

## **CHAPTER 7 - THE BED-CHAMBER**

It is now time to resume our chronicle of the eventful night which marked the destruction of Antonina's lute and the conspiracy against Antonina's honour.

The gates of Vetrano's palace were closed, and the noises in it were all hushed; the banquet was over, the triumph of the Nightingale Sauce had been achieved, and the daybreak was already glimmering in the eastern sky, when the senator's favoured servant, the freedman Carrio, drew back the shutter of the porter's lodge, where he had been dozing since the conclusion of the feast, and looked out lazily into the street. The dull, faint light of dawn was now strengthening slowly over the lonely roadway and on the walls of the lofty houses. Of the groups of idlers of the lowest class who had assembled during the evening in the street to snuff the fragrant odours which steamed afar from Vetrano's kitchens, not one remained; men, women, and children had long since departed to seek shelter wherever they could find it, and to fatten their lean bodies on what had been charitable bestowed on them of the coarser relics of the banquet. The mysterious solitude and tranquility of daybreak in a great city prevailed over all things. Nothing impressed, however, by the peculiar and solemn attraction of the scene at this moment, the freedman apostrophised the fresh morning air, as it blew over him, in strong terms of disgust, and even ventured in lowered tones to rail against his master's uncomfortable fancy for being awakened after a feast at the approach of dawn. Far too well aware, nevertheless, of the necessity of yielding the most implicit obedience to the commands he had received to resign himself any longer to the pleasant temptations of repose, Carrio, after yawning, rubbing his eyes, and indulging for a few moments more in the luxury of complaint, set forth in earnest to follow the corridors leading to the interior of the palace, and to awaken Vetrano without further delay.

He had not advanced more than a few steps when a proclamation, written in letters of gold on a blue-coloured board, and hung against the wall at his side, attracted his attention. This public notice, which delayed his progress at the very outset, and which was intended for the special edification of all the inhabitants of Rome, was thus expressed:--

'ON THIS DAY, AND FOR TEN DAYS FOLLOWING, THE AFFAIRS OF OUR PATRON OBLIGE HIM TO BE ABSENT FROM ROME.'

Here the proclamation ended, without descending to particulars. It had been put forth, in accordance with the easy fashion of the age, to answer at

once all applications at Vetrano's palace during the senator's absence. Although the colouring of the board, the writing of the letters, and the composition of the sentence were the work of his own ingenuity, the worthy Carrio could not prevail upon himself to pass the proclamation without contemplating its magnificence anew. For some time he stood regarding it with the same expression of lofty and complacent approbation which we see in these modern days illuminating the countenance of a connoisseur before one of his own old pictures which he has bought as a great bargain, or dawning over the bland features of a linen-draper as he surveys from the pavement his morning's arrangement of the window of the shop. All things, however, have their limits, even a man's approval of an effort of his own skill. Accordingly, after a prolonged review of the proclamation, some faint ideas of the necessity of immediately obeying his master's commands revived in the mind of the judicious Carrio, and counselled him to turn his steps at once in the direction of the palace sleeping apartments.

Greatly wondering what new caprice had induced the senator to contemplate leaving Rome at the dawn of day--for Vetrano had divulged to no one the object of his departure--the freedman cautiously entered his master's bed-chamber. He drew aside the ample silken curtains suspended around and over the sleeping couch, from the hands of Graces and Cupids sculptured in marble; but the statues surrounded an empty bed. Vetrano was not there. Carrio next entered the bathroom; the perfumed water was steaming in its long marble basin, and the soft wrapping-cloths lay ready for use; the attendant slave, with his instruments of ablution, waited, half asleep, in his accustomed place; but here also no signs of the master's presence appeared. Somewhat perplexed, the freedman examined several other apartments. He found guests, dancing girls, parasites, poets, painters--a motley crew--occupying every kind of dormitory, and all peacefully engaged in sleeping off the effects of the wine they had drunk at the banquet; but the great object of his search still eluded him as before. At last it occurred to him that the senator, in an excess of convivial enthusiasm and jovial hospitality, might yet be detaining some favoured guest at the table of the feast.

Pausing, therefore, at some carved doors which stood ajar at one extremity of a spacious hall, he pushed them open, and hurriedly entered the banqueting-room beyond.

