

GEORGE GISSING

VERANILDA

George Gissing

Veranilda

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=38307065

Veranilda:

Содержание

CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	17
CHAPTER III	32
CHAPTER IV	48
CHAPTER V	67
CHAPTER VI	85
CHAPTER VII	97
CHAPTER VIII	113
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	115

George Gissing

Veranilda

CHAPTER I

THE VANQUISHED ROMAN

Seven years long had the armies of Justinian warred against the Goths in Italy. Victor from Rhegium to Ravenna, the great commander Belisarius had returned to the East, Carrying captive a Gothic king. The cities of the conquered land were garrisoned by barbarians of many tongues, who bore the name of Roman soldiers; the Italian people, brought low by slaughter, dearth, and plague, crouched under the rapacious tyranny of governors from Byzantium.

Though children born when King Theodoric still reigned had yet scarce grown to manhood, that golden age seemed already a legend of the past. Athalaric, Amalasuntha, Theodahad, last of the Amal blood, had held the throne in brief succession and were gone; warriors chosen at will by the Gothic host, mere kings of the battlefield, had risen and perished; reduced to a wandering tribe, the nation which alone of her invaders had given peace and hope to Italy, which alone had revered and upheld the laws, polity, culture of Rome, would soon, it was thought, be utterly

destroyed, or vanish in flight beyond the Alps. Yet war did not come to an end. In the plain of the great river there was once more a chieftain whom the Goths had raised upon their shields, a king, men said, glorious in youth and strength, and able, even yet, to worst the Emperor's generals. His fame increased. Ere long he was known to be moving southward, to have crossed the Apennines, to have won a battle in Etruria. The name of this young hero was Totila.

In these days the senators of Rome, heirs to a title whose ancient power and dignity were half-forgotten, abode within the City, under constraint disguised as honour, the conqueror's hostages. One among them, of noblest name, Flavius Anicius Maximus, broken in health by the troubles of the time and by private sorrow, languishing all but unto death in the heavy air of the Tiber, was permitted to seek relief in a visit to which he would of his domains in Italy. His birth, his repute, gave warrant of loyalty to the empire, and his coffers furnished the price put upon such a favour by Byzantine greed. Maximus chose for refuge his villa by the Campanian shore, vast, beautiful, half in ruin, which had been enjoyed by generations of the Anician family; situated above the little town of Surrentum it caught the cooler breeze, and on its mountainous promontory lay apart from the tramp of armies. Here, as summer burned into autumn, the sick man lived in brooding silence, feeling his strength waste, and holding to the world only by one desire.

The household comprised his unwedded sister Petronilla, a

lady in middle age, his nephew Basil, and another kinsman, Decius, a student and an invalid; together with a physician, certain freedmen who rendered services of trust, a eunuch at the Command of Petronilla, and the usual body of male and female slaves. Some score of glebe-bound peasants cultivated the large estate for their lord's behoof. Notwithstanding the distress that had fallen upon the Roman nobility, many of whom were sunk into indigence, the chief of the Anicii still controlled large means; and the disposal of these possessions at his death was matter of interest to many persons—not least to the clergy of Rome, who found in the dying man's sister a piously tenacious advocate. Children had been born to Maximus, but the only son who reached mature years fell a victim to pestilence when Vitiges was camped about the City. There survived one daughter, Aurelia. Her the father had not seen for years; her he longed to see and to pardon ere he died. For Aurelia, widowed of her first husband in early youth, had used her liberty to love and wed a flaxen-haired barbarian, a lord of the Goths; and, worse still, had renounced the Catholic faith for the religion of the Gothic people, that heresy of Arianism condemned and abhorred by Rome. In Consequence she became an outcast from her kith and kin. Her husband commanded in the city of Cumae, hard by Neapolis. When this stronghold fell before the advance of Belisarius, the Goth escaped, soon after to die in battle; Aurelia, a captive of the Conquerors, remained at Cumae, and still was living there, though no longer under restraint. Because of its

strength, this ancient city became the retreat of many ladies who fled from Rome before the hardships and perils of the siege; from them the proud and unhappy woman, ever held apart, yet she refused to quit the town when she would have been permitted to do so. From his terrace above the Surrentine shore, Maximus gazed across the broad gulf to the hills that concealed Cumae, yearning for the last of his children. When at length he wrote her a letter, a letter of sad kindness, inviting rather than beseeching her to visit him, Aurelia made no reply. Wounded, he sunk again into silence, until his heart could no longer bear its secret burden, and he spoke—not to Petronilla, from whose austere orthodoxy little sympathy was to be expected—but to his nephew Basil, whose generous mettle willingly lent itself to such a service as was proposed. On his delicate mission, the young man set forth without delay. To Cumae, whether by sea or land, was but a short journey: starting at daybreak, Basil might have given ample time to his embassy, and have been back again early on the morrow. But the second day passed, and he did not return. Though harassed by the delay, Maximus tried to deem it of good omen, and nursed his hope through another sleepless night.

Soon after sunrise, he was carried forth to his place of observation, a portico in semicircle, the marble honey-toned by time, which afforded shelter from the eastern rays and commanded a view of vast extent. Below him lay the little town, built on the cliffs above its landing-place; the hillsides on either hand were clad with vineyards, splendid in the purple of autumn,

and with olives. Sky and sea shone to each other in perfect calm; the softly breathing air mingled its morning freshness with a scent of fallen flower and leaf. A rosy vapour from Vesuvius floated gently inland; and this the eye of Maximus marked with contentment, as it signified a favourable wind for a boat crossing hither from the far side of the bay. For the loveliness of the scene before him, its noble lines, its jewelled colouring, he had little care; but the infinite sadness of its suggestion, the decay and the desolation uttered by all he saw, sank deep into his heart. If his look turned to the gleaming spot which was the city of Neapolis, there came into his mind the sack and massacre of a few years ago, when Belisarius so terribly avenged upon the Neapolitans their stubborn resistance to his siege. Faithful to the traditions of his house, of his order, Maximus had welcomed the invasion which promised to restore Italy to the Empire; now that the restoration was effected, he saw with bitterness the evils resulting from it, and all but hoped that this new king of the Goths, this fortune-favoured Totila, might sweep the land of its Greek oppressors. He looked back upon his own life, on the placid dignity of his career under the rule of Theodoric, the offices by which he had risen, until he sat in the chair of the Consul. Yet in that time, which now seemed so full of peaceful glories, he had never at heart been loyal to the great king; in his view, as in that of the nobles generally, Theodoric was but a usurper, who had abused the mandate intrusted to him by the Emperor Zeno, to deliver Italy from the barbarians. When his

own kinsmen, Boethius and Symmachus, were put to death on a charge of treachery, Maximus burned with hatred of the Goth. He regarded with disdain the principles of Cassiodorus, who devoted his life to the Gothic cause, and who held that only as an independent kingdom could there be hope for Italy. Having for a moment the ear of Theodoric's daughter, Amalasuntha, when she ruled for her son, Maximus urged her to yield her kingdom to the Emperor, and all but saw his counsel acted upon. After all, was not Cassiodorus right? Were not the senators who had ceaselessly intrigued with Byzantium in truth traitors to Rome? It was a bitter thought for the dying man that all his life he had not only failed in service to his country, but had obstinately wrought for her ruin.

Attendants placed food beside him. He mingled wine with water and soothed a feverish thirst. His physician, an elderly man of Oriental visage, moved respectfully to his side, greeted him as Illustrious, inquired how his Magnificence had passed the latter part of the night. Whilst replying, as ever courteously—for in the look and bearing of Maximus there was that *senatorius decor* which Pliny noted in a great Roman of another time—his straining eyes seemed to descry a sail in the quarter he continually watched. Was it only a fishing boat? Raised upon the couch, he gazed long and fixedly. Impossible as yet to be sure whether he saw the expected bark; but the sail seemed to draw nearer, and he watched.

The voice of a servant, who stood at a respectful distance,

announced: 'The gracious Lady'; and there appeared a little procession. Ushered by her eunuch, and attended by half a dozen maidens, one of whom held over her a silk sunshade with a handle of gold, the sister of Maximus approached at a stately pace. She was tall, and of features severely regular; her dark hair—richer in tone and more abundant than her years could warrant—rose in elaborate braiding intermingled with golden threads; her waistless robe was of white silk adorned with narrow stripes of purple, which descended, two on each side, from the shoulders to the hem, and about her neck lay a shawl of delicate tissue. In her hand, which glistened with many gems, she carried a small volume, richly bound, the Psalter. Courtesies of the gravest passed between her and Maximus, who, though he could not rise from his couch, assumed an attitude of graceful deference, and Petronilla seated herself in a chair which a slave had placed for her. After many inquiries as to her brother's health, the lady allowed her eyes to wander for a moment, then spoke with the smile of one who imparts rare tidings.

'Late last night—too late to trouble you with the news—there came a post from the reverend deacon Leander. He disembarked yesterday at Salernum, and, after brief repose, hopes to visit us. Your Amiability will, I am sure, welcome his coming.'

'Assuredly,' answered Maximus, bending his head, whilst his eyes watched the distant sail. 'Whence comes he?'

'From Sicily. We shall learn, I dare say, the business which took him there,' added Petronilla, with a self-satisfied softening

of her lips. 'The deacon is wont to talk freely with me of whatever concerns the interests of our holy Church, even as I think you remember, has now and then deigned—though I know not how I have deserved such honour—to ask, I dare not say my counsel, but my humble thoughts on this or that. I think we may expect him before morning. The day will not be too warm for travel.'

Maximus wore an anxious look, and spoke after hesitation.

'Will his reverend leisure permit him to pass more than one day with us?'

'Earnestly I hope so. You, beyond doubt, dear lord, my brother, will desire long privacy with the holy man. His coming at this time is plainly of Heaven's direction.'

'Lady sister,' answered Maximus, with the faintest smile on his sad features, 'I would not willingly rob you of a moment's conference with the good deacon. My own business with him is soon despatched. I would fain be assured of burial in the Temple of Probus where sleep our ancestors.'

'Of that,' replied Petronilla, solemnly and not unkindly, 'doubt not for a moment. Your body shall lie there, by the blessed Peter's sanctuary, and your tomb be honoured among those of the greatest of our blood. But there is another honour that I covet for you, an honour above all that the world can bestow. In these sad times, Maximus, the Church has need of strengthening. You have no children—'

A glance from the listener checked her, and, before she could resume, Maximus interposed in a low voice:

'I have yet a daughter.'

'A daughter?' exclaimed Petronilla, troubled, confused, scarce subduing indignation.

'It is better I should tell you,' continued her brother, with some sternness, resulting from the efforts to command himself, 'that Basil is gone to Cumae to see Aurelia, and, if it may be, to lead her to me. Perhaps even now'—he pointed to the sea—'they are on the way hither. Let us not speak of it, Petronilla,' he added in a firmer tone. 'It is my will; that must suffice. Of you I ask nothing save silence.'

The lady arose. Her countenance expressed angry and bitter feeling, but there was no danger of her uttering what she thought. Gravely, somewhat coldly, she spoke good wishes for her brother's ease during the day, and so retired with her retinue. Alone, Maximus sighed, and looked again across the waters.

In a few minutes the servant who guarded his privacy was again heard announcing the lord Decius. The Senator turned his eyes with a look of good-humoured greeting.

'Abroad so early, good cousin? Did the oil fail you last night and send you too soon to bed?'

'You have not chanced to remember, dear my lord, what day it is?' returned Decius, when he had bestowed a kiss on his kinsman's cheek. 'Had I but vigour enough, this morning would have seen me on a pilgrimage to the tomb.' He put out a hand towards Neapolis. 'I rose at daybreak to meditate the Fourth Eclogue.'

'The ides of October—true. I take shame to myself for having lost the memory of Virgil in my own distresses.'

Decius, whose years were scarce thirty, had the aspect and the gait of an elderly man; his thin hair streaked with grey, his cheeks hollow, his eyes heavy, he stooped in walking and breathed with difficulty; the tunic and the light cloak, which were all his attire, manifested an infinite carelessness in matters of costume, being worn and soiled. Than he, no Roman was poorer; he owned nothing but his clothing and a few books. Akin to the greatest, and bearing a name of which he was inordinately proud—as a schoolboy he had once burst into tears when reciting with passion the Lay of the Decii—felt content to owe his sustenance to the delicate and respectful kindness of Maximus, who sympathised with the great wrong he had suffered early in life. This was no less than wilful impoverishment by his father, who, seeking to atone for sins by fanaticism, had sold the little he possessed to found a pilgrims' hospice at Portus, whither, accompanied by the twelve-year-old boy, he went to live as monk-servitor. In a year or two the penitent died; Decius, in revolt against the tasks to which he was subjected, managed to escape, made his way to Rome, and appealed to Maximus. Nominally he still held the post of secretary to his benefactor, but for many years he had enjoyed entire leisure, all of it devoted to study. Several times illness had brought him to the threshold of death, yet it had never conquered his love of letters, his enthusiasm for his country's past. Few liked him only one or two understood him: Decius was content that it

should be so.

'Let us speak of it,' he continued, unrolling a manuscript of Virgil some two hundred years old, a gift to him from Maximus. 'Tell me, dear lord, your true thought: is it indeed a prophecy of the Divine Birth? To you'—he smiled his gentle, beautiful smile—'may I not confess that I have doubted this interpretation? Yet'—he cast his eyes down—'the doubt is perhaps a prompting of the spirit of evil.'

'I know not, Decius, I know not,' replied the sick man with thoughtful melancholy. 'My father held it a prophecy his father before him.—But forgive me, I am expecting anxiously the return of Basil; yonder sail—is it his? Your eyes see further than mine.'

Decius at once put aside his own reflections, and watched the oncoming bark. Before long there was an end of doubt. Rising in agitation to his feet, Maximus gave orders that the litter, which since yesterday morning had been in readiness, should at once be borne with all speed down to the landing-place. Sail and oars soon brought the boat so near that Decius was able to descry certain female figures and that of a man, doubtless Basil, who stood up and waved his arms shoreward.

'She has come,' broke from Maximus; and, in reply to his kinsman's face of inquiry, he told of whom it was he spoke.

The landing-place was not visible from here. As soon as the boat disappeared beneath the buildings of the town, Maximus requested of his companion a service which asked some courage

in the performance: it was, to wait forthwith upon the Lady Petronilla, to inform her that Aurelia had just disembarked, to require that three female slaves should be selected to attend upon the visitor. This mission Decius discharged, not without trembling; he then walked to the main entrance of the villa, and stood there, the roll of Virgil still in his hand, until the sound of a horse's hoofs on the upward road announced the arrival of the travellers. The horseman, who came some yards in advance of the slave-borne litter, was Basil. At sight of Decius, he dismounted, and asked in an undertone: 'You know?' The other replied with the instructions given by Maximus, that the litter, which was closed against curious eyes, should be straightway conveyed to the Senator's presence, Basil himself to hold apart until summoned.

And so it was done. Having deposited their burden between two columns of the portico, the bearers withdrew. The father's voice uttered the name of Aurelia, and, putting aside the curtains that had concealed her, she stood before him. A woman still young, and of bearing which became her birth; a woman who would have had much grace, much charm, but for the passion which, turned to vehement self-will, had made her blood acrid. Her great dark eyes burned with quenchless resentment; her sunken and pallid face told of the sufferings of a tortured pride.

'Lord Maximus,' were her first words, as she stood holding by the litter, glancing distrustfully about her, 'you have sworn!'

'Hear me repeat my oath,' answered the father, strengthened

by his emotion to move forward from the couch. 'By the blessed martyr Pancratius, I swear that no harm shall befall you, no constraint shall be put upon you, that you shall be free to come and to go as you will.'

It was the oath no perjurer durst make. Aurelia gazed into her father's face, which was wet with tears. She stepped nearer to him, took his thin, hot hand, and, as in her childhood, bent to kiss the back of the wrist. But Maximus folded her to his heart.

CHAPTER II

BASIL'S VISION

Basil and Decius paced together a garden alley, between a row of quince-trees and a hedge of Christ's-thorn; at one end was a fountain in a great basin of porphyry, at the other a little temple, very old and built for the worship of Isis, now an oratory under the invocation of the Blessed Mary. The two young men made a singular contrast, for Basil, who was in his twenty-third year, had all the traits of health and vigour: a straight back, lithe limbs, a face looking level on the world, a lustrous eye often touched to ardour, a cheek of the purest carnation, a mouth that told of fine instincts, delicate sensibilities, love of laughter. No less did his costume differ from the student's huddled garb; his tunic was finely embroidered in many hues, his silken cloak had a great buckle of gold on the shoulder; he wore ornate shoes, and by his waist hung a silver-handled dagger in a sheath of chased bronze. He stepped lightly, as one who asks but the occasion to run and leap. In their intimate talk, he threw an arm over his companion's neck, a movement graceful as it was affectionate; his voice had a note frank and cordial.

