

CHAPTER 2 - THE COURT

The traveller who so far departs from the ordinary track of tourists in modern Italy as to visit the city of Ravenna, remembers with astonishment, as he treads its silent and melancholy streets, and beholds vineyards and marshes spread over an extent of four miles between the Adriatic and the town, that this place, now half deserted, was once the most populous of Roman fortresses; and that where fields and woods now present themselves to his eyes the fleets of the Empire once rode securely at anchor, and the merchant of Rome disembarked his precious cargoes at his warehouse door.

As the power of Rome declined, the Adriatic, by a strange fatality, began to desert the fortress whose defence it had hitherto secured. Coeval with the gradual degeneracy of the people was the gradual withdrawal of the ocean from the city walls; until, at the beginning of the sixth century, a grove of pines already appeared where the port of Augustus once existed.

At the period of our story--though the sea had even then receded perceptibly--the ditches round the walls were yet filled, and the canals still ran through the city in much the same manner as they intersect Venice at the present time.

On the morning that we are about to describe, the autumn had advanced some days since the events mentioned in the preceding chapter. Although the sun was now high in the eastern horizon, the restlessness produced by the heat emboldened a few idlers of Ravenna to brave the sultriness of the atmosphere, in the vain hope of being greeted by a breeze from the Adriatic as they mounted the seaward ramparts of the town. On attaining their destined elevation, these sanguine citizens turned their faces with fruitless and despairing industry towards every point of the compass, but no breath of air came to reward their perseverance. Nothing could be more thoroughly suggestive of the undiminished universality of the heat than the view, in every direction, from the position they then occupied. The stone houses of the city behind them glowed with a vivid brightness overpowering to the strongest eyes. The light curtains hung motionless over the lonely windows. No shadows varied the brilliant monotony of the walls, or softened the lively glitter on the waters of the fountains beneath. Not a ripple stirred the surface of the broad channel, that now replaced the ancient harbour. Not a breath of wind unfolded the scorching sails of the deserted vessels at the quay. Over the marshes in the distance hung a hot, quivering mist; and in the vineyards, near the town, not a leaf waved upon its slender stem. On the seaward side lay, vast and level, the prospect of the burning sand; and beyond it the main ocean--waveless, torpid, and suffused in a flood of fierce

brightness--stretched out to the cloudless horizon that closed the sunbright view.

Within the town, in those streets where the tall houses cast a deep shadow on the flagstones of the road, the figures of a few slaves might here and there be seen sleeping against the walls, or gossiping languidly on the faults of their respective lords. Sometimes an old beggar might be observed hunting on the well-stocked preserves of his own body the lively vermin of the South. Sometimes a restless child crawled from a doorstep to paddle in the stagnant waters of a kennel; but, with the exception of these doubtful evidences of human industry, the prevailing characteristic of the few groups of the lowest orders of the people which appeared in the streets was the most listless and utter indolence. All that gave splendour to the city at other hours of the day was at this period hidden from the eye. The elegant courtiers reclined in their lofty chambers; the guards on duty ensconced themselves in angles of walls and recesses of porticoes; the graceful ladies slumbered on perfumed couches in darkened rooms; the gilded chariots were shut into the carriage-houses; the prancing horses were confined in the stables; and even the wares in the market-places were removed from exposure to the sun. It was clear that the luxurious inhabitants of Ravenna recognised no duties of sufficient importance, and no pleasures of sufficient attraction, to necessitate the exposure of their susceptible bodies to the noontide heat.

To give the reader some idea of the manner in which the indolent patricians of the Court loitered away their noon, and to satisfy, at the same time, the exigencies attaching to the conduct of this story, it is requisite to quit the lounging-places of the plebeians in the streets for the couches of the nobles in the Emperor's palace.

Passing through the massive entrance gates, crossing the vast hall of the Imperial abode, with its statues, its marbles, and its guards in attendance, and thence ascending the noble staircase, the first object that might on this occasion have attracted the observer, when he gained the approaches to the private apartments, was a door at an extremity of the corridor, richly carved and standing half open. At this spot were grouped some fifteen or twenty individuals, who conversed by signs, and maintained in all their movements the most decorous and complete silence. Sometimes one of the party stole on tiptoe to the door, and looked cautiously through, returning almost instantaneously, and expressing to his next neighbour, by various grimaces, his immense interest in the sight he had just beheld. Occasionally there came from this mysterious chamber sounds resembling the cackling of poultry, varied now and then by a noise like the falling of a shower of small,

light substances upon a hard floor. Whenever these sounds were audible, the members of the party outside the door looked round upon each other and smiled--some sarcastically, some triumphantly. A few among these patient expectants grasped rolls of vellum in their hands; the rest held nosegays of rare flowers, or supported in their arms small statues and pictures in mosaic. Of their number, some were painters and poets, some orators and philosophers, and some statuaries and musicians. Among such a motley assemblage of professions, remarkable in all ages of the world for fostering in their votaries the vice of irritability, it may seem strange that so quiet and orderly a behaviour should exist as that just described. But it is to be observed that in attending at the palace, these men of genius made sure at least of outward unanimity among their ranks, by coming equally prepared with one accomplishment, and equally animated by one hope: they waited to employ a common agent--flattery; to attain a common end--gain.

