

CHAPTER 11 - GOISVINTHA'S RETURN

It was morning. The sun had risen, but his beams were partially obscured by thick heavy clouds, which scowled already over the struggling brightness of the eastern horizon. The bustle and animation of the new day gradually overspread the Gothic encampment in all directions. The only tent whose curtain remained still closed, and round which no busy crowds congregated in discussion or mingled in labour, was that of Hermanric. By the dying embers of his watchfire stood the young chieftain, with two warriors, to whom he appeared to be giving some hurried directions. His countenance expressed emotions of anxiety and discontent, which, though partially repressed while he was in the presence of his companions, became thoroughly visible, not only in his features, but in his manner, when they left him to watch alone before his tent.

For some time he walked regularly backwards and forwards, looking anxiously down the westward lines of the encampment, and occasionally whispering to himself a hasty exclamation of doubt and impatience. With the first breath of the new morning, the delighting meditations which had occupied him by his watchfire during the darkness of the night had begun to subside. And now, as the hour of her expected return gradually approached, the image of Goisvintha banished from his mind whatever remained of those peaceful and happy contemplation in which he had hitherto been absorbed. The more he thought on his fatal promise--on the nation of Antonina--on his duties to the army and the people to whom he belonged, the more doubtful appeared to him his chance of permanently protecting the young Roman without risking his degradation as a Goth, and his ruin as a warrior; and the more sternly and ominously ran in his ears the unassailable truth of Goisvintha's parting taunt--'You must remember your promise, you cannot save her if you would!'

Wearied of persisting in deliberations which only deepened his melancholy and increased his doubts; bent on sinking in a temporary and delusive oblivion the boding reflections that overcame him in spite of himself, by seeking--while its enjoyment was yet left to him--the society of his ill-fated charge, he turned towards his tent, drew aside the thick, heavy curtains of skins which closed its opening, and approached the rude couch on which Antonina was still sleeping.

A ray of sunlight, fitful and struggling, burst at this moment through the heavy clouds, and stole into the opening of the tent as he contemplated the slumbering girl. It ran its flowing course up her uncovered hand and arm, flew over her bosom and neck, and bathed in a bright fresh glow, her still

and reposing features. Gradually her limbs began to move, her lips parted gently and half smiled, as if in welcome to the greeting of the light; her eyes slightly opened, then dazzled by the brightness that flowed through their raised lids, tremblingly closed again. At length thoroughly awakened, she shaded her face with her hands, and sitting up on the couch, met the gaze of Hermanric fixed on her in sorrowful examination.

'Your bright armour, and your glorious name, and your merciful words, have remained with me even in my sleep,' said she, wonderingly; 'and now, when I awake, I see you before me again! It is a happiness to be aroused by the sun which has gladdened me all my life, to look upon you who have given me shelter in my distress! But why,' she continued, in altered and enquiring tones, 'why do you gaze upon me with doubting and mournful eyes?'

'You have slept well and safely,' said Hermanric, evasively, 'I closed the opening of the tent to preserve you from the night-damps, but I have raised it now, for the air is warming under the rising sun--'

'Are you wearied with watching?' she interrupted, rising to her feet, and looking anxiously into his face. But he spoke not in reply. His head was turned towards the door of the tent. He seemed to be listening for some expected sound. It was evident that he had not heard her question. She followed the direction of his eyes. The sight of the great city, half brightened, half darkened, as its myriad buildings reflected the light of the sun, or retained the shadows of the clouds, brought back to her remembrance her last night's petition for her father's safety. She laid her hand upon her companion's arm to awaken his attention, and hastily resumed:--

'You have not forgotten what I said to you last night? My father's name is Numerian. He lives on the Pincian Mount. You will save him, Hermanric--you will save him! You will remember your promise!'

The young warrior's eyes fell as she spoke, and an irrepressible shudder shook his whole frame. The last part of Antonina's address to him, was expressed in the same terms as a past appeal from other lips, and in other accents, which still clung to his memory. The same demand, 'Remember your promise,' which had been advanced to urge him to bloodshed, by Goisvintha, was now proffered by Antonina, to lure him to pity. The petition of affection was concluded in the same terms as the petition of revenge. As he thought on both, the human pity of the one, and the fiend-like cruelty of the other, rose in sinister and significant contrast on the mind of the Goth,

realising in all its perils the struggle that was to come when Goisvintha returned, and dispelling instantaneously the last hopes that he had yet ventured to cherish for the fugitive at his side.

