

Virgilia

Felicia Buttz Clark

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Virgilia

or, Out of the Lion's Mouth

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VIRGILIA

or

OUT OF THE LION'S MOUTH

By

FELICIA BUTTZ CLARK

1917

I. A CONFESSION OF FAITH.

The Circus in Rome was thronged with an enormous crowd of persons on a day in June, about two thousand years ago. One hundred thousand men and women sat on its tiers of white marble seats, under the open sky and witnessed a gladiatorial contest in the arena, beneath.

At the western end of the oval amphitheatre was the Emperor's box, flanked with tall Corinthian pillars, on which were hung the coat-of-arms of the Roman people. Here sat one of the most cruel emperors Rome has ever suffered under. His cloak was royal purple, and was thrown carelessly back, on this warm June afternoon, to disclose a white tunic, embroidered in scarlet.

Beside him were several ladies, elaborately gowned in the manner of the day, with hair dressed high, studded with jewels brought from Oriental lands, while their necks and arms were loaded with strings of pearls and emeralds, armlets of tawny gold in Etruscan designs, in which were set cameos of extraordinary delicacy and diamonds, only partially polished, as large as the half of a hen's egg.

To every class of Romans, the gladiatorial show was open. Senators and Patricians, artists and mechanics, poets and artisans, women of every rank, from the highest lady of the land to the humblest washerwoman who beat her clothes on the rounded stones of the River Tiber, were here to gloat over the hideous contest in the arena.

In the third row, about half way in the long side of the oval amphitheatre sat two women and a man. The women were unusually beautiful. They were mother and daughter. The man was plainly the father, a stalwart Roman, a lawyer, who had his office in the courts of the Forum, where business houses flanked the splendid temples of white marble, where the people worshipped their gods, Jupiter and Saturn, Diana and Cybele.

"See," said Claudia, pointing a finger on which blazed an enormous emerald, "the Vestals are giving the signal. Their thumbs are reversed. The Emperor, also, is signalling for a cessation of the fight. How proud Lycias, the gladiator, is to-day, for he won the victory. Well, we must go. Come, Virgilia."

The young girl arose, obediently, but her father noticed that her eyes were full of tears and that she shivered slightly in spite of the warm, scented June air.

As the three mingled with the thousands who were in a very leisurely manner wending their way down the steps to the ground, Aurelius Lucanus drew her frail hand through his arm and said, gently: "What hast thou, dearest? Art thou not well?"

"I am quite well, father dear," and as she spoke, she drew over her face a light, filmy veil, effectually shielding her from the too curious gaze of the laughing throng of merry-makers.

"Why, then, dost thou cry, my daughter?"

Virgilia glanced at her mother and noticing that she was out of hearing, whispered in his ear: "I hate it, father. Do not bring me again."

He looked at her with surprise, then, remembering that girls have strange fancies, he was silent, and guided her safely out into the blazing sunshine. The sun was still an hour above the horizon; the pine-trees on the Palatine Hills, where Caesar's palaces were, stood up like giant sentinels against a sky of limpid blue.

Aurelius Lucanus led the way through the Forum, where his wife, an ardent worshipper of the gods, stopped to lay a bunch of roses on the base of a large statue of Ceres, standing near the Temple and a building dedicated to the use of the Vestal Virgins.

The Chief Virgin was being carried to the entrance in her chair, borne by four bearers, while in front of her walked the two men who held high the symbols of her priestly office. Claudia fell upon her knees as the holy vestal went by, until her chair had been carried through the iron gates.

Virgilia watched her mother, with an anxious look on her young face.

"Why didst thou not also kneel before the holy one?" her mother said, in a stern tone. "Dost not know that in her hands she holds such power that even the emperor himself trembles before her and does her bidding, lest the gods send upon him disaster and ruin?"

Virgilia made no reply, but walked quietly by her mother's side through the Forum, beneath the great arches, up over the Capitoline Hill where Jupiter's Temple arose in grandeur, its ivory-tinted marbles beginning to turn a dull rose in the rays of the fast-lowering sun.

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They descended on the other side and entered a labyrinth of narrow streets, winding in and out between rows of houses, most of them showing a plain, windowless front, the only decoration being over and around the door.

With a quick double-knock at one of these doors, the lawyer summoned a servant, who bowed deeply as the two ladies and his master entered.

Aurelius Lucanus lingered a moment, while his wife passed on into the atrium, but here, it was hot, so she went further, into a court, transformed into a beautiful garden. Around the fountain, which cooled the air, bloomed literally hundreds of calla lilies, masses of stately blossoms with snowy chalices and hearts of gold. Around the pillars twined the June roses, pink and yellow, and mixed with them were vines, of starry jessamine, shedding forth a faint, delicious odor, akin to that of orange-blossoms.

Here were chairs of rare woods inlaid with ivory, and couches, gracefully formed, covered with soft silks and cushions embroidered in gold.

Claudia sank down, as if she were weary, and a slave sprang forward to remove the white outer garment, worn upon the street to cover the costly silk one, and the jewels which she had worn in the amphitheatre.

Aurelius was conversing with the dark-skinned porter.

"Has Martius returned?" he asked.

"Yes, master. He came in about two hours after noon, but went out again almost immediately."

"Leaving no word?"

"No, master."

The porter stood watching his master as he walked away. There was a strange expression on his strongly marked face. He was pitted with small-pox, and over one eye was a deep scar. He had never forgotten how he got that scar, how he had fallen beneath a blow struck by that man's hand, the man who owned his body, but not his soul. In falling, he had struck his head against the corner of the marble pedestal supporting the statue of the god who ruled in this household, and had been carried away unconscious.

Ah, no, he had not forgotten!

Aurelius entered the court just in time to hear his wife saying to Virgilia in her severest tone: "Thou art exactly like thy step-brother, Martius, self-willed and foolish. Why else has he been exiled from Rome by thy father? He has worshipped strange gods, has followed after a man named Christus, a malefactor, a thief, crucified with thieves—"

"Mother!" exclaimed Virgilia, and there was that in her voice which stopped the stream of language, and made Claudia sit up straight and grasp the griffin-heads on the arms of her chair.

"Wilt tell me that thou, too, art mad over the dead Christus?" she shrieked. "Then art thou no daughter of mine! Thou shall go forth from here, homeless, an outcast. Join thyself with the beggarly band of men and women who hide in the dark places of the earth that they may work their spells—"

"Claudia, cease thy talking," exclaimed Aurelius, taking his daughter in his arms. "Canst thou not see that the child is fainting? She is ill. I saw it but now in the Circus. Hast thou no heart?"