Yet Basil was not quite his familiar self to-day; he talked with less than his natural gaiety, wore a musing look, fell into silences. Now that Aurelia had come, there was no motive for

reserve on that subject with Decius, and indeed they conversed of their kinswoman with perfect openness, pitying rather than condemning her, and wondering what would result from her presence under one roof with the rigid Petronilla. Not on Aurelia's account did Basil droop his head now and then, look about him vacantly, bite his lip, answer a question at hazard, play nervously with his dagger's hilt. All at once, with an abruptness which moved his companion's surprise, he made an inquiry, seemingly little relevant to their topic.

'Heard you ever of a Gothic princess—a lady of the lineage of Theodoric—still living in Italy?'

'Never,' responded Decius, with a puzzled smile. 'Is there such a one?'

'I am told so—I heard it by chance. Yet I know not who she can be. Did not the direct line of Theodoric end with Athalaric and his sister Matasuntha, who is now at the Emperor's court?'

'So I believed,' said Decius, 'though I have thought but little of the matter.'

'I too, trust me,' let fall Basil, with careful carelessness; no actor he. 'And the vile Theodahad—what descendants did he leave?'

'He was a scholar,' said the other musingly, 'deep read in Plato.'

'None the less a glutton and a murderer and a coward, who did well to give his throat to the butcher as he ran away from his enemies. Children he had, I think—but—'

Basil broke off on a wandering thought. He stood still, knitted his brows, and sniffed the air. At this moment there appeared in the alley a serving man, a young and active fellow of very honest visage, who stood at some yards' distance until Basil observed him.

'What is it, Felix?' inquired his master.

The attendant stepped forward, and made known that the lord Marcian had even now ridden up to the villa, with two followers, and desired to wait upon Basil. This news brought a joyful light to the eyes of the young noble; he hastened to welcome his friend, the dearest he had. Marcian, a year or two his elder, was less favoured by nature in face and form: tall and vigorous enough of carriage, he showed more bone and sinew than flesh; and his face might have been that of a man worn by much fasting, so deep sunk were the eyes, so jutting the cheek-bones, and so sharp the chin; its cast, too, was that of a fixed and native melancholy. But when he smiled, these features became much more pleasing, and revealed a kindliness of temper such as might win the love of one who knew him well. His dress was plain, and the dust of Campanian roads lay somewhat thick upon him.

'By Bacchus!' cried his friend, as they embraced each other, 'fortune is good to me to-day. Could I have had but one wish granted, it would have been to see Marcian. I thought you still in Rome. What makes you travel? Not in these days solely to visit a friend, I warrant. By Peter and Paul and as many more saints as you can remember, I am glad to hold your hand! What news

do you bring?'

'Little enough,' answered Marcian, with a shrug of the shoulders. The natural tune of his voice harmonised with his visage, and he spoke as one who feels a scornful impatience with the affairs of men. 'At Rome, they wrangle about goats' wool, as is their wont. Anything else? Why, yes; the freedman Chrysanthus glories in an ex-consulate. It cost him the trifle of thirty pounds of gold.'

Basil laughed contemptuously, half angrily.

'We must look to our honours,' he exclaimed. 'If Chrysanthus be ex-consul, can you and I be satisfied with less than ex-Praetorian-Prefect? What will be the price, think you? Has Bessas hung out a tariff yet in the Forum?'

'He knows better than to fix a maximum, as long as a wealthy fool remains in the city—though that won't be much longer, I take it.'

'Why come you hither, dear my lord?' urged Basil, with more seriousness.

Regarding him with a grave eye, his friend replied in an undertone:

'To spy upon you.'

'Ha!—In very truth?'

'You could wish me a more honourable office,' Marcian went on, smiling sadly. 'Yet, if you think of it, in these days, it is some honour to be a traitor to both sides. There has been talk of you in Rome. Nay, who knows how or why! They have nothing to do

but talk, and these victories of the Goth have set up such a Greek cackle as was never heard since Helen ran away to Troy,—and, talking of Greek, I bear a letter for you from Heliodora.'

Basil, who had been listening gravely, started at this name and uttered an idle laugh. From a wallet hanging at his girdle, Marcian drew forth the missive.

'That may wait,' said Basil, glancing indifferently at the folded and sealed paper before he hid it away. 'Having said so much, you must tell me more. Put off that sardonic mask—I know very well what hides beneath it—and look me in the eye. You have surprised some danger?'

'I heard you spoken of—by one who seldom opens his lips but to ill purpose. It was not difficult for me to wade through the shallows of the man's mind, and for my friend's sake to win his base confidence. Needing a spy, and being himself a born traitor, he readily believed me at his beck; in truth he had long marked me, so I found, for a cankered soul who waited but the occasion to advance by infamy. I held the creature in my hand; I turned him over and over, and he, the while, thinking me his greedy slave. And so, usurping the place of some other who would have ambushed you in real enmity, I came hither on his errand.'

'Marcian,' said the listener, 'I could make a guess at that man's name.'

'Nay, I doubt if you could, and indeed it matters nothing. Enough that I may do you some little service.'

'For which,' replied Basil, 'I cannot pay you, since all my love

is already yours. And she—Heliodora,' he added, with a careless gesture, 'knows of your mission?'

'Of my mission, no; but of my proposed journey. Though indeed she may know more than I suppose. Who shall say what reaches the ear of Heliodora—?'

'You have not heard perhaps that her husband is dead?'

'The Prefect dead?' exclaimed Basil.

'Three weeks ago.—Rather suddenly—after supper. An indigestion, no doubt.'

Marcian spoke with peculiar dryness, averting his eyes from the listener. Upon Basil's face came a deep flush; he took out the folded paper again, and held it at arm's length.

'You mean—? You think—?' he stammered.

'About women I think not at all,' said the other, 'as you well know. There is talk, talk—what care I?'

Basil tore the letter open. It contained a lock of raven-black hair, tied with gold thread, and on the paper was written, in Greek, 'I am free.' Again his cheek flushed; he crushed paper and hair together in his hand.

'Let us never again speak of her,' he exclaimed, moving away from the spot. 'Before I left Rome, I told you that I would gladly see her no more, and you smiled dubiously. Believe me now. I abhor the thought of her. If she ask you for my reply, repeat those words.'

'Nay, dear my lord, in that I will beg to be excused,' replied Marcian with his melancholy smile.

They were walking silently, side by side, when the servant Felix again presented himself before them. Maximus, having heard of the arrival of Marcian from Rome, requested that he and Basil would grant him a moment of their leisure. At once the young men turned to obey this summons. On the way, Basil communicated to his friend in a whisper the event of the day. A couple of hours having passed since Aurelia's coming, the Senator had in some degree recovered from his agitation; he lay now in a room which opened upon the central court of the villa, a room adorned with rich marbles and with wall-paintings which were fading under the hand of time. Deathly pale, scarce able to raise his head from the cushion of the couch, he none the less showed a countenance bright with joyous emotion. His quivering voice strove to welcome the visitor cheerily.

'What news from the city, dear lord Marcian? How are all our friends? Do they begin to forget us?'

'Not so, Illustrious,' answered the young man, with head bent. 'You are much desired in the Senate, where grave counsel is just now greatly in demand.'

'The Senate, the Senate,' murmured Maximus, as if reminded of something he had long forgotten. 'They must needs lack my voice, I fear. What do men say of the Gothic king?'

Marcian threw a glance at Basil, then towards the curtained portals of the room; lastly, his eyes turned upon the sick man, whom he regarded steadily.

'They say much—or little,' fell from his lips.

'I understand you,' replied the Senator, with a friendly movement of the head. 'Here we may speak freely. Does Totila draw near to Rome?'

'He is still in Tuscany, and rumours come from his army that he will pass into Samnium. All the strongholds of Umbria are his, all the conquests of Belisarius from Ariminum to Spoletium.'

'Where are the Roman captains?'

'Each in his city of the far north, holding the plunder he has got, and looking for the chance of more. In Rome—'

Marcian paused significantly, and the Senator took up his words.

'In Rome rules Bessas.'

'The Thracian,' remarked Basil bitterly.

'And in Ravenna,' added the sick man, 'Alexandros—the coin-clipper.'

The eyes of Basil and of Marcian encountered. Between them came no shadow of distrust, the smile they exchanged told of loyal affection.

'This Totila,' pursued Marcian, 'seems to be not only a brave and capable commander, but a shrewd politician. Everywhere he spares the people; he takes nothing by force; his soldiers buy at market; he protects the farmer against the taxing Greek. As a result, his army grows; where he passes, he leaves a good report, and before him goes a welcome. At this rate he will soon make all Italy his own. And unless the Patricius returns—'

By this title men were wont to speak of Belisarius. Hearing it,

Basil threw up an arm, his eyes flashing.

'The Patricius!' he exclaimed fervently. 'There is the man who might have saved us!'

'By the holy Laurentius!' murmured Maximus, looking sadly at his nephew, 'I have all but come to think as you do.'

'Who that knew him,' cried Basil, 'but must have seen him, in thought—not King, for only the barbarians have kings—but Emperor—Emperor of the West, ruling at Rome as in the days gone by! There lives no man more royal. I have seen him day by day commanding and taking counsel; I have talked with him in his privacy. In the camp before Ravenna there was but one voice, one hope, as to what should follow when the city opened its gates, and the Goths themselves only surrendered because they thought to be ruled by him. But for the scruple of his conscience—and should not that have yielded to the general good?'

'Is breach of faith so light a thing?' fell from Marcian, under his breath.

'Nay,' answered the other, with drooping head, 'but he did break faith with *us*. We had his promise; we saw him Emperor—'

'You should have won Antonina,' said Marcian, with a return to his sarcastic humour. 'She must have mused long and anxiously, weighing the purple against Theodora's fury. The Patrician's fidelity stood by his wife's prudence.'

'The one blot upon his noble nature,' uttered Basil, with a sigh. 'His one weakness. How,' he cried scornfully, 'can the conqueror of half the world bend before such a woman?'

Fatigued already by the conversation, Maximus had lain back and closed his eyes. Very soon the two young men received his permission to withdraw, and, as they left the room, the physician entered. Obedient to this counsellor the invalid gave several hours to repose, but midway in the afternoon he again summoned his daughter, with whom he had a long and agitating conversation. He besought Aurelia to cast off her heretical religion, putting before her all the perils to which she exposed herself, by abandonment of the true faith, in this world and the next. His life was hurrying to its end; hour by hour he felt the fever wasting what little strength remained to him; and when he was gone who would protect her against the enmities to which religion and avarice would expose her? Aurelia's resistance was sullen rather than resolute; her countenance, her words, suggested that she was thinking more of what it would cost her pride to become a penitent than of any obstacle in conscience. At length she declared plainly that never would she humiliate herself before her aunt Petronilla, who had offered her no greeting and held scornfully apart. Here, as Maximus too well knew, lay the great difficulty of the situation; these women hated each other, and their hate would only be exasperated by Aurelia's conversion. He spoke of the deacon Leander, now on his way hither—begged Aurelia to listen to the reverend man, and gave solemn assurance that, the moment she abjured her errors, he would place her in a position of wealth and authority far above that of Petronilla. So utterly did he exhaust himself in entreaty and argument that he

fell into a fainting fit. The physician was called for, and Aurelia, she too overcome with violent emotions, again retired to the part of the villa which had been assigned to her.

The Anicii of a bygone time, who took their solace here when marbles and mosaics, paintings and tapestries, were yet new, would have looked with consternation on halls so crumbling and bare, chambers so ill-appointed, as these in which the guests of the Senator Maximus had their dwelling. Space there was in abundance, but of comfort in the guest-rooms little enough; and despite her brother's commands, Petronilla had seen to it that Aurelia was not luxuriously lodged. Better accommodation awaited the deacon Leander, whose arrival was announced an hour before sunset by a trotting courier. His journey from Salernum had so wearied the ecclesiastic that he could but give a hand to be kissed by his hostess, and straightway retire into privacy; the repast that was ready for him had to be served beside his couch, and soon after night had fallen, Leander slumbered peacefully. Meanwhile Basil and Decius and their friend from Rome had supped together, making what cheer they might under the circumstances; the Surrentine wine was a little acrid, falling short of its due age, but it sufficed to animate the talk. Presently Decius withdrew, to study or to meditate through some hours of the night, for he slept ill; the others, going apart to a gallery lighted by the full moon, sat wrapped in thick, hooded cloaks, to converse awhile before they slept. With their voices mingled the soft splash of a fountain.

Basil was telling of his journey to Cumae, and of the difficulty he had had in persuading Aurelia to visit her father.

'Does she live alone there?' inquired Marcian.

There was a pause before the reply, and when Basil spoke his voice fell to a note of half-hesitating confidence.

'Alone? yes,' he said, 'in the sense that no relative abode with her; but she had a companion—a lady—very young.' And here he again paused, as if in some embarrassment.

'A Roman?' was Marcian's next question, carelessly thrown out for he had little interest in Aurelia, and was half occupied with other thoughts.

'No,' answered Basil, his voice subdued. 'A Goth; and, she says, of the royal blood, of the line of Theodoric.'

His friend became attentive. 'A Gothic princess? Whose daughter, then?' asked Marcian. And Basil, who desired nothing more than to speak on this subject, little by little threw off his hesitancy, grew rapid and eager in narration. He told how, on his first introduction to Aurelia's presence, he had found sitting with her a young girl, whose aspect proclaimed her of the Gothic race. In a second interview with his cousin, alone, Aurelia had spoken of this companion, bestowing much praise upon her, and declaring that they were united by an affection which nothing could diminish. She was of Amal blood; more than that Aurelia seemed unwilling to reveal.

'Did you not learn her name?' asked the listener.

'Veranilda.'

Marcian echoed the melodious syllables, but they told him nothing.

'And did you make no inquiry of those with whom you spoke?'

'I conversed as little as might be with strangers, and purposely held apart from our acquaintances in the town; this was my uncle's express command.'

'You had no second sight of her?'

'Indeed I had; and talked with her moreover. Marcian, how can I describe her to you? The words which suffice for common beauty sound meaningless when I would use them to depict Veranilda. Shall I tell you that she has hair of the purest gold, eyes brighter than the sky at noon, lips like the flower of the pomegranate, a cheek so fair, so soft—nay, you may well laugh at these idle phrases—'

'Not your phrases,' said Marcian, 'but your voice as it utters them sets me smiling. Talk on. The chaste goddess who beams above us inspire you with worthy terms!'

'There you speak to the point,' pursued Basil ardently. 'For Veranilda is chaste as she is beautiful. Blessed saints! how my heart shrank in abhorrence when I saw that letter this morning; and how fain I would blot from my memory that baseness of the past! O Marcian, truest of friends, I slighted your counsel, scoffed at your warnings, but now I know how wisely and how honestly you spoke.'

'Be that as it may,' said the other. 'But is it possible that, on a mere glimpse, this Gothic maiden should so have vanquished

you?'

'It had been more prudent to hold my peace. But you know me of old. When I am moved, I must needs unbosom myself; happy that I have one whom I can trust. Her voice, Marcian! This whisper of the night breeze in the laurels falls rudely upon the ear after Veranilda's speech. Never have I heard a tone so soft, so gentle. The first word she spoke thrilled through me, as never did voice before; and I listened, listened, hoping she would speak again.'

'Who may she be? Has not the lady Aurelia adorned her origin? Golden hair and blue eyes are no rarity among daughters of the Goths.'

'Had you seen her!' exclaimed Basil, and grew rapturous again. Whilst he exhausted language in the effort to prove how remote was Veranilda from any shape of loveliness easily presented by memory or imagination, Marcian pondered.

'I can think of but one likelihood,' was his quiet remark, when his friend had become silent. 'King Theodahad had a daughter, who married the Gothic captain, Ebrimut.'

'The traitor,' murmured Basil uneasily.

'Or friend of the Romans, as you will. He delivered Rhegium to Belisarius, and enjoys his reward at Byzantium. What if he left a child behind him?'

