use of things not only as a soldier run riot, but as a patrician who passes the measure. He had instilled into himself, or had perhaps even roused in himself, a love for the beautiful, – a love for statues rescued from the ruins of Corinth, for pitchers from Attica, for Etruscan vases from foggy Sericum, for Roman mosaics, for fabrics brought from the Euphrates, for Arabian perfumes, and for all the peculiar trifles which filled the void of patrician life.

He knew how to talk of these trifles, as a specialist and connoisseur, with toothless old men, who decked out their baldness in wreaths of roses when going to a feast, and who after the feast chewed heliotrope blossoms to make the breath of their lungs odoriferous. He felt also the beauty of Cicero's periods, and of verses of Horace or Ovid.

Educated by an Athenian rhetor, he conversed in Greek fluently; he knew whole pages of the "Iliad" by heart, and during a feast could sing odes of Anacreon till he had grown hoarse or drunk. Through his master and other rhetors he had rubbed against philosophy, and become sufficiently acquainted with it to know the plans of various edifices of thought reared in Hellas and the colonies; he understood too that all these edifices were in ruins. He knew many Stoics personally; for these he cherished dislike, since he looked on them rather as a political party, and, besides, as hypochondriacs, hostile to joyous living. Sceptics had a seat frequently at his table; and during intervals between courses they overturned entire systems, and announced at their cups, filled with wine, that pleasure was vanity, truth something unattainable, and that the object of a sage could be only dead rest.

All this struck Cinna's ears without piercing to the depth. He recognized no principle, and would have none. In Cato he saw the union of great character and great folly. He looked on life as a sea, on which winds blew whithersoever they listed; and wisdom in his eyes was the art of setting sails in such fashion that they would urge one's boat forward. He esteemed his own broad shoulders and sound stomach; he esteemed his own beautiful Roman head, with his aquiline nose and powerful jaws. He was certain that with these he could pass through life somehow.

Though not belonging to the school of Sceptics, he was a practical Sceptic and hence a lover of pleasure, though he knew that pleasure was not happiness. The genuine teaching of Epicurus he did not know; hence he considered himself an Epicurean. In general he looked on philosophy as mental fencing, as useful as that which was taught by the sword-master. When discourses on it wearied him, he went to the circus to see blood.

He did not believe in the gods any more than in virtue, truth, and happiness. He believed only in soothsaying, and had his own superstitions; moreover, the mysterious beliefs of the Orient roused his curiosity. To slaves he was a good master, unless when occasional tedium brought him to cruelty. He thought life a great amphora, which was the more valuable the better the wine contained in it; hence he tried to fill his own with the best. He did not love any one, but he loved many things, among others his own eagle-like face with splendid skull, and his shapely patrician foot.

In the first years of his frolicking life he loved also to astound Rome, and succeeded a number of times. Later he grew as indifferent to that as to other things.

CHAPTER II

At last he ruined himself. His creditors tore his property to pieces, and in place of it there remained to Cinna weariness, as after great toil, satiety, and one more unexpected thing, a certain deep disquiet. He had tried wealth; he had tried love, as that age understood it; he had tried pleasure, military glory, and dangers. He had come to know the limits of human thought more or less; he had come in contact with poetry and art. Hence he might suppose that from life he had taken what it had to give. Now he felt as though he had overlooked something – and that the most important. But he did not know what it was, and tortured his head over this problem in vain. More than once had he striven to shake himself out of these thoughts, and out of this disquiet. He had tried to persuade himself that there was nothing more in life, and could not be; but straightway his disquiet, instead of diminishing, increased quickly to such a degree that it seemed to him that he was disquieted not only for himself, but for all Rome. He envied the Sceptics and also considered them fools, for they insisted that one may fill completely the void with the empty. There existed in him then two men, as it were, one of whom was astonished at the disquiet which he felt, while the other was forced to recognize it as perfectly normal.

Soon after the loss of his property, thanks to great family influence, Cinna was sent to an official post in Alexandria, partly to build up a new fortune in a rich country. His disquiet entered the ship at Brundisium, and sailed across the sea with him. In Alexandria Cinna thought that questions concerning office, new people, another society, new impressions, would relieve him of the intrusive companion. But he was mistaken.

Two months passed, and just as the grain of Demeter, brought from Italy, grew still more luxuriantly in the rich soil of the Delta, so his disquiet from a sturdy twig changed, as it were, into a spreading cedar, and began to cast a still greater shadow on the soul of Cinna.

At first he strove to free himself of this shadow by the same life that he had led in Rome formerly. Alexandria was a place of pleasure, full of Grecian women with golden hair and clear complexions, which the Egyptian sun covered with a transparent, amber lustre. In their society he sought rest.

But when this also proved vain he began to think of suicide. Many of his comrades had freed themselves from life's cares in that manner, and for causes still more foolish than those which Cinna had, – frequently from weariness alone, from the emptiness of life, or a lack of desire to make further use of it. When a slave held a sword adroitly and with sufficient strength, one instant ended all. Cinna caught at this idea; but when he had almost resolved to obey it, a wonderful dream held him back. Behold, it seemed to him that when he was borne across the river¹ he saw on the other bank his disquiet in the form of a wretched slave; it bowed to him, saying, "I have come in advance to receive thee." Cinna was terrified for the first time in life; because he understood that if he could not think of existence beyond the grave without disquiet, then they would both go there.

In this extreme, he resolved to make the acquaintance of sages with whom the Serapeum was crowded, judging that among them perhaps he might find the solution of his riddle. They, it is true, were unable to solve any doubt of his; but to make up they entitled him "of the museum," which title they offered usually to Romans of high birth and position. That was small consolation at first; and the stamp of sage, given a man who could not explain that which concerned him most highly, might seem to Cinna ironical. He supposed, however, that the Serapeum did not reveal all its wisdom at once, perhaps; and he did not lose hope altogether.