'No assault of the city is commanded--no assault is intended. Your father's life is safe from the swords of the Goths,' he gloomily replied, in answer to Antonina's last words.

The girl moved back from him a few steps as he spoke, and looked thoughtfully round the tent. The battle-axe that Hermanric had secured during the scene of the past evening, still lay on the ground, in a corner. The sight of it brought back a flood of terrible recollections to her mind. She started violently; a sudden change overspread her features, and when she again addressed Hermanric, it was with quivering lips and in almost inarticulate words.

'I know now why you look on me so gloomily,' said she; 'that woman is coming back! I was so occupied by my dreams and my thoughts of my father and of you, and my hopes for days to come, that I had forgotten her when I awoke! But I remember all now! She is coming back--I see it in your sorrowful eyes--she is coming back to murder me! I shall die at the moment when I had such hope in my life! There is no happiness for me! None!--none!'

The Goth's countenance began to darken. He whispered to himself several times, 'How can I save her?' For a few minutes there was a deep silence, broken only by the sobs of Antonina. He looked round at her after an interval. She held her hands clasped over her eyes. The tears were streaming through her parted fingers; her bosom heaved as if her emotions would burst their way through it in some palpable form; and her limbs trembled so, that she could scarcely support herself. Unconsciously, as he looked on her, he passed his arm round her slender form, drew her hands gently from her face, and said to her, though his heart belied his words as he spoke, 'Do not be afraid--trust in me!'

'How can I be calm?' she cried, looking up at him entreatingly; 'I was so happy last night, so sure that you could preserve me, so hopeful about tomorrow--and now I see by your mournful looks, I know by your doubting voice, that to soothe my anguish you have promised me more than you can perform! The woman who is your companion, has a power over us both, that it is terrible even to think of! She will return, she will withdraw all mercy from your heart, she will glare upon me with her fearful eyes, she will kill me at your feet! I shall die after all I have suffered and all I have hoped!'

Oh, Hermanric, while there is yet time let us escape! You were not made to shed blood--you are too merciful! God never made you to destroy! You cannot yearn towards cruelty and woe, for you have aided and protected me! Let us escape! I will follow you wherever you wish! I will do whatever you ask! I will go with you beyond those far, bright mountains behind us, to any strange and distant land; for there is beauty everywhere; there are woods that may be dwelt in, and valleys that may be loved, on all the surface of this wide great earth!

The Goth looked sadly on her as she paused; but he gave her no answer--the gloom was deepening over his heart--the false words of consolation were silenced on his lips.

'Think how many pleasures we should enjoy, how much we might see!' continued the girl, in soft, appealing tones. 'We should be free to wander wherever we pleased; we should never be lonely; never be mournful; never be wearied! I could listen to you day after day, while you told me of the country where your people were born! I could sing you sweet songs that I have learned upon the lute! Oh, how I have wept in my loneliness to lead such a life as this! How I have longed that such freedom and joy might be mine! How I have thought of the distant lands that I would visit, of the happy nations that I would discover, of the mountain breezes that I would breathe, of the shady places that I would repose in, of the rivers that I would follow in their course, of the flowers I would plant, and the fruits I would gather! How I have hoped for such an existence as this! How I have longed for a companion who might enjoy it as I should! Have you never felt this joy that I have imagined to myself, you who have been free to wander wherever you pleased? Let us leave this place, and I will teach it to you if you have not. I will be so patient, so obedient, so happy! I will never be sorrowful; never repining--but let us escape--Oh, Hermanric, let us escape while there is yet time! Will you keep me here to be slain? Can you drive me forth into the world alone? Remember that the gates of the city and the doors of my home are now closed to me! Remember that I have no mother, and that my father has forsaken me! Remember that I am a stranger on the earth which was made for me to be joyful in! Think how soon the woman who has vowed that she will murder me will return; think how terrible it is to be in the fear of death; and while there is time let us depart--Hermanric, Hermanric, if you have pity for me, let us depart!'

She clasped her hands, and looked up in his face imploringly. The manner of Hermanric had expressed more to her senses, sharpened as they were by peril, than his words could have conveyed, even had he confessed to her the cause of the emotions of doubt and apprehension that oppressed his mind.