A soft, dim, luxurious light reigned over this apartment, which now presented, as far as the eye could discern, an aspect of confusion that was at once graceful and picturesque. Of the various lamps, of every variety of pattern, hanging from the ceiling, but few remained alight. From those,

however, which were still unextinguished there shone a mild brightness, admirably adapted to display the objects immediately around them. The golden garlands and the alabaster pots of sweet ointment which had been suspended before the guests during the banquet, still hung from the painted ceiling. On the massive table, composed partly of ebony and partly of silver, yet lay, in the wildest confusion, fragments of gastronomic delicacies, grotesque dinner services, vases of flowers, musical instruments, and crystal dice; while towering over all rose the glittering dish which had contained the nightingales consumed by the feasters, with the four golden Cupids which had spouted over them that illustrious invention--the Nightingale Sauce. Around the couches, of violet and rose colour, ranged along the table, the perfumed and gaily-tinted powders that had been strewn in patterns over the marble floor were perceptible for a few yards; but beyond this point nothing more was plainly distinguishable. The eye roved down the sides of the glorious chamber, catching dim glimpses of gorgeous draperies, crowded statues, and marble columns, but discerning nothing accurately, until it reached the half-opened windows, and rested upon the fresh dewy verdure now faintly visible in the shady gardens without. There--waving in the morning breezes, charged on every leaf with their burden of pure and welcome moisture--rose the lofty pine-trees, basking in the recurrence of the new day's beautiful and undying youth, and rising in reproofing contrast before the exhausted allurements of luxury and the perverted creations of art which burdened the tables of the hall within.

After a hasty survey of the apartment, the freedman appeared to be on the point of quitting it in despair, when the noise of a falling dish, followed by several partly suppressed and wholly confused exclamations of affright, caught his ear. He once more approached the banqueting-table, retrimmed a lamp that hung near him, and taking it in his hand, passed to the side of the room whence the disturbance proceeded. A hideous little negro, staring in ludicrous terror at a silver oven, half filled with bread, which had just fallen beside him, was the first object he discovered. A few paces beyond the negro reposed a beautiful boy, crowned with vine leaves and ivy, still sleeping by the side of his lyre; and farther yet, stretched in an uneasy slumber on a silken couch, lay the identical object of the freedman's search--the illustrious author of the Nightingale Sauce.

Immediately above the sleeping senator hung his portrait, in which he was modestly represented as rising by the assistance of Minerva to the top of Parnassus, the nine Muses standing round him rejoicing. At his feet reposed a magnificent white cat, whose head rested in all the luxurious laziness of satiety on the edge of a golden saucer half filled with dormice stewed in milk. The most indubitable evidences of the night's debauch

appeared in Vetrano's disordered dress and flushed countenance as the freedman regarded him. For some minutes the worthy Carrio stood uncertain whether to awaken his master or not, deciding finally, however, on obeying the commands he had received, and disturbing the slumbers of the wearied voluptuary before him. To effect this purpose, it was necessary to call in the aid of the singing-boy; for, by a refinement of luxury, Vetrano had forbidden his attendants to awaken him by any other method than the agency of musical sounds.

With some difficulty the boy was sufficiently aroused to comprehend the service that was required of him. For a short time the notes of the lyre sounded in vain. At last, when the melody took a louder and more martial character, the sleeping patrician slowly opened his eyes and stared vacantly around him.

'My respected patron,' said the polite Carrio in apologetic tones, 'commanded that I should awaken him with the dawn; the daybreak has already appeared.'

When the freedman had ceased speaking, Vetrano sat up on the couch, called for a basin of water, dipped his fingers in the refreshing liquid, dried them abstractedly on the long silky curls of the singing-boy who stood beside him, gazed about him once more, repeated interrogatively the word 'daybreak', and sunk gently back upon his couch. We are grieved to confess it--but the author of the Nightingale Sauce was moderately inebriated.

A short pause followed, during which the freedman and the singing-boy stared upon each other in mutual perplexity. At length the one resumed his address of apology, and the other resumed his efforts on the lyre. Once more, after an interval, the eyes of Vetrano lazily unclosed, and this time he began to speak; but his thoughts--if thoughts they could be called--were as yet wholly occupied by the 'table-talk' at the past night's banquet.

'The ancient Egyptians--oh, sprightly and enchanting Camilla--were a wise nation!' murmured the senator drowsily. 'I am myself descended from the ancient Egyptians; and, therefore, I hold in high veneration that cat in your lap, and all cats besides. Herodotus--an historian whose works I feel a certain gratification in publicly mentioning as good--informs us, that when a cat died in the dwelling of an ancient Egyptian, the owner shaved his eyebrows as a mark of grief, embalmed the defunct animal in a consecrated house, and carried it to be interred in a considerable city of Lower Egypt, called 'Bubastis'--an Egyptian word which I have discovered to mean The Sepulchre of all the Cats; whence it is scarcely erroneous to infer--'

At this point the speaker's power of recollection and articulation suddenly failed him, and Carrio--who had listened with perfect gravity to his master's oration upon cats--took immediate advantage of the opportunity now afforded him to speak again.

'The equipage which my patron was pleased to command to carry him to Aricia,' said he, with a strong emphasis on the last word, 'now stands in readiness at the private gate of the palace gardens.'

As he heard the word 'Aricia', the senator's powers of recollection and perception seemed suddenly to return to him. Among that high order of drinkers who can imbibe to the point of perfect enjoyment, and stop short scientifically before the point of perfect oblivion, Vetricano occupied an exalted rank. The wine he had swallowed during the night had disordered his memory and slightly troubled his self-possession, but had not deprived him of his understanding. There was nothing plebeian even in his debauchery; there was an art and a refinement in his very excesses.

