

## CHAPTER 19 - THE GUARDIAN RESTORED

Not long is the new-made grave left unwatched to the solemn guardianship of Solitude and Night. More than a few minutes have scarcely elapsed since it was dug, yet already human footsteps press its yielding surface, and a human glance scans attentively its small and homely mound.

But it is not Antonina, whom he loved; it is not Goisvintha, through whose vengeance he was lost, who now looks upon the earth above the young warrior's corpse. It is a stranger, an outcast; a man lost, dishonoured, abandoned--it is the solitary and ruined Ulpus who now gazes with indifferent eyes upon the peaceful garden and the eloquent grave.

In the destinies of woe committed to the keeping of the night, the pagan had been fatally included. The destruction that had gone forth against the body of the young man who lay beneath the earth had overtaken the mind of the old man who stood over his simple grave. The frame of Ulpus, with all its infirmities, was still there, but the soul of ferocious patience and unconquerable daring that had lighted it grandly in its ruin was gone. Over the long anguish of that woeful life the veil of self-oblivion had closed for ever!

He had been dismissed by Alaric, but he had not returned to the city whither he was bidden. Throughout the night he had wandered about the lonely suburbs, striving in secret and horrible suffering for the mastery of his mind. There did the overthrow of all his hopes from the Goths expand rapidly into the overthrow of the whole intellect that had created his aspirations. There had reason burst the bonds that had so long chained, perverted, degraded it! At length, wandering hither and thither, he had dragged the helpless body, possessed no longer by the perilous mind, to the farm-house garden in which he now stood, gazing alternately at the upturned sods of the chieftain's grave and the red gleam of the fire as it glowed from the dreary room through the gap of the shattered door.

His faculties were fatally disordered rather than utterly destroyed. His penetration, his firmness, and his cunning were gone; but a wreck of memory, useless and unmanageable--a certain capacity for momentary observation still remained to him. The shameful miscarriage in the tent of Alaric, which had overthrown his faculties, had passed from him as an event that never happened, but he remembered fragments of his past existence--he still retained a vague consciousness of the ruling purpose of his whole life.

These embryo reflections, disconnected and unsustained, flitted to and fro over his dark mind as luminous exhalations over a marsh--rising and sinking, harmless and delusive, fitful and irregular. What he remembered of the past he remembered carelessly, viewing it with as vacant a curiosity as if it were the visionary spectacle of another man's struggles and misfortunes and hopes, acting under it as under a mysterious influence, neither the end nor the reason of which he cared to discover. For the future, it was to his thoughts a perfect blank; for the present, it was a jarring combination of bodily weariness and mental repose.

He shuddered as he stood shelterless under the open heaven. The cold, that he had defied in the vaults of the rifted wall, pierced in the farm-house garden; his limbs, which had resisted repose on the hard journey from Rome to the camp of the Goths, now trembled so that he was fain to rest them on the ground. For a short time he sat glaring with vacant and affrighted eyes upon the open dwelling before him, as though he longed to enter it but dare not. At length the temptation of the ruddy firelight seemed to vanquish his irresolution; he rose with difficulty, and slowly and hesitatingly entered the house.

He had advanced, thief-like, but a few steps, he had felt but for a moment the welcome warmth of the fire, when the figure of Antonina, still extended insensible upon the floor, caught his eye; he approached it with eager curiosity, and, raising the girl on his arm, looked at her with a long and rigid scrutiny.

For some moments no expression of recognition passed his lips or appeared on his countenance, as, with a mechanical, doting gesture of fondness, he smoothed her dishevelled hair over her forehead. While he was thus engaged, while the remains of the gentleness of his childhood were thus awfully revived in the insanity of his age, a musical string wound round a small piece of gilt wood fell from its concealment in her bosom; he snatched it from the ground--it was the fragment of her broken lute, which had never quitted her since the night when, in her innocent grief, she had wept over it in her maiden bed-chamber.

Small, obscure, insignificant as it was, this little token touched the fibre in the Pagan's shattered mind which the all-eloquent form and presence of its hapless mistress had failed to reach; his memory flew back instantly to the garden on the Pincian Mount, and to his past duties in Numerian's household, but spoke not to him of the calamities he had wreaked since that period on his confiding master. His imagination presented to him at this moment but one image--his servitude in the Christian's abode; and as he

now looked on the girl he could regard himself but in one light--as 'the guardian restored'.