Basil repulsed the suggestion vehemently.

'Not that! I had half thought of it myself; but no. Aurelia said of the house of Theodoric.'

'Why so would be a daughter of Ebrimut, through her mother—who was the daughter of Theodahad, who was the son of Amalafrida, who was the sister of Theodoric himself.'

'She could not have meant that,' protested Basil. 'Child of a mercenary traitor, who opened Italy to his people's foe! Not that. Had you seen her, you would not believe it.'

'Oh, my good Basil,' laughed the other, 'do you think I should see her with your eyes? But perhaps we conjecture idly quite missing the mark. What does it matter? You have no intention, I hope, of returning to Cumae?'

Basil opened his lips to reply, but thought better of it, and said nothing. Then his friend turned to speak of the ecclesiastical visitor who had that evening arrived, and, the subject not proving very fruitful, each presently betook himself to his night's repose.

CHAPTER III

THE DEACON LEANDER

The deacon Leander was some forty years of age, stoutish, a trifle asthmatic, with a long visage expressive of much shrewdness, and bushy eyebrows, which lent themselves at will to a look of genial condescension, of pious austerity, or of stern command. His dark hair and reddish beard were carefully trimmed; so were the nails of his shapely, delicate hands. His voice, now subject to huskiness, had until a few years ago been remarkably powerful and melodious; no deacon in Rome was wont to excite more admiration by his chanting of the Gradual; but that glory had passed away, and at the present time Leander's spiritual activity was less prominent than his services as a most capable steward of the patrimony of St. Peter. He travelled much, had an extensive correspondence, and was probably rather respected than revered by most lay folk with whom he came in contact.

But in the eyes of the lady Petronilla, Leander was an ideal churchman. No one treated her judgment with so much respect; no one confided to her curious ear so many confidential matters, ranging from the secret scandals of aristocratic Rome to high debates of ecclesiastical polity—or what Petronilla regarded as such. Their closer acquaintance began with the lady's

presentation of certain columns of tawny Numidian marble, from a ruined temple she had inherited, to the deacon's basilica, St. Laurentius; and many were the donations which Leander had since accepted from her on behalf of the Church. In return, he had once or twice rejoiced her with the gift of a precious relic, such as came into the hands of few below royal rank; thus had Petronilla obtained the filings of the chain of St. Peter, which, enclosed in a golden key, hung upon her bosom. Some day, as the deacon well knew, this pious virgin would beg him to relieve her of all her earthly possessions, and enter into some holy retreat; but she awaited the death of her brother, by whose will she would doubtless benefit more or less substantially.

If in view of the illness of Maximus, Petronilla had regarded the deacon's visit as providential, the event of yesterday moved her to a more agitated thankfulness for the conference she was about to enjoy. After a night made sleepless by dread and wrath, she rose at daybreak and passed in a fever of impatience the time which elapsed before her reverend guest issued from his chamber. This being the fourth day of the week, Petronilla held rigid fast until the hour of nones; and of course no refreshment was offered to the churchman, who, with that smiling placidity, that graceful self-possession, which ever distinguished him in such society, at length entered the inner hall, and suavely, almost tenderly, greeted his noble hostess. Brimming over as she was with anxiety and indignation, Petronilla allowed nothing of this to appear in her reception of the revered friend. To his inquiries

touching the health of the Senator, she replied with significant gravity that Maximus had suffered during the night, and was this morning, by the physician's report, much weaker; she added not a word on the momentous subject presently to be broached. Then Leander, after viewing with many compliments a piece of rich embroidery which occupied the lady's leisure, and or its completion would of course be put at his disposal, took a seat, set the tips of his fingers together, and began to chat pleasantly of his journey. Many were the pious offerings which had fallen to him upon his way: that of the Sicilian lady who gave her little all to be used to maintain the lamps in the basilica of the Chief Apostle; that of the merchant encountered on shipboard, who gave ten pounds of gold to purchase the freedom of slaves; that of the wealthy curial in Lucania, healed of disease by miracle on the feast of St. Cyprian, who bestowed upon the church in gratitude many acres of olive-bearing land, and promised an annual shipload of prime hogs to feed St. Peter's poor. By smooth transition he passed to higher themes: with absent eyes turned to the laurel-planted court on to which the hall opened, he spoke as if scarcely aware of a listener, of troubles at Rome occasioned by imprudences, indiscretions—what should he say—of the Holy Father. As Petronilla bent forward, all tremulous curiosity, he lowered his voice, grew frankly confidential. The Pope had been summoned to Byzantium, to discuss certain points of doctrine with the Emperor; his departure was delayed, but no doubt in his weakness he would obey. Verily, the lack of courage—not

to use severer terms—so painfully evident in Pope Vigilius, was a grave menace to the Church—the Catholic Church, which, rightly claiming to rule Christendom, should hold no terms with the arrogance of Justinian. Could it be wondered that the Holy Father was disliked—not to say hated—by the people of Rome? By his ill management the papal granaries had of late been so ill stored that the poor had suffered famine, the Greeks having put an end to that gratuitous distribution of food to which the Roman populace had from of old been accustomed. On this account, chiefly, had Leander journeyed to Sicily, to look after the supplies of corn, and seek out those who were to blame for the recent negligence. His bushy eyebrows gave a hint of their sterner possibilities as he spoke of the measures he had taken, the reproofs and threats he had distributed.

'May I live,' breathed Petronilla, with modest emphasis, 'to see a great, a noble, a puissant Pontiff in the Apostolic Chair!'

Whereat the deacon smiled, well understanding whither the lady looked for her ideal Pope. She went on to speak of the part Vigilius had played in the deposition and miserable death of his predecessor Silverius, and that, as was too well known, at the bidding of haughty, unscrupulous women, the Empress Theodora and her friend Antonina, wife of Belisarius. Verily, the time had come for a great reform at the Lateran; the time had come, and perhaps the divine instrument was not far to seek. Whereupon Petronilla murmured ardently, and the deacon again smiled.

There was a pause. Having permitted Leander to muse a

little, his hostess turned the conversation to the troublous topic of her thoughts; and began by saying how her brother would esteem the privilege of counsel and solace from one so qualified to impart them. But alas she must make known a distressful occurrence, whereby the office of a spiritual adviser by the bedside of Maximus must needs be complicated and made painful; and therewith Petronilla related the events of yesterday. As he listened, the deacon knitted his brows, but in thought rather than in affliction; and when the speaker was silent, he still mused awhile.

'Gracious madam,' he began at length solemnly, 'you of course hold no intercourse with this lady?'

'None! I have shrunk ever from the sight of her.'

'Such abhorrence of error witnesses to the purity and the illumination of your soul: I could have expected nothing less from Petronilla. You know not whether the misguided woman shows any disposition to return to the true faith?'

'I fear not,' replied Petronilla, looking rather as if the fear were a hope. 'Her nature is stubborn: she has the pride of the fallen angels.'

'And her father, I am afraid, has no longer the strength to treat her sin with due severity?'

'Earthly affection has subdued him,' replied the lady, shaking her head. 'Who knows,' she added, 'how far his weakness may lead my poor brother?'

She glanced about the hall, and Leander perfectly understood

what was in her mind.

'Be not over anxious,' he replied soothingly. 'Leave this in my hands. Should it be necessary, I can dispose of some days before pursuing my journey. Take comfort, noble and pious lady! The truth will prevail.'

The deacon's first step was to obtain a private interview with the physician. He then made known his desire to wait upon Maximus, and with no great delay was admitted. Tactfully, sagaciously, he drew the sufferer to confide in him, to see in him, not so much a spiritual admonisher as a counsellor and a support in worldly difficulties. Leander was already well aware that the Senator had small religious zeal, but belonged to the class of men, numerous at this time, who, whilst professing the Christian and the orthodox faith, were in truth philosophers rather than devotees, and regarded dogmatic questions with a calm not easily distinguished from indifference. Maximus had scarcely spoken of his daughter, when the deacon understood it was Aurelia's temporal, much more than her eternal, interests which disturbed the peace of the dying man. Under Roman law, bequests to a heretic were null and void; though this enactment had for the most part been set aside in Italy under Gothic rule, it might be that the Imperial code would henceforth prevail. Maximus desired to bestow upon his daughter a great part of his possessions. Petronilla, having sufficient means of her own, might well be content with a moderate bequest; Basil, the relative next of kin, had a worthy claim upon his uncle's generous

treatment, and Decius, who needed but little, must have that little assured. The father had hoped that his entreaties, together with a prospect of substantial reward, would prevail against Aurelia's pride-rooted heresy, but as yet he pleaded and tempted in vain. Could the deacon help him?

Leander seemed to meditate profoundly. The subject of his thought was what seemed to him a glaring omission in this testament of Maximus. He breathed an intimate inquiry: Was the sick man at peace with his own soul? Had he sought strength and solace from the reverend presbyter of Surrentum, his spiritual father in this district? Maximus replied that he had neglected no ordinary means of grace. Whilst speaking, he met the deacon's eye; its significance was not to be mistaken.

'I should have mentioned,' he said, averting his look, 'that the presbyter Andreas and his poor will not be forgotten. Moreover, many of my slaves will receive their freedom.'

Leander murmured approvingly. Again he reflected, and again he ventured an inquiry: Maximus would desire, no doubt, to rest with his glorious ancestors in the mortuary chapel known as the Temple of Probus, by St. Peter's? And seeing the emotion this excited in his listener he went on to speak at large of the Anician house—first among the great families of Rome to embrace Christianity, and distinguished, generation after generation, by their support of the church, which indeed numbered among its Supreme Pontiffs one of their line, the third Felix. Did not the illustrious father of Maximus lead the Christian senators in

their attack upon that lingering shame, the heathen Lupercalia, since so happily supplanted by the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Mary? He, dying—added Leander, with an ecstatic smile—made over to the Apostolic See an estate in Sicily which yielded every year two rich harvests to the widows, the orphans, the sick, and the destitute of Rome.

'Deacon,' broke from the hot lips of Maximus, who struggled to raise himself, 'if I do the like, will you swear to me to use your influence, your power, for the protection of my daughter?'

It was the voice of nature in its struggle with the universal doom; reason had little part in the hope with which those fading eyes fixed themselves upon the countenance of the self-possessed churchman.

'Heaven forbid,' was Leander's reply, 'that I should bind myself in such terms to perform an office of friendship, which under any circumstances would be my anxious care.'

'Even,' asked Maximus, 'if she persist in her heresy?'

'Even so, my dear lord, remembering from whom she springs. But,' he added, in a soothing voice, 'let me put your mind at rest. Trust me, the lady Aurelia will not long cling to her error. In poverty, in humiliation, she might be obstinate; but as the possessor of wealth—restored to her due rank—oh, my gracious lord, be assured that her conversion will soon follow.'

The same thought had occurred to Maximus. He sighed in profound relief, and regarded the deacon gratefully.

'In that hope I rest. Give me your promise to befriend her, and

ask of me what you will.'

Save for the hours she passed at her father's side, Aurelia kept a strict retirement, guarded by the three female slaves whom Petronilla had reluctantly assigned to her. Of them she required no intimate service, having her own attendants, an elderly woman, the nurse of her childhood, who through all changes of fortune had never quitted her, and a younger, half-Goth, half-Italian, who discharged humbler duties. She occupied a small dwelling apart from the main structure of the villa, but connected with it by a portico: this was called the House of Proba, it having been constructed a hundred years ago for the lady Faltonia Proba, who wrote verses, and perhaps on that account desired a special privacy. Though much neglected, the building had beauty of form, and was full of fine work in mosaic. Here, in a little peristyle, where shrubs and creepers had come to wild growth, the sore-hearted lady sat brooding or paced backwards and forwards, her eyes ever on the ground. When yet a maiden she had several times spent summer at Surrentum; her memory revived that early day which seemed so long ago; she lived again with her brothers and sisters, all dead, with her mother whom griefs had aged so soon. Then came a loveless marriage, which soon involved her in the public troubles of the time; for her husband, whose estates lay in Tuscany, was robbed of all by Theodahad, and having vainly sought redress from the young King Athalaric, decided to leave Italy for Byzantium, to which end Aurelia sold a property in Campania, her dower.

Before they could set forth upon their journey, her husband caught the plague and died. In second wedlock she would have known contentment but for the alienation of her kin and the scornful hostility of all her class. When widowhood again befell her she was saved from want by a small treasure of money which remained hidden in the dwelling at Cumae when the Gothic warrior, her lord, escaped from Belisarius. As this store diminished, Aurelia had looked forward with dread, for she hoped nothing from her father. And now that such fears seemed to be over, her long tortured pride clamoured for solace. It was not enough to regain her father's love and enjoy an inheritance; she wished to see her enemies at her feet, and to trample upon them—her enemies being not only Petronilla and certain other kinsfolk but all the nobility of Rome, nay, all the orthodox of the Christian church. Pacing, pacing alone, she brooded vast schemes of vengeance.

When it was announced to her that the Roman deacon besought an interview, she at first refused to receive him. Thereupon Leander sent her a few lines in writing, most ceremoniously worded, in which he declared that his purposes were those of a disinterested friend, that no word such as could pain or offend her would pass his lips, and that he had it in his power to communicate something which would greatly benefit her. Aurelia reflected disdainfully, but at length consented to the churchman's approach. Leander's bearing as he entered her presence was as elaborately courteous as the phrasing of his

letter.

'Noble lady,' he began, standing with bowed head, 'let not your eyes take note of my garb. See in me only a devoted servant of your illustrious house. His Magnificence, your father, assured of the sincerity wherewith I place at his command such powers and opportunities as I owe to heaven's grace, has deigned to confide in me regarding the disposition of his worldly affairs whereto he is prompted by languishing health.'

He paused a moment, but Aurelia had no word of reply to this exordium. Seeing her keep the same haughty posture in her chair, with eyes scornfully averted as if she scarce listened, Leander proceeded to disclose his mind in less ornate terms. By subtle grades of confidential speech, beginning with a declaration of the sympathy moved in him by the parent's love, the daughter's distress, he came with lowering voice, with insinuating tone, with blandly tolerant countenance, to the kernel of his discourse; it contained a suggestion which might—he only said *might*—aid her amid the manifold perplexities of her position. By this time Aurelia was more attentive; the churchman almost affectionate in his suavity, grew still more direct; and at length, in a voice which only reached the ear of the listener, he spoke thus:

'I understand why you stepped aside from the way of truth; I perceive the obstacles hindering your return. I know the tender impulses which urge you to soothe your father's last hours, and, not less, the motives, natural to a woman of your beauty, of your birth, which are at strife with that tenderness and threaten to

overcome it. Could you discover a means of yielding to your filial affection, and at the same time safeguarding your noble pride, would you not gladly use it? Such a means I can point out to you.'

He became silent, watching Aurelia. She, won by the perspicacity which read her heart, had put aside all arrogance, and wore a look of grave intentness.

'Let me know it,' she murmured.

'It is this. Return to the true belief, but guard awhile the secret of your conversion. That it shall not be disclosed until you wish, I can give you firm assurance—if need be, on solemn oath. You will privately make known to your father that he has prevailed, thereby you put his flesh and spirit at rest,—he will die blessing you, and enriching you to the full extent of his desire. You will then also set your signature to a paper, which I shall write, making confession of the orthodox faith, and undertaking to be duly reconciled with the church, by the imposition of hands, at some convenient season. That is all that will be asked of you for the present. The lady Petronilla'—he all but smiled in uttering the name—'shall not even suspect what has happened.'

'Will this villa be mine?' asked the listener after brief reflection.

'This villa shall be yours.'

An exultant gleam shone in Aurelia's eyes.

'Deacon,' she said sternly, 'your promise is not enough. Swear to me that no one living, save my father and you, shall know.'

From his bosom Leander drew forth a little golden cross.

'This,' he said reverently, 'contains dust of iron from the bars on which the blessed Laurentius suffered martyrdom.'

'Swear also,' demanded Aurelia, 'by the Holy Pancratius.' In the name of both saints Leander took his oath of secrecy. Petronilla was of course aware that the deacon had been admitted to audience by her niece. When he descended, she awaited him at the end of the portico, and her look questioned him.

'Stubborn, stubborn!' murmured Leander, shaking his head, and passed on as though in troubled thought.

Later in the day, when she had seen her father, Aurelia made known to her cousin Basil, who had requested an interview, that he might come. His cousin received him smilingly, almost affectionately.