"What, thou, too, Aurelius! Thou art but half a man, and worshipeth the gods only in form. Long have I suspected that Virgilia had been infected by this poisonous virus, this doctrine of a malefactor. Thy son taught it to her, thy son, Martius, who is, thanks to Jupiter, far away from here."

"Not so, dear mother," said a cheerful voice, "Martius has returned to his father's house, and to thee and Virgilia."

A tall youth, about nineteen years of age, full of manly vigor speaking in a rich voice, vibrant with feeling, sprang forward, knelt at Claudia's feet and kissed her hand, then he embraced his father and sister.

Claudia's expression relaxed. Had it not been for his absurd belief in the Jew, who seemed to have set the world mad, she could have loved this fine-looking young man, whose auburn curls fell over a white forehead, whose brown eyes gleamed with a mixture of earnestness and merriment. He was, indeed, a lovable youth.

"Hast thou come back cured, Martius? Then art thou indeed welcome."

"Cured of what, mother?"

"Of thy mistaken worship of Christus."

"No, mother," came the firm reply. Aurelius saw his son's face pale, saw him straighten up as though he expected a blow on those broad shoulders, saw his hand clench as if he were in pain. And Aurelius was sorrowful. He loved Martius for himself and for his mother, whom he resembled. The lawyer was also, only too well aware

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of the danger run by all those who called themselves followers of Christus. The worst had not yet come. There were only threats now against the members of this sect who were growing daily more numerous, and more menacing to the priests and the pagan religion. No one could tell what might happen by to-morrow, the storm would break suddenly.

He knew Claudia and her blind bigotry. She would not hesitate to sacrifice Martius if she thought that her soul's salvation depended on it; Claudia's soul was her chief thought. But would she sacrifice her own daughter, if her religion should prove to be the same as that of her brother?

The sister had slipped her hand into that of Martius. She stood beside him shoulder to shoulder. Virgilia was unusually tall. She had inherited the fine, cameo-like profile of her mother, but her hair was fair and very abundant. It was bound around her head in heavy braids and was not decorated by any jewel. Her white draperies had fallen from her arm, disclosing its pure whiteness and delicate outline.

Virgilia looked straight at her mother and spoke, breaking sharply the silence following the two words of Martius. The sun had now set. It was almost dark in the garden. The lilies gleamed ghostly white among their long green leaves. The odor of the jessamine was heavy on the evening air, overpowering in its sweetness. A servant entered and lighted torches in iron rings fastened on the fluted pillows. He lit, also, the wicks in huge bronze lamps placed here and there, and in a three-tapered silver lamp on a table by Claudia's side.

The soft radiance lit up the strange scene, the Roman matron, seated in her chair, jewels gleaming in her dark hair and on her bosom, her face set and stern. It shone upon the young Virgilia and Martius, standing before her, and upon the heavier figure of the lawyer, Aurelius Lucanus, just behind them.

Then Virgilia spoke, and her voice was as clear as the sun-down bell which had just rung out its warning from Caesar's Hill.

“I, too, am a Christian.”

With a sharp outcry, Claudia, dragging her white draperies on the ground, disappeared in her small room, opening by a long window from the gallery bordering on the garden. She was seen no more that night. Silently, the lawyer and his son and daughter ate their evening meal, reclining on the triclinium in the long room tinted in Pompeian red, a frieze three feet in width ran around the walls. Small, chubby cherubs, or cupids doing the work of men, weaving draperies, preparing food, chopping meat, plucking grapes and carrying them away in miniature wheelbarrows, were faithfully portrayed in rich colors. Some of these frescoes, tints as vivid as when they were laid on by the artists of twenty centuries ago, remain to this day on the walls of ancient Roman dwellings, and enable us to know how people lived in those far-off times.

A servant, assisted by the porter, Alyrus, brought the food in on huge trays, roast kid and vegetables, green salad fresh from the market in the Forum Boarium, dressed with oil from the groves of Lucca and vinegar made of sour red wine. Then came a delicious pudding, made from honey brought from Hymetus in Greece to add luxury to the food of the already too luxurious Romans, and fruit strawberries, dipped in fine sugar and sprinkled with lemon.

Virgilia ate little; the main portions of the food she sent away untouched. The salad and fruit were more to her liking. She was very pale. The scene in the Circus, followed by the sudden confession of her faith, had taxed her strength. This, her anxiety for her mother and the unusual heat of the evening caused her to feel faint, so that she excused herself and went away, climbing a narrow staircase to the flat, tiled roof. Here were many plants, blossoming vines and the gurgling of cool water, as it passed through the mouth of a hideous gorgan mask and fell into a basin where soft green mosses clung and ferns waved their feathery fronds.

Seating herself on a granite bench, supported by two carved lions, Virgilia fell into deep thought. It was the everlasting problem, old as human life. Ought she to obey her mother, or God? To do the former, meant to stifle her conscience and destroy her inner life. Worship the gods she could not since this new, this pure love for the meek and lovely Jesus had entered into her very being.

She clasped and unclasped her slender white hands in her agitation. What should she do? If God would only show her where duty lay.

Glorified in the silvery whiteness of the moonlight, arose the splendid palaces of the Caesars. Virgilia could see them plainly if she lifted her eyes, for they stood high, on the Palatine Hill. There was revelry yonder. The notes of flutes and harps came faintly to her ears. Below, wound the Tiber, back and forth, like the coils of a huge, glistening serpent. Many boating parties were enjoying the river and its coolness, while the moon rode high in the

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heavens and shone upon the sheeny garments and fair faces of the women.

Up the river, from the port of Ostia, came a big merchant vessel bringing from Constantinople and Egypt, carpets and costly stuffs, richly wrought in gold, filmy tissue and rare embroideries for Roman ladies and papyrus volumes for the learned Senators.

Far out on the Campagna, Virgilia knew that the Christians were gathering to-night, coming from all parts of the city. Some were freedmen and others were slaves; among the figures gliding out on the cobble-stoned Appian Way were members of Caesar's household, and one or two tall Praetorian guards. The religion of Christ had found converts among all classes. Rome was full of Christians, many of whom feared to openly confess their faith, though later, they dared to do so, even in the face of a cruel death.