Nothing could more strikingly testify to the innocence of her character and the seclusion of her life, than her attempt to combine with her escape from Goisvintha's fury, the acquisition of such a companion as the Goth. But to the forlorn and affectionate girl who saw herself--a stranger to the laws of the social existence of her fellow creatures--suddenly thrust forth friendless into the unfriendly world, could the heart have naturally prompted any other desire, than anxiety to secure the companion after having discovered the protector? In the guilelessness of her character, in her absolute ignorance of humanity, of the influence of custom, of the adaptation of difference of feeling to difference of sex, she vainly imagined that the tranquil existence she had urged on Hermanric, would suffice for the attainment of her end, by presenting the same allurements to him, a warrior and a Goth, that it contained for her--a lonely, thoughtful, visionary girl! And yet, so wonderful was the ascendancy that she had acquired by the magic of her presence, the freshness of her beauty, and the novelty of her manner, over the heart of the young chieftain, that he, who would have spurned from him with contempt any other woman who might have addressed to him such a petition as Antonina's, looked down sorrowfully at the girl as she ceased speaking, and for an instant hesitated in his choice.

At that moment, when the attention of each was fixed on the other, a third person stealthily approached the opening of the tent, and beholding them together thus, burst into a bitter, taunting laugh. Hermanric raised his eyes instantly; but the sound of that harsh unwomanly voice was all-eloquent to Antonina's senses. She hid her face against the Goth's breast, and murmured breathlessly--'She has returned! I must die! I must die!'

She had returned! She perceived Hermanric and Antonina in a position, which left no doubt that a stronger feeling than the mere wish to protect the victim of her intended revenge, had arisen, during her absence, in the heart of her kinsman. Hour after hour, while she had fulfilled her duties by the beds of Alaric's invalided soldiery, had she brooded over her projects of vengeance and blood. Neither the sickness nor the death which she had beheld around her, had possessed an influence powerful enough over the stubborn ferocity which now alone animated her nature, to lure it to mercy or awe it to repentance. Invigorated by delay, and enlarged by disappointment, the evil passion that consumed her had strengthened its power, and aroused the most latent of its energies, during the silent vigil that she had just held. She had detested the girl on the evening before, for her nation; she now hated her for herself.

'What have you to do with the trappings of a Gothic warrior?' she cried, in mocking accents, pointing at Hermanric with a long hunting-knife which

she held in her hand. 'Why are you here in a Gothic encampment? Go, knock at the gates of Rome, implore her guards on your knees to admit you among the citizens, and when they ask you why--show them the girl there! Tell them that you love her, that you would wed her, that it is nothing to you that her people have murdered your brother and his children! And then, when you yourself have begotten sons, Gothic bastards infected with Roman blood, be a Roman at heart yourself, send your children forth to complete what your wife's people left undone at Aquileia--by murdering me!'

She paused and laughed scornfully. Then her humour suddenly changed, she advanced a few steps, and continued in a louder and sterner tone:--

'You have broken your faith; you have lied to me; you have forgotten your wrongs and mine; but you have not yet forgotten my parting words when I left you last night! I told you that she should be slain, and now that you have refused to avenge me, I will make good my words by killing her with my own hand! If you would defend her, you must murder me. You must shed her blood or mine!'

She stepped forward, her towering form was stretched to its highest stature, the muscles started into action on her bare arms as she raised them above her head. For one instant, she fixed her glaring eyes steadily on the girl's shrinking form--the next, she rushed up and struck furiously with the knife at her bare neck. As the weapon descended, Hermanric caught her wrist. She struggled violently to disengage herself from his grasp, but in vain.

The countenance of the young warrior grew deadly pale, as he held her. For a few minutes he glanced eagerly round the tent, in an agony of bewilderment and despair. The conflicting interests of his duty towards his sister, and his anxiety for Antonina's preservation, filled his heart to distraction. A moment more he hesitated, and during that short delay, the despotism of custom had yet power enough to prevail over the promptings of pity. He called to the girl--withdrawing his arm which had hitherto been her support,--'Go, have mercy on me, go!'

But she neither heeded nor heard him. She fell on her knees at the woman's feet, and in a low moaning voice faltered out:--

'What have I done that I deserve to be slain? I never murdered your children; I never yet saw a child but I loved it; if I had seen your children, I should have loved them!'