'Aricia--Aricia!' he repeated to himself, 'ah! the villa that Julia lent to me at Ravenna! The pleasures of the table must have obscured for a moment the image of my beautiful pupil of other days, which now revives before me again as Love resumes the dominion that Bacchus usurped! My excellent Carrio,' he continued, speaking to the freedman, 'you have done perfectly right in awakening me; delay not a moment more in ordering my bath to be prepared, or my man-monster Ulpian, the king of conspirators and high priest of all that is mysterious, will wait for me in vain! And you, Glyco,' he pursued, when Carrio had departed, addressing the singing-boy, 'array yourself for a journey, and wait with my equipage at the garden-gate. I shall require you to accompany me in my expedition to Aricia. But first, oh! gifted and valued songster, let me reward you for the harmonious symphony that has just awakened me. Of what rank of my musicians are you at present, Glyco?'

'Of the fifth,' replied the boy.

'Were you bought, or born in my house?' asked Vetricano.

'Neither; but bequeathed to you by Geta's testament,' rejoined the gratified Glyco.

'I advance you,' continued Vetricano, 'to the privileges and the pay of the first rank of my musicians; and I give you, as a proof of my continued favour,

this ring. In return for these obligations, I desire to keep secret whatever concerns my approaching expedition; to employ your softest music in soothing the ear of a young girl who will accompany us--in calming her terrors if she is afraid, in drying her tears if she weeps; and finally, to exercise your voice and your lute incessantly in uniting the name 'Antonina' to the sweetest harmonies of sound that your imagination can suggest.'

Pronouncing these words with an easy and benevolent smile, and looking round complacently on the display of luxurious confusion about him, Vetrano retired to the bath that was to prepare him for his approaching triumph.

Meanwhile a scene of a very different nature was proceeding without, at Numerian's garden-gate. Here were no singing-boys, no freedmen, no profusion of rich treasures--here appeared only the solitary and deformed figure of Ulpus, half hidden among surrounding trees, while he waited at his appointed post. As time wore on, and still Vetrano did not appear, the Pagan's self-possession began to desert him. He moved restlessly backwards and forwards over the soft dewy grass, sometimes in low tones calling upon his gods to hasten the tardy footsteps of the libertine patrician, who was to be made the instrument of restoring to the temples the worship of other days--sometimes cursing the reckless delay of the senator, or exulting in the treachery by which he madly believed his ambition was at last to be fulfilled; but still, whatever his words or thoughts, wrought up to the same pitch of fierce, fanatic enthusiasm which had strengthened him for the defence of his idols at Alexandria, and had nerved him against the torment and misery of years in his slavery in the copper mines of Spain.

The precious moments were speeding irrevocably onwards. His impatience was rapidly changing to rage and despair as he strained his eyes for the last time in the direction of the palace gardens, and now at length discerned a white robe among the distant trees. Vetrano was rapidly approaching him.

Restored by his bath, no effect of the night's festivity but its exhilaration remained in the senator's brain. But for a slight uncertainty in his gait, and an unusual vacancy in his smile, the elegant gastronome might now have appeared to the closest observer guiltless of the influence of intoxicating drinks. He advanced, radiant with exultation, prepared for conquest, to the place where Ulpus awaited him, and was about to address the Pagan with that satirical familiarity so fashionable among the nobles of Rome in their communications with the people, when the object of his intended pleasantries sternly interrupted him, saying, in tones more of command than of advice, 'Be silent! If you would succeed in your purpose, follow me

without uttering a word!

There was something so fierce and determined in the tones of the old man's voice--low, tremulous, and husky though they were--as he uttered those words, that the bold, confident senator instinctively held his peace as he followed his stern guide into Numerian's house. Avoiding the regular entrance, which at that early hour of the morning was necessarily closed, Ulpian conducted the patrician through a small wicket into the subterranean apartment, or rather outhouse, which was his customary, though comfortless, retreat in his leisure hours, and which was hardly ever entered by the other members of the Christian's household.

From the low, arched brick ceiling of this place hung an earthenware lamp, whose light, small and tremulous, left all the corners of the apartment in perfect obscurity. The thick buttresses that projected inwards from the walls, made visible by their prominence, displayed on their surfaces rude representations of idols and temples drawn in chalk, and covered with strange, mysterious hieroglyphics. On a block of stone which served as a table lay some fragments of small statues, which Vetranio recognised as having belonged to the old, accredited representations of Pagan idols. Over the sides of the table itself were scrawled in Latin characters these two words, 'Serapis', 'Macrinus'; and about its base lay some pieces of torn, soiled linen, which still retained enough of their former character, both in shape, size, and colour, to convince Vetranio that they had once served as the vestments of a Pagan priest. Further than this the senator's observation did not carry him, for the close, almost mephitic atmosphere of the place already began to affect him unfavourably. He felt a suffocating sensation in his throat and a dizziness in his head. The restorative influence of his recent bath declined rapidly. The fumes of the wine he had drunk in the night, far from having been, as he imagined, permanently dispersed, again mounted to his head. He was obliged to lean against the stone table to preserve his equilibrium as he faintly desired the Pagan to shorten their sojourn in his miserable retreat.