Virgilia was so intent on her thoughts that she did not observe the cat-like approach of her mother's personal slave, the daughter of Alyrus, the porter. She and her father had been brought to Rome as prisoners of war after a victorious conquest by the Romans in North Africa. They were by descent, Moors, having dark skins but very regular, even classical features. Sahira, the slave, walked like a queen and was so proud that she would not mingle with the other servants. Her father, Alyrus, chief of hundreds in the desert-land of his own country, was but a door-keeper in the house of Aurelius Lucanus, and he was, very bitter in spirit.

"Your mother has need of you," said Sahira, in her velvet voice. "I think that the Lady Claudia is very ill."
"I will come at once."

The Lady Claudia was indeed very ill and continued so for several weeks. The summer waxed and waned. The cool winds of September blew strongly from the West and the calla lilies and jessamine had long since withered in the garden before Claudia was able once again to sit in the chair under the late tea-rose vines and listen to the rippling water of the fountain.

The old, proud Claudia seemed to have disappeared and in her place was a feeble woman, with trembling hands, whose glance followed every move her daughter made, who seemed to be happy only when Virgilia was near. She ignored the ministrations of the slave Sahira, whose heart warmed to only one person except her father, and that was her beautiful mistress. Sahira cast angry looks at Virgilia's fair head, bending over her embroidery while she talked cheerfully to her mother. The slave went away and cried, for she was of a deep, passionate nature, loving few and ready to lay down her life for those whom she adored.

Alyrus, her father, found her crying one night in her tiny room in the section of the house assigned to the servants. He succeeded in finding out the thing that caused her sorrow. When he went away there was a resolution formed in his soul which boded ill to Virgilia. He would bide his time—and then—

The young Christian wondered often whether her mother had forgotten that scene on the day she was taken so ill, had forgotten that she, as well as Martius, was one of the despised sect. Up to the present, Virgilia had never refused to twine the garlands to be laid on the altars of the household gods or at the feet of the special god which Claudia worshipped in her own room. She had not refused because she felt that it would agitate her mother too much, and the man who came from the School of Esculapsius on the Island in the Tiber where the Temple was, had warned them against exciting the invalid. It might cause her death, he said.

Virgilia knew, however, that the time must come soon when, if she was loyal to her faith, she must refuse to offer outward homage to the pagan gods.

In spite of her belief in Christ and her desire to serve him, her heart grew cold within her and her limbs trembled at the thought of that dread time, for she was very delicate and her mother's will was strong. How could she defy her mother? It was an awful crime in pagan Rome to refuse to offer libations and flowers before the shrines of the family gods, a crime punishable by death.

Had she strength to stand firm?

II. THE "LITTLE FISH."

In the meantime, Martius was still under the roof of his father's house. It looked now as if he would be allowed to stay there, for his step-mother's illness and the quiet condition of her mind during her convalescence, gave rise to the hope that when completely recovered, she would be no longer so intolerant and would permit the religious differences to be forgotten.

Aurelius Lucanus was a broad-minded man. In his business as a lawyer and pleader of cases in the Law Courts of the Forum, he had come into personal contact with several of the Christians, finding them to be men and women of the strictest rectitude and following stern moral codes, such as were notably unobserved by the Roman of that day.

One of his clients was a widow, Octavia, wife of Aureus Cantus, the Senator, a woman of rare mental gifts and a personality which was at once gracious and commanding. She had two children, a boy and girl, a little older than Martius and Virgilia, and the lawyer, while saying nothing, had noticed that his son was not averse to lingering in the office when the sweet Hermione came with her mother to consult him on some subjects dealing with her husband's will and the large property interests now coming under the widow's control.

Octavia did not live in the handsome house formerly occupied when her husband was living on the same street where Aurelius Lucanus dwelt, preferring to leave it in charge of her freedman and his wife, who had served her family for many years. She occupied a villa about two miles from the city gates, where there were immense vineyards, festooned between mulberry trees. The vines were now hung with great purple clusters of grapes, promises of luscious fruits a little later, when the time of the Vendemmia should come in October. Then, there would be feasting and merriment among the servants, but no dancing or drinking, as was the custom on other grape plantations, so numerous on the broad Campagna around Rome.

Before Martius had been sent away from home, by his step-mother's orders, in the main hope that the poison of Christian belief would be drawn from his mind, he had been a student in his father's office, going with him daily at nine o'clock and returning at two for the family dinner. Now, he resumed his studies for the legal profession, and once more walked proudly by his father's side through the crowded passageways of the city and the broad, handsome streets of the Forum. Martius was a little taller than his father.

Aurelius Lucanus was, like many another pagan, no great believer in the gods, although, partly from regard to prevailing sentiment, partly because of his business relations, he outwardly gave attention to the formal customs of the day.

This morning, as father and son entered the Forum, passing by the great statue of Jupiter standing in front of the temple dedicated to his worship, Aurelius bowed profoundly, and muttered a prayer, but Martius, his proud young head held high, passed by, without making his obeisance.

The two were followed, as usual, by a servant, who happened this morning to be Alyrus, the Moor. He closely observed Martius and a faint smile or sneer added to the ugliness of his disfigured face. Alyrus had a fine face, so far as form and feature went, but his expression was full of cunning and revenge. In his ears he wore two huge gold rings, chased in cabalistic characters of strange design. They were the emblem of his chieftain power in that land bordering on the desert, from which he had been so rudely carried away. It was not strange that Alyrus, a barbarian, should bear in his heart a bitter hatred for the Romans and all that belonged to them. A slave, he was, and Sahira, too, but they loathed their bonds. It did not occur to Alyrus to be grateful that when they were placed on a platform down yonder at the lower end of the Forum, to be sold to the highest bidder, Aurelius Lucanus, who had bought him first, being moved by pity, had also purchased Sahira, his daughter, paying for her many sesterces of gold, because she was very beautiful and could bring a high price. Thus, father, and daughter, (who was somewhat superfluous in a house already well-supplied with women-slaves) were able to dwell together, and Sahira was spared many humiliations and dangers to which a beautiful young slave was inevitably subjected in these degenerate days of ancient Rome.

Alyrus was not the only person who observed the "irreverence" of Martius. A priest of Jupiter, coming out of the Temple, saw the whole thing and made his own comments. He knew Aurelius Lucanus, the Advocate, slightly, but not the young man with him.

