

CHAPTER 16 - LOVE MEETINGS

Who that has looked on a threatening and tempestuous sky, has not felt the pleasure of discovering unexpectedly a small spot of serene blue, still shining among the stormy clouds? The more unwillingly the eye has wandered over the gloomy expanse of the rest of the firmament, the more gladly does it finally rest on the little oasis of light which meets at length its weary gaze, and which, when it was dispersed over the whole heaven, was perhaps only briefly regarded with a careless glance. Contrasted with the dark and mournful hues around it, even that small spot of blue gradually acquires the power of investing the wider and sadder prospect with a certain interest and animation that it did not before possess--until the mind recognises in the surrounding atmosphere of storm an object adding variety to the view--a spectacle whose mournfulness may interest as well as repel.

Was it with sensations resembling these (applied, however, rather to the mind than to the eye) that the reader perused those pages devoted to Hermanric and Antonina? Does the happiness there described now appear to him to beam through the stormy progress of the narrative as the spot of blue beams through the gathering clouds? Did that small prospect of brightness present itself, at the time, like a garden of repose amid the waste of fierce emotions which encompassed it? Did it encourage him, when contrasted with what had gone before, to enter on the field of gloomier interest which was to follow? If, indeed, it has thus affected him, if he can still remember the scene at the farm-house beyond the suburbs with emotions such as these, he will not now be unwilling to turn again for a moment from the gathering clouds to the spot of blue,--he will not deny us an instant's digression from Ulpian and the city of famine to Antonina and the lonely plains.

During the period that has elapsed since we left her, Antonina has remained secure in her solitude, happy in her well-chosen concealment. The few straggling Goths who at rare intervals appeared in the neighbourhood of her sanctuary never intruded on its peaceful limits. The sight of the ravaged fields and emptied granaries of the deserted little property sufficed invariably to turn their marauding steps in other directions. Day by day ran smoothly and swiftly onwards for the gentle usurper of the abandoned farm-house. In the narrow round of its gardens and protecting woods was comprised for her the whole circle of the pleasures and occupations of her new life.

The simple stores left in the house, the fruits and vegetables to be gathered in the garden, sufficed amply for her support. The pastoral solitude of the

place had in it a quiet, dreamy fascination, a novelty, an unwearying charm, after the austere loneliness to which her former existence had been subjected in Rome. And when evening came, and the sun began to burnish the tops of the western tress, then, after the calm emotions of the solitary day, came the hour of absorbing cares and happy expectations--ever the same, yet ever delighting and ever new. Then the rude shutters were carefully closed; the open door was shut and barred; the small light--now invisible to the world without--was joyfully kindled; and then, the mistress and author of these preparations resigned herself to await, with pleased anxiety, the approach of the guest for whose welcome they were designed.

And never did she expect the arrival of that treasured companion in vain. Hermanric remembered his promise to repair constantly to the farm-house, and performed it with all the constancy of love and all the enthusiasm of youth. When the sentinels under his command were arranged in their order of watching for the night, and the trust reposed in him by his superiors exempted his actions from superintendence during the hours of darkness that followed, he left the camp, passed through the desolate suburbs, and gained the dwelling where the young Roman awaited him--returning before daybreak to receive the communications regularly addressed to him, at that hour, by his inferior in the command.

Thus, false to his nation, yet true to the new Egeria of his thoughts and actions--traitor to the requirements of vengeance and war, yet faithful to the interests of tranquility and love--did he seek, night after night, Antonina's presence. His passion, though it denied him to his warrior duties, wrought not deteriorating change in his disposition. All that it altered in him it altered nobly. It varied and exalted his rude emotions, for it was inspired, not alone by the beauty and youth that he saw, but by the pure thoughts, the artless eloquence that he heard. And she--the forsaken daughter, the source whence the Northern warrior derived those new and higher sensations that had never animated him until now--regarded her protector, her first friend and companion, as her first love, with a devotion which, in its mingled and exalted nature, may be imagined by the mind, but can be but imperfectly depicted by the pen. It was a devotion created of innocence and gratitude, of joy and sorrow, of apprehension and hope. It was too fresh, too unworldly to own any upbraidings of artificial shame, any self-reproaches of artificial propriety. It resembled in its essence, though not in its application, the devotion of the first daughters of the Fall to their brother-lords.