The chamber thus sacred, even from the intrusion of intellectual inspiration, although richly ornamented, was of no remarkable extent. At other times the eye might have wandered with delight on the exquisite plants and flowers, scattered profusely over a noble terrace, to which a second door in the apartment conducted; but, at the present moment, the employment of the occupant of the room was of so extraordinary a nature, that the most attentive observation must have missed all the inferior characteristics of the place, to settle immediately on its inhabitant alone.

In the midst of a large flock of poultry, which seemed strangely misplaced on a floor of marble and under a gilded roof, stood a pale, thin, debilitated youth, magnificently clothed, and holding in his hand a silver vase filled with grain, which he ever and anon distributed to the cackling multitude at his feet. Nothing could be more pitiably effeminate than the appearance of this young man. His eyes were heavy and vacant, his forehead low and retiring, his cheeks sallow, and his form curved as if with a premature old age. An unmeaning smile dilated his thin, colourless lips; and as he looked down on his strange favourites, he occasionally whispered to them a few broken expressions of endearment, almost infantine in their simplicity. His whole soul seemed to be engrossed by the labour of distributing his grain, and he followed the different movements of the poultry with an earnestness of attention which seemed almost idiotic in its ridiculous intensity. If it be asked, why a person so contemptible as this solitary youth has been introduced with so much care, and described with so much minuteness, it must be answered, that, though destined to form no important figure in this work, he played, from his position, a remarkable part in the great drama on which it is founded--for this feeder of chickens was no less a person than Honorius, Emperor of Rome.

It is the very imbecility of this man, at such a time as that we now write on, which invests his character with a fearful interest in the eye of posterity. In himself the impersonation of the meanest vices inherent in the vicious civilisation of his period, to his feebleness was accorded the terrible responsibility of liberating the long-prisoned storm whose elements we have attempted to describe in the preceding chapter. With just intellect enough to be capricious, and just determination enough to be mischievous, he was an instrument fitted for the uses of every ambitious villain who could succeed in gaining his ear. To flatter his puerile tyranny, the infatuated intriguers of the Court rewarded the heroic Stilicho for the rescue of his country with the penalty of death, and defrauded Alaric of the moderate concessions that they had solemnly pledged themselves to perform. To gratify his vanity, he was paraded in triumph through the streets of Rome for a victory that others had gained. To pander to his arrogance, by an exhibition of the vilest privilege of that power which had been intrusted to him for good, the massacre of the helpless hostages, confided by Gothic honour to Roman treachery, was unhesitatingly ordained; and, finally, to soothe the turbulence of his unmanly fears, the last act of his unscrupulous councillors, ere the Empire fell, was to authorise his abandoning his people in the hour of peril, careless who suffered in defenceless Rome, while he was secure in fortified Ravenna. Such was the man under whom the mightiest of the world's structures was doomed to totter to its fall! Such was the figure destined to close a scene which Time and Glory had united to hallow and adorn! Raised and supported by a superhuman daring, that invested the nauseous horrors of incessant bloodshed with a rude and appalling magnificence, the mistress of nations was now fated to sink by the most ignoble of defeats, under the most abject of tremblers. For this had the rough old kingdom shaken off its enemies by swarms from its vigorous arms! For this had the doubtful virtues of the Republic, and the perilous magnificence of the Empire, perplexed and astonished the world! In such a conclusion as Honorius ended the dignified barbarities of a Brutus, the polished splendours of an Augustus, the unearthly atrocities of a Nero, and the immortal virtues of a Trajan! Vainly, through the toiling ages, over the ruin of her noblest hearts, and the prostitution of her grandest intellects, had Rome striven pitilessly onward, grasping at the shadow--Glory; the fiat had now gone forth that doomed her to possess herself finally of the substance--Shame!

When the imperial trifler had exhausted his store of grain, and satisfied the cravings of his voracious favourites, he was relieved of his silver vase by two attendants. The flock of poultry was then ushered out at one door, while the flock of geniuses was ushered in at the other.

Leaving the emperor to cast his languid eyes over objects of art for which he had no admiration, and to open his unwilling ears to panegyric orations for which he had no comprehension, we proceed to introduce the reader to an apartment on the opposite side of the palace, in which are congregated all the beauty and elegance of his Court.