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He stepped quickly to the side of Alyrus, who had been very profound in his reverence to the god, although he hated Rome's gods as he hated her people.

"Who is that young man?" inquired the priest.

"The son of my master, Aurelius Lucanus."

"And thou?"

"I am a humble porter," responded Alyrus, with such bitterness that it attracted the priest's attention. Being a man who understood character at a glance, he seized the opportunity. Anything which could in any way enable the pagans to hunt down the hated, despised followers of that Christus who had made them so much trouble, was worth following up. The priests knew that there were thousands of men in Rome who had no faith at all in the gods, but there were few who would dare neglect an outward observance. When a man did that, in the public Forum, he was certainly possessed of that strange courage typical of the Christians.

"Thou art a slave."

Alyrus bowed, keeping his eyes on his master and son, now approaching the splendid white marble law-courts.

"What is thy country?"

"Beyond the seas, your reverence."

Alyrus turned a pair of black eyes on the questioner. In them smouldered hidden passions.

"Your young master does not bow before Jupiter."

"No."

"And why, may I ask? His father is, I know, a faithful follower of our gods. Why not his son, also?"

The portico, surmounted by a marvelous relief in marble, a copy of an allegorical representation of jurisprudence, brought from Greece, was in front of the slave and the priest. The lawyer and Martius had already vanished in the cool shadows of the interior.

For one moment, Alyrus hesitated. It was an awful thing for a slave to betray his master's son. He gave one backward thought to those days when hundreds of horsemen acknowledged him chief, and date-palms waved their feathery arms over his tent; he remembered that he was a slave, bought with a price, and his master had struck him. And he remembered Sahira and her tears.

"Because Martius, son of Aurelius, is a Christian," he replied, and in his heart was a fearsome glee.

He was walking up the broad steps, now, while the priest, laying a detaining hand on his arm, said: "I see that thou art a man to be trusted. I am interested in these Christians. I would hear more. Come to me tomorrow, at the Temple, after sundown. There is a little back entrance in the alleyway. Ask for Lycidon, the priest of Jupiter, and show the porter this symbol. It will admit thee."

The priest was gone, and Alyrus, half-dazed, stood under the arch between two tall columns and gazed down at the bronze lizard he held in his hand. The lizard leered at him, he thought.

Just at that moment a cry was heard, which drove the crowds of people aside.

"Way! Way for the noble Lady, Octavia, widow of Aureus Cantus, Senator of the Roman Empire. Way! I say."

Through the ranks of people was borne a large chair, gilded and wrought in graceful form, adapted to such a woman as Octavia, reported to be possessed of enormous wealth. The embroidered curtains were tightly drawn, so that the passerby could not look in, but so curious were they to see the lady whose name was familiar to all, owing to the valuable services rendered by her illustrious husband to the State, that the people crowded the steps of the Law Courts to watch Octavia and her daughter Hermione descend.

They drew their veils closely, but a murmur of admiration arose as Hermione's veil slipped aside and revealed cheeks of cream and rose, eyes inherited from some northern hero, of deep violet blue, and hair, arranged in ringlets, in the style of the age, of a red-brown tint.

Hastily, the two ladies passed into the dark corridors of the court, and were soon admitted to the private office of Aurelius Lucanus. Two attendants, who had walked behind the chair all the way from the Villa to guard their mistress and her daughter, waited in the ante-chamber with Alyrus, whose duty it was to remain here until the lawyer's day of work was over.

The Roman welcomed Octavia with much ceremony. He bowed to Hermione, who threw back her veil and greeted Martius as an old friend.

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While her mother explained the matter of business to her trusted lawyer, Hermione and Martius withdrew to the other side of the room and sat down side by side on an ivory and ebony bench in the window. High above them was Caesar's Palace, white and glistening in the September sunshine. Sweet scents from the imperial gardens came to them, but sweeter yet, in its innocence and freshness was the face of the young girl.

"Thou hast been long absent, Martius?" she said, while she twirled in her fingers a tea-rose, large and fragrant.

"Half a year, Hermione."

"And hast never wanted to see Rome? Was it so lovely in those far-off Eastern lands that thou couldst forget thy home and thy friends?"

"Not so. But it was not possible for me to return. My heart yearned for Rome. There is no place like her in all the world, in the whole Roman Empire," he said, proudly.

"Was it thy business kept thee?" Then fearing lest she might be asking too much, Hermione blushed. Martius thought that the rich color flooding her cheek was in tint like that of a wondrous rose he had seen on the Isle of Cyprus, where his ship had touched in the journey toward Asia Minor. "Do not answer if it is not my right to know," she added, hastily. "I thought,—we are old friends—"

Martius was silent. He had heard that Octavia was a Christian, while her husband was not. He did not know whether Hermione followed the religion of her father or her mother. They had never talked on these matters. Christians, while exceedingly courageous where their principles were involved, did not run useless risks. There was always danger.

He drew from his tunic a small wax-tablet, and with the ivory stylus, began, carelessly, to scribble on it, as if he had not noticed her question, or as she might readily infer, did not wish to reply.

Hermione, slightly embarrassed and annoyed, watched him idly drawing. Then her breath came quickly and her face glowed. He was drawing, in the midst of other designs, a fish; little by little, it became plain.

Under her breath, she said: "I, too, am a Little Fish."

There was a sudden clasping of hands, as Martius looked frankly into her eyes.

"I was sent away," he explained, after assuring himself that his father and Octavia were still busy discussing the case. "Sent away because I learned to believe in Christ. My step-mother would not have me at home. She hates the Christians, and my father yielded to her, though, personally, he is indifferent and says that everyone has a right to believe what he pleases."

"Why didst thou return? Is thy step-mother satisfied?" Hermione asked eagerly.

"Only a few weeks ago. My father's wife has been very ill. She is only now convalescing. All depends on the attitude she takes. I must wait. And in the meantime, I am preparing to be a lawyer, like my father. If I can stay in Rome, I shall be very happy. If not, I shall go to one of the distant provinces."

"O, I hope not!" she exclaimed.

Martius smiled at her.

"I hope not, too," he replied.

"There is another complication," Martius continued, after a pause. "The real cause of my stepmother's illness was Virgilia's declaration that she, too, has adopted the Christian faith. Where she heard about it, further than the things I taught her, I do not know. Thou seest, that the matter is very complicated."