'If I had preserved to this time the child that I saved from the massacre, and

you had approached him,' returned the woman fiercely, 'I would have taught him to strike at you with his little hands! When you spoke to him, he should have spat upon you for answer--even thus!'

Trembling, exhausted, terrified as she was, the girl's Roman blood rushed over her pale cheeks as she felt the insult. She turned towards Hermanric, looked up at him appealingly, attempted to speak, and then sinking lower upon the ground, wept bitterly.

'Why do you weep and pray and mouth it at him?' shrieked Goisvintha, pointing to Hermanric with her disengaged hand. 'He has neither courage to protect you, nor honour to aid me. Do you think that I am to be moved by your tears and entreaties? I tell you that your people have slain my husband and my children, and that I hate you for that. I tell you that you have lured Hermanric into love for a Roman and unfaithfulness to me, and I will slay you for doing it! I tell you that there is not a living thing of the blood of your country, or the name of your nation, throughout the length and breadth of this empire, that I would not destroy if I had the power! If the very trees on the road hither could have had feeling, I would have torn the bark from their stems with my own hands! If a bird, native of your skies, had flown into my bosom from very tameness and sport, I would have crushed it dead at my feet! And do you think that you shall escape? Do you think that I will not avenge the deaths of my husband and my children upon you, after this?'

As she spoke, she mechanically unclenched her hands. The knife dropped to the ground. Hermanric instantly stooped and secured it. For a moment she stood before him released from his grasp, motionless and speechless. Then, starting as if struck by a sudden idea, she moved towards the opening of the tent, and, in tones of malignant triumph, addressed him thus:--

'You shall not save her yet! You are unworthy of your nation and your name! I will betray your cowardice and treachery to your brethren in the camp!' And she ran to the outside of the tent, calling in a loud voice to a group of young warriors who happened to be passing at a short distance. 'Stay, stay! Fritigern--Athanaric--Colias--Suerid--Witheric--Fravitta! Hasten hitherward! Hermanric has a captive in his tent--a prisoner whom it will rejoice to see! Hitherward! hitherward!'

The group she addressed contained some of the most turbulent and careless spirits of the whole Gothic army. They had just been released from their duties of the past night, and were at leisure to comply with Goisvintha's request. She had scarcely concluded her address before they

turned and hurried eagerly up to the tent, shouting to Hermanric, as they advanced, to make his prisoner visible to them in the open air.

They had probably expected to be regaled by the ludicrous terror of some Roman slave whom their comrade had discovered lurking in the empty suburbs; for when they entered the tent, and saw nothing but the shrinking figure of the unhappy girl, as she crouched on the earth at Hermanric's feet, they all paused with one accord, and looked round on each other in speechless astonishment.

'Behold her!' cried Goisvintha, breaking the momentary silence. 'She is the Roman prisoner that your man of valour there has secured for himself! For that trembling child he has forgotten the enmities of his people! She is more to him already than army, general, or companions. You have watched before the city during the night; but he has stood sentinel by the maiden of Rome! Hope not that he will share in your toils, or mix in your pleasures more. Alaric and the warriors have lost his services--his future king cringes there at his feet!'

She had expected to arouse the anger and excite the jealousy of the rough audience she addressed; but the result of her envenomed jeers disappointed her hopes. The humour of the moment prompted the Goths to ridicule, a course infinitely more inimical to Antonina's interests with Hermanric than menaces or recrimination. Recovered from their first astonishment, they burst into a loud and universal laugh.

'Mars and Venus caught together! But, by St. Peter, I see not Vulcan and the net!' cried Fravitta, who having served in the armies of Rome, and acquired a vague knowledge there of the ancient mythology, and the modern politics of the Empire, was considered by his companions as the wit of the battalion to which he was attached.

'I like her figure,' growled Fritigern, a heavy, phlegmatic giant, renowned for his imperturbable good humour and his prowess in drinking. 'What little there is of it looks so limp that Hermanric might pack her into his light baggage and carry her about with him on his shoulders wherever he goes!'

'By which process you would say, old sucker of wine-skins, that he will attain the double advantage of always keeping her to himself, and always keeping her warm,' interrupted Colias, a ruddy, reckless boy of sixteen, privileged to be impertinent in consideration of his years.