Without even noticing the request, Ulpian hurriedly proceeded to erase the drawings on the buttresses and the inscriptions on the table. Then collecting the fragments of statues and the pieces of linen, he deposited them in a hiding-place in the corner of the apartment. This done, he returned to the stone against which Vetranio supported himself, and for a few minutes silently regarded the senator with a firm, earnest, and penetrating gaze.

A dark suspicion that he had betrayed himself into the hands of a villain,

who was then plotting some atrocious project connected with his safety or honour, began to rise on the senator's bewildered brain as he unwillingly submitted to the penetrating examination of the Pagan's glance. At that moment, however, the withered lips of the old man slowly parted, and he began to speak. Whether as he looked on Vetrano's disturbed countenance, and marked his unsteady gait, the heart of Ulpius, for the first time since his introduction to the senator, misgave him when he thought of their monstrous engagement; or whether the near approach of the moment that was henceforth, as he wildly imagined, to fix Vetrano as his assistant and ally, so powerfully affected his mind that it instinctively sought to vent its agitation through the natural medium of words, it is useless to inquire. Whatever his motives for speech, the impressive earnestness of his manner gave evidence of the depth and intensity of his emotions as he addressed the senator thus:--

'I have submitted to servitude in a Christian's house, I have suffered the contamination of a Christian's prayers, to gain the use of your power and station when the time to employ them should arrive. The hour has now come when my part of the conditions of our engagement is to be performed; the hour will yet come when your part shall be exacted from you in turn! Do you wonder at what I have done and what I will do? Do you marvel that a household drudge should speak thus to a nobleman of Rome? Are you astonished that I risk so much as to venture on enlisting you--by the sacrifice of the girl who now slumbers above--in the cause whose end is the restoration of our fathers' gods, and in whose service I have suffered and grown old? Listen, and you shall hear from what I have fallen--you shall know what I once was!'

'I adjure you by all the gods and goddesses of our ancient worship, let me hear you where I can breathe--in the garden, on the housetop, anywhere but in this dungeon!' murmured the senator in entreating accents.

'My birth, my parents, my education, my ancient abode--these I will not disclose,' interrupted the Pagan, raising one arm authoritatively, as if to obstruct Vetrano from approaching the door. 'I have sworn by my gods, that until the day of restitution these secrets of my past life shall remain unrevealed to strangers' ears. Unknown I entered Rome, and unknown I will labour in Rome until the projects I have lived for are crowned with success! It is enough that I confess to you that with those sacred images whose fragments you have just beheld, I was once lodged; that those sacred vestments whose remains you discerned at your feet, I once wore. To attain the glories of the priesthood there was nothing that I did not resign, to preserve them there was nothing I did not perform, to recover them there is



nothing that I will not attempt! I was once illustrious, prosperous, beloved; of my glory, my happiness, my popularity, the Christians have robbed me, and I will yet live to requite it heavily at their hands! I had a guardian who loved me in my youth; the Christians murdered him! A temple was under the rule of my manhood; the Christians destroyed it! The people of a whole nation once listened to my voice; the Christians have dispersed them! The wise, the great, the beautiful, the good, were once devoted to me; the Christians have made me a stranger at their doors, and outcast of their affections and thoughts! For all this shall I take no vengeance? Shall I not plot to rebuild my ruined temple, and win back, in my age, the honours that adorned me in my youth?'

'Assuredly!--at once--without delay!' stammered Vetrano, returning the stern and inquiring gaze of the Pagan with a bewildered, uneasy stare.

'To mount over the bodies of the Christian slain,' continued the old man, his sinister eyes dilating in anticipated triumph as he whispered close at the senator's ear, 'to rebuild the altars that the Christians have overthrown, is the ambition that has made light to me the sufferings of my whole life. I have battled, and it has sustained me in the midst of carnage; I have wandered, and it has been my home in the desert; I have failed, and it has supported me; I have been threatened with death, and it has preserved me from fear; I have been cast into slavery, and it has made my fetters light. You see me now, old, degraded, lonely--believe that I long neither for wife, children, tranquility, nor possessions; that I desire no companion but my cherished and exalted purpose! Remember, then, in the hour of performance the promise you have now made to aid me in the achievement of that purpose! Remember that you are a Pagan yourself! Feast, laugh, carouse with your compeers; be still the airy jester, the gay companion; but never forget the end to which you are vowed--the destiny of glory that the restoration of our deities has in store for us both!'