'What does she with her music here?' he whispered apprehensively. 'This is not her father's house, and the garden yonder looks not from the summit of the hill!'

As he curiously examined the room, the red spots on the floor suddenly attracted his attention. A panic, a frantic terror seemed instantly to overwhelm him. He rose with a cry of horror, and, still holding the girl on his arm, hurried out into the garden trembling and breathless, as if the weapon of an assassin had scared him from the house.

The shock of her rough removal, the sudden influence of the fresh, cold air, restored Antonina to the consciousness of life at the moment when Ulpus, unable to support her longer, laid her against the little heap of turf which marked the position of the young chieftain's grave. Her eyes opened wildly; their first glance fixed upon the shattered door and the empty room. She rose from the ground, advanced a few steps towards the house, then paused, rigid, breathless, silent, and, turning slowly, faced the upturned turf.

The grave was all-eloquent of its tenant. His cuirass, which the soldiers had thought to bury with the body that it had defended in former days, had been overlooked in the haste of the secret interment, and lay partly imbedded in the broken earth, partly exposed to view--a simple monument over a simple grave! Her tearless, dilated eyes looked down on it as though they would number each blade of grass, each morsel of earth by which it was surrounded! Her hair waved idly about her cheeks, as the light wind fluttered it; but no expression passed over her face, no gestures escaped her limbs. Her mind toiled and quivered, as if crushed by a fiery burden; but her heart was voiceless, and her body was still.

Ulpus had stood unnoticed by her side. At this moment he moved so as to confront her, and she suddenly looked up at him. A momentary expression of bewilderment and suspicion lightened the heavy vacancy of despair which had chased their natural and feminine tenderness from her eyes, but it disappeared rapidly. She turned from the Pagan, knelt down by the grave, and pressed her face and bosom against the little mound of turf beneath her.

No voice comforted her, no arm caressed her, as her mind now began to penetrate the mysteries, to probe the darkest depths of the long night's

calamities! Unaided and unsoled, while the few and waning stars glimmered from their places in the sky, while the sublime stillness of tranquillised Nature stretched around her, she knelt at the altar of death, and raised her soul upward to the great heaven above her, charged with its sacred offering of human grief!

Long did she thus remain; and when at length she arose from the ground, when, approaching the Pagan, she fixed on him her tearless, dreary eyes, he quailed before her glance, as his dull faculties struggled vainly to resume the old, informing power that they had now for ever lost. Nothing but the remembrance aroused by his first sight of the fragment of the lute lived within even yet, as he whispered to her in low, entreating tones--

'Come home--come home! Your father may return before us--come home!'

As the words 'home' and 'father'--those household gods of the heart's earliest existence--struck upon her ears, a change flashed with electric suddenness over the girl's whole aspect. She raised her wan hands to the sky; all her woman's tenderness repossessed itself of her heart; and as she again knelt down over the grave, her sobs rose audibly through the calmed and fragrant air.

With Hermanric's corpse beneath her, with the blood-sprinkled room behind her, with a hostile army and a famine-wasted city beyond her, it was only through that flood of tears, that healing passion of gentle emotions, that she rose superior to the multiplied horrors of her situation at the very moment when her faculties and her life seemed sinking under them alike. Fully, freely, bitterly she wept, on the kindly and parent earth--the patient, friendly ground that once bore the light footsteps of the first of a race not created for death; that now holds in its sheltering arms the loved ones, whom, in mourning, we lay there to sleep; that shall yet be bound to the farthest of its depths, when the sun-bright presence of returning spirits shines over its renovated frame, and love is resumed in angel perfection at the point where death suspended it in mortal frailness!

'Come home--your father is awaiting you--come home!' repeated the Pagan vacantly, moving slowly away as he spoke.

At the sound of his voice she started up, and clasping his arm with her trembling fingers, to arrest his progress, looked affrightedly into his seared and listless countenance. As she thus gazed on him she appeared for the first time to recognise him. Fear and astonishment mingled in her expression with grief and despair as she sunk at his feet, moaning in tones

of piercing entreaty--

'O Ulpus!--if Ulpus you are--have pity on me and take me to my father! My father! my father! In all the lonely world there is nothing left to me but my father!'

'Why do you weep to me about your broken lute?' answered Ulpus, with a dull, unmeaning smile; 'it was not I that destroyed it!'