Imagine a room two hundred feet long and proportionably broad. Its floor is mosaic, wrought into the loveliest patterns. Its sides are decorated with immense pillars of variegated marble, the recesses formed by which are occupied by statues, all arranged in exquisite variety of attitude, so as to appear to be offering to whoever approaches them the rare flowers which it is the duty of the attendants to place in their hands. The ceiling is painted in fresco, in patterns and colours harmonising with those on the mosaic floor. The cornices are of silver, and decorated with mottoes from the amatory poets of the day, the letters of which are formed by precious stones. In the middle of the room is a fountain throwing up streams of perfumed water, and surrounded by golden aviaries containing birds of all sizes and nations. Three large windows, placed at the eastern extremity of the apartment, look out upon the Adriatic, but are covered at this hour, from the outside, with silk curtains of a delicate green shade, which cast a soft, luxurious light over every object, but are so thinly woven and so skilfully arranged that the slightest breath of air which moves without finds its way immediately to the languid occupants of the Court waiting-room. The number of these individuals amounts to about fifty or sixty persons. By far the larger half of the assemblage are women. Their black hair tastefully braided into various forms, and adorned with flowers or precious stones, contrasts elegantly with the brilliant whiteness of the robes in which they are for the most part clothed. Some of them are occupied in listlessly watching the movements of the birds in the aviaries; others hold a languid and whispered conversation with such of the courtiers as happen to be placed near them. The men exhibit in their dresses a greater variety of colour, and in their occupations a greater fertility of resource, than the women. Their garments, of the lightest rose, violet, or yellow tints, diversify fantastically the monotonous white robes of their gentle companions. Of their employments, the most conspicuous are playing on the lute, gaming with dice, teasing their lapdogs, and insulting their parasites. Whatever their occupation, it is performed with little attention, and less enthusiasm. Some recline on their couches with closed eyes, as if the heat made the labour of using their organs of vision too much for them; others, in the midst of a conversation, suddenly leave a sentence unfinished, apparently incapacitated by lassitude from giving expression to the simplest ideas. Every sight in the apartment that attracts the eye, every sound that gains

the ear, expresses a luxurious repose. No brilliant light mars the pervading softness of the atmosphere; no violent colour materialises the light, ethereal hues of the dresses; no sudden noises interrupt the fitful and plaintive notes of the lute, jar with the soft twittering of the birds in the aviaries, or drown the still, regular melody of the ladies' voices. All objects, animate and inanimate, are in harmony with each other. It is a scene of spiritualised indolence--a picture of dreamy beatitude in the inmost sanctuary of unruffled repose.

Amid this assemblage of beauty and nobility, the members of which were rather to be generally noticed than particularly observed, there was, however, one individual who, both by the solitary occupation he had chosen and his accidental position in the room, was personally remarkable among the listless patricians around him.

His couch was placed nearer the window than that of any other occupant of the chamber. Some of his indolent neighbours--especially those of the gentler sex--occasionally regarded him with mingled looks of admiration and curiosity; but no one approached him, or attempted to engage him in conversation. A piece of vellum lay by his side, on which, from time to time, he traced a few words, and then resumed his reclining position, apparently absorbed in reflection, and utterly regardless of all the occupants, male and female, of the imperial apartment. Judging from his general appearance, he could scarcely be twenty-five years of age. The conformation of the upper part of his face was thoroughly intellectual--the forehead high, broad, and upright; the eyes clear, penetrating, and thoughtful;--but the lower part was, on the other hand, undeniably sensual. The lips, full and thick, formed a disagreeable contrast to the delicate chiselling of the straight Grecian nose; while the fleshiness of the chin, and the jovial redundancy of the cheeks, were, in their turn, utterly at variance with the character of the pale, noble forehead, and the expression of the quick, intelligent eyes. In stature he was barely of the middle size; but every part of his body was so perfectly proportioned that he appeared, in any position, taller than he really was. The upper part of his dress, thrown open from the heat, partly disclosed the fine statuesque formation of his neck and chest. His ears, hands, and feet were of that smallness and delicacy which is held to denote the aristocracy of birth; and there was in his manner that indescribable combination of unobtrusive dignity and unaffected elegance, which in all ages and countries, and through all changes of manners and customs, has rendered the demeanour of its few favoured possessors the instantaneous interpreter of their social rank.

While the patrician was still occupied over his vellum, the following

conversation took place in whispers between two ladies placed near the situation he occupied.

'Tell me, Camilla,' said the eldest and stateliest of the two, 'who is the courtier so occupied in composition? I have endeavoured, I know not how often, to catch his eye; but the man will look at nothing but his roll of vellum or the corners of the room.'

'What, are you so great a stranger in Italy as not to know him!' replied the other, a lively girl of small delicate form, who fidgeted with persevering restlessness on her couch, and seemed incapable of giving an instant's steady attention to any of the objects around her. 'By all the saints, martyrs, and relics of my uncle the bishop!'

'Hush! You should not swear!'

'Not swear! Why, I am making a new collection of oaths, intended solely for ladies' use! I intend to set the fashion of swearing by them myself!'

'But answer my question, I beseech you! Will you never learn to talk on one subject at a time?'

'Your question--ah, your question! It was about the Goths?'

'No, no! It was about that man who is incessantly writing, and will look at nobody. He is almost as provoking as Camilla herself!'