He ceased. Though his voice, while he spoke, never rose beyond a hoarse, monotonous, half-whispering tone, all the ferocity of his abused and degraded nature was for the instant thoroughly aroused by his recapitulation of his wrongs. Had Vetrano at this moment shown any symptoms of indecision, or spoken any words of discouragement, he would have murdered him on the spot where they stood. Every feature in the Pagan's seared and livid countenance expressed the stormy emotions that were rushing over his heart as he now confronted his bewildered yet attentive listener. His firm, menacing position; his poor and scanty garments; his wild, shaggy hair; his crooked, distorted form; his stern, solemn, unwavering gaze--opposed as they were (under the fitful

illumination of the expiring lamp and the advancing daylight) to the unsteady gait, the vacant countenance, the rich robes, the youthful grace of form and delicacy of feature of the object of his steady contemplation, made so wild and strange a contrast between his patrician ally and himself that they scarcely looked like beings of the same race. Nothing could be more immense than the difference, more wild than the incongruity between them. It was sickness hand-in-hand with health; pain marshalled face to face with enjoyment; darkness ranged in monstrous discordance by the very side of light.

The next instant--just as the astonished senator was endeavouring to frame a suitable answer to the solemn adjuration that had been addressed to him--Ulpus seized his arm, and opening a door at the inner extremity of the apartment, led him up some stairs that conducted to the interior of the house.

They passed the hall, on the floor of which still lay the fragments of the broken lute, dimly distinguishable in the soft light of daybreak; and ascending another staircase, paused at a little door at the top, which Ulpus cautiously opened, and in a moment afterwards Vetrano was admitted into Antonina's bed-chamber.

The room was of no great extent; its scanty furniture was of the most ordinary description; no ornaments glittered on its walls; no frescoes adorned its ceiling; and yet there was a simple elegance in its appearance, an unobtrusive propriety in its minutest details, which made it at once interesting and attractive to the eye. From the white curtains at the window to the vase of flowers standing by the bedside, the same natural refinement of taste appeared in the arrangement of all that the apartment contained. No sound broke the deep silence of the place, save the low, soft breathing, occasionally interrupted by a long, trembling sigh, of its sleeping occupant. The sole light in the room consisted of a little lamp, so placed in the middle of the flowers round the sides of the vase that no extended or steady illumination was cast upon any object. There was something in the decent propriety of all that was visible in the bed-chamber; in the soft obscurity of its atmosphere; in the gentle and musical sound that alone interrupted its magical stillness, impressive enough, it might have been imagined, to have awakened some hesitation in the bosom of the boldest libertine ere he deliberately proceeded to intrude on the unprotected slumbers of its occupant. No such feeling of indecision, however, troubled the thoughts of Vetrano as he cast a rapid glance round the apartment which he had ventured so treacherously to invade. The fumes of the wine he had imbibed at the banquet had been so thoroughly resuscitated by the oppressive

atmosphere of the subterranean retreat he had just quitted, as to have left him nothing of his more refined nature. All that was honourable or intellectual in his character had now completely ceded to all that was base and animal. He looked round, and perceiving that Ulpus had silently quitted him, softly closed the door. Then advancing to the bedside with the utmost caution compatible with the involuntary unsteadiness of an intoxicated man, he took the lamp from the vase in which it was half concealed, and earnestly surveyed by its light the figure of the sleeping girl.

The head of Antonina was thrown back and rested rather over than on her pillow. Her light linen dress had become so disordered during the night that it displayed her throat and part of her bosom, in all the dawning beauties of their youthful formation, to the gaze of the licentious Roman. One hand half supported her head, and was almost entirely hidden in the locks of her long black hair, which had escaped from the white cincture intended to confine it, and now streamed over the pillow in dazzling contrast to the light bed-furniture around it. The other hand held tightly clasped to her bosom the precious fragment of her broken lute. The deep repose expressed in her position had not thoroughly communicated itself to her face. Now and then her slightly parted lips moved and trembled, and ever and anon a change, so faint and fugitive that it was hardly perceptible, appeared in her complexion, breathing on the soft olive that was its natural hue, the light rosy flush which the emotions of the past night had impressed on it ere she slept. Her position, in its voluptuous negligence, seemed the very type of Oriental loveliness; while her face, calm and sorrowful in its expression, displayed the more refined and sober graces of the European model. And thus these two characteristics of two different orders of beauty, appearing conjointly under one form, produced a whole so various and yet so harmonious, so impressive and yet so attractive, that the senator, as he bent over the couch, though the warm, soft breath of the young girl played on his cheeks and waved the tips of his perfumed locks, could hardly imagine that the scene before him was more than a bright, delusive dream.

While Vetrano was yet absorbed in admiration of her charms, Antonina's form slightly moved, as if agitated by the influence of a passing dream. The change thus accomplished in her position broke the spell that its former stillness and beauty had unconsciously wrought to restrain the unhallowed ardour of the profligate Roman. He now passed his arm round her warm, slender figure, and gently raising her till her head rested on his shoulder as he sat by the bed, imprinted kiss after kiss on the pure lips that sleep had innocently abandoned to him.