"And dangerous. Dost thou not know that there has been talk in the Senate about the constantly increasing number of Christians in Rome and in the Empire? It is growing, this religion of Jesus Christ."

"Thanks be to His name," said Martius.

"Amen. But with the growth comes peril and perhaps death. We may have to bear witness for our faith before very long. My mother has been warned but feels no fear. She says that where other martyrs have gone, we can go. She is very brave."

"He giveth strength in time of need. We must wait and trust."

Hermione stretched out her hand to him and he grasped it warmly in his strong one. They were destined to be firm, true friends, these two young Christians who faced an unknown and dangerous future.

Octavia arose.

"Come, Hermione," she said, "we must be going."

The lawyer rang a small silver bell on his desk, and Alyrus appeared at the door.

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“See that the Lady Octavia's chair is ready.”

The Moor vanished.

“And now, my lady, I trust that you will not be at all anxious about this matter. I will attend to it.”

“I thank you. Greetings to your wife, and we hope to see you both soon at our Villa. The grapes are almost ready for the gathering. My children are counting much on the festivities for the Vendemmia. Can you not come at that time, you and Claudia, with your son and daughter. It will delight Hermione and Marcus. I will send a messenger to remind you again before the Feast of the Grapes.”

“Claudia has been very ill, my lady. I fear that she could not bear the motion of the chair so soon. But I will tell her of your gentle bidding to the feast, when the God Bacchus is adored with so much mirth.”

A cloud crossed Octavia's face.

“The God Bacchus—” she began, but stopped. The warning she had received but a few days before from a Christian high in the service of the Emperor, rang in her ears. “We must be courageous, Octavia,” he had said, “but we must not be foolish.”

“If you permit, we will send Martius and Virgilia to represent us at the feast,” added Aurelius.

“With pleasure. I will send a messenger before the day.”

The lawyer and Martius bowed low, and the two ladies, who were carefully veiled went out on the portico. Aurelius Lucanus assisted them into the luxurious chair and he and Martius stood watching them as the four tall bearers carried them away, followed by two stalwart men. It had been a marvel to certain circles of Roman society that Octavia had freed all her slaves, men and women, after the death of Aureus. It was some business connected with this unusual matter that had brought her to the lawyer's office today.

Some had said that she was crazy to free hundreds of slaves. Others had whispered behind their hands that there were other reasons, Octavia followed Christus, and the Christians did not own slaves. But they dared not say this aloud, for Octavia was very rich and had powerful friends, even in Caesar's Palace.

III. THE HYMN OF THE WATER-CARRIER.

As the lawyer and his children reclined at the triclinium in the cool arcade opening on the garden, Martius narrated to Virgilia his conversation with Hermione that morning in his father's office.

It was the custom, in the summer months, for the family to take their meals out of doors, in the shadowed corridor, where there was almost always a pleasant breeze, even when the sun scorched the bricks and square stones of the street in front of their house. Occasionally, a man would pass through the streets, carrying a sheepskin filled with water. He sang a strange, low song as he sprinkled the red bricks from which a thick steam arose at once, so scorching hot were they.

He was singing now; the weird melody penetrated even to the corridor.

“What a strange song!” said Aurelius Lucanus, cutting a piece of tender chicken, roasted on a spit before an open fire in the kitchen so tiny that there was scarcely room for the cook and his attendants to move about. Yet here, they prepared the elaborate dinners, served with the utmost nicety, in which Romans delighted. “It is different from anything I ever heard.”

Two men were carrying around the table huge platters of food. One was Alyrus, the Moor, who was not only a porter, but a general factotum. His duties were many and various, from sweeping the floors and keeping their highly-colored mosaics clear and shining, to accompanying his master to business, as he had done this morning, and assisting the man who served at table. He was sent, also, with Virgilia when she went to pay a visit to some of her friends, or when, in former times, she went to see one of the Vestal Virgins, and worshipped at the shrine. There had been some talk of her taking the vows of the Vestals, who held a very high position in Rome, but both her father and mother felt that, as an only daughter, she could not be spared from home, Marcella, one of her companions, had always entered as a novice. In all her seventeen years of life, Virgilia had never been alone outside of her father's house. It was not the custom for young girls to go upon the streets unaccompanied. Even when she paid a visit, Alyrus or one of the other slaves was waiting in the ante-chamber, to obey her lightest call.

The other slave, who followed Alyrus with a glass carafe of iced water, was named Alexis. He was a Greek, from near Ephesus, seized as prisoner by one of the victorious generals, sold to Aurelius as Alyrus and Sahira had been. He was unusually handsome, very tall, with broad, well-formed shoulders and a face and head like one of the ancient pagan gods, whose statues have come down to us from the chisel of Phidias, the Greek sculptor. His skin was fair and his hair yellow as gold. Between him and the dark Moor who walked near him, there was the difference between light and darkness. It was not a difference in physical beauty, altogether, although Alyrus bore not only the disfiguring scar on his face, but smallpox scars, he was not altogether unpleasing in appearance. The difference lay chiefly in the expression of eyes and mouth. Alyrus was satirical, sneering, critical; Alexis was gentle, yet commanding; benign, yet firm.

Both slaves became alert, as the Master had been, listening to the song of the water-carrier, now becoming less and less distinct.

Alexis's eyes shown, but Alyrus cast a malignant glance at Martius, whose face was flushed.

“What a strange song!” repeated the lawyer. “It seems to be religious in its type, yet I never heard it at our functions or in the temples. Who was that man, Alyrus? Thou, who sittest ever at the doorway and hast an insatiable curiosity about our neighbors, wilt surely know.”

Alyrus frowned at the implied reproof which was, after all, for the Moor kept closely to himself, except when information could serve some end.

“It is Lucius, the water-carrier,” he said, as shortly as he dared speak to his master. “It is a Christian song that he is singing.”

“Ah!”

Aurelius selected a large, rosy peach, covered with burnished down and deliciously cold, from the dish presented to him by Alexis. The figs, grapes and peaches were laid in snow and cracked ice, brought from distant lands and preserved in this tropical clime by some process known to the Romans. If Aurelius Lucanus had not been one of the most prominent advocates in the city, receiving a large pension from the Emperor himself, he could not have afforded these luxuries.

Virgilia

There was a scowl on his forehead as he pared the peach daintily with a sharp silver knife. These Christians were beginning to make him nervous.