'Don't frown so! That man, as you call him, is the senator Vetrano.'

The lady started. It was evident that Vetrano had a reputation.

'Yes!' continued the lively Camilla, 'that is the accomplished Vetrano; but he will be no favourite of yours, for he sometimes swears--swears by the ancient gods, too, which is forbidden!'

'He is handsome.'

'Handsome! he is beautiful! Not a woman in Italy but is languishing for him!'

'I have heard that he is clever.'

'Who has not? He is the author of some of the most celebrated sauces of the

age. Cooks of all nations worship him as an oracle. Then he writes poetry, and composes music, and paints pictures! And as for philosophy--he talks it better than my uncle the bishop!

'Is he rich?'

'Ah! my uncle the bishop!--I must tell you how I helped Vetrano to make a satire on him! When I was staying with him at Rome, I used often to see a woman in a veil taken across the garden to his study; so, to perplex him, I asked him who she was. And he frowned and stammered, and said at first that I was disrespectful; but he told me afterwards that she was an Arian whom he was labouring to convert. So I thought I should like to see how this conversion went on, and I hid myself behind a bookcase. But it is a profound secret; I tell it you in confidence.'

'I don't care to know it. Tell me about Vetrano.'

'How ill-natured you are! Oh! I shall never forget how we laughed when I told Vetrano what I had seen. He took up his writing materials, and made the satire immediately. The next day all Rome heard of it. My uncle was speechless with rage! I believe he suspected me; but he gave up converting the Arian lady, and--'

'I ask you again--Is Vetrano rich?'

'Half Sicily is his. He has immense estates in Africa, olive-grounds in Syria, and corn-fields in Gaul. I was present at an entertainment he gave at his villa in Sicily. He fitted up one of his vessels from the descriptions of the furnishing of Cleopatra's galley, and made his slaves swim after us as attendant Tritons. Oh! it was magnificent!'

'I should like to know him.'

'You should see his cats! He has a perfect legion of them at his villa. Twelve slaves are employed to attend on them. He is mad about cats, and declares that the old Egyptians were right to worship them. He told me yesterday, that when his largest cat is dead he will canonise her, in spite of the Christians! And then he is so kind to his slaves! They are never whipped or punished, except when they neglect or disfigure themselves; for Vetrano will allow nothing that is ugly or dirty to come near him. You must visit his banqueting-hall in Rome. It is perfection!'

'But why is he here?'

'He has come to Ravenna, charged with some secret message from the Senate, and has presented a rare breed of chickens to that foolish--'

'Hush! you may be overheard!'

'Well!--to that wise emperor of ours! Ah! the palace has been so pleasant since he has been here!'

At this instant the above dialogue--from the frivolity of which the universally-learned readers of modern times will, we fear, recoil with contempt--was interrupted by a movement on the part of its hero which showed that his occupation was at an end. With the elaborate deliberation of a man who disdains to exhibit himself as liable to be hurried by any mortal affair, Vetrano slowly folded up the vellum he had now filled with writing, and depositing it in his bosom, made a sign to a slave who happened to be then passing near him with a dish of fruit.

Having received his message, the slave retired to the entrance of the apartment, and beckoning to a man who stood outside the door, motioned him to approach Vetrano's couch.

This individual immediately hurried across the room to the window where the elegant Roman awaited him. Not the slightest description of him is needed; for he belonged to a class with which moderns are as well acquainted as ancients--a class which has survived all changes of nations and manners--a class which came in with the first rich man in the world, and will only go out with the last. In a word, he was a parasite.

He enjoyed, however, one great superiority over his modern successors: in his day flattery was a profession--in ours it has sunk to a pursuit.

'I shall leave Ravenna this evening,' said Vetrano.

The parasite made three low bows and smiled ecstatically.

'You will order my travelling equipage to be at the palace gates an hour before sunset.'

The parasite declared he should never forget the honour of the commission, and left the room.

The sprightly Camilla, who had overheard Vetrano's command, jumped off

her couch, as soon as the parasite's back was turned, and running up to the senator, began to reproach him for the determination he had just formed.

'Have you no compunction at leaving me to the dulness of this horrible palace, to satisfy your idle fancy for going to Rome,' said she, pouting her pretty lip, and playing with a lock of the dark brown hair that clustered over Vetrano's brow.

'Has the senator Vetrano so little regard for his friends as to leave them to the mercy of the Goths?' said another lady, advancing with a winning smile to Camilla's side.

'Ah, those Goths!' exclaimed Vetrano, turning to the last speaker. 'Tell me, Julia, is it not reported that the barbarians are really marching into Italy?'

'Everybody has heard of it. The emperor is so discomposed by the rumour, that he has forbidden the very name of the Goths to be mentioned in his presence again.'

'For my part,' continued Vetrano, drawing Camilla towards him, and playfully tapping her little dimpled hand, 'I am in anxious expectation of the Goths, for I have designed a statue of Minerva, for which I can find no model so fit as a woman of that troublesome nation. I am informed upon good authority, that their limbs are colossal, and their sense of propriety most obediently pliable under the discipline of the purse.'