'They have slain him!' she shrieked distractedly, heedless of the Pagan's reply. 'I saw them draw their swords on him! See, his blood is on me--me!--Antonina, whom he protected and loved! Look there; that is a grave--his grave--I know it! I have never seen him since; he is down--down there! under the flowers I grew to gather for him! They slew him; and when I knew it not, they have buried him!--or you--you have buried him! You have hidden him under the cold garden earth! He is gone!--Ah, gone, gone--for ever gone!'

And she flung herself again with reckless violence on the grave. After looking steadfastly on her for a moment, Ulpus approached and raised her from the earth.

'Come!' he cried angrily, 'the night grows on--your father waits!'

'The walls of Rome shut me from my father! I shall never see my father nor Hermanric again!' she cried, in tones of bitter anguish, remembering more perfectly all the miseries of her position, and struggling to release herself from the Pagan's grasp.

The walls of Rome! At those words the mind of Ulpus opened to a flow of dark remembrances, and lost the visions that had occupied it until that moment. He laughed triumphantly.

'The walls of Rome bow to my arm!' he cried, in exulting tones; 'I pierced them with my good bar of iron! I wound through them with my bright lantern! Spirits roared on me, and struck me down, and grinned upon me in the thick darkness, but I passed the wall! The thunder pealed around me as I crawled along the winding rifts; but I won my way through them! I came out conquering on the other side! Come, come, come, come! We will return! I know the track, even in the darkness! I can outwatch the sentinels! You shall walk in the pathway that I have broken through the bricks!'

The girl's features lost for a moment their expression of grief, and grew rigid with horror, as she glanced at his fiery eyes, and felt the fearful suspicion of his insanity darkening over her mind. She stood powerless, trembling, unresisting, in his grasp, without attempting to delude him into departure or to appease him into delay.

'Why did I make my passage through the wall?' muttered the Pagan in a low, awe-struck voice, suddenly checking himself, as he was about to step forward. 'Why did I tear down the strong brick-work and go forth into the dark suburbs?'

He paused, and for a few moments struggled with his purposeless and disconnected thoughts; but a blank, a darkness, an annihilation overwhelmed Alaric and the Gothic camp, which he vainly endeavoured to disperse. He sighed bitterly to himself--'It is gone!' and still grasping Antonina by the hand, drew her after him to the garden gate.

'Leave me!' she shrieked, as he passed onward into the pathway that led to the high-road. 'Oh, be merciful, and leave me to die where he has died!'

'Peace! or I will rend you limb by limb, as I rent the stones from the wall when I passed through it!' he whispered to her in fierce accents, as she struggled to escape him. 'You shall return with me to Rome! You shall walk in the track that I have made in the rifted brick-work!'

Terror, anguish, exhaustion, overpowered her weak efforts. Her lips moved, partly in prayer and partly in ejaculation; but she spoke in murmurs only, as she mechanically suffered the Pagan to lead her onward by the hand.

They paced on under the waning starlight, over the cold, lonely road, and through the dreary and deserted suburbs,--a fearful and discordant pair! Coldly, obediently, impassively, as if she were walking in a dream, the spirit-broken girl moved by the side of her scarce-human leader. Disjointed exclamation, alternating horribly between infantine simplicity and fierce wickedness, poured incessantly from the Pagan's lips, but he never addressed himself further to his terror-stricken companion. So, wending rapidly onward, they gained the Gothic lines; and here the madman slackened his pace, and paused, beast-like, to glare around him, as he approached the habitations of men.

Still not opposed by Antonina, whose faculties of observation were petrified by her terror into perfect inaction, even here, within reach of the doubtful aid of the enemies of her people, the Pagan crept forward through the

loneliest places of the encampment, and, guided by the mysterious cunning of his miserable race, eluded successfully the observation of the drowsy sentinels. Never bewildered by the darkness--for the moon had gone down--always led by the animal instinct co-existent with his disease, he passed over the waste ground between the hostile encampment and the city, and arrived triumphant at the heap of stones that marked his entrance to the rifted wall.

For one moment he stopped, and turning towards the girl, pointed proudly to the dark, low breach he was about to penetrate. Then, drawing her half-fainting form closer to his side, looking up attentively to the ramparts, and stepping as noiselessly as though turf were beneath his feet, he entered the dusky rift with his helpless charge.

As they disappeared in the recesses of the wall, Night--the stormy, the eventful, the fatal!--reached its last limit; and the famished sentinel on the fortifications of the besieged city roused himself from his dreary and absorbing thoughts, for he saw that the new day was dawning in the east.