There was the Lady Octavia, for instance, who must needs be so foolish as to release all her slaves just because of a silly fancy that Christians should not possess human beings as property. She would lose half her income by this freak, and a good share of her principal invested in these slaves. What would Aureus Cantus have said to such a wild thing as this? He should have tied up his affairs in a way which would have prevented the widow from having the rights to do it. She was now in for trouble and he did not know how to get her out of it. His own reputation would suffer if he lost her case.

And then, he had to deal with Martius and Virgilia. That was even more difficult, for he loved them both very dearly, and hated to be severe with them. The illness of Claudia could be traced to the same cause, the singular fanaticism of the members of this new sect.

“The Lady Octavia has invited us to come to enjoy the festivities of the grape-gathering,” Martius was saying.

“It was very good of her and we shall have a splendid time. Everything at the villa is so beautiful. I wish that father would buy a home out on the Campagna. But he says that he cannot afford to keep up two establishments and he must remain in Rome on account of the Emperor and the Law Courts.”

“Father says, though, that when the Emperor goes to his villa at Antium, we shall all go, too. The Emperor wants father near at hand. Thou knowest that his magnificent villa is finished now. The house is enormous, and there is room for us and many others.”

“Hast thou seen Octavia's place?”

“Very often. During thy absence, I have been carried frequently out of the gates and along the Ostian Way. Mother never wished to go. She dislikes the Lady Octavia. Alyrus, and sometimes Alexis, was with me.”

The lawyer had now left the table, retiring to his wife's room. Martius cast a cautious look around and, seeing no one, said, under his breath: “I do not wonder that mother does not desire to go there. Thou knowest, that they, too, are of the faith? Today, Hermione told me: 'I too, am a little Fish.'”

A smile lit up Virgilia's sweet face.

“Who should know it better than I? For from Hermione I have heard much of Christ. With her, I went to the meetings of the Christians, of our brothers and sisters, and heard the Truth.”

“What will be the outcome of it all, Virgilia?” Martius spoke earnestly in her ear. “When mother is well, what will happen? Thou dost remember what she said, that we must both leave this roof? I try to forget those cruel words, I try to believe that I shall stay here, to work in my father's office, to take up his profession, to be in that dearest place of all—home. It is hard to be exiled, Virgilia, hard never to see Rome again, Rome, the centre of the world. But if it should be hard for me, what will it be for thee, so tenderly matured, so lovingly cared for? It cannot be possible that Claudia will thrust thee, her own daughter, forth from her door, simply because thou hast become a follower of Christus. No. It is only a bad dream.”

That Martius was deeply in earnest could be seen from his clenched hands, where the nails sank into the flesh, from the pallor of his cheeks and the sorrow in his eyes.

“Neither can I believe it. Martius, by nature, mother is not cruel. It is only our religion that she hates, not us. But when the moment comes that she asks me to give up Christ, I will face hunger and privation, even death, itself, for His sweet sake.”

The light of that exaltation which filled the martyrs of ancient days with strength to face a shameful and awful death was on Virgilia's face, it was the look of a saint.

Martius was thrilled by her enthusiasm.

“And I, too, dear sister, will never deny my Saviour. We will go forth together, if need be. Let us hope for better things, however. God can do all things.

“Amen,” responded Virgilia. “But, Martius, things cannot continue as they are now. Each morning, to please my mother, I weave the garlands for the statues of the gods, I offer sweet oils and spices and libations at the altar. I could not do otherwise while she was so ill. Now, she is getting better. Tomorrow, or the next day, I must refuse to do this. What will happen then?”

They had left the triclinium, and were walking slowly in the garden. So tall was she that Virgilia's head was almost on a level with that of her stalwart brother. Alyrus and Alexis had cleared the table, watching with keen gaze the young people walking in the Pergola, beneath the heavy grape vine, whose leaves, pierced by the sun,

Virgilia

cast queer shadows over Virgilia's white draperies and on her abundant hair, which threw back glints of copper tints to mock the shifting lights. Alyrus watched them because he hated them and longed for the moment when he could wreak his revenge. Alexis looked at them in love, for he, too, was a Christian, and the reason for the scene which Claudia had made in the garden on the day when Martius returned from exile, was well known to all the servants. In the dark corners of their miserable quarters, they discussed the situation, wondering what would happen. In these early days of Christianity, men and women often worked side by side, never daring to make known that they were Christians, for fear that the other might prove traitor. In this household of Aurelius Lucanus and Claudia, there were three slaves who were Christians, and one was Alexis, the Greek, but the others were unaware of it. He waited now in silence, hoping to be able to help the young son and daughter of his master. He, too, saw the shadow of suspicion creeping nearer, growing larger. Some day the Christians of Rome would be enveloped in the darkness and then would come death, as it had come in other times to other martyrs of the Cross.

Martius had only time to seize his sister's hand and press it warmly, when his father's voice was heard behind them.

"Virgilia, thy mother needs thee. Go to her. She seems to be very weak. Do nothing to agitate or excite her. Sacrifice thine own wishes to hers."

He was gone, and the girl looked in bewilderment at Martius.

"Dost think that he heard what I said?" She whispered.

Martius shrugged his shoulders.

"I know not. But he is right, Virgilia. Thou must wait. For a time, we must worship in secret. Some day, all will be open to the light and we must suffer what comes. Christ will help us."

"Yes, Christ will give us strength."

All that afternoon, Virgilia sat patiently by her mother's couch. The change in the proud woman during these weeks of illness was only too apparent. It seemed as if the ardor of her hatred had burned out her strength. Her lovely eyes were lustreless. The neck on which Sahira had hung a splendid cord of sapphires from Persia, linked together with milky pearls from India, was thin and haggard. Her skin, fair and beautiful on that day when she sat so proudly by her husband and daughter in the Circus, watching the gladiatorial contest, was yellow and drawn. The jewels were a mockery in the shadow of threatened death.

It was nearing sundown when Virgilia, very tired from the hours passed in gently soothing her mother's querulous complaints, giving her cooling drinks and telling her old Grecian legends to amuse her, entered her own little cubicle, her sleeping-chamber.

In Roman houses, the sleeping quarters were the smallest, the worst ventilated of all. It is a superstition, come down to modern times, that night air is injurious. Many ancient Roman dwellings show that rooms used for sleeping sometimes had no windows at all, the sole means of ventilation being provided by the doorway, which was curtained, opening into a larger room, or by a small trap door in the ceiling.