'If the Goths supply you with a model for anything,' said a courtier who had joined the group while Vetrano was speaking, 'it will be with a representation of the burning of your palace at Rome, which they will enable you to paint from the inexhaustible reservoir of your own wounds.'

The individual who uttered this last observation was remarkable among the brilliant circle around him by his excessive ugliness. Urged by his personal disadvantages, and the loss of all his property at the gaming-table, he had latterly personated a character, the accomplishments attached to which rescued him, by their disagreeable originality in that frivolous age, from oblivion or contempt. He was a Cynic philosopher.

His remark, however, produced no other effect on his hearers' serenity than to excite their merriment. Vetrano laughed, Camilla laughed, Julia laughed. The idea of a troop of barbarians ever being able to burn a palace at Rome was too wildly ridiculous for any one's gravity; and as the speech was repeated in other parts of the room, in spite of their dulness and

lassitude the whole Court laughed.

'I know not why I should be amused by that man's nonsense,' said Camilla, suddenly becoming grave at the very crisis of a most attractive smile, 'when I am so melancholy at the thought of Vetrano's departure. What will become of me when he is gone? Alas! who will be left in the palace to compose songs to my beauty and music for my lute? Who will paint me as Venus, and tell me stories about the ancient Egyptians and their cats? Who at the banquet will direct what dishes I am to choose, and what I am to reject? Who?'--and poor little Camilla stopped suddenly in her enumeration of the pleasures she was about to lose, and seemed on the point of weeping as piteously as she had been laughing rapturously but the instant before.

Vetrano was touched--not by the compliment to his more intellectual powers, but by the admission of his convivial supremacy as a guide to the banquet, contained in the latter part of Camilla's remonstrance. The sex were then, as now, culpably deficient in gastronomic enthusiasm. It was, therefore, a perfect triumph to have made a convert to the science of the youngest and loveliest of the ladies of the Court.

'If she can gain leave of absence,' said the gratified senator, 'Camilla shall accompany me to Rome, and shall be present at the first celebration of my recent discovery of a Nightingale Sauce.'

Camilla was in ecstasies. She seized Vetrano's cheeks between her rosy little fingers, kissed him as enthusiastically as a child kisses a new toy, and darted gaily off to prepare for her departure.

'Vetrano would be better employed,' sneered the Cynic, 'in inventing new salves for future wounds than new sauces for future nightingales! His carcass will be carved by Gothic swords as a feast for the worms before his birds are spitted with Roman skewers as a feast for his guests! Is this a time for cutting statues and concocting sauces? Fie on the senators who abandon themselves to such pursuits as Vetrano's!'

'I have other designs,' replied the object of all this moral indignation, looking with insulting indifference on the Cynic's repulsive countenance, 'which, from their immense importance to the world, must meet with universal approval. The labour that I have just achieved forms one of a series of three projects which I have for some time held in contemplation. The first is an analysis of the new priesthood; the second, a true personification, both by painting and sculpture, of Venus; the third, a discovery of what has been hitherto uninvented--a nightingale sauce. By the inscrutable wisdom of

Fate, it has been so willed that the last of the objects I proposed to myself has been the first attained. The sauce is composed, and I have just concluded on this vellum the ode that is to introduce it at my table. The analysis will be my next labour. It will take the form of a treatise, in which, making the experience of past years the groundwork of prophecy for the future, I shall show the precise number of additional dissensions, controversies, and quarrels that will be required to enable the new priesthood to be themselves the destroyers of their own worship. I shall ascertain by an exact computation the year in which this destruction will be consummated; and I have by me as the materials for my work an historical summary of Christian schisms and disputes in Rome for the last hundred years. As for my second design, the personification of Venus, it is of appalling difficulty. It demands an investigation of the women of every nation under the sun; a comparison of the relative excellences and peculiarities of their several charms; and a combination of all that is loveliest in the infinite variety of their most prominent attractions, under one form. To forward the execution of this arduous project, my tenants at home and my slave-merchants abroad have orders to send to my villa in Sicily all women who are born most beautiful in the Empire, or can be brought most beautiful from the nations around. I will have them displayed before me, of every shade in complexion and of every peculiarity in form! At the fitting period I shall commence my investigations, undismayed by difficulty, and determined on success. Never yet has the true Venus been personified! Should I accomplish the task, how exquisite will be my triumph! My work will be the altar at which thousands will offer up the softest emotions of the heart. It will free the prisoned imagination of youth, and freshen the fading recollections on the memory of age!

Vetranio paused. The Cynic was struck dumb with indignation. A solitary zealot for the Church, who happened to be by, frowned at the analysis. The ladies tittered at the personification. The gastronomists chuckled at the nightingale sauce; but for the first few minutes no one spoke. During this temporary embarrassment, Vetranio whispered a few words in Julia's ear; and--just as the Cynic was sufficiently recovered to retort--accompanied by the lady, he quitted the room.