As he had foreseen, Antonina instantly awoke, but, to his unmeasured

astonishment, neither started nor shrieked. The moment she had opened her eyes she had recognised the person of Vetranio; and that overwhelming terror which suspends in its victims the use of every faculty, whether of the body or the mind, had immediately possessed itself of her heart. Too innocent to imagine the real motive that prompted the senator's intrusion on her slumbers, where others of her sex would have foreboded dishonour, she feared death. All her father's vague denunciations against the enormities of the nobles of Rome rushed in an instant over her mind, and her childish imagination pictured Vetranio as armed with some terrible and mysterious vengeance to be wreaked on her for having avoided all communication with him as soon as she had gained possession of her lute. Prostrate beneath the petrifying influence of her fears, motionless and powerless before him as its prey before the serpent, she made no effort to move or speak; but looked up steadfastly into the senator's face, her large eyes fixed and dilated in a gaze of overpowering terror.

Intoxicated though he was, the affrighted expression of the poor girl's pale, rigid countenance did not escape Vetranio's notice; and he taxed his bewildered brain for such soothing and reassuring expressions as would enable him to introduce his profligate proposals with some chance that they would be listened to and understood.

'Dearest pupil! Most beautiful of Roman maidens,' he began in the husky, monotonous tones of inebriety, 'abandon your fears! I come hither, wafted by the breath of love, to restore the worship of the--I would say to bear you on my bosom to a villa--the name of which has for the moment escaped my remembrance. You cannot have forgotten that it was I who taught you to compose the Nightingale Sauce--or, no--let me rather say to play upon the lute. Love, music, pleasure, all await you in the arms of your attached Vetranio. Your eloquent silence speaks encouragement to my heart. Beloved Anto--'

Here the senator suddenly paused; for the eyes of the girl, which had hitherto been fixed on him with the same expression of blank dismay that had characterised them from the first, slowly moved in the direction of the door. The instant afterwards a slight noise caught Vetranio's ear, and Antonina shuddered so violently as he pressed her to his side that he felt it through his whole frame. Slowly and unwillingly he withdrew his gaze from the pale yet lovely countenance on which it had been fixed, and looked up.

At the open door, pale, silent, motionless, stood the master of the house.

Incapable, from the confusion of his ideas, of any other feeling than the

animal instinct of self-defence, Vetricano no sooner beheld Numerian's figure than he rose, and drawing a small dagger from his bosom, attempted to advance on the intruder. He found himself, however, restrained by Antonina, who had fallen on her knees before him, and grasped his robe with a strength which seemed utterly incompatible with the slenderness of her form and the feebleness of her sex and age.

The first voice that broke the silence which ensued was Numerian's. He advanced, his face ghastly with anguish, his lip quivering with suppressed emotions, to the senator's side, and addressed him thus:--

'Put up your weapon; I come but to ask a favour at your hands.'

Vetricano mechanically obeyed him. There was something in the stern calmness, frightful at such a moment, of the Christian's manner that awed him in spite of himself.

'The favour I would petition for,' continued Numerian, in low, steady, bitter tones, 'is that you would remove your harlot there, to your own abode. Here are no singing-boys, no banqueting-halls, no perfumed couches. The retreat of a solitary old man is no place for such an one as she. I beseech you, remove her to a more congenial home. She is well fitted for her trade; her mother was a harlot before her!'

He laughed scornfully, and pointed, as he spoke, to the figure of the unhappy girl kneeling with outstretched arms at his feet.

'Father, father!' she cried, in accents bereft of their native softness and melody, 'have you forgotten me?'

'I know you not!' he replied, thrusting her from him. 'Return to his bosom; you shall never more be pressed to mine. Go to his palace; my house is yours no longer! You are his harlot, not my daughter! I command you--go!'

As he advanced towards her with fierce glance and threatening demeanour, she suddenly rose up. Her reason seemed crushed within her as she looked with frantic earnestness from Vetricano to her father, and then back again from her father to Vetricano. On one side she saw an enemy who had ruined her she knew not how, and who threatened her with she knew not what; on the other, a parent who had cast her off. For one instant she directed a final look on the room, that, sad and lonely though it was, had still been a home to her; and then, without a word or a sigh, she turned, and crouching like a beaten dog, fled from the house.

During the whole of the scene Vetrano had stood so fixed in the helpless astonishment of intoxication as to be incapable of moving or uttering a word. All that took place during the short and terrible interview between father and child utterly perplexed him. He heard no loud, violent anger on one side, no clamorous petitioning for forgiveness on the other. The stern old man whom Antonina had called father, and who had been pointed out to him as the most austere Christian in Rome, far from avenging his intrusion on Antonina's slumber, had voluntarily abandoned his daughter to his licentious will. That the anger or irony of so severe a man should inspire such an action as this, or that Numerian, like his servant, was plotting to obtain some strange mysterious favour from him by using Antonina as a bribe, seemed perfectly impossible. All that passed before the senator was, to his bewildered imagination, thoroughly incomprehensible. Frivolous, thoughtless, profligate as he might be, his nature was not radically base, and when the scene of which he had been the astounded witness was abruptly terminated by the flight of Antonina, the look of frantic misery fixed on him by the unfortunate girl at the moment of her departure, almost sobered him for the instant, as he stood before the now solitary father gazing vacantly around him with emotions of uncontrollable confusion and dismay.