Marcian having this morning taken his leave, called away by some unexplained business to Neapolis, Basil had been on the point of taking Decius into his amorous confidence, when this summons rejoiced him.

'Is the letter written?' were Basil's first words.

'It is here. Can you despatch it at once?'

'I will take it myself,' he answered promptly.

Aurelia shook her head.

'You must not. My father's life is fast failing. No one can say which hour may be his last. If he asked for you, and you were absent—'

'Felix shall go,' said Basil. 'The wind is favourable. He may have to ride back to-morrow, but we can trust him to make all

speed.'

'He took the letter, which was superscribed, 'To the most noble lady Veranilda.'

'Dear cousin, you have spoken of me?' he asked with a wistful look.

'I have said, good cousin,' Aurelia answered pleasantly, 'that you wished to be spoken of.'

'Only that?'

'What more should I say? Your Amiability is too hasty. Remember that you have scarce seen her.'

'Scarce seen Veranilda!' exclaimed Basil. 'Why, it seems to me as though I had known her for years! Have we not talked together?'

'Once. The first time does not count; you exchanged hardly a dozen words. When,' added Aurelia, smiling, 'were you so dashed in a maid's presence?'

'Nay, never! I am not accused of too much modesty; but when I entered and looked on Veranilda—oh, it was the strangest moment of my life! Noble cousin,' he added pleadingly, 'honoured Aurelia, do but tell me what is her parentage?'

'How does that concern your Excellence? I have told you all that it imports you to know—at all events for the present. Cousin Basil, you delay the letter; I should wish her to have it before nightfall, for she thinks anxiously of me.'

'I go. When may I again speak with you?'

'You shall hear when I am at leisure.'

Basil despatched his servant to Cumae not with one letter only, but with two. Greatly daring, he had himself written to Veranilda; in brief terms, but every word tremulous with his passion. And for half an hour he stood watching the sail which wafted his messenger over the gulf, ruffled to-day by a south-west wind, driver of clouds. Little thought had he to give to the dying Maximus, but at the ninth hour he turned his steps to the oratory, once a temple of Isis, and heard the office, and breathed a prayer for his kindly relative. Which duty discharged, he prayed more fervently, to whatever saint or deity has ear for such petitions, that he might be loved by the Gothic maid.

This evening Maximus seemed to suffer less. He lay with closed eyes, a look of calm on his worn countenance. Beside him sat Decius, reading in low tones from that treatise on the Consolation of Philosophy, which Boethius wrote in prison, a book wherein Maximus sought comfort, this last year or two more often than in the Evangel, or the Lives of Saints. Decius himself would have chosen a philosopher of older time, but in the words of his own kinsman, Maximus found an appeal more intimate, a closer sympathy, than in ancient teaching. He loved especially the passages of verse; and when the reader came to those lines—

'O felix hominum genus,
Si vestros animos amor
Quo coelum regitur, regat,'

he raised his hand, smiling with peculiar sweetness.

'Pause there, O Decius,' he said, in a weak but clear voice; 'let me muse awhile.' And he murmured the verses to himself.

CHAPTER IV TO CUMAE

The Bishop of Surrentum, an elderly man and infirm, had for the past fortnight been unable to leave his house, but day by day he received news of what passed at the villa of Maximus, and held with the presbyter, Andreas, many colloquies on that weighty topic, the senator's testament. As it happened, neither bishop nor presbyter had much aptitude for worldly affairs; they were honest, simple-minded clerics, occupied with visions and marvels and the saving details of dogma; exultant whenever a piece of good fortune befell their church, but modest in urging a claim at the bedside of the sick. Being the son of a freedman who had served in the Anician house, the bishop could not approach Maximus without excessive reverence; before Petronilla he was even more unduly awed.

On Sunday morning the good prelate lay wakeful at the hour of matins, and with quavering voice chanted to himself the psalm of the office from which his weakness held him apart. Presently the door opened, and in the dim lamp-light appeared the presbyter Andreas, stepping softly. He made known that an urgent message had just summoned him to the villa; Maximus was near his end.

'I, too, will come,' exclaimed the bishop, rising in his bed and ringing loudly a little hand-bell.

'Venerable father! your health—'

'Hasten, hasten, Andreas! I follow.'

In less than an hour he descended from his litter, and, resting on the arms of two servants, was conducted to the chamber of the dying man. Andreas had just administered the last rites, whether the fixed eyes still saw was doubtful. At a murmur of 'the bishop' those by the doorway reverently drew aside. On one side of the bed were Aurelia and the deacon; on the other, Petronilla and Basil and Decius. Though kneeling, the senator's daughter held herself proudly. Though tears were on her face, she hardly disguised an air of triumph. Nor was the head of Petronilla bent; her countenance looked hard and cold as marble. Leander, a model of decorum, stepped with grave greeting towards the prelate, and whispered a word or two. In the stillness that followed there quivered a deep breath. Flavius Anicius Maximus had lived his life.

When the bishop, supported by Leander and Andreas, rose from prayer, he was led by the obsequious clerics to a hall illumined by several lamps, where two brasiers gave forth a grateful glow in the chill of the autumn morning. Round about the walls, in niches, stood busts carved or cast of the ancestors of him who lay dead. Here, whilst voices of lamentation sounded from without, Leander made known to the prelate and the presbyter the terms of the will. Basil was instituted 'heir'; that is to say, he became the legal representative of the dead man, and was charged with the distribution of those parts of the estate

bequeathed to others. First of the legatees stood Aurelia. The listeners learnt with astonishment that the obstinate heretic was treated as though her father had had no cause of complaint against her; she was now mistress of the Surrentine estate, as well as of the great house in Rome, and of other property. A lamentable thing, the deacon admitted suavely; but, for his part, he was not without hope, and he fixed his eyes with a peculiar intensity on the troubled bishop.

Petronilla drew near. The will was already known to her in every detail, and she harboured a keen suspicion of the secret which lay behind it. Leander, she could not doubt, was behaving to her with duplicity, and this grieved her to the heart. It was to the bishop that she now addressed herself.

'Holy father, I am your suppliant. Not even for a day will I remain under this roof, even if—which is doubtful—I should be suffered to do so. I put myself under the protection of your Holiness, until such time as I can set forth on my sad journey to Rome. At Surrentum I must abide until the corpse of my brother can be conveyed to its final resting place—as I promised him.'

Much agitated, the prelate made answer that a fitting residence should be prepared for her before noon, and the presbyter Andreas added that he would instantly betake himself to the city on that business. Petronilla thanked him with the loftiest humility. For any lack of respect, or for common courtesy, to which they might be exposed ere they quitted the villa, she besought their Sanctities not to hold her responsible, she herself

being now an unwilling intruder at this hearth, and liable at any moment to insult. Uttering which words in a resonant voice, she turned her eyes to where, a few yards away, stood Aurelia, with Basil and Decius behind her.

'Reverend bishop,' spoke a voice not less steady and sonorous than that of the elder lady, 'should you suffer any discourtesy in my house, it will come not from me, but from her who suggests its possibility, and whose mind is bent upon such things. Indeed, she has already scanted the respect she owes you in uttering these words. As for herself, remain she here for an hour or for a month, she is in no danger of insult—unless she deem it an insult to have her base falsehood flung back at her, and the enmity in her fierce eyes answered with the scorn it merits.'

Petronilla trembled with wrath.

'Falsehood!' she echoed, on a high, mocking note. 'A charge of falsehood upon *her* lips! Your Holiness will ere long, I do not doubt, be enlightened as to that woman's principles in the matter of truth and falsehood. Meanwhile, we shall consult our souls' welfare, as well as our dignity, in holding as little intercourse as may be with one who has renounced the faith in Christ.'

Aurelia bent her eyes upon the deacon, who met the look with austere fixedness. There was dead silence for a moment, then she turned to the young men behind her.

'My noble cousins, I desired your company because I foresaw this woman's violence, and knew not to what length it might carry her. She pretends to fear my tongue; for my part, I would not

lightly trust myself within reach of her hands, of which I learnt the weight when I was a little child. Lord Decius, attend, I beg you, these reverend men whilst they honour my house and on their way homeward. My cousin Basil, I must needs ask you to be my guard, until I can command service here. Follow me, I pray.'

With another piercing glance at Leander she withdrew from the assembly.

It was a morning of wind and cloud; the day broke sadly. When the first gleam of yellow sunlight flitted over Surrentum towards the cliffs of Capreae, silence had fallen upon the villa. Wearied by their night of watching, the inhabitants slept, or at least reposed in privacy. But this quiet was of short duration. When the customary bell had given notice of the third hour, Aurelia called together the servants of the house—only those who belonged to Petronilla failing to answer her summons—and announced to them her new authority. At the same time the steward of the estate read out a list of those slaves who, under the will of Maximus, could claim their emancipation. The gathering having dispersed, there appeared an attendant of the deacon Leander; his reverend master would wait upon the lady Aurelia, as soon as her leisure permitted, for the purpose of taking leave. Forthwith the deacon was admitted. Alone in the great hall, Aurelia sat beside a brasier, at which she warmed her hands; she scarcely deigned to glance at the ecclesiastic.

'You pursue your journey, reverend?' were her first words.

'As far as Neapolis, gracious lady,' came the suave reply.

'There or in the neighbourhood I shall remain at least ten days. Should you desire to communicate with me—'

'I think I can save that trouble,' interrupted Aurelia, with quivering lips. 'All I have to say to your Sanctity, I will say at once. It is, that you have enlightened me as to the value of solemn oaths on the lips of the Roman clergy.'

'Your meaning, dear madam?' asked Leander, with a look of bland disdain.

'You have the face to ask it, deacon, after Petronilla's words this morning?'

'I feared they might mislead you. The lady Petronilla knows nothing of what has passed between us. She spoke in anger, and hazarded an accusation—as angry ladies are wont.'

'Of course you say so,' returned Aurelia. 'I will believe you if you give me back the paper I signed, and trust to my word for the fulfilment of what I promised.'

Leander smiled, almost as if he had heard some happy intelligence.

'You ask,' he said, 'for a trust you yourself refuse.'

'Then go your way, perjurer!' exclaimed Aurelia, her cheeks aflame with passion. 'I know henceforth on whom to rely.'

For a moment Leander stood as if reflecting on these last words; then he bowed, and with placid dignity retired.

Meanwhile Basil and Decius were conversing with Petronilla. Neither of them had ever stood on terms of more than courteous forbearance with this authoritative lady; at present

they maintained their usual demeanour, and did not think it needful to apologise for friendly relations with Aurelia. The only subject on which Petronilla deigned to hold colloquy with them was that of her brother's burial at Rome. Should the transport be by land or by sea? This evening the corpse would be conveyed to the cathedral of Surrentum, where due rites would be performed early on the morrow; there it would remain in temporary interment until a coffin of lead could be prepared, and arrangements completed for the removal. Was the year too advanced, questioned Petronilla, to allow of the sea voyage? On the other hand, would the land journey be safe, having regard to the advance of the Gothic army? Basil pronounced for the sea, and undertook to seek for a vessel. Was he willing, asked Petronilla, to accompany the body to Rome? This question gave Basil pause; he reflected uneasily; he hesitated. Yet who could discharge this duty, if he did not? Suddenly ashamed of his hesitation, the true reason of which could not be avowed, he declared that he would make the voyage.

Hereupon entered the deacon, who, the matter being put before him, approved these arrangements. He himself would doubtless be in Rome before the arrival of the remains of Maximus, and all the details of the burial there might be left to him. So Petronilla thanked and dismissed the young men, on whose retirement she turned eagerly to Leander.

'Forgive me!' broke from her lips. 'I know how deeply I have offended your Sanctity. It was my fear that you would go away

without a word. My haste, my vehemence, merited even that punishment.'

'Calm yourself, noble lady,' returned the deacon. 'I was indeed grieved, but I know your provocation. We may speak on this subject again; but not here. For the present, I take my leave of you, all being ready for my departure. As you are quitting this house at once, you need no counsel as to immediate difficulties; I will only say, in all things be prudent, be self-controlled; before long, you may see reason for the discreet silence which I urge upon you.'

'When do you set forth to Rome?' asked Petronilla. 'If it might be my privilege to journey in your company—?'

'The day is uncertain,' replied Leander; 'but if it be possible for us to travel together, trust me to beg for the honour. You shall hear of my projects in a week's time from Neapolis.'

Petronilla fell to her knees, and again besought his forgiveness with his benediction. The deacon magnanimously granted both, and whilst bending over the devout lady, whispered one word:

'Patience!'

An hour after mid-day, Petronilla quitted the villa. Her great travelling chariot, drawn by four mules, wherein she and her most precious possessions were conveyed, descended at a stately pace the winding road to Surrentum. Before it rode Basil; behind came a laden wagon, two light vehicles carrying female slaves, and mounted men-servants, armed as though for a long and perilous journey. Since the encounter before sunrise, there had been no

meeting between the hostile ladies. Aurelia signified her scorn by paying no heed to her aunt's departure.

Alone in her dominion, the inheritress entered the death-chamber, and there passed an hour upon her knees. Whilst she was thus secluded, a pealing storm traversed the sky. When Aurelia came forth again, her face was wan, tearstained. She summoned her nurse, and held much talk with her as to the significance of thunder whilst a corpse lay in the house. The good woman, though she durst not utter all her thoughts, babbled concern, and used the occasion to beseech Aurelia—as she had often done since the death of her Gothic lord—to be reconciled with the true church.

'True church!' exclaimed Aurelia, with sudden passion. 'How do you know which is the true church? Have not emperors, have not bishops and numberless holy men lived and died in the faith I confess—?'

She checked herself; grew silent, brooded. Meanwhile, the old nurse talked on, and presently began to relate how a handmaid of Petronilla, in going with her this morning, professed to know on the surest evidence that Aurelia, by her father's deathbed, had renounced Arianism. The sullen countenance of her mistress flashed again into wrath.

'Did I not forbid you,' cried Aurelia, 'to converse with those women? And you dare repeat to me their loose-lipped chatter. I am too familiar with you; go and talk with your kind; go!'

Mutteringly the woman went apart. The mistress, alone, fell

into a long weeping. When she had sobbed herself into quiet once more, she sought a volume of the Gospels, inserted her forefinger between the pages at random, and anxiously regarded the passage thus chosen.

'While ye have the light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light.'

She brooded, but in the end seemed to find solace.

Basil was absent all day. On his return, just before sunset, Aurelia met him in the atrium, heard the report of what he had done, and at length asked whether, on the day after to-morrow, he could go to Cumae.

'To Cumae?' exclaimed Basil. 'Ay, that I can! You are returning thither?'

'For a day only. I go to seek that which no one but myself can find.'

The listener had no difficulty in understanding this; it meant, of course, treasure concealed in the house Aurelia had long inhabited.

'We must both go and return by sea,' said Aurelia, 'even though it cause us delay. I have no mind to pass through Neapolis.'

'Be it so. The sky will be calm when this storm has passed. Shall you return,' said Basil, 'alone?'

'Alone? Do you purpose to forsake me?'

'Think better of my manners, cousin—and more shrewdly of my meaning.'

'You mean fairly, I trust?' she returned, looking him steadily

in the face.

'Nay,' cried the young man vehemently, 'if I have any thought other than honest, may I perish before I ever again behold her!'

Aurelia's gaze softened.

'It is well,' she said; 'we will speak again to-morrow.'

That night Petronilla kept vigil in the church of Surrentum, Basil and Decius relieving her an hour before dawn. At the funeral service, which began soon after sunrise, the greater part of the townsfolk attended. All were eager to see whether the daughter of Maximus would be present, for many rumours were rife touching Aurelia, some declaring that she had returned to the true faith, some that she remained obstinate in heresy. Her failure to appear did not set the debate at rest. A servant of Petronilla whispered it about that only by a false pretence of conversion had Aurelia made sure her inheritance; and at the mere thought of such wickedness the hearers shuddered, foretelling a dread retribution. The clergy were mute on the subject, even with the most favoured of their flock. Meanwhile the piety and austerity of Petronilla made a safe topic of talk, and a long procession reverently escorted her to her temporary abode near the bishop's house.

To-day the clouds spent themselves in rain; before nightfall the heavens began to clear. The island peak of Inarime stood purple against a crimson sunset. After supper, Aurelia and Basil held conference. The wind would not be favourable for their voyage; none the less, they decided to start at the earliest possible hour.