The furniture in Virgilia's room was very simple. The bed was a couch, covered with white, with head and foot-board of ebony, curved in form and inlaid with quaint flower designs in mother-of-pearl. There was one chair, with slender arms, also in ebony and mother-of-pearl, and a stand, with ewer and basin of beaten brass. The floor was laid in red brick, and on it, at the bedside, lay a tiger-skin, brought from the East. Its tawny tints, varied by bright yellow, were the only colors in the room.

Virgilia was fond of fresh air. She pushed up the trap door in the roof, reaching it easily, as the ceiling was so low, and let in a flood of glorious evening light. Through the aperture she could see a patch of brilliant blue sky. The swallows, dipping and circling, were swirling about in the heavens, black specks against the golden light of the departing sun.

Virgilia drew a long breath and then another. It had been very hot and very fatiguing in her mother's room. She had refused to have any sun or light except that coming out of the large living-room, from which four sleeping chambers opened.

The girl stretched out her arms, in graceful languor, then, throwing herself on the couch, she closed her eyes, but she was not sleeping. A panorama of thoughts and visions passed rapidly through her mind. She saw herself as she had been, a pagan, a worshipper of the gods, with no thought above the arranging of her hair or the flowers she would wear at the banquets. She recalled the visits to Hermione and the quiet meetings of the Christians in their hiding-places in the catacombs, surrounded by the graves of many martyrs to the Christian faith.

Virgilia

One scene she would never forget. It was one afternoon when she and Hermione accompanied by Marcus leaving Alyrus sleeping in the antechamber, had slipped out by a side entrance, joining the other Christians in the shadowy passageways of the underground cemeteries.

An old man, with snowy beard and piercing eyes was reading aloud a letter, a letter from the Apostle Paul to those who were at Rome. The light from torches stuck into the rough walls of the cubiculum shone on an hundred upturned faces of brave followers of Christ who knew not on what day, or in what hour they would be arrested and thrown into prison.

They listened to the words of their fellow Christian, Paul, who had seen the Lord on the way to Damascus.

“To all that be in Rome,” he wrote, “beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ * * * Your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world * * * I long to see you * * * I am debtor both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians * * * So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the Gospel to you that are at Rome also.”

Then the elder told them that a report had been brought by brethren arrived from Antioch, that the Apostle, who had for some time been confined at Caesarea, had finally appealed to Caesar, and would be brought to Rome to be tried. He might come at any time, and perhaps they would be privileged to see him face to face.

Marcus and Hermione had said also on the way back to the villa, that their mother thought that some day the Apostle would come to Rome, it might be soon, and would bring them news of the Lord Christ, for he had seen him with his own eyes.

The darkness settled down over Rome and still Virgilia dreamed on, but the dreams were not prophetic; in the visions which she had there were no forebodings of that which was to come.

IV. THE INNER SHRINE OF JUPITER.

Alyrus crept out of the rear door of the house about sundown, while Virgilia, her head pillowed on a cushion of soft down, was dreaming of things past. He told Alexis to guard the entrance and if the master inquired for him to tell him that a pair of sandals needed repairing and he was carrying them to the shoemaker. In fact, he had the sandals, of yellow Persian leather, wrapped up in an old handkerchief, and showed them to the Greek.

While Alexis seated himself on the porter's marble bench just inside the front door, left open that the evening breeze blowing fresh and cool from the sea might pass through the heated rooms, Alyrus went into the narrow alley at the rear. Just outside, a man crouched against the brick wall. It was Lucius, the water-carrier, who had sung the Christian hymn so boldly on the streets where pagan gods were worshipped. His goat-skin water-bag was empty and lay, wrinkled and collapsed, beside him.

Lucius, himself, was a strange sight in the midst of the luxurious people of Rome. A peasant he was, dwelling in a cave far out on the Roman Campagna, remote from the splendid villas and gardens lining the wide ways leading out of the city to North and South and West. This cave was in a mass of tufa rock rising abruptly from the flat, green fields, and not far from the aqueduct, three tiers of brick arches, one above the other, joined by massive masonry, through which fresh water was brought in big leaden pipes to the city.

Hundreds of long-horned cattle, white and clean and strong, were grazing in the fields. It was such as these that Cincinnatus guided, ploughing the fields, when the messenger rode swiftly from Rome to call him to come and save her by becoming Dictator.

Lucius was a tiller of the fields, but, also, a water-carrier. He was resting now, after his labors in the scorching sunshine, half-asleep.

The Moor roused him into wide wakefulness, by giving him a sturdy kick.

"What art thou doing here, lazybones? Get thou to thy kennel, wherever it may be, dog of a Christian, and do not dare to show thy face here again."

"Dog of a Christian!" murmured Lucius, scrambling to his feet. "How did you know?"

Alyrus caught the words.

"How did I know? When a creature such as thou singest thy wicked songs in broad daylight, he must expect to be heard. A little more and thou, too, wilt go to feed the lions and offer entertainment to the thousands who are weary of other amusements and seek something new. Turn pale, scarecrow, and tremble. Thy day will come, the day when those and others—shall suffer. Ha! ha! it strikes home, doesn't it? Thou fearest, eh? So much the better."

Lucius stood before him, a pitiable figure. His body, brown as an Indian's, was bare almost to the waist. He wore only one garment, a sort of a shirt, made from the skin of one of his own sheep. His legs and feet were as brown as the rest of his body, and as tough as those of an animal.

His hair was black and long, a lock hung over his forehead and hid his black eyes. A long beard fell from cheeks and chin on to his hairy breast. There was nothing attractive about his appearance, it was thoroughly animal.

"I am not afraid," he replied, with such dignity that Alyrus stared at him. "When my time comes, I can die, trusting to a God whom thou knowest not, Alyrus, the Moor, doorkeeper in the house of Aurelius Lucanus."

"Thou knowest me, then?"

"I know thee well." His manner became cringing and servile. "I did but wait here a moment to rest, and fell asleep. I will go on my way."

Alyrus nodded and walked on, going first to the shoemaker's, a tiny shop where a man worked all day and slept at night. Having accomplished this business, and saved himself from having left a lying message for the lawyer, the porter went on his way to the Forum, where all was still now, for the business of the day was over. A few men were passing, but they paid no attention to the Moor.

It was quite dark, heavy clouds from the west were encircling rapidly toward Rome and the wind had increased to a gale. There were sharp flashes of copper-blue lightning and a roar of thunder like booming cannon, echoing against the Alban and Salbine Hills encircling the city.