But it is now time that we return to the course of our narrative; although, ere we again enter on the stirring and rapid present, it will be necessary for

a moment more to look back in another direction to the eventful past.

But it is not on peace, beauty, and pleasure that our observation now fixes itself. It is to anger, disease, and crime--to the unappeasable and unwomanly Goisvintha, that we now revert.

Since the day when the violence of her conflicting emotions had deprived her of consciousness, at the moment of her decisive triumph over the scruples of Hermanric and the destiny of Antonina, a raging fever had visited on her some part of those bitter sufferings that she would fain have inflicted on others. Part of the time she lay in a raving delirium; part of the time in helpless exhaustion; but she never forgot, whatever the form assumed by her disease, the desperate purpose in the pursuit of which she had first incurred it. Slowly and doubtfully her vigour at length returned to her, and with it strengthened and increased the fierce ambition of vengeance that absorbed her lightest thoughts and governed her most careless actions.

Report informed her of the new position, on the line of blockade, on which Hermanric was posted, and only enumerated as the companions of his sojourn the warriors sent thither under his command. But, though thus persuaded of the separation of Antonina and the Goth, her ignorance of the girl's fate rankled unintermittingly in her savage heart. Doubtful whether she had permanently reclaimed Hermanric to the interests of vengeance and bloodshed; vaguely suspecting that he might have informed himself in her absence of Antonina's place of refuge or direction of flight; still resolutely bent on securing the death of her victim, wherever she might have strayed, she awaited with trembling eagerness that day of restoration to available activity and strength which would enable her to resume her influence over the Goth, and her machinations against the safety of the fugitive girl. The time of her final and long-expected recovery, was the very day preceding the stormy night we have already described, and her first employment of her renewed energy was to send word to the young Goth of her intention of seeking him at his encampment ere the evening closed.

It was this intimation which caused the inquietude mentioned as characteristic of the manner of Hermanric at the commencement of the preceding chapter. The evening there described was the first that saw him deprived, through the threatened visit of Goisvintha, of the anticipation of repairing to Antonina, as had been his wont, under cover of the night; for to slight his kinswoman's ominous message was to risk the most fatal of discoveries. Trusting to the delusive security of her sickness, he had hitherto banished the unwelcome remembrance of her existence from his thoughts. But, now that she was once more capable of exertion and of

crime, he felt that if he would preserve the secret of Antonina's hiding-place and the security of Antonina's life, he must remain to oppose force to force and stratagem to stratagem, when Goisvintha sought him at his post, even at the risk of inflicting, by his absence from the farm-house, all the pangs of anxiety and apprehension on the lonely girl.

Absorbed in such reflections as these, longing to depart, yet determined to remain, he impatiently awaited Goisvintha's approach, until the rising of the storm with its mysterious and all-engrossing train of events forced his thoughts and actions into a new channel. When, however, his interviews with the stranger and the Gothic king were past, and he had returned as he had been bidden to his appointed sojourn in the camp, his old anxieties, displaced but not destroyed, resumed their influence over him. He demanded eagerly of his comrades if Goisvintha had arrived in his absence, and received the same answer in the negative from each.

As he now listened to the melancholy rising of the wind and the increasing loudness of the thunder, to the shrill cries of the distant night-birds hurrying to shelter, emotions of mournfulness and awe possessed themselves of his heart. He now wondered that any events, however startling, however appalling, should have had the power to turn his mind for a moment from the dreary contemplations that had engaged it at the close of day. He thought of Antonina, solitary and helpless, listening to the tempest in affright, and watching vainly for his long-delayed approach. His fancy arrayed before him dangers, plots, and crimes, robed in all the horrible exaggerations of a dream. Even the quick, monotonous dripping of the rain-drops outside aroused within him dark and indefinable forebodings of ill. The passion that had hitherto created for him new pleasures was now fulfilling the other half of its earthly mission, and causing him new pains.

As the storm strengthened, as the darkness lowered deeper and deeper, so did his inquietude increase, until at length it mastered the last feeble resistance of his wavering firmness. Persuading himself that, after having delayed so long, Goisvintha would now refrain from seeking him until the morrow, and that all communications from Alaric, had they been despatched, would have reached him ere this; unable any longer to combat his anxiety for the safety of Antonina; determined to risk the worst possibilities rather than be absent at such a time of tempest and peril from the farm-house, he made a last visit to the stations of the watchful sentinels, and quitted the camp for the night.