Dawn was but just streaking the sky, when they rode down the dark gorge which led to the shore, Basil attended by Felix, the lady by one maid. The bark awaited them, swaying gently against the harbour-side. Aurelia descended to the little cabin curtained off below a half-deck, and—sails as yet being useless—four great oars urged the craft on its way.

What little wind there was breathed from the north. For an hour they made but slow progress, but when the first rays of sun gleamed above the mountains, the breeze shifted westward; sails were presently hoisted, and the rippling water hissed before the prow. Soon a golden day shone upon sea and land. Aurelia came forth on to the deck, and sat gazing towards Neapolis.

'You know that the deacon is yonder,' she said in a low voice to Basil, this the first mention of Leander that had fallen from her lips in speaking with him.

'Is he?' returned the other carelessly. 'Yes, I remember.'

But Basil's eyes were turned to the long promontory of Misenum. He was wondering anxiously how his letter had affected Veranilda, and whether, when she heard of it, Aurelia would be angered.

'Where is your friend Marcian?' were her next words.

Basil replied that he, too, was sojourning at Neapolis; and, when Aurelia inquired what business held him there, her cousin answered truly that he did not know.

'Do you trust him?' asked the lady, after a thoughtful pause.

'Marcian? As I trust myself!'

One of the boatmen coming within earshot, their conversation ceased.

The hour before noon saw them drawing near to land. They left on the right the little island of Nesis, and drew towards Puteoli. On the left lay Baiae, all but forsaken, its ancient temples and villas stretching along the shore from the Lucrine lake to the harbour shadowed by Cape Misenum; desolate magnificence, marble overgrown with ivy, gardens where the rose grew wild, and terraces crumbling into the sea. Basil and Aurelia looked upon these things with an eye made careless by familiarity; all their lives ruin had lain about them, deserted sanctuaries of a bygone creed, unpeopled homes of a vanished greatness.

As the boat advanced into the bay, it lost the wind, and rowing again became needful. Thus they entered the harbour of Puteoli, where the travellers disembarked.

Hard by the port was a tavern, which, owing to its position midway between Neapolis and Cumae, still retained something of its character as a *mansio* of the posting service; but the vehicles and quadrupeds of which it boasted were no longer held in strict reserve for state officials and persons privileged. Gladly the innkeeper put at Basil's disposal his one covered carriage, a trifle cleaner inside than it was without, and a couple of saddle horses, declared to be Sicilian, but advanced in age. Thus, with slight delay, the party pursued their journey, Basil and his man riding before the carriage. The road ran coastwise as far as the Julian haven, once thronged with the shipping of the Roman world,

now all but abandoned to a few fishermen; there it turned inland, skirted the Lucrine water, and presently reached the shore of Lake Avernus, where was the entrance to the long tunnel piercing the hill between the lake and Cumae. On an ill-kept way, under a low vault of rock dripping moisture, the carriage with difficulty tossed and rumbled through the gloom. Basil impatiently trotted on, and, as he issued into sunlight, there before him stood the walls of the ancient city, round about that little hill by the sea which, in an age remote, had been chosen for their abode by the first Hellenes tempted to the land of Italy. High above rose the acropolis, a frowning stronghold. Through Basil's mind passed the thought that ere long Cumae might again belong to the Goths, and this caused him no uneasiness; half, perchance, he hoped it.

A guard at the city gate inspected the carriage, and let it pass on. In a few minutes, guided by Basil, it drew up before a house in a narrow, climbing street, a small house, brick fronted, with stucco pilasters painted red at the door, and two windows, closed with wooden shutters, in the upper storey. On one side of the entrance stood a shop for the sale of earthenware; on the other, a vintner's with a projecting marble table, the jars of wine thereon exhibited being attached by chains to rings in the wall. Odours of cookery, and of worse things, oppressed the air, and down the street ran a noisome gutter. When Basil's servant had knocked, a little wicket slipped aside for observation; then, after a grinding of heavy locks and bars, the double doors were opened, and a grey-headed slave stepped forward to receive his mistress. Basil

had jumped down from his horse, and would fain have entered, but, by an arrangement already made, this was forbidden. Saying that she would expect him at the second hour on the morrow, Aurelia disappeared. Her cousin after a longing look at the blind and mute house, rode away to another quarter of the city, near the harbour, where was an inn at which he had lodged during his previous visit. In a poor and dirty room, he made shift to dine on such food as could be offered him; then lay down on the truckle bed, and slept for an hour or two.

A knock at the door awoke him. It was Felix, who brought the news that Marcian was at Cumae.

'You have seen him?' cried Basil, astonished and eager.

'His servant Sagaris,' Felix replied. 'I met him but now in the forum, and learnt that his lord lodges at the house of the curial Venustus; hard by the Temple of Diana.'

'Go thither at once, and beg him, if his leisure serve, to come to me. I would go myself; but, if he have seen Sagaris, he may be already on the way here.'

And so it proved, for in a very few minutes Marcian himself entered the room.

'Your uncle is dead,' were his first words. 'I heard it in Neapolis yesterday. What brings you here?'

'Nay, best Marcian,' returned the other, with hands on his friend's shoulders, and peering him in the face, 'let me once again put that question to *you*.'

'I cannot answer it, yet,' said Marcian gravely. 'Your business

is more easily guessed.'

'But must not be talked of here,' interrupted Basil, glancing at the door. 'Let us find some more suitable place.'

They descended the dark, foul stairs, and went out together. Before the house stood the two serving-men, who, as their masters walked away, followed at a respectful distance. When safe from being overheard, Basil recounted to his friend the course of events at the Surrentine villa since Marcian's departure, made known his suspicion that Aurelia had secretly returned to the Catholic faith. He then told of to day's journey and its purpose, his hearer wearing a look of grave attention.

'Can it be,' asked Marcian, 'that you think of wedding this Gothic beauty?'

'Assuredly,' answered Basil, with a laugh, 'I have thought of it.'

'And it looks as though Aurelia favoured your desire.'

'It has indeed something of that appearance.'

'Pray you now, dear lord,' said Marcian, 'be sober awhile. Have you reflected that, with such a wife, you would not dare return to Rome?'

Basil had not regarded that aspect of the matter, but his friend's reasoning soon brought him to perceive the danger he would lightly have incurred. Dangers, not merely those that resulted from the war; could he suppose, asked Marcian, that Heliodora would meekly endure his disdain, and that the life of Veranilda would be safe in such a rival's proximity? Hereat, Basil gnashed his teeth and handled his dagger. Why return to Rome

at all? he cried impatiently. He had no mind to go through the torments of a long siege such as again threatened. Why should he not live on in Campania—

'And tend your sheep or your goats?' interrupted Marcian, with his familiar note of sad irony. 'And pipe *sub tegmine fagi* to your blue-eyed Amaryllis? Why not, indeed? But what if; on learning the death of Maximus, the Thracian who rules yonder see fit to command your instant return, and to exact from you an account of what you have inherited? Bessas loses no time—suspecting—perhaps—that his tenure of a fruitful office may not be long.'

'And if the suspicion be just?' said Basil, gazing hard at his friend.

'Well, if it be?' said the other, returning the look.

'Should we not do well to hold far from Rome, looking to King Totila, whom men praise, as a deliverer of our land from hateful tyranny?'

Marcian laid a hand on his friend's shoulder.

'O, brave Basil!' he murmured, with a smile. 'O, nobly confident in those you love! Never did man so merit love in return.—Do as you will. In a few days I shall again visit you at Surrentum, and perchance bring news that may give us matter for talk.'

From a portico hard by there approached a beggar, a filthy and hideous cripple, who, with whining prayer, besought alms. Marcian from his wallet took a copper coin, and, having glanced

at it, drew Basil's attention.

'Look,' said he, smiling oddly, 'at the image and the superscription.'

It was a coin of Vitiges, showing a helmeted bust of the goddess of the city, with legend '*Invicta Roma*.'

'*Invicta Roma*,' muttered Basil sadly, with head bent.

Meanwhile, out of earshot of their masters, the two servants conversed with not less intimacy. At a glance these men were seen to be of different races. Felix, aged some five and thirty, could boast of free birth; he was the son of a curial—that is to say, municipal councillor—of Arpinum, who had been brought to ruin, like so many of his class in this age, by fiscal burdens, the curiales being responsible for the taxes payable by their colleagues, as well as for the dues on any estate in their district which might be abandoned, and, in brief, for whatsoever deficiencies of local revenue. Gravity and sincerity appeared in his countenance; he seldom smiled, spoke in a subdued voice, and often kept his eyes on the ground; but his service was performed with rare conscientiousness, and he had often given proof of affection for his master. Sagaris, a Syrian slave, less than thirty years old, had a comely visage which ever seemed to shine with contentment, and often twinkled with a sort of roguish mirth. Tall and of graceful bearing, the man's every movement betrayed personal vanity; his speech had the note of facile obsequiousness; he talked whenever occasion offered, and was fond of airing his views on political and other high matters. Therewithal, he was the

most superstitious of mortals; wore amulets, phylacteries, charms of all sorts, and secretly prayed to many strange gods. When he had nothing else to do, and could find a genial companion, his delight was to play by the hour at *micare digitis*; but, in spite of his master's good opinion, not to Sagaris would have applied the proverb that you might play that game with him in the dark.

'Take my word for it,' he whispered to Felix, with his most important air, 'we shall see strange things ere long. Last night I counted seven shooting stars.'

'What does that argue?' asked the other soberly.

'More than I care to put into Latin. At Capua, three days ago, a woman gave birth to a serpent, a winged dragon, which flew away towards Rome. I talked at Neapolis with a man who saw it.'

'Strange, indeed,' murmured Felix, with raised eyebrows. 'I have often heard of such portents, but never had the luck to behold one of them. Yet,' he added gravely, 'I have received a sign. When my father died, I was far away from him, and at that very hour, as I prayed in the church of Holy Clement at Rome, I heard a voice that said in my ear, *Vale!* three times.'

'Oh, I have had signs far more wonderful than that,' exclaimed the Syrian. 'I was at sea, between Alexandria and Berytus—for you must know that in my boyhood I passed three years at Berytus, and there obtained that knowledge of law which you may have remarked in talking with me—well, I was at sea—'

'Peace!' interposed Felix. 'We are summoned.'

Sagaris sighed, and became the obsequious attendant.

CHAPTER V

BASIL AND VERANILDA

At the appointed hour next morning, when yet no ray of sunshine had touched the gloomy little street, though a limpid sky shone over it, Basil stood at Aurelia's door. The grey-headed porter silently admitted him, and he passed by a narrow corridor into a hall lighted as usual from above, paved with red tiles, here and there trodden away, the walls coloured a dusky yellow, and showing an imaginary line of pillars painted in blue. A tripod table, a couch, and a few chairs were the only furniture. When the visitor had waited for a few moments a curtain concealing the entrance to the inner part of the house moved aside, and Aurelia's voice bade her cousin come forward. He entered a smaller room opening upon a diminutive court where a few shrubs grew; around the walls hung old and faded tapestry; the floor was of crude mosaic; the furniture resembled that of the atrium, with the addition of a brasier.

'I have been anxious for your coming,' were Aurelia's first words. 'Do you think they will let us depart without hindrance? Yesterday I saw the owner of this house to transact my business with him. It is Venustus, a curial, a man who has always been well disposed to me. He said that he must perforce make known to the governor my intention of leaving the city, and hoped no

obstacle would be put in our way. This morning, before sunrise, a messenger from the citadel came and put questions to the porter.'

Basil knitted his brows.

'Venustus? It is with Venustus that Marcian lodges. Yes, Marcian is here; I know not on what business. It would have been wiser,' he added, 'to have said nothing, to have gone away as before. When shall you be ready?'

'I am ready now. Why delay? What matter though we reach Surrentum by night? The moon rises early.'

'What reply was given to the messenger from the citadel?'

'He learned, perforce, that we were preparing for a journey.'

A moment's reflection and Basil decided to risk immediate departure; delay and uncertainty were at all times hateful to him, and at the present juncture intolerable. At once he quitted the house (not having ventured to speak the name of Veranilda), and in an hour's time the covered carriage from Puteoli, and another vehicle, were in waiting. The baggage was brought out; then, as Basil stood in the hall, he saw Aurelia come forward, accompanied by a slight female figure, whose grace could not be disguised by the long hooded cloak which wrapped it from head to foot, allowing not a glimpse of face. The young man trembled, and followed. He saw the ladies step into the carriage, and was himself about to mount his horse, when a military officer, attended by three soldiers, stepped towards him, and, without phrase of courtesy, demanded his name. Pallid, shaken with all manner of emotions, Basil replied to this and several other

inquiries, the result being that the two vehicles were ordered to be driven to the citadel, and he to go thither under guard.

At the entrance to the citadel the carriage drew up and remained there under guard. Basil was led in, and presently stood before the military governor of Cumae; this was a Hun named Chorsoman, formerly one of Belisarius's bodyguard. He spoke Latin barbarously; none the less was his language direct and perspicuous. The Roman lady wished to quit Cumae, where she had lived for some years; she purposed, moreover, to take away with her a maiden of Gothic race, who, though not treated as a captive, had been under observation since she was sent to dwell here by Belisarius. This could not pass as a matter of small moment. Plainly, permission to depart must be sought of the authorities, and such permission, under the circumstances, could only be granted in return for substantial payment—a payment in proportion to the lady's rank. It was known that the senator Maximus had died, and report said that his daughter inherited great wealth. The price of her passport would be one thousand gold pieces.

Basil knew that Aurelia had not, in the coffer she was taking away, a quarter of this sum of money. He foresaw endless delay, infinite peril to his hopes. Schooling a hot tongue to submissive utterance, he asked that Aurelia might be consulted.

'Speak with her yourself,' said the Hun, 'and bring her answer.'

So Basil went forth, and, under the eyes of the guard, held converse with his cousin. Aurelia was willing to give all the

treasure she carried with her—money, a few ornaments of gold and silver, two or three vessels of precious metal—everything for immediate liberty; all together she thought it might be the equivalent of half the sum demanded. The rest she would swear to pay. This being reported to Chorsoman, his hideous, ashen-grey countenance assumed a fierce expression; he commanded that all the baggage on the vehicles should be brought and opened before him; this was done. Whilst Basil, boiling with secret rage, saw his cousin's possessions turned out on to the floor a thought flashed into his mind.

'I ought to inform your Sublimity,' he said, with all the indifference he could assume, 'that the lady Aurelia despatched two days ago a courier to Rome apprising the noble commandant Bessas of her father's death, and of her intention to arrive in the city as soon as possible, and to put her means at his disposal for the defence of Rome against King Totila.'

Chorsoman stared.

'Is not this lady the widow of a Goth and a heretic?'

'The widow of a Goth, yes, but no longer a heretic,' answered Basil boldly, half believing what he said.

He saw that he had spoken to some purpose. The Hun blinked his little eyes, gazed greedily at the money, and was about to speak when a soldier announced that a Roman named Marcian desired immediate audience, therewith handing to the governor a piece of metal which looked like a large coin. Chorsoman had no sooner glanced at this than he bade admit the Roman; but

immediately changing his mind, he went out into another room. On his return, after a quarter of an hour, he gruffly announced that the travellers were free to depart.

'We humbly thank your Clemency,' said Basil, his heart leaping in joy. 'Does your Greatness permit me to order these trifles to be removed?'

'Except the money,' replied Chorsoman, growling next moment, 'and the vessels'; then snarling with a savage glance about him, 'and the jewels.'

Not till the gates of Cumae were behind them, and they had entered the cavern in the hill, did Basil venture to recount what had happened. He alighted from his horse, and walking through the gloom beside the carriage he briefly narrated all in a whisper to Aurelia—all except his own ingenious device for balking the Hun's cupidity. What means Marcian had employed for their release he could but vaguely conjecture; that would be learned a few days hence when his friend came again to Surrentum. Aurelia's companion in the carriage, still hooded and cloaked, neither moved nor uttered a word.

At a distance of some twenty yards from the end of the tunnel, Felix, riding in advance, checked his horse and shouted. There on the ground lay a dead man, a countryman, who it was easy to see had been stabbed to death, and perhaps not more than an hour ago. Quarrel or robbery, who could say? An incident not so uncommon as greatly to perturb the travellers; they passed on and came to Puteoli. Here the waiting boatmen were soon found;

the party embarked; the vessel oared away in a dead calm.