'Is she Orthodox or Arian?' gravely demanded Athanaric, who piqued himself

on his theological accomplishments and his extraordinary piety.

'What hair she has!' exclaimed Suerid, sarcastically. 'It is as black as the horse-hides of a squadron of Huns!'

'Show us her face! Whose tent will she visit next?' cried Witheric, with an insolent laugh.

'Mine!' replied Fritigern, complacently. 'What says the chorus of the song?'

'Money and wine Make beauty mine!'

I have more of both than any of you. She will come to my tent!'

During the delivery of these clumsy jests, which followed one upon another with instantaneous rapidity, the scorn at first expressed in Hermanric's countenance became gradually replaced by a look of irrepressible anger. As Fritigern spoke, he lost all command over himself, and seizing his sword, advanced threateningly towards the easy-tempered giant, who made no attempt to recede or defend himself, but called out soothingly, 'Patience, man! patience! Would you kill an old comrade for jesting? I envy you your good luck as a friend, not as an enemy!'

Yielding to the necessity of lowering his sword before a defenceless man, Hermanric was about to reply angrily to Fritigern, when his voice was drowned in the blast of a trumpet, sounding close by the tent. The signal that it gave was understood at once by the group of jesters still surrounding the young Goth. They turned, and retired without an instant's delay. The last of their number had scarcely disappeared, when the same veteran who had spoken with Hermanric, on the departure of Goisvintha the evening before, entered and thus addressed him:--

'You are commanded to post yourself with the division that now awaits you, at a place eastward of your present position, which will be shown you by a guide. Make ready at once--you have not an instant to delay.'

As the words passed the old man's lips, Hermanric turned and looked on Goisvintha. During the presence of the Goths in the tent, she had sat listening to their rough jeers in suppressed wrath and speechless disdain; now she rose and advanced a few steps. But there suddenly appeared an unwonted hesitation in her gait; her face was pale; she breathed fast and heavily. 'Where will you shelter her now?' she cried, addressing Hermanric, and threatening the girl with her outstretched hands. 'Abandon her to your

companions, or leave her to me; she is lost either way! I shall triumph-- triumph!--

At this moment her voice sank to an unintelligible murmur; she tottered where she stood. It was evident that the long strife of passions during her past night of watching, and the fierce and varying emotions of the morning, suddenly brought to a crisis, as they had been, by her exultation when she heard the old warrior's fatal message, had at length overtaken the energies even of her powerful frame. Yet one moment more she endeavoured to advance, to speak, to snatch the hunting knife from Hermanric's hand; the next she fell insensible at his feet.

Goaded almost to madness by the successive trials that he had undergone; Goisvintha's furious determination to thwart him, still present to his mind; the scornful words of his companions yet ringing in his ears; his inexorable duties demanding his attention without reserve or delay; Hermanric succumbed at last under the difficulties of his position, and despairingly abandoned all further hope of effecting the girl's preservation. Pointing to some food that lay in a corner of the tent, and to the country behind, he said to her, in broken and gloomy accents, 'Furnish yourself with those provisions, and fly, while Goisvintha is yet unable to pursue you. I can protect you no longer!'

Until this moment, Antonina had kept her face hidden, and had remained still crouching on the ground; motionless, save when a shudder ran through her frame as she listened to the loud, coarse jesting of the Goths; and speechless, except that when Goisvintha sank senseless to the earth, she uttered an exclamation of terror. But now, when she heard the sentence of her banishment proclaimed by the very lips which but the evening before had assured her of shelter and protection, she rose up instantly, cast on the young Goth a glance of such speechless misery and despair, that he involuntarily quailed before it; and then, without a tear or a sigh, without a look of reproach, or a word of entreaty, petrified and bowed down beneath a perfect trance of terror and grief, she left the tent.

Hurrying his actions with the reckless energy of a man determined on banishing his thoughts by his employments, Hermanric placed himself at the head of his troop, and marched quickly onwards in an eastward direction past the Pincian Gate. Two of his attendants who happened to enter the tent after his departure, observing Goisvintha still extended on the earth, proceeded to transport her to part of the camp occupied by the women who were attached to the army; and then, the little sheltering canopy which made the abode of the Goth, and which had witnessed so large a

share of human misery and so fierce a war of human contention in so few hours, was left as silent and lonely as the deserted country in which Antonina was now fated to seek a refuge and a home.