Never was popularity more unalloyed than Vetranio's. Gifted with a disposition the pliability of which adapted itself to all emergencies, his generosity disarmed enemies, while his affability made friends. Munificent without assumption, successful without pride, he obliged with grace and shone with safety. People enjoyed his hospitality, for they knew that it was disinterested; and admired his acquirements, for they felt that they were unobtrusive. Sometimes (as in his dialogue with the Cynic) the whim of the

moment, or the sting of a sarcasm, drew from him a hint at his station, or a display of his eccentricities; but, as he was always the first soon afterwards to lead the laugh at his own outbreak, his credit as a noble suffered nothing by his infirmity as a man. Gaily and attractively he moved in all grades of the society of his age, winning his social laurels in every rank, without making a rival to dispute their possession, or an enemy to detract from their value.

On quitting the Court waiting-room, Vetrano and Julia descended the palace stairs and passed into the emperor's garden. Used generally as an evening lounge, this place was now untenanted, save by the few attendants engaged in cultivating the flower-beds and watering the smooth, shady lawns. Entering one of the most retired of the numerous summer-houses among the trees, Vetrano motioned his companion to take a seat, and then abruptly addressed her in the following words:--

'I have heard that you are about to depart for Rome--is it true?'

He asked this question in a low voice, and with a manner in its earnestness strangely at variance with the volatile gaiety which had characterised him, but a few moments before, among the nobles of the Court. As Julia answered him in the affirmative, his countenance expressed a lively satisfaction; and seating himself by her side, he continued the conversation thus:--

'If I thought that you intended to stay for any length of time in the city, I should venture upon a fresh extortion from your friendship by asking you to lend me your little villa at Aricia!'

'You shall take with you to Rome an order on my steward to place everything there at your entire disposal.'

'My generous Julia! You are of the gifted few who really know how to confer a favour! Another woman would have asked me why I wanted the villa--you give it unreservedly. So delicate an unwillingness to intrude on a secret reminds me that the secret should now be yours!'

To explain the easy confidence that existed between Vetrano and Julia, it is necessary to inform the reader that the lady--although still attractive in appearance--was of an age to muse on her past, rather than to meditate on her future conquests. She had known her eccentric companion from his boyhood, had been once flattered in his verses, and was sensible enough--now that her charms were on the wane--to be as content with the friendship

of the senator as she had formerly been enraptured with the adoration of the youth.

'You are too penetrating,' resumed Vetrano, after a short pause, 'not to have already suspected that I only require your villa to assist me in the concealment of an intrigue. So peculiar is my adventure in its different circumstances, that to make use of my palace as the scene of its development would be to risk a discovery which might produce the immediate subversion of all my designs. But I fear the length of my confession will exceed the duration of your patience!'

'You have aroused my curiosity. I could listen to you for ever!'

'A short time before I took my departure from Rome for this place,' continued Vetrano, 'I encountered an adventure of the most extraordinary nature, which has haunted me with the most extraordinary perseverance, and which will have, I feel assured, the most extraordinary results. I was sitting one evening in the garden of my palace on the Pincian Mount, occupied in trying a new composition on my lute. In one of the pauses of the melody, which was tender and plaintive, I heard sounds that resembled the sobbing of some one in distress among the trees behind me. I looked cautiously round, and discerned, half-hidden by the verdure, the figure of a young girl, who appeared to be listening to the music with the most entranced attention. Flattered by such a testimony to my skill, and anxious to gain a nearer view of my mysterious visitant, I advanced towards her hiding-place, forgetting in my haste to continue playing on the lute. The instant the music ceased, she discerned me and disappeared. Determined to behold her, I again struck the chords, and in a few minutes I saw her white robe once more among the trees. I redoubled my efforts. I played with the utmost expression the most pathetic parts of the melody. As if under the influence of a charm, she began to advance towards me, now hesitating, now moving back a few steps, now approaching, half-reluctantly, half willingly, until, utterly vanquished by the long trembling close of the last cadence of the air, she ran suddenly up to me, and falling at my feet, raised her hands as if to implore my pardon.'

'Truly this was no common tribute to your skill! Did she speak to you?'

'She uttered not a word,' continued Vetrano. 'Her large soft eyes, bright with tears, looked piteously up in my face; her delicate lips trembled, as if she wished to speak, but dared not; her smooth round arms were the very perfection of beauty. Child as she seemed in years and emotions, she looked a woman in loveliness and form. For the moment I was too much

astonished by the suddenness of her supplicating action to move or speak. As soon as I recovered myself I attempted to fondle and console her, but she shrunk from my embrace, and seemed inclined to escape from me again; until I touched once more the strings of the lute, and then she uttered a subdued exclamation of delight, nestled close up to me, and looked into my face with such a strange expression of mingled adoration and rapture, that I declare to you, Julia, I felt as bashful before her as a boy.'