The long voyage was tedious to Basil only because Veranilda remained unseen in the cabin; the thought of bearing her off; as though she were already his own, was an exultation, a rapture. When he reflected on the indignities he had suffered in the citadel rage burned his throat, and Aurelia, all bitterness at the loss of her treasure, found words to increase this wrath. A Hun! A Scythian savage! A descendant perchance of the fearful Attila! He to represent the Roman Empire! Fit instrument, forsooth, of such an Emperor as Justinian, whose boundless avarice, whose shameful subjection to the base-born Theodora, were known to every one. To this had Rome fallen; and not one of her sons who dared to rise against so foul a servitude!

'Have patience, cousin,' Basil whispered, bidding her with a glance beware of the nearest boatman. 'There are some who will not grieve if Totila—'

'No more than that? To stand, and look on, and play the courtier to whichever may triumph!'

Basil muttered with himself. He wished he had been bred a soldier instead of growing to manhood in an age when the nobles of Rome were held to inglorious peace, their sole career that of the jurist And Aurelia, brooding, saw him involved beyond recall in her schemes of vengeance.

The purple evening fell about them, an afterglow of sunset trembling upon the violet sea. Above the heights of Capreae a star began to glimmer; and lo, yonder from behind the mountains

rose the great orb of the moon. They were in the harbour at last, but had to wait on board until a messenger could go to the village and a conveyance arrive. The litter came, with a horse for Basil; Felix, together with Aurelia's grey-headed porter and a female slave—these two the only servants that had remained in the house at Cumae—followed on foot, and the baggage was carried up on men's shoulders.

'Decius!' cried Basil, in a passionate undertone, when he encountered his kinsman in the vestibule. 'Decius! we are here—and one with us whom you know not. Hush! Stifle your curiosity till to-morrow. Let them pass.'

So had the day gone by, and not once had he looked upon the face of Veranilda.

He saw her early on the morrow. Aurelia, though the whole villa was now at her command, chose still to inhabit the house of Proba; and thither, when the day was yet young, she summoned Basil. The room in which she sat was hung with pictured tapestry, representing Christ and the Apostles; crude work, but such as had pleased Faltonia Proba, whose pious muse inspired her to utter the Gospel in a Virgilian canto. And at Aurelia's side, bending over a piece of delicate needlework, sat the Gothic maiden, clad in white, her flaxen hair, loosely held with silk, falling behind her shoulders, shadowing her forehead, and half hiding the little ears. At Basil's entrance she did not look up; at the first sound of his voice she bent her head yet lower, and only when he directly addressed her, asking, with all the gentleness his lips

could command, whether the journey had left much fatigue, did she show for a moment her watchet eyes, answering few words with rare sweetness.

'Be seated, dear my lord,' said his cousin, in the soft, womanly voice once her habitual utterance. 'There has been so little opportunity of free conversation, that we have almost, one might say, to make each other's acquaintance yet. But I hope we may now enjoy a little leisure, and live as becomes good kinsfolk.'

Basil made such suitable answer as his agitation allowed.

'And the noble Decius,' pursued Aurelia, 'will, I trust, bestow at times a little of his leisure upon us. Perhaps this afternoon you could persuade him to forget his books for half an hour? But let us speak, to begin with, of sad things which must needs occupy us. Is it possible, yet, to know when the ship will sail for Rome?'

Aurelia meant, of course, the vessel which would convey her father's corpse, and the words cast gloom upon Basil, who had all but forgotten the duty that lay before him. He answered that a week at least must pass before the sailing, and, as he spoke, kept his eyes upon Veranilda, whose countenance—or so it seemed to him—had become graver, perhaps a little sad.

'Is it your purpose to stay long in Rome?' was Aurelia's next question, toned with rather excessive simplicity.

'To stay long?' exclaimed Basil. 'How can you think it? Perchance I shall not even enter the city. At Portus, I may resign my duty into other hands, and so straightway return.'

There was a conflict in Aurelia's mind. Reverence for her

father approved the thought of his remains being transported under the guardianship of Basil; none the less did she dread this journey, and feel tempted to hinder it. She rose from her chair.

'Let us walk into the sunshine,' she said. 'The morning is chilly.' And, as she passed out into the court, hand in hand with Veranilda, 'O, the pleasure of these large spaces, this free air, after the straight house at Cumae! Do you not breathe more lightly, sweetest? Come into Proba's garden, and I will show you where I sat with my broidery when I was no older than you.'

The garden was approached by a vaulted passage. A garden long reconquered by nature; for the paths were lost in herbage, the seats were overgrown with creeping plants, and the fountain had crumbled into ruin. A high wall formerly enclosed it, but, in a shock of earthquake some years ago, part of this had fallen, leaving a gap which framed a lovely picture of the inland hills. Basil pulled away the trailing leafage from a marble hemicycle, and, having spread his cloak upon it, begged tremorously that Veranilda would rest.

'That wall shall be rebuilt,' said Aurelia, and, as if to inspect the ruin, wandered away. When she was distant not many paces, Basil bent to his seated companion, and breathed in a passionate undertone:

'My letter reached your hands, O fairest?'

'I received it—I read it.'

As she spoke, Veranilda's cheeks flushed as if in shame.

'Will you reply, were it but one word?'

Her head drooped lower. Basil seated himself at her side.

'One word, O Veranilda! I worship you—my soul longs for you—say only that you will be mine, my beloved lady, my wife!'

Her blue eyes glistened with moisture as for an instant they met the dark glow in his.

'Do you know who I am?' she whispered.

'You are Veranilda! You are beauty and sweetness and divine purity—'

He sought her hand, but at this moment Aurelia turned towards them, and the maiden, quivering, stood up.

'Perhaps the sun is too powerful,' said Aurelia, with her tenderest smile. 'My lily has lived so long in the shade.'

They lingered a little on the shadowed side, Aurelia reviving memories of her early life, then passed again under the vaulted arch. Basil, whose eyes scarcely moved from Veranilda's face, could not bring himself to address her in common words, and dreaded that she would soon vanish. So indeed it befell. With a murmur of apology to her friend, and a timid movement of indescribable grace in Basil's direction, she escaped, like a fugitive wild thing, into solitude.

'Why has she gone?' exclaimed the lover, all impatience. 'I must follow her—I cannot live away from her! Let me find her again.'

His cousin checked him.

'I have to speak to you, Basil. Come where we can be private.'

They entered the room where they had sat before, and Aurelia,

taking up the needlework left by Veranilda, showed it to her companion with admiration.

'She is wondrous at this art. In a contest with Minerva, would she not have fared better than Arachne? This mourning garment which I wear is of her making, and look at the delicate work; it was wrought four years ago, when I heard of my brother's death—wrought in a few days. She was then but thirteen. In all that it beseems a woman to know, she is no less skilled. Yonder lies her cithern; she learnt to touch it, I scarce know how, out of mere desire to soothe my melancholy, and I suspect—though she will not avow it—that the music she plays is often her own. In sickness she has tended me with skill as rare as her gentleness; her touch on the hot forehead is like that of a flower plucked before sunrise. Hearing me speak thus of her, what think you, O Basil, must be my trust in the man to whom I would give her for wife?'

'Can you doubt my love, O Aurelia?' cried the listener, clasping his hands before him.

'Your love? No. But your prudence, is that as little beyond doubt?'

'I have thought long and well,' said Basil.

Aurelia regarded him steadily.

'You spoke with her in the garden just now. Did she reply?'

'But few words. She asked me if I knew her origin, and blushed as she spoke.'

'It is her wish that I should tell you; and I will.'

Scarce had Aurelia begun her narrative, when Basil perceived

that his own conjecture, and that of Marcian, had hit the truth. Veranilda was a great-grandchild of Amalafrida, the sister of King Theodoric, being born of the daughter of King Theodahad; and her father was that Ebrimut, whose treachery at the beginning of the great war delivered Rhegium into the hands of the Greeks. Her mother, Theodenantha, a woman of noble spirit, scorned the unworthy Goth, and besought the conqueror to let her remain in Italy, even as a slave, rather than share with such a husband the honours of the Byzantine court. She won this grace from Belisarius, and was permitted to keep with her the little maiden, just growing out of childhood. But shame and grief had broken her heart; after a few months of imprisonment at Cumae she died. And Veranilda passed into the care of the daughter of Maximus.

'For I too was a captive,' said Aurelia, 'and of the same religion as the orphan child. By happy hazard I had become a friend of her mother, in those days of sorrow; and with careless scorn our conquerors permitted me to take Veranilda into my house. As the years went by, she was all but forgotten; there came a new governor—this thievish Hun—who paid no heed to us. I looked forward to a day when we might quit Cumae and live in freedom where we would. Then something unforeseen befell. Half a year ago, just when the air of spring began to breathe into that dark, chill house, a distant kinsman of ours, who has long dwelt in Byzantium—do you know Olybrius, the son of Probinus?'

'I have heard his name.'

'He came to me, as if from my father; but I soon discovered that he had another mission, his main purpose being to seek for Veranilda. By whom sent, I could not learn; but he told me that Ebrimut was dead, and that his son, Veranilda's only brother, was winning glory in the war with the Persians. For many days I lived in fear lest my pearl should be torn from me. Olybrius it was, no doubt, who bade the Hun keep watch upon us, and it can only have been by chance that I was allowed to go forth unmolested when you led me hither the first time. He returned to Byzantium, and I have heard no more. But a suspicion haunts my mind. What if Marcian were also watching Veranilda?'

'Marcian!' cried the listener incredulously. 'You do not know him. He is the staunchest and frankest of friends. He knows of my love; we have talked from heart to heart.'

'Yet it was at his intercession that the Hun allowed us to go; why, you cannot guess. What if he have power and motives which threaten Veranilda's peace?'

Basil exclaimed against this as the baseless fear of a woman. Had there been a previous command from some high source touching the Gothic maiden, Chorsoman would never have dared to sell her freedom. As to Marcian's power, that was derived from the authorities at Rome, and granted him for other ends; if he used it to release Veranilda, he acted merely out of love to his friend, as would soon be seen.

'I will hope so,' murmured Aurelia. 'Now you have heard what she herself desired that I should tell you, for she could not meet

your look until you knew it. Her father's treachery is Veranilda's shame; she saw her noble mother die for it, and it has made her mourning keener than a common sorrow. I think she would never have dared to wed a Goth; all true Goths, she believes in her heart, must despise her. It is her dread lest you, learning who she is, should find your love chilled.'

'Call her,' cried Basil, starting to his feet. 'Or let me go to her. She shall not suffer that fear for another moment. Veranilda! Veranilda!'

His companion retained and quieted him. He should see Veranilda ere long. But there was yet something to be spoken of.

'Have you forgotten that she is not of your faith?'

'Do I love her, adore her, the less?' exclaimed Basil. 'Does she shrink from me on that account?'

'I know,' pursued his cousin, 'what the Apostle of the Gentiles has said: "For the husband who believes not is sanctified by the wife, and the wife who believes not is sanctified by the husband." None the less, Veranilda is under the menace of the Roman law; and you, if it be known that you have wedded her, will be in peril from all who serve the Emperor—at least in dark suspicion; and will be slightly esteemed by all of our house.'

The lover paced about, and all at once, with a wild gesture, uttered his inmost thought.

'What if I care naught for those of our house? And what if the Emperor of the East is of as little account to me? My country is not Byzantium, but Rome.'

Aurelia hushed his voice, but her eyes shone with stern gladness as she stood before him, and took him by the hand, and spoke what he alone could hear.

'Then unite yourself in faith with those who would make Rome free. Be one in religion with the brave Goths—with Veranilda.'

He cast down his eyes and drew a deep breath.

'I scarce know what that religion is, O Aurelia,' came from him stammeringly. 'I am no theologian; I never cared to puzzle my head about the mysteries which men much wiser than I declare to pass all human understanding. Ask Decius if he can defend the faith of Athanasius against that of the Arians; he will smile, and shake his head in that droll way he has. I believe,' he added after a brief hesitancy, 'in Christ and in the Saints. Does not Veranilda also?'

The temptress drew back a little, seated herself; yielded to troublous thought. It was long since she had joined in the worship of a congregation, for at Cumae there was no Arian church. Once only since her captivity had she received spiritual comfort from an Arian priest, who came to that city in disguise. What her religion truly was she could not have declared, for the memories of early life were sometimes as strong in her as rancour against the faith of her enemies. Basil's simple and honest utterance touched her conscience. She put an end to the conversation, promising to renew it before long; whilst Basil, for his part, went away to brood, then to hold converse with Decius.

Through all but the whole of Theodoric's reign, Italy had enjoyed a large toleration in religion: Catholics, Arians, and even Jews observed their worship under the protection of the wise king. Only in the last few years of his life did he commit certain acts of harshness against his Catholic subjects, due to the wrath that was moved in him by a general persecution of the Arians proclaimed at Byzantium. His Gothic successors adhered to Theodoric's better principle, and only after the subjugation of the land by Belisarius had Arianism in Italy been formally condemned. Of course it was protected by the warring Goths: Totila's victories had now once more extended religious tolerance over a great part of the country; the Arian priesthood re-entered their churches; and even in Rome the Greek garrison grew careless of the reviving heresy. Of these things did Decius speak, when the distressed lover sought his counsel. No one more liberal than Decius; but he bore a name which he could not forget, and in his eyes the Goth was a barbarian, the Gothic woman hardly above the level of a slave. That Basil should take a Gothic wife, even one born of a royal line, seemed to him an indignity. Withheld by the gentleness of his temper from saying all he thought, he spoke only of the difficulties which would result from such a marriage, and when, in reply, Basil disclosed his mind, though less vehemently than to Aurelia, Decius fell into meditation. He, too, had often reflected with bitterness on the results of that restoration of Rome to the Empire which throughout the Gothic dominion most of the Roman nobles had

never ceased to desire; all but was he persuaded to approve the statesmanship of Cassiodorus. Nevertheless, he could not, without shrinking, see a kinsman pass over to the side of Totila.

'I must think,' he murmured. 'I must think.'

He had not yet seen Veranilda. When, in the afternoon, Basil led him into the ladies' presence, and his eyes fell upon that white-robed loveliness, censure grew faint in him. Though a Decius, he was a man of the sixth century after Christ; his mind conceived an ideal of human excellence which would have been unintelligible to the Decii of old; in his heart meekness and chastity had more reverence than perhaps he imagined. He glanced at Basil; he understood. Though the future still troubled him, opposition to the lover's will must, he knew, be idle.

Several hours before, Basil had scratched on a waxed tablet a few emphatic lines, which his cousin allowed to be transmitted to Veranilda. They assured her that what he had learned could only—if that were possible—increase his love, and entreated her to grant him were it but a moment's speech after the formal visit, later in the day. The smile with which she now met him seemed at once gratitude and promise; she was calmer, and less timid. Though she took little part in the conversation, her words fell very sweetly after the men's speech and the self-confident tones of Aurelia; her language was that of an Italian lady, but in the accent could be marked a slight foreignness, which to Basil's ear had the charm of rarest music, and even to Decius sounded not displeasing. Under the circumstances, talk, confined

to indifferent subjects, could not last very long; as soon as it began to flag, Decius found an excuse for begging permission to retire. As though wishing for a word with him in confidence, Aurelia at the same time passed out of the room into the colonnade. Basil and Veranilda were left alone.

CHAPTER VI

THE EMPEROR'S COMMAND

His voice made tremulous music, inaudible a few paces away; his breath was on her cheek; his eyes, as she gazed into them, seemed to envelop her in their glow.

'My fairest! Let me but touch your hand. Lay it for a moment in mine—a pledge for ever!'

'You do not fear to love me, O lord of my life?'

The whisper made him faint with joy.

'What has fear to do with love, O thou with heaven in thine eyes! what room is there for fear in the heart where thy beauty dwells? Speak again, speak again, my beloved, and bless me above all men that live!'

'Basil! Basil! Utter my name once more. I never knew how sweet it could sound.'

'Nor I, how soft could be the sound of mine. Forgive me, O Veranilda, that out of my love pain has come to you. You will not ever be sad again? You will not think ever again of those bygone sorrows?'

She bent her head low.

'Can you believe in my truth, O Basil? Can *you* forget?'

'All save the nobleness of her who bore you, sweet and fair one.'

'Let *that* be ever in your thought,' said Veranilda, with a radiant look. 'She sees me now; and my hope, your strength and goodness, bring new joy to her in the life eternal.'

'Say the word I wait for—whisper low—the word of all words.'

