

CHAPTER 17 - THE HUNS

More than an hour after Hermanric had left the encampment, a man hurriedly entered the house set apart for the young chieftain's occupation. He made no attempt to kindle either light or fire, but sat down in the principal apartment, occasionally whispering to himself in a strange and barbarous tongue.

He had remained but a short time in possession of his comfortless solitude, when he was intruded on by a camp-follower, bearing a small lamp, and followed closely by a woman, who, as he started up and confronted her, announced herself as Hermanric's kinswoman, and eagerly demanded an interview with the Goth.

Haggard and ghastly though it was from recent suffering and long agitation, the countenance of Goisvintha (for it was she) appeared absolutely attractive as it was now opposed by the lamp-light to the face and figure of the individual she addressed. A flat nose, a swarthy complexion, long, coarse, tangled locks of deep black hair, a beardless, retreating chin, and small, savage, sunken eyes, gave a character almost bestial to this man's physiognomy. His broad, brawny shoulders overhung a form that was as low in stature as it was athletic in build; you looked on him and saw the sinews of a giant strung in the body of a dwarf. And yet this deformed Hercules was no solitary error of Nature--no extraordinary exception to his fellow-beings, but the actual type of a whole race, stunted and repulsive as himself. He was a Hun.

This savage people, the terror even of their barbarous neighbours, living without government, laws, or religion, possessed but one feeling in common with the human race--the instinct of war. Their historical career may be said to have begun with their early conquests in China, and to have proceeded in their first victories over the Goths, who regarded them as demons, and fled at their approach. The hostilities thus commenced between the two nations were at length suspended by the temporary alliance of the conquered people with the empire, and subsequently ceased in the gradual fusion of the interests of each in one animating spirit--detestation of Rome.

By this bond of brotherhood, the Goths and the Huns became publicly united, though still privately at enmity--for the one nation remembered its former defeats as vividly as the other remembered its former victories. With various disasters, dissensions, and successes, they ran their career of battle and rapine, sometimes separate, sometimes together, until the period of our

romance, when Alaric's besieging forces numbered among the ranks of their barbarian auxiliaries a body of Huns, who, unwillingly admitted to the title of Gothic allies, were dispersed about the army in subordinate stations, and of whom the individual above described was one of those contemptuously favoured by promotion to an inferior command, under Hermanric, as a Gothic chief.

An expression of aversion, but not of terror, passed over Goisvintha's worn features as she approached the barbarian, and repeated her desire to be conducted to Hermanric's presence. For the second time, however, the man gave her no answer. He burst into a shrill, short laugh, and shook his huge shoulders in clumsy derision.

The woman's cheek reddened for an instant, and then turned again to livid paleness as she thus resumed--

'I came not hither to be mocked by a barbarian, but to be welcomed by a Goth! Again I ask you, where is my kinsman, Hermanric?'

'Gone!' cried the Hun. And his laughter grew more wild and discordant as he spoke.

A sudden tremor ran through Goisvintha's frame as she marked the manner of the barbarian and heard his reply. Repressing with difficulty her anger and agitation, she continued, with apprehension in her eyes and entreaty in her tones--

'Whither has he gone? Wherefore has he departed? I know that the hour I appointed for our meeting here has long passed; but I have suffered a sickness of many weeks, and when, at evening, I prepared to set forth, my banished infirmities seemed suddenly to return to me again. I was borne to my bed. But, though the woman who succoured me bid me remain and repose, I found strength in the night to escape them, and through storm and darkness to come hither alone--for I was determined, though I should perish for it, to seek the presence of Hermanric, as I had promised by my messengers. You, that are the companion of his watch, must know whither he is gone. Go to him, and tell him what I have spoken. I will await his return!'

'His business is secret,' sneered the Hun. 'He has departed, but without telling me whither. How should I, that am a barbarian, know the whereabouts of an illustrious Goth? It is not for me to know his actions, but to obey his words!'

'Jeer not about your obedience,' returned Goisvintha with breathless eagerness. 'I say to you again, you know whither he is gone, and you must tell me for what he has departed. You obey him--there is money to make you obey me!'

'When I said his business was secret, I lied not,' said the Hun, picking up with avidity the coins she flung to him--'but he has not kept it secret from me! The Huns are cunning! Aha, ugly and cunning!'

Suspicion, the only refined emotion in a criminal heart, half discovered to Goisvintha, at this moment, the intelligence that was yet to be communicated. No word, however, escaped her, while she signed the barbarian to proceed.

'He has gone to a farm-house on the plains beyond the suburbs behind us. He will not return till daybreak,' continued the Hun, tossing his money carelessly in his great, horny hands.

'Did you see him go?' gasped the woman.

'I tracked him to the house,' returned the barbarian. 'For many nights I watched and suspected him--to-night I saw him depart. It is but a short time since I returned from following him. The darkness did not delude me; the place is on the high-road from the suburbs--the first by-path to the westward leads to its garden gate. I know it! I have discovered his secret! I am more cunning than he!'