'You bashful! The Senator Vetrano bashful!' exclaimed Julia, looking up with an expression of the most unfeigned incredulity and astonishment.

'The lute,' pursued Vetrano gravely, without heeding the interruption, 'was my sole means of procuring any communication with her. If I ceased playing, we were as strangers; if I resumed, we were as friends. So, subduing the notes of the instrument while she spoke to me in a soft tremulous musical voice, I still continued to play. By this plan I discovered at our first interview that she was the daughter of one Numerian, that she was on the point of completing her fourteenth year, and that she was called Antonina. I had only succeeded in gaining this mere outline of her story, when, as if struck by some sudden apprehension, she tore herself from me with a look of the utmost terror, and entreating me not to follow her if I ever desired to see her again, she disappeared rapidly among the trees.'

'More and more wonderful! And, in your new character of a bashful man, you doubtless obeyed her injunctions?'

'I did,' replied the senator; 'but the next evening I revisited the garden grove, and, as soon as I struck the chords, as if by magic, she again approached. At this second interview I learned the reason of her mysterious appearances and departures. Her father, she told me, was one of a new sect, who imagine--with what reason it is impossible to comprehend--that they recommend themselves to their Deity by making their lives one perpetual round of bodily suffering and mental anguish. Not content with distorting all his own feelings and faculties, this tyrant perpetrated his insane austerities upon the poor child as well. He forbade her to enter a theatre, to look on sculpture, to read poetry, to listen to music. He made her learn long prayers, and attend to interminable sermons. He allowed her no companions of her own age--not even girls like herself. The only recreation that she could obtain was the permission--granted with much reluctance and many rebukes--to cultivate a little garden which belonged to the house they lived in, and joined at one point the groves round my palace. There, while she was engaged over her flowers, she first heard the sound of my lute for many months before I had discovered her, she had been in the habit of

climbing the enclosure that bounded her garden, and hiding herself among the trees to listen to the music, whenever her father's concerns took him abroad. She had been discovered in this occupation by an old man appointed to watch her in his master's absence. The attendant, however, on hearing her confession, not only promised to keep her secret, but permitted her to continue her visits to my grove whenever I chanced to be playing there on the lute. Now the most mysterious part of this matter is, that the girl seemed--in spite of his severity towards her--to have a great affection for her surly; for, when I offered to deliver her from his custody, she declared that nothing could induce her to desert him--not even the attraction of living among fine pictures and hearing beautiful music every hour in the day. But I see I weary you; and, indeed, it is evident from the length of the shadows that the hour of my departure is at hand. Let me then pass from my introductory interviews with Antonina, to the consequences that had resulted from them when I set forth on my journey to Ravenna.'

'I think I can imagine the consequences already!' said Julia, smiling maliciously.

'Begin then,' retorted Vetrano, 'by imagining that the strangeness of this girl's situation, and the originality of her ideas, invested her with an attraction for me, which the charms of her person and age contributed immensely to heighten. She delighted my faculties as a poet, as much as she fired my feelings as a man; and I determined to lure her from the tyrannical protection of her father by the employment of every artifice that my ingenuity could suggest. I began by teaching her to exercise for herself the talent which had so attracted her in another. By the familiarity engendered on both sides by such an occupation, I hoped to gain as much in affection from her as she acquired in skill from me; but to my astonishment, I still found her as indifferent towards the master, and as tender towards the music, as she had appeared at our first interview. If she had repelled my advances, if they had overwhelmed her with confusion, I could have adapted myself to her humour, I should have felt the encouragement of hope; but the coldness, the carelessness, the unnatural, incomprehensible ease with which she received even my caresses, utterly disconcerted me. It seemed as if she could only regard me as a moving statue, as a mere impersonation, immaterial as the science I was teaching her. If I spoke, she hardly looked on me; if I moved, she scarcely noticed the action. I could not consider it dislike; she seemed to gentle to nourish such a feeling for any creature on earth. I could not believe it coldness; she was all life, all agitation, if she heard only a few notes of music. When she touched the chords of the instrument, her whole frame trembled. Her eyes, mild, serious, and thoughtful when she looked on me, now brightened with

delight, now softened with tears, when she listened to the lute. As day by day her skill in music increased, so her manner towards me grew more inexplicably indifferent. At length, weary of the constant disappointments that I experienced, and determined to make a last effort to touch her heart by awakening her gratitude, I presented her with the very lute which she had at first heard, and on which she had now learned to play. Never have I seen any human being so rapturously delighted as this incomprehensible girl when she received the instrument from my hands. She alternately wept and laughed over it, she kissed it, fondled it, spoke to it, as if it had been a living thing. But when I approached to suppress the expressions of thankfulness that she poured on me for the gift, she suddenly hid the lute in her robe, as if afraid that I should deprive her of it, and hurried rapidly from my sight. The next day I waited for her at our accustomed meeting-place, but she never appeared. I sent a slave to her father's house, but she would hold no communication with him. It was evident that, now she had gained her end, she cared no more to behold me. In my first moments of irritation, I determined to make her feel my power, if she despised my kindness; but reflection convinced me, from my acquaintance with her character, that in such a matter force was impolitic, that I should risk my popularity in Rome, and engage myself in an unworthy quarrel to no purpose. Dissatisfied with myself, and disappointed in the girl, I obeyed the first dictates of my impatience, and seizing the opportunity afforded by my duties in the senate of escaping from the scene of defeated hopes, I departed angrily for Ravenna.'