'Out of my soul, O Basil, I love you!'

As the sound trembled into silence, his lips touched hers. In the golden shadow of her hair, the lily face flushed warm; yet she did not veil her eyes, vouchers of a life's loyalty.

When Aurelia entered the room again, she walked as though absorbed in thought.

'Decius tells me he must soon go to Rome,' were her words, in drawing near to the lovers.

Basil had heard of no such purpose. His kinsman, under the will of Maximus, enjoyed a share in the annual revenue of this Surrentine estate; moreover, he became the possessor of many books, which lay in the Anician mansion of Rome, and it was his impatience, thought Aurelia, to lay hands upon so precious a legacy, which might at any time be put in danger by the events of the war, that prompted him to set forth.

'Might he not perform the duty you have undertaken?' she added in a lower voice, as she met Basil's look.

Veranilda did not speak, but an anxious hope dawned in her face. And Basil saw it.

'Have you spoken of it, cousin?' he asked.

'The thought has but just come to me.'

'Decius is not in good health. Thus late in the year, to travel by

sea—Yet the weather may be fair, the sea still; and then it would be easier for him than the journey by land.'

Basil spoke in a halting tone. He could not without a certain shame think of revoking his promise to Petronilla, a very distinct promise, in which natural obligation had part. Yet the thought of the journey, of an absence from Veranilda, not without peril of many kinds, grew terrible to him. He looked at Veranilda again, and smiled encouragement.

The lady Petronilla had been wont to dine and sup in dignified publicity, seated on the *sigma*, in the room which had seen so many festivals, together with her male relatives and any guest who might be at the villa; in her presence, no man permitted himself the recumbent attitude, which indeed had been unusual save among the effeminate. But Aurelia and her companion took their meals apart. This evening, Basil and Decius supped almost in silence, each busy with his reflections. They lingered over the wine, their attendants having left them, until Decius, as if rousing himself from a dream, asked how long it was likely to be before the ship could sail. Basil answered that the leaden coffin would be ready within a few days (it was being made at Neapolis, out of water-pipes which had served a villa in ruins), and after that there would only be delay through wind and weather.

'Are you greatly bent on going to Rome just now?' was the student's next inquiry, a twinkle in his eyes as he spoke.

'By Bacchus!' answered the other, handling his goblet. 'If I saw my way to avoid it!'

'I guessed as much. The suspicion came to me at a certain moment this morning—a mere grain, which ever since has been growing *tanquam favus*. I am not wont to consider myself as of much use, but is it not just possible that, in this case, your humble kinsman might serve you?'

'My good, my excellent, my very dear Decius!' broke from the listener. 'But would it not be with risk to your health?'

'I would beg permission not to weigh anchor in a tempest, that's all. The sea in its gentler moods I have never feared, and *alcyoneum medicamen*, you know, in other words the sea-foam, has always been recommended for freckles.'

He touched his face, which was in deed much freckle-spotted, and Basil, whose spirits rose each moment, gave a good-natured laugh.

'One thing only,' added Decius seriously. 'Inasmuch as this charge is a grave one, I would not undertake it without the consent of the ladies Aurelia and Petronilla. Perchance, in respect for the honoured Maximus, they would feel reluctant to see me take your place.'

'O modest Decius!' exclaimed the other. 'Which, pray, carries the more dignity, your name or mine?—not to speak of your learning and my ignorance. As to Aurelia, I can ease your mind at once. She would not dream of objecting.'

'Then let us, to-morrow, beg audience of the pious lady at Surrentum, and request her permission.'

The proposal made Basil uncomfortable; but a visit of respect

to Petronilla was certainly due, and perhaps it would pass without troublesome incident. He nodded assent.

Early on the morrow they carried out their purpose. To the surprise of both, Petronilla received them in her modest abode not ungraciously, though with marked condescension; she gave them to understand that her days, and much of her nights, passed in religious exercises, the names of her kinsfolk not being omitted from her prayers; of the good bishop she spoke almost tenderly, and with a humble pride related that she had been able to ease a persistent headache from which his Sanctity suffered. When Basil found an opportunity of reporting what had passed between him and Decius, the lady's austere smile was for a moment clouded; it looked as though storm might follow. But the smile returned, with perhaps a slightly changed significance. Did Basil think of remaining long at the villa? Ah, he could not say; to be sure, the times were so uncertain. For her own part, she would start on her journey as soon as the coffin was on board the ship. Indeed, she saw no objection to the arrangement her dear nephew proposed; she only trusted that the learned and amiable Decius, so justly esteemed by all, would have a care of his health. Did he still take the infusion of marjoram which she had prescribed for him? A holy man, newly returned from the East, had deigned to visit her only yesterday, and had given her a small phial of water from Rebekah's well; it was of priceless virtue, and one drop of it had last evening restored to health and strength a child that lay at the point of death.

In the afternoon Basil was again permitted to see Veranilda, though not alone. To her and to Aurelia he made known that Decius would willingly undertake the voyage. After lingering for an hour in the vain hope that Aurelia would withdraw, were it but for a moment, he went away and scratched ardent words on his tablet. 'I will be in your garden,' he concluded, 'just at sunrise to-morrow. Try, try to meet me there.'

Scarcely had he despatched a servant with this when Felix announced to him the arrival of Marcian. On fire with eagerness, Basil sped to greet his friend.

'Give me to drink,' were the traveller's first words. 'I have ridden since before dawn, and have a tongue like leather.'

Wine and grapes, with other refreshments, were set forth for him. Marcian took up an earthenware jug full of spring water, and drank deeply. His host then urged the wine, but it was refused; and as Basil knew that one of his friend's peculiarities was a rigorous abstinence at times from all liquor save the pure element, he said no more.

'I have been at Nuceria,' Marcian continued, throwing himself on a seat, 'with Venantius. What a man! He was in the saddle yesterday from sunrise to sunset; drank from sunset to the third hour of the night; rose before light this morning, gay and brisk, and made me ride with him, so that I was all but tired out before I started on the road hither. Venantius declares that he can only talk of serious things on horseback.'

'My uncle regarded him as a Roman turned barbarian,' said

Basil.

'Something of that, but such men have their worth and their place.'

'We will talk about him at another time,' Basil interrupted. 'Remember how we parted at Cumae and what happened afterwards. We are private here; you can speak freely. How did you release us from the grip of the Hun?'

'I told you before, good Basil, that I was here to spy upon you; and be sure that I did not undertake that office without exacting a proof of the confidence of our lords at Rome. Something I carry with me which has power over such dogs as Chorsoman.'

'I saw that, best Marcian. But it did not avail to save my cousin Aurelia from robbery.'

'Nothing would, where Chorsoman was sure of a week's—nay, of an hour's—impunity. But did he steal aught belonging to the Gothic maiden?'

'To Veranilda? She has but a bracelet and a ring, and those she was wearing. They came from her mother, a woman of noblest heart, who, when her husband Ebrimut played the traitor, and she was left behind in Italy, would keep nothing but these two trinkets, which once were worn by Amalafrida.'

'You know all that now,' observed Marcian quietly.

'The story of the trinkets only since an hour or two ago. That of Veranilda's parentage I learned from Aurelia, Veranilda refusing to converse with me until I knew.'

'Since when you have conversed, I take it, freely enough.'

'Good my lord,' replied Basil, with a look of some earnestness, 'let us not jest on this matter.'

'I am little disposed to do so, O fiery lover!' said Marcian, with a return of his wonted melancholy. 'For I have that to tell you which makes the matter grave enough. We were right, you see, in our guess of Veranilda's origin; I could wish she had been any one else. Patience, patience! You know that I left you here to go to Neapolis. There I received letters from Rome, one of them from Bessas himself, and, by strange hazard, the subject of it was the daughter of Ebrimut.'

Basil made a gesture of repugnance. 'Nay, call her the daughter of Theodenantha.'

'As you will. In any case the granddaughter of a king, and not likely to be quite forgotten by the royal family of her own race. Another king's grandchild, Matasuntha, lives, as you know, at Byzantium, and enjoys no little esteem at the Emperor's court; it is rumoured, indeed, that her husband Vitiges, having died somewhere in battle, Matasuntha is to wed a nephew of Justinian. This lady, I am told, desires to know the daughter of Ebri—nay, then, of Theodenantha; of whom, it seems, a report has reached her. A command of the Emperor has come to Bessas that the maiden Veranilda, resident at Cumae, be sent to Constantinople with all convenient speed. And upon me, O Basil, lies the charge of seeking her in her dwelling, and of conveying her safely to Rome, where she will be guarded until—'

'Will be guarded!' echoed Basil fiercely. 'Nay, by the holy

Peter and Paul, that will she not! You are my friend, Marcian, and I hold you dear, but if you attempt to obey this order—'

Hand on dagger, and eyes glaring, the young noble had sprung to his feet. Marcian did not stir; his head was slightly bent, and a sad smile hovered about his lips.

'O descendant of all the Anicii,' he replied, 'O son of many consuls, remember the ancestral dignity. Time enough to threaten when you detect me in an unfriendly act. Did I play the traitor to you at Cumae? With the Hun this command of Justinian served you in good stead; Veranilda would not otherwise have escaped so easily. Chorsoman, fat-witted as he is, willingly believed that Veranilda and Aurelia, and you yourself, were all in my net—which means the net of Bessas, whom he fears. Do you also believe it, my good Basil?'

For answer Basil embraced his friend, and kissed him on either cheek.

'I know how this has come about,' he said; and thereupon related the story of the visit of Olybrius to Aurelia six months ago. It seemed probable that a report of Veranilda's beauty had reached Matasuntha, who wished to adorn her retinue with so fair a remnant of the Amal race. How, he went on to ask, would Marcian excuse himself at Rome for his failure to perform this office?

'Leave that to my ingenuity,' was the reply. 'Enough for you to dare defiance of the Emperor's will.'

Basil made a scornful gesture, which his friend noted with the

same melancholy smile.

'You have no misgiving?' said Marcian. 'Think who it is you brave. Emperor Caesar Flavius Justinianus—Africanus, Gothicus, Germanicus, Vandalicus, and I know not what else—Pius, Felix, Inclytus, Victor ac Triumphator, Semper Augustus —'

The other laid a hand upon his shoulder.

'Marcian, no word of this to Aurelia, I charge you!'

'I have no desire to talk about it, be assured. But it is time that we understood each other. Be plain with me. If you wed Veranilda how do you purpose to secure your safety? Not, I imagine, by prostrating yourself before Bessas. Where will you be safe from pursuit?'

Basil reflected, then asked boldly:

'Has not the King Totila welcomed and honourably entertained Romans who have embraced his cause?'

'Come now,' exclaimed the other, his sad visage lighting up, 'that is to speak like a man! So, we *do* understand each other. Be it known unto you then, O Basil, that at this moment the Gothic king is aware of your love for Veranilda, and of your purpose to espouse her. You indeed are a stranger to him, even in name; but not so the Anician house; and an Anician, be assured, will meet with no cold reception in the camp of the Goths.'

'You enjoy the confidence of Totila?' asked Basil, wondering, and a little confused.

'Did I not tell you that I claimed the merit of playing traitor

to both sides?'

Marcian spoke with a note of bitterness, looking his friend fixedly in the face.

'It is a noble treachery,' said Basil, seizing both his hands. 'I am with you, heart and soul! Tell me more. Where is the king? Will he march upon Rome?'

'Neapolis will see him before Rome does. He comes slowly through Samnium, making sure his conquest on the way. Let me now speak again of Venantius. He would fain know you.'

'He is one of ours?'

'One of those true Romans who abhor the Eastern tyranny and see in the Goth a worthy ally. Will you ride with me to-morrow to Nuceria?'

'I cannot,' replied Basil, 'for I dare not leave Veranilda without protection, after what you have told me.'

'Why, then, Venantius must come hither.'

Whilst the friends were thus conversing a courier rode forth from Surrentum towards Neapolis. He bore a letter whereof the contents were these:—

**'To the holy and reverend deacon
Leander, Petronilla's humble salutation**

**'I am most punctually informed of all that passes
at the villa. My nephew goes not to Rome; his
place will be taken by Decius. The reason is
that which I have already suggested to your
Sanctity. Marcian has arrived this afternoon,
coming I know not whence, but I shall learn. I
suspect things of the darkest moment. Let your
Sanctity pursue the project with which heaven has
inspired you. You shall receive, if necessary, two
missives every day. Humbly I entreat your prayers.'**

CHAPTER VII

HERESY

The Roman Empire, by confining privileges and honours to the senatorial order, created a noble caste, and this caste, as Imperial authority declined, became a power independent of the state, and a menace to its existence. In Italy, by the end of the fifth century, the great system of citizenship, with its principle of infinite devotion to the good of the commonwealth, was all but forgotten. In matters of justice and of finance the nobles were beginning to live by their own law, which was that of the right of the strongest. Having ceased to hold office and perform public services in the municipia, they became, in fact, rulers of the towns situated on or near their great estates. Theodoric, striving to uphold the ancient civility, made strenuous efforts to combat this aristocratic predominance; yet on some points he was obliged to yield to the tendency of the times, as when he forbade the freedmen, serfs, and slaves on any estate to plead against their lord, and so delivered the mass of the rural inhabitants of Italy to private jurisdiction. The Gothic war of course hastened the downfall of political and social order. The manners of the nobles grew violent in lawlessness; men calling themselves senators, but having in fact renounced that rank by permanent absence from Rome, and others who merely belonged

to senatorial houses, turned to fortifying their villas, and to building castles on heights, whilst they gathered about them a body of retainers, armed for defence or for aggression.

Such a personage was Venantius, son of a senator of the same name, who, under Theodoric, had attained the dignity of Patrician and what other titular glories the time afforded. Venantius, the younger, coming into possession of an estate between Neapolis and Salernum, here took up his abode after the siege of Rome, and lived as seemed good to him, lord over the little town of Nuceria, and of a considerable tract of country, with a villa converted into a stronghold up on the mountain side. Having suffered wrongs at the hands of the Imperial conquerors—property of his in Rome had been seized—he heard with satisfaction of the rise of Totila, and, as soon as the king's progress southward justified such a step, entered into friendly communication with the Goth, whom he invited to come with all speed into Campania, where Salernum, Neapolis, Cumae, would readily fall into his hands. Marcian, on his double mission of spy in the Greek service and friend of the Goths, had naturally sought out Venantius; and the description he gave to Basil of the fortress above Nuceria filled the listener with enthusiasm.

'I would I could live in the same way,' Basil exclaimed. 'And why not? My own villa in Picenum might be strengthened with walls and towers. We have stone enough, and no lack of men to build.'

Yet as he spoke a misgiving betrayed itself on his countenance.

Consciously or not, he had always had before him a life at Rome, the life which became a Roman, as distinguished from a barbarian. But the need to seek security for Veranilda again became vivid to his mind. At Rome, clearly, he could not live with his wife until the Goths had reconquered the city, which was not likely to happen soon. His means were represented chiefly by the Arpinum estate, which he had inherited from his father; in Rome he had nothing but his mansion on the Caelian. The treasure at his command, a considerable sum, he had brought away in a strong box, and it was now more than doubled in value by what fell to him under the will of Maximus—money to be paid out of the great coffer which the senator had conveyed hither. As they talked, Marcian urged upon him a close friendship with Venantius, in whose castle he would be welcomed. Here at Surrentum he could not long rest in safety, for Chorsoman might at any time have his suspicions awakened by learning the delay of Veranilda's journey to Rome, and the news of her marriage could not be prevented from spreading.

So Basil lay through an anxious hour or two before sleep fell upon him to-night. He resolved to change the habits of his life, to shake off indolence and the love of ease, to fortify himself with vigorous exercises, and become ready for warfare. It was all very well for an invalid, like Decius, to nurse a tranquil existence, unheeding the temper of the times. A strong and healthy man had no right to lurk away from the streaming flood of things; it behoved him to take his part in strife and tumult, to aid in re-

establishing a civic state. This determination firmly grasped, he turned to think of the hoped-for meeting with Veranilda in the morning, and gentler emotions lulled him into dreams.

At dawn he bestirred himself. The gallery outside his chamber was lighted with a hanging lamp, and at a little distance sounded the footstep of the watchman, who told him that the morning was fair, and, at his bidding, opened a door which admitted to the open terrace overlooking the sea. Having stepped forth, Basil stood for a moment sniffing the cool air with its scent from the vineyards, and looking at the yellow rift in the eastern sky; then he followed a path which skirted the villa's outward wall and led towards the dwelling of Aurelia. Presently he reached the ruined wall of the little garden, and here a voice challenged him, that of a servant on watch until sunrise.