'For what did he seek the farm-house at night?' demanded Goisvintha after an interval, during which she appeared to be silently fixing the man's last speech in her memory; 'are you cunning enough to tell me that?'

'For what do men venture their safety and their lives, their money and their renown?' laughed the barbarian. 'They venture them for women! There is a girl at the farm-house; I saw her at the door when the chief went in!'

He paused; but Goisvintha made no answer. Remembering that she was descended from a race of women who slew their wounded husbands, brothers, and sons with their own hands when they sought them after battle dishonoured by a defeat; remembering that the fire of the old ferocity of such ancestors as these still burnt at her heart; remembering all that she had hoped from Hermanric, and had plotted against Antonina; estimating in all its importance the shock of the intelligence she now received, we are alike

unwilling and unable to describe her emotions at this moment. For some time the stillness in the room was interrupted by no sounds but the rolling of the thunder without, the quick, convulsive respiration of Goisvintha, and the clinking of the money which the Hun still continued to toss mechanically from hand to hand.

'I shall reap good harvest of gold and silver after to-night's work,' pursued the barbarian, suddenly breaking the silence. 'You have given me money to speak--when the chief returns and hears that I have discovered him, he will give me money to be silent. I shall drink to-morrow with the best men in the army, Hun though I am!'

He returned to his seat as he ceased, and began beating in monotonous measure, with one of his pieces of money on the blade of his sword, some chorus of a favourite drinking song; while Goisvintha, standing pale and breathless near the door of the chamber, looked down on him with fixed, vacant eyes. At length a deep sigh broke from her; her hands involuntarily clenched themselves at her side; her lips moved with a bitter smile; then, without addressing another word to the Hun, she turned, and softly and stealthily quitted the room.

The instant she was gone, a sudden change arose in the barbarian's manner. He started from his seat, a scowl of savage hatred and triumph appeared on his shaggy brows, and he paced to and fro through the chamber like a wild beast in his cage. 'I shall tear him from the pinnacle of his power at last!' he whispered fiercely to himself. 'For what I have told her this night, his kinswoman will hate him--I knew it while she spoke! For his desertion of his post, Alaric may dishonour him, may banish him, may hang him! His fate is at my mercy; I shall rid myself nobly of him and his command! More than all the rest of his nation I loathe this Goth! I will be by when they drag him to the tree, and taunt him with his shame, as he has taunted me with my deformity.' Here he paused to laugh in complacent approval of his project, quickening his steps and hugging himself joyfully in the barbarous exhilaration of his triumph.

His secret meditations had thus occupied him for some time longer, when the sound of a footstep was audible outside the door. He recognised it instantly, and called softly to the person without to approach. At the signal of his voice a man entered--less athletic in build, but in deformity the very counterpart of himself. The following discourse was then immediately held between the two Huns, the new-comer beginning it thus:--

'Have you tracked him to the door?'

'To the very threshold.'

'Then his downfall is assured! I have seen Alaric.'

'We shall trample him under our feet!--this boy, who has been set over us that are his elders, because he is a Goth and we are Huns! But what of Alaric? How did you gain his ear?'

'The Goths round his tent scoffed at me as a savage, and swore that I was begotten between a demon and a witch. But I remembered the time when these boasters fled from their settlements; when our tribes mounted their black steeds and hunted them like beasts! Aha, their very lips were pale with fear in those days.'

'Speak of Alaric--our time is short,' interrupted the other fiercely.

'I answered not a word to their taunts,' resumed his companion, 'but I called out loudly that I was a Gothic ally, that I brought messages to Alaric, and that I had the privilege of audience like the rest. My voice reached the ears of the king: he looked forth from his tent, and beckoned me in. I saw his hatred of my nation lowering in his eye as we looked on one another, but I spoke with submission and in a soft voice. I told him how his chieftain whom he had set over us secretly deserted his post; I told him how we had seen his favoured warrior for many nights journeying towards the suburbs; how on this night, as on others before, he had stolen from the encampment, and how you had gone forth to track him to his lurking-place.'

'Was the tyrant angered?'

'His cheeks reddened, and his eyes flashed, and his fingers trembled round the hilt of his sword while I spoke! When I ceased he answered me that I lied. He cursed me for an infidel Hun who had slandered a Christian chieftain. He threatened me with hanging! I cried to him to send messengers to our quarters to prove the truth ere he slew me. He commanded a warrior to return hither with me. When we arrived, the most Christian chieftain was nowhere to be beheld--none knew whither he had gone! We turned back again to the tent of the king; his warrior, whom he honoured, spoke the same words to him as the Hun whom he despised. Then the wrath of Alaric rose. "This very night," he cried, "did I with my own lips direct him to await my commands with vigilance at his appointed post! I would visit such disobedience with punishment on my own son! Go, take with you others of your troop--your comrade who has tracked him will guide

you to his hiding-place--bring him prisoner into my tent!" Such were his words! Our companions wait us without--lest he should escape let us depart without delay.'

'And if he should resist us,' cried the other, leading the way eagerly towards the door; 'what said the king if he should resist us?'

'Slay him with your own hands.'