Meanwhile a third person was now approaching to join the two occupants of the bedchamber abandoned by its ill-fated mistress. Although in the subterranean retreat to which he had retired on leaving Vetrano, Ulpian had not noticed the silent entrance of the master of the house, he had heard through the open doors the sound, low though it was, of the Christian's voice. As he rose, suspecting all things and prepared for every emergency, to ascend to the bedchamber, he saw, while he mounted the lowest range of stairs, a figure in white pass rapidly through the hall and disappear by the principal entrance of the house. He hesitated for an instant and looked after it, but the fugitive figure had passed so swiftly in the uncertain light of early morning that he was unable to identify it, and he determined to ascertain the progress of events, now that Numerian must have discovered a portion at least of the plot against his daughter and himself, by ascending immediately to Antonina's apartment, whatever might be the consequences of his intrusion at such an hour on her father's wrath.

As soon as the Pagan appeared before him, a sensible change took place in Vetrano. The presence of Ulpian in the chamber was a positive relief to the senator's perturbed faculties, after the mysterious, overpowering influence that the moral command expressed in the mere presence of the father and the master of the house, at such an hour, had exercised over them. Over

Ulpian he had an absolute right, Ulpian was his dependant; and he determined, therefore, to extort from the servant whom he despised an explanation of the mysteries in the conduct of the master whom he feared, and the daughter whom he began to doubt.

'Where is Antonina?' he cried, starting as if from a trance, and advancing fiercely towards the treacherous Pagan. 'She has left the room--she must have taken refuge with you.'

With a slow and penetrating gaze Ulpian looked round the apartment. A faint agitation was perceptible in his livid countenance, but he uttered not a word.

The senator's face became pale and red with alternate emotions of apprehension and rage. He seized the Pagan by the throat, his eyes sparkled, his blood boiled, he began to suspect even then that Antonina was lost to him for ever.

'I ask you again where is she?' he shouted in a voice of fury. 'If through this night's work she is lost or harmed, I will revenge it on you. Is this the performance of your promise? Do you think that I will direct your desired restoration of the gods of old for this? If evil comes to Antonina through your treachery, sooner than assist in your secret projects, I would see you and your accursed deities all burning together in the Christians' hell! Where is the girl, you slave? Villain, where was your vigilance, when you let that man surprise us at our first interview?'

He turned towards Numerian as he spoke. Trouble and emergency gift the faculties with a more than mortal penetration. Every word that he had uttered had eaten its burning way into the father's heart. Hours of narrative could not have convinced him how fatally he had been deceived, more thoroughly than the few hasty expressions he had just heard. No word passed his lips--no action betrayed his misery. He stood before the spoilers of his home, changed in an instant from the courageous enthusiast to the feeble, helpless, heart-broken man.

Though all the ferocity of his old Roman blood had been roused in Vetrician, as he threatened Ulpian, the father's look of cold, silent, frightful despair froze it in his young veins in an instant. His heart was still the impressible heart of youth; and, struck for the first time in his life with emotions of horror and remorse, he advanced a step to offer such explanation and atonement as he best might, when the voice of Ulpian suspended his intentions, and made him pause to listen.

'She passed me in the hall,' muttered the Pagan, doggedly. 'I did my part in betraying her into your power--it was for you to hinder her in her flight. Why did you not strike him to the earth,' he continued, pointing with a mocking smile to Numerian, 'when he surprised you? You are wealthy and a noble of Rome; murder would have been no crime in you!'

'Stand back!' cried the senator, thrusting him from the position he had hitherto occupied in the door-way. 'She may be recovered even yet! All Rome shall be searched for her!'

The next instant he disappeared from the room, and the master and servant were left together alone.

The silence that now reigned in the apartment was broken by distant sounds of uproar and confusion in the streets of the city beneath. These ominous noises had arisen with the dawn of day, but the different emotions of the occupants of Numerian's abode had so engrossed them, that the turmoil in the outer world had passed unheeded by all. No sooner, however, had Vetrano departed than it caught the attention of Ulpus, and he advanced to the window. What he there saw and heard was of no ordinary importance, for it at once fixed him to the spot where he stood in mute and ungovernable surprise.