The most active sage in Alexandria was the noble Timon of Athens, a man of wealth, and a Roman citizen. He had lived a number of years in Alexandria, whither he had come to sound the

¹ Styx.

depths of Egyptian science. It was said of him that there was no parchment or papyrus in the Library which he had not read, and that he possessed all the wisdom of mankind. He was, moreover, mild and forbearing. Cinna distinguished him at once among the multitude of pedants and commentators with stiffened brains, and soon formed with him an acquaintance which, after a time, was changed into close intimacy, and even into friendship. The young Roman admired the dialectic skill, the eloquence and dignity, with which the old man spoke of lofty themes touching man's destiny, and that of the world. He was struck especially by this, that that dignity was joined to a certain sadness. Later, when they had grown more intimate, Cinna was seized frequently by the wish to inquire of the old sage the cause of that sadness, and to open his own heart to him. In fact, it came to that finally.

CHAPTER III

A certain evening, after animated discussions about the transmigration of souls, they remained alone on the terrace, from which the view was toward the sea. Cinna, taking Timon's hand, declared openly what the great torment of his life was, and why he had striven to approach the scholars and philosophers of the Serapeum.

"I have gained this much at least," said he; "I have learned to know you, O Timon, and I understand now that if you cannot solve my life's riddle, no other man can."

Timon gazed for a time at the smooth surface of the sea, in which the new moon was reflected; then he said, —

"Hast thou seen those flocks of birds, Cinna, which fly past here in winter from northern glooms? Dost thou know what they seek in Egypt?"

"I do. Warmth and light."

"Souls of men also seek warmth, which is love, and light, which means truth. The birds know whither they are flying for their good; but souls are flying over roadless places, in wandering, in sadness, and disquiet."

"Why can they not find the road, noble Timon?"

"Once man's repose was in the gods; to-day, faith in the gods is burnt out, like oil in a lamp. Men thought that to souls philosophy would be the light of truth; to-day, as thou knowest best of all, on its ruins in Rome and in the Academy in Athens, and here, sit Sceptics, to whom it seemed that it was bringing in peace, but it brought in disquiet. For to renounce light and heat is to leave the soul in darkness, which is disquiet. Hence, stretching out our hands before us, we seek an exit in groping."

"Hast thou not found it?"

"I have sought, and I have not found it. Thou hast sought it in pleasure, I in thought; and the same mist encircles us. Know then that not thou alone art suffering, but in thee the soul of the world is tortured. Is it long since thou hast ceased to believe in the gods?"

"At Rome they are honored publicly yet, and even new ones are brought from Asia and Egypt; but no one believes in them sincerely, except dealers in vegetables, who come in the morning from the country to the city."

"And these are the only people who live in peace."

"They are like those who bow down here to cats and onions."

"Just like those, who, in the manner of beasts, ask for nothing beyond sleep after eating."

"But is life worth the living in view of this?"

"Do I know what death will bring?"

"What is the difference, then, between thee and the Sceptics?"

"Sceptics are satisfied with darkness, or feign that they are satisfied, but I suffer in it."

"And thou seest no salvation?"

Timon was silent for a moment, and then answered slowly, as if with hesitation, —

"I wait for it."

"Whence?"

"I know not."

Then he rested his head on the palm of his hand; and as if under the influence of that silence which had settled down on the terrace, he began to speak in a low and measured voice, —

"A wonderful thing; but at times it seems to me that if the world contained nothing beyond that which we know, and if we could be nothing more than we are, this disquiet would not exist in us. So in this sickness I find hope of health. Faith in Olympus and philosophy are dead, but health may be some new truth which I know not."

Beyond expectation, that talk brought great solace to Cinna. When he heard that the whole world was sick, and not he alone, he felt as if some one had taken a great weight from him and distributed it on a thousand shoulders.

CHAPTER IV

From that time the friendship uniting Cinna and the old Greek became still more intimate. They visited each other frequently and exchanged thoughts, like bread in time of a banquet. Besides, Cinna, in spite of experience and the weariness which comes of use, had not reached the age yet when life has ceased to contain the charm of unknown things; and just this charm he found in Antea, Timon's only daughter.

Her fame was not less in Alexandria than the fame of her father. Eminent Romans frequenting Timon's house did her homage, Greeks did her homage, philosophers from the Serapeum did her homage, and so did the people. Timon did not restrict her to the gineceum, after the manner of other women; and he tried to transfer to her everything that he himself knew. When she had passed the years of childhood, he read Greek books with her, and even Latin and Hebrew; for, gifted with an uncommon memory, and reared in many-tongued Alexandria, she learned those languages quickly. She was a companion to him in thoughts; she took frequent part in the discussions which were held in Timon's house during Symposiums. Often in the labyrinth of difficult questions, she was able, like Ariadne, to avoid going astray herself and to extricate others. Her father honored and admired her. The charm of mystery and almost of sacredness surrounded her, besides; for she had prophetic dreams, in which she saw things invisible to common mortals. The old sage loved her as his own soul, and the more for this reason, that he was afraid of losing her; for frequently she said that beings appeared in dreams to her, – ominous beings, – also a certain divine light, and she knew not whether this light was the source of life or death.

Meanwhile she was met only by love. The Egyptians, who frequented Timon's house, called her the Lotus; perhaps because that flower received divine honor on the banks of the Nile, and perhaps also because whoever saw it might forget the whole world besides.

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