'Departed for Ravenna!' cried Julia, laughing outright. 'Oh, what a conclusion to the adventure! I confess it, Vetrano, such consequences as these are beyond all imagination!'

'You laugh, Julia,' returned the senator, a little piqued; 'but hear me to the end, and you will find that I have not yet resigned myself to defeat. For the few days that I have remained here, Antonina's image has incessantly troubled my thoughts. I perceive that my inclination, as well as my reputation, is concerned in subduing her ungrateful aversion. I suspect that my anxiety to gain her will, if unremoved, so far influence my character, that from Vetrano the Serene, I shall be changed into Vetrano the Sardonic. Pride, honour, curiosity, and love all urge me to her conquest. To prepare for my banquet is an excuse to the Court for my sudden departure from this place; the real object of my journey is Antonina alone.'

'Ah, now I recognise my friend again in his own character,' remarked the lady approvingly.

'You will ask me how I purpose to obtain another interview with her?' continued Vetrano. 'I answer, that the girl's attendant has voluntarily offered himself as an instrument for the prosecution of my plans. The very day before I departed from Rome, he suddenly presented himself to me in my garden, and proposed to introduce me into Numerian's house--having first demanded, with the air more of an equal than an inferior, whether the report that I was still a secret adherent of the old religion, of the worship of the gods, was true. Suspicious of the fellow's motives (for he abjured all recompense as the reward of his treachery), and irritated by the girl's recent ingratitude, I treated his offer with contempt. Now, however, that my dissatisfaction is calmed and my anxiety aroused, I am determined, at all hazards, to trust myself to this man, be his motives for aiding me what they may. If my efforts at my expected interview--and I will not spare them--are rewarded with success, it will be necessary to obtain some refuge for Antonina that will neither be suspected nor searched. For such a hiding-place, nothing can be more admirably adapted than your Arician villa. Do you--now that you know for what use it is intended--repent of your generous disposal of it in aid of my design?'

'I am delighted to have had it to bestow on you,' replied the liberal Julia, pressing Vetrano's hand. 'Your adventure is indeed uncommon--I burn with impatience to hear how it will end. Whatever happens, you may depend on my secrecy and count on my assistance. But see, the sun is already verging towards the west; and yonder comes one of your slaves to inform you, I doubt not, that your equipage is prepared. Return with me to the palace, and I will supply you with the letter necessary to introduce you as master to my country abode.'

* * * * *

The worthy citizens of Ravenna assembled in the square before the palace to behold the senator's departure, had entirely exhausted such innocent materials for amusement as consisted in staring at the guards, catching the clouds of gnats that hovered about their ears, and quarrelling with each other; and were now reduced to a state of very noisy and unanimous impatience, when their discontent was suddenly and most effectually appeased by the appearance of the travelling equipage with Vetrano and Camilla outside the palace gates.

Uproarious shouts greeted the appearance of the senator and his magnificent retinue; but they were increased a hundred-fold when the chief slaves, by their master's command, each scattered a handful of small coin among the poorer classes of the spectators. Every man among that

heterogeneous assemblage of rogues, fools, and idlers roared his loudest and capered his highest, in honour of the generous patrician. Gradually and carefully the illustrious travellers moved through the crowd around them to the city gate; and thence, amid incessant shouts of applause, raised with imposing unanimity of lung, and wrought up to the most distracting discordancy of noise, Vetrano and his lively companion departed in triumph for Rome.

* * * * *

A few days after this event the citizens were again assembled at the same place and hour--probably to witness another patrician departure--when their ears were assailed by the unexpected sound produced by the call to arms, which was followed immediately by the closing of the city gates. They had scarcely asked each other the meaning of these unusual occurrences, when a peasant, half frantic with terror, rushed into the square, shouting out the terrible intelligence that the Goths were in sight!

The courtiers heard the news, and starting from a luxurious repast, hurried to the palace windows to behold the portentous spectacle. For the remainder of the evening the banqueting tables were unapproached by the guests.

The wretched emperor was surprised among his poultry by that dreaded intelligence. He, too, hastened to the windows, and looking forth, saw the army of avengers passing in contempt his solitary fortress, and moving swiftly onward towards defenceless Rome. Long after the darkness had hidden the masses of that mighty multitude from his eyes, did he remain staring helplessly upon the fading landscape, in a stupor of astonishment and dread; and, for the first time since he had possessed them, his flocks of fowls were left for that night unattended by their master's hand.