While Ulpus was occupied at the window, Numerian had staggered to the side of the bed which his ill-timed severity had made vacant, perhaps for ever. The power of action, the capacity to go forth and seek his child himself, was entirely suspended in the agony of her loss, as the miserable man fell on his knees, and in the anguish of his heart endeavoured to find solace in prayer. In the positions they severally occupied the servant and the master long remained--the betrayer watching at the window, the betrayed mourning at his lost daughter's bed--both alike silent, both alike unconscious of the lapse of time.

At length, apparently unaware at first that he was not alone in the room, Numerian spoke. In his low, broken, tremulous accents, none of his adherents would have recognised the voice of the eloquent preacher--the bold chastiser of the vices of the Church. The whole nature of the man--moral, intellectual, physical--seemed fatally and completely changed.

'She was innocent, she was innocent!' he whispered to himself. 'And even had she been guilty, was it for me to drive her from my doors! My part, like my Redeemer's, was to teach repentance, and to show mercy! Accursed be



the pride and anger that drove justice and patience from my heart, when I beheld her, as I thought, submitting herself without a struggle or a cry, to my dishonour, and hers! Could I not have imagined her terror, could I not have remembered her purity? Alas, my beloved, if I myself have been the dupe of the wicked, what marvel is it that you should have been betrayed as well! And I have driven you from me, you, from whose mouth no word of anger ever dropped! I have thrust you from my bosom, you, who were the adornment of my age! My death approaches, and you will not be by to pardon my heavy offence, to close my weary eyes, to mourn by my solitary tomb! God--oh God! If I am left thus lonely on the earth, thou hast punished me beyond what I can bear!

He paused--his emotions for the instant bereft him of speech. After an interval, he muttered to himself in a low, moaning voice--'I called her harlot! My pure, innocent child! I called her harlot--I called her harlot!'

In a paroxysm of despair, he started up and looked distractedly around him. Ulpian still stood motionless at the window. At the sight of the ruthless Pagan he trembled in every limb. All those infirmities of age that had been hitherto spared him, seemed to overwhelm him in an instant. He feebly advanced to his betrayer's side, and addressed him thus:--

'I have lodged you, taught you, cared for you; I have never intruded on your secrets, never doubted your word, and for all this, you have repaid me by plotting against my daughter and deceiving me! If your end was to harm me by assailing my child's happiness and honour you have succeeded! If you would banish me from Rome, if you would plunge me into obscurity, to serve some mysterious ambition of your own, you may dispose of me as you will! I bow before the terrible power of your treachery! I will renounce whatever you command, if you will restore me to my child! I am helpless and miserable; I have neither heart nor strength to seek her myself! You, who know all things and can dare all dangers, may restore her to pardon and bless me, if you will! Remember, whoever you really are, that you were once helpless and alone, and that you are still old, like me! Remember that I have promised to abandon to you whatever you desire! Remember that no woman's voice can cheer me, no woman's heart feel for me, now that I am old and lonely, but my daughter's! I have guessed from the words of the nobleman whom you serve, what are the designs you cherish and the faith you profess; I will neither betray the one nor assault the other! I thought that my labours for the Church were more to me than anything on earth, but now, that through my fault, my daughter is driven from her father's roof, I know that she is dearer to me than the greatest of my designs; I must gain her pardon; I must win back her affection before I die! You are

powerful and can recover her! Ulpus! Ulpus!

As he spoke, the Christian knelt at the Pagan's feet. It was terrible to see the man of affection and integrity thus humbled before the man of heartlessness and crime.

Ulpus turned to behold him, then without a word he raised him from the ground, and thrusting him to the window, pointed with flashing eyes to the wide view without.

The sun had arisen high in the heaven and beamed in dazzling brilliancy over Rome and the suburbs. A vague, fearful, mysterious desolation seemed to have suddenly overwhelmed the whole range of dwellings beyond the walls. No sounds rose from the gardens, no population idled in the streets. The ramparts on the other hand were crowded at every visible point with people of all ranks, and the distant squares and amphitheatres of the city itself, swarmed like ant-hills to the eye with the crowds that struggled within them. Confused cries and strange wild noises rose at all points from these masses of human beings. The whole of Rome seemed the prey of a vast and universal revolt.

Extraordinary and affrighting as was the scene at the moment when he beheld it, it passed unheeded before the eyes of the scarce conscious father. He was blind to all sights but his daughter's form, deaf to all sounds but her voice; and he murmured as he looked vacantly forth upon the wild view before him, 'Where is my child!--where is my child!'

'What is your child to me? What are the fortunes of affections of man or woman, at such an hour as this?' cried the Pagan, as he stood by Numerian, with features horribly animated by the emotions of fierce delight and triumph that were raging within him at the prospect he beheld. 'Dotard, look from this window! Listen to those voices! The gods whom I serve, the god whom you and your worship would fain have destroyed, have risen to avenge themselves at last! Behold those suburbs, they are left desolate! Hear those cries--they are from Roman lips! While your household's puny troubles have run their course, this city of apostates has been doomed! In the world's annals this morning will never be forgotten! THE GOTHS ARE AT THE GATES OF ROME!'