'It is well,' he replied. 'I will relieve you for this last half hour; go to your rest.'

But the slave hesitated. He had strictest orders, and feared to disobey them even at this bidding.

'You are an honest fellow,' said Basil, 'and the lady Aurelia shall know of your steadfastness. But get you gone; there is no danger whilst I am here.'

Impatiently he watched the man retire, then stood just within the gap of the wall, and waited with as much fear as hope. It might be that Veranilda would not venture forth without speaking to Aurelia, who might forbid the meeting; or, if she tried to steal out, she might be detected and hindered; perhaps she would fear

to pass under the eyes of a watchman or other servant who might be in her way. He stamped nervously, and turned to look for a moment in the outward direction. This little villa stood on the edge of a declivity falling towards the sea; a thicket of myrtles grew below. At the distance of half a mile along the coast, beyond a hollow wooded with ilex, rose a temple, which time and the hand of man had yet spared; its whiteness glimmered against a sky whose cloudless dusk was warming with a reflection of the daybreak. An influence in the scene before him, something he neither understood nor tried to understand, held him gazing longer than he supposed, and with a start he heard his name spoken by the beloved voice. Close to him stood Veranilda. She was cloaked and hooded, so that he could hardly see her face; but her white hands were held out for his.

Heart to heart, mouth to mouth, they whispered. To be more private, Basil drew her without the garden. Veranilda's eyes fixed themselves upon the spreading glory of the east; and it moved her to utterance.

'When I was a child,' she said, 'at Ravenna, I gazed once at the sunrise, and behold, in the rays which shot upwards stood an angel, a great, beautiful angel, with wings of blue, and a garment which shone like gold, and on his head was a wreath of I know not what flowers. I ran to tell my mother, but when she came, alas! the angel had vanished. No one could tell me certainly what the vision meant. Often I have looked and hoped to see the angel again, but he has never come.'

Basil listened without a doubt, and murmured soft words. Then he asked whether Aurelia knew of this meeting; but Veranilda shook her head.

'I durst not speak. I so feared to disappoint you. This night I have hardly slept, lest I should miss the moment. Should I not return very soon, O Basil?'

'You shall; though your going will make the sky black as when Auster blows. But it is not for long. A few days—'

He broke off with the little laugh of a triumphing lover.

'A few days?' responded Veranilda, timidly questioning.

'We wait only until that dark ship has sailed for Rome.' 'Does Aurelia know that you purpose it so soon?' asked Veranilda.

'Why? Has she seemed to you to wish otherwise?'

'She has never spoken of it.—And afterwards? Shall we remain here, Basil?'

'For no long time. Here I am but a guest. We must dwell where I am lord and you lady of all about us.'

He told her of his possessions, of the great house in Rome with the villa at Arpinum. Then he asked her, playfully, but with a serious purpose in his mind, which of the two she would prefer for an abode.

'I have no choice but yours,' she replied. 'Where it seems good to my dear lord to dwell, there shall I be at rest.'

'We must be safe against our enemies,' said Basil, with graver countenance.

'Our enemies?'

'Has not Aurelia talked to you of the war? You know that the Gothic king is conquering all before him, coming from the north?'

Veranilda looked into her lover's face with a tender anxiety.

'And you fear him, O Basil? It is he that is our enemy?'

'Not so, sweetest. No foe of mine is he who wears the crown of Theodoric. They whom I fear and abhor are the slaves of Justinian, the robber captains who rule at Ravenna and in Rome.'

As she heard him, Veranilda trembled with joy. She caught his hand, and bent over it, and kissed it.

'Had I been the enemy of Totila,' said Basil, 'could you still have loved me as a wife should love?'

'I had not asked myself,' she answered, 'for it was needless. When I look on you, I think neither of Roman nor of Goth.'

Basil spoke of his hope that Rome might be restored to the same freedom it had enjoyed under the great king. Then they would dwell together in the sacred city. That, too, was Veranilda's desire; for on her ear the name of Rome fell with a magic sound; all her life she had heard it spoken reverentially, with awe, yet the city itself she had never seen. Rome, she knew, was vast; there, it seemed to her, she would live unobserved, unthought of save by him she loved. Seclusion from all strangers, from all who, learning her origin, would regard her slightly, was what her soul desired.

Day had broken; behind the mountains there was light of the sun. Once more they held each other heart to heart, and Veranilda

hastened through the garden to regain her chamber. Basil stood for some minutes lost in a delicious dream; the rising day made his face beautiful, his eyes gleamed with an unutterable rapture. At length he sighed and awoke and looked about him. At no great distance, as though just issued from the ilex wood, moved a man's figure. It approached very slowly, and Basil watched until he saw that the man was bent as if with age, and had black garments such as were worn by wandering mendicant monks. Carelessly he turned, and went his way back to the villa.

An hour later, Aurelia learnt that a 'holy man,' a pilgrim much travel worn, was begging to be admitted to her. She refused to see him. Still he urged his entreaty, declaring that he had a precious gift for her acceptance, and an important message for her ear. At length he was allowed to enter the atrium, and Aurelia saw before her a man in black monkish habit, his body bent and tremulous, but evidently not with age, for his aspect otherwise was that of middle life. What, she asked briefly and coldly, was his business with her? Thereupon the monk drew from his bosom a small wrappage of tissues, which when unfolded disclosed a scrap of something hairy.

'This, noble lady,' said the monk, in a voice reverently subdued, 'is from the camel-hair garment of Holy John the Baptist. I had it of a hermit in the Egyptian desert, who not many days after I quitted him was for his sanctity borne up to heaven by angels, and knew not death.'

Aurelia viewed the relic with emotion.

'Why,' she asked, 'do you offer it to me?'

The monk drew a step nearer and whispered:

'Because I know that you, like him from whom I received it, are of the true faith.'

Aurelia observed him closely. His robe was ragged and filthy, his bare feet were thick with the dust of the road; his visage, much begrimed, wore an expression of habitual suffering, and sighs as of pain frequently broke from him. The hand by which he supported himself on a staff trembled as with weakness.

'You are not a presbyter?' she said in an undertone, after a glance at his untoursured head.

'I am unworthy of the meanest order in the Church. In pilgrimings and fastings I do penance for a sin of youth. You see how wasted is my flesh.'

'What, then,' asked Aurelia, 'was the message you said you bore for me?'

'This. Though I myself have no power to perform the sacraments of our faith, I tend upon one who has. He lies not far from here, like myself sick and weary, and, because of a vow, may not come within the precincts of any dwelling. In Macedonia, oppressed by our persecutors, he was long imprisoned, and so sorely tormented that, in a moment when the Evil One prevailed over his flesh, he denied the truth. This sin gave him liberty, but scarce had he come forth when a torment of the soul, far worse than that of his body, fell upon him. He was delivered over to the Demon, and, being yet alive, saw about

him the fires of Gehenna. Thus, for a season, did he suffer things unspeakable, wandering in desert places, ahungred, athirst, faint unto death, yet not permitted to die. One night of storm, he crept for shelter into the ruins of a heathen temple. Of a sudden, a dreadful light shone about him, and he beheld the Demon in the guise of that false god, who fell upon him and seemed like to slay him. But Sisinnius—so is the holy man named—strove in prayer and in conjuration, yea, strove hours until the crowing of the cock, and thus sank into slumber. And while he slept, an angel of the Most High appeared before him, and spoke words which I know not. Since then, Sisinnius wanders from land to land, seeking out the temples of the heathen which have not been purified, and passing the night in strife with the Powers of Darkness, wherein he is ever victorious.'

With intent look did Aurelia listen to this narrative. At its close, she asked eagerly:

'This man of God has sent you to me?'

'Moved by a vision—for in the sleep which follows upon his struggle it is often granted him to see beyond this world. He bids you resist temptation, and be of good courage.'

'Know you what this bidding means?' inquired the awed woman, gazing into the monk's eyes till they fell.

'I know nothing. I am but a follower of the holy Sisinnius—an unworthy follower.'

'May I not speak with him?'

The monk had a troubled look.

'I have told you, lady, that he must not, by reason of his vow, enter a human dwelling.'

'But may I not go to him?' she urged. 'May I not seek him in his solitude, guided by you?'

To this, said the monk, he could give no reply until he had spoken with Sisinnius. He promised to do so, and to return, though he knew not at what hour, nor even whether it would be this day. And, after demanding many assurances that he would come again as speedily as might be, Aurelia allowed the messenger to depart.

Meanwhile Basil and Marcian have spent an hour in talk, the result of which was a decision that Marcian should again repair to the stronghold of Venantius, and persuade him to come over to Surrentum. When his friend had ridden forth Basil sought conversation with Aurelia, whom he found in a mood unlike any she had yet shown to him, a mood of dreamy trouble, some suppressed emotion appearing in her look and in her speech. He began by telling her of Venantius, but this seemed to interest her less than he had expected.

'Cousin,' he resumed, 'I have a double thought in desiring that Venantius should come hither. It is not only that I may talk with him of the war, and learn his hopes, but that I may secure a safe retreat for Veranilda when she is my wife, and for you, dear cousin, if you desire it.'

He spoke as strongly as he could without revealing the secret danger, of the risks to which they would all be exposed when

rumours of his marriage reached the governor of Cumae, or the Greeks in Neapolis. Until the Goths reached Campania, a Roman here who fell under suspicion of favouring them must be prepared either to flee or to defend himself. Defence of this villa was impossible even against the smallest body of soldiers, but within the walls, raised and fortified by Venantius, a long siege might be safely sustained.

'It is true,' said Aurelia at length, as if rousing herself from her abstraction, 'that we must think of safety. But you are not yet wedded.'

'A few days hence I shall be.'

'Have you forgotten,' she resumed, meeting his resolute smile, 'what still divides you from Veranilda?'

'You mean the difference of religion. Tell me, did that stand in the way of your marriage with a Goth?'

She cast down her eyes and was silent.

'Was your marriage,' Basil went on, 'blessed by a Catholic or by an Arian presbyter?'

'By neither,' replied Aurelia gently.

'Then why may it not be so with me and Veranilda? And so it shall be, lady cousin,' he added cheerily. 'Our good Decius will be gone; we await the sailing of the ship; but you and Marcian, and perhaps Venantius, will be our witnesses.'

For the validity of Christian wedlock no religious rite was necessary: the sufficient, the one indispensable, condition was mutual consent. The Church favoured a union which had been

sanctified by the oblation and the blessing, but no ecclesiastical law imposed this ceremony. As in the days of the old religion, a man wedded his bride by putting the ring upon her finger and delivering her dowry in a written document, before chosen witnesses. Aurelia knew that even as this marriage had satisfied her, so would it suffice to Veranilda, whom a rapturous love made careless of doctrinal differences: She perceived, moreover, that Basil was in no mood for religious discussion; there was little hope that he would consent to postpone his marriage on such an account; yet to convert Basil to 'heresy' was a fine revenge she would not willingly forego, her own bias to Arianism being stronger than ever since the wrong she believed herself to have suffered at the hands of the deacon, and the insult cast at her by her long-hated aunt. After years of bitterness, her triumph seemed assured. It was much to have inherited from her father, to have expelled Petronilla; but the marriage of Basil with a Goth, his renunciation of Catholicism, and with it the Imperial cause, were greater things, and together with their attainment she foredreamt the greatest of all, Totila's complete conquest of Italy. She saw herself mistress in the Anician palace at Rome, commanding vast wealth, her enemies mute, powerless, submissive before her. Then, if it seemed good to her, she would again wed, and her excited imagination deigned to think of no spouse save him whose alliance would make her royal.

Providential was the coming of the holy Sisinnius. Beyond doubt he had the gift of prophecy. From him she would not only

receive the consolations of religion, but might learn what awaited her. Very slowly passed the hours until the reappearance of the black monk. He came when day was declining, and joyfully she learnt that Sisinnius permitted her to visit him; it must be on the morrow at the second hour, the place a spot in the ilex wood, not far away, whither the monk would guide her. But she must come alone; were she accompanied, even at a distance, by any attendant, Sisinnius would refuse to see her. To all the conditions Aurelia readily consented, and bade the monk meet her at the appointed hour by the breach in her garden wall.

On the morrow there was no glory of sunrise; clouds hung heavy, and a sobbing wind shook the dry leaves of the vine. But at the second hour, after pretence of idling about the garden, Aurelia saw approach the black, bowed figure, with a gesture bade him go before, and followed. She was absent not long enough to excite the remark of her household. In going forth she had been pale with agitation; at her return she had a fire in her cheeks, a lustre in her eyes, which told of hopes abundantly fulfilled. At once she sought Veranilda, to whom she had not yet spoken of the monk's visit. At this juncture the coming even of an ordinary priest of the Arian faith would have been more than welcome to them, living as they perforce did without office or sacrament; but Sisinnius, declared Aurelia, was a veritable man of God, one who had visions and saw into the future, one whom merely to behold was a sacred privilege. She had begged his permission to visit him again, with Veranilda, and he had

consented; but a few days must pass before that, as the holy man was called away she knew not whither. When he summoned them they must go forth in early morning, to a certain cave near at hand, where Sisinnius would say mass and administer to them the communion. Hearing such news, Veranilda gladdened.

'Will the holy man reveal our fate to us?' she asked, with a child's simplicity.

'To me he has already uttered a prophetic word,' answered Aurelia, 'but I may not repeat it, no, not even to you. Enough that it has filled my soul with wonder and joy.'

'May that joy also be mine!' said Veranilda, pressing her hands together.

This afternoon, when Basil sat with her and Aurelia, she took her cithern, and in a low voice sang songs she had heard her mother sing, in the days before shame and sorrow fell upon Theodenantha. There were old ballads of the Goths, oftener stern than tender, but to the listeners, ignorant of her tongue, Veranilda's singing made them sweet as lover's praise. One little song was Greek; it was all she knew of that language, and the sole inheritance that had come to her from her Greek-loving grandparent, the King Theodahad.

Auster was blowing; great lurid clouds rolled above the dark green waters, and at evening rain began to fall. Through the next day, and the day after that, the sky still lowered; there was thunder of waves upon the shore; at times a mist swept down from the mountains, which enveloped all in gloom. To Basil and

Veranilda it mattered nothing. Where they sat together there was sunshine, and before them gleamed an eternity of cloudless azure.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SNARE

Meanwhile all was made ready for the sailing of the ship. Coffined in lead, the body of Maximus awaited only a return of fine weather for its conveyance to the vessel. When at length calm fell upon the sea, and after a still night of gentle rain the day broke radiantly, all Surrentum was in movement between church and harbour. Mass having been said, the bishop himself led the procession down the hollow way and through the chasm in the cliffs seaward, whilst psalms were chanted and incense burnt. Carried in her litter, Petronilla followed the bier; beside her walked Basil and Decius. Only by conscious effort could these two subdue their visages to a becoming sadness; for Basil thought of his marriage, Decius of Rome and his library. Nor did Petronilla wear an aspect of very profound gloom; at moments she forgot herself, and a singular animation appeared on her proud features; it was as though some exultancy took hold of her mind.

That Aurelia held apart, that the daughter gave no testimony of reverence for a father's remains, caused such murmuring in the crowd of Surrentines: her heresy seemed to be made more notorious, more abominable, by this neglect. At Surrentum, Arianism had never been known; no Goth had ever dwelt here;

and since Aurelia's arrival public opinion had had time to gather force against her. It was believed that she had driven forth with insults the most noble Petronilla, that exemplar of charity and of a saintly life. Worse still was the rumour, now generally believed, that the Senator's daughter had obtained her inheritance by wicked hypocrisy, by a false show of return to the true faith. Being herself so evil, it was not to be wondered that she corrupted those who fell under her influence; the young lord Basil, for instance, who, incredible as it sounded, was said to be on the point of espousing a Gothic damsel, a mysterious attendant upon Aurelia, of whom strange stories were rife. Talk of these things made no little agitation in the town when ceremonies were over and the coffin had been embarked. The generality threw up their hands, and cried shame, and asked why the bishop did not take some action in so grave a scandal. But here and there folk whispered together in a different tone, with winkings and lips compressed, and nods significant of menace. Patience! Wait a day or two, and they would see what they would see. Heaven was not regardless of iniquity.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.