Virgilia

So dark was it that Alyrus did not observe that he was followed; did not see a strange figure with a sheep-skin flung over his back not far behind him, slipping from one doorway to another, hiding behind pillars, keeping the Moor ever in view.

Lucius the shepherd knew only one thing, intelligently, and that was the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Even the most ignorant can learn this. The knowledge had been obtained one day, when, seeing a company of men and women crossing the Campagna, he had, out of curiosity, followed them to their gathering-place, where he had learned the truth about Jesus. Outside of this Lucius was absolutely unlearned, and almost as stupid as his own sheep. He had not wit enough to know that when he sang a Christian hymn where any and all could hear it his life was in the greatest danger. He was stupid, downright stupid, but he had a keen eye, knew whom to trust and was possessed of an insatiable curiosity.

Because, by instinct, he knew that Alyrus was up to some mischief, he followed him to see where he went. There was another reason. In the house of Aurelius Lucanus dwelt a small scullery maid, who assisted the slaves in the kitchen, doing all the dirty work and being struck and sworn at for any mistake. She earned a few cents a day. Lucius was waiting outside in the alley-way, as was his daily custom after finishing his work, to exchange a word with his daughter, whom he dearly loved.

I have said that in the lawyer's household were three Christians, one was Alexis, the Greek, and another was Lidia, the scullery-maid, who had been baptized by the white-haired elder in the Catacomb, beside her father.

Through her Lucius had learned that Martius and Virgilia were, also, Christians and, with his usual genius for following people, he had gone behind them to the Christian meeting place. He knew how wicked Alyrus was, how ill the Lady Claudia had been and for what reason. Lidia had poured out the whole story to him.

Lucius crouched down near the temple door at the side of the huge white building with its many columns, after he had heard the knock Alyrus gave at the small portal, and had heard the door clang behind the porter. No good could come from that temple and its priests. Even though they bowed before the statue of the god and burned incense, the Romans did not trust the priests. They regarded them as intriguers, trying to get their hands on everything, ready to worm out secrets for their own profit and obtain private and political power whenever possible.

The great black cloud enveloped Rome. It belched out lightning and thunder, the flashes revealing the groups of stately buildings in the Forum and Caesar's palace on the Palatine Hill. The rain poured in torrents and it hailed, the ground was white with stones, some as large as pigeon eggs.

Still, Lucius waited, calmly. He was accustomed to all sorts of weather and his finery could not be spoiled. He drew his bare legs up under him, threw the skin water bag over his head and shoulders and waited.

Neither did Alyrus trust the priests. After all, these were not his gods, nor his priests. He worshipped Baal, a greater god than Jupiter. As a matter of personal safety, however, he bowed the knee to those strange and worthless gods of Rome.

He kept his eyes well open, having been admitted to the temple by a young priest, who, carrying a taper, led him through several winding passages. A man could get into this gruesome building and never find his way out, thought Alyrus, and though a brave chieftain in his own country, he shivered here in the black corridors, echoing with every footfall.

The priest conducted him to a large square room, with very high ceiling, lighted only by a single silver lamp having five branches, each of which contained a taper. Evidently this was an internal room, having no windows. Alyrus judged that it was lighted by day from an opening in the roof, covered with transparent material which withstood water. The rain began to beat upon it, and later, hailstones clattered by the thousands.

Around the table sat six priests, ghostly in their white robes. Their faces were stern and gloomy. The Moor began to feel a misgiving about his errand here. Perhaps after all, it would have been wiser to stay at home.

"Hast thou the token I gave thee?" asked Lycidon, the priest, who sat at the head of the table.

Alyrus saw that he was higher in position than the others. Around his forehead was bound a golden circlet, bearing a lizard covered with jewels. Its eyes were two emeralds and its body blazed with diamonds and rubies.

"I have."

The porter held up the bronze lizard, similar in form to that on the priest's forehead.

"It is well. Come forward to the light, and relate to me and these my brethren, all that thou knowest of thy master."

Virgilia

The spirit of recklessness which makes men daring possessed Alyrus at this moment. He felt approaching the glad hour of his revenge on those whom he despised. But he had not lost all caution.

“What do I get as a reward for this knowledge which you so much desire?”

The priest rose to his full height. His eyes blazed with anger and he raised his arm to strike Alyrus, who did not cringe but faced him boldly, though his dark cheeks grew livid.

An aged priest on the superior's right, laid a trembling hand on his arm.

“Is it wise?” he asked, gently. “If thou frightenest the slave, he will not give thee correct information.”

“Thou art late to-night, father,” said Lidia, reaching up her hardened little hands to caress affectionately his weatherworn cheek. “I was just going to bed.”

“I was late because I was watching *him*,” Lucius nodded his head toward the door.

“Who? the master? Surely thou wouldst not.”

“Be not so hasty, Lidia. It was not the master, but Alyrus.”

“Oh! he is worth watching,” responded wise and observant Lidia.

She was little thing, in spite of her twenty years, with a small face, old in anxiety, but sparkling with vivacity. Lucius had said sometimes that her eyes talked, they varied so with her different moods. She petted and humored her father in an amusingly maternal way, and carried the cares of his poor home in her heart.

“I believe it. To-night, he has been for an hour at the temple in the Forum, and it bodes little good. What has he to do with the priests of Jupiter? I trust not one of them, not one. It means some evil to this dwelling.”

Lidia's eyes grew anxious.

“I fear,” she began then paused. She had learned that while her father was apt in tracing information, he was not to be relied on in moments when delicate problems were to be solved. Her own brain was much more clear. “I will watch,” she added. “Go home now, dear father and get thy rest, for our God is ever near us. No harm can really destroy us. It can only touch our bodies, not our souls, as the Great Teacher saith.”

“And thou, Lidia,” the shepherd drew her close to him and turned the determined little face so that he could see her. “Art thou happy here? Remember thou art no slave, though thou hast chosen to be a menial. Thy father wears no iron ring of bondage around his neck. He is a free man.”

“I wash the kettles clean,” replied Lidia, laughing, while her expressive eyes danced, “and that is something. What said our Teacher? He who does the meanest work faithfully and well, has the Lord Christ by his side. I am happy. And though I am only a kitchen maid, I can see sometimes sweet Lady Virgilia whom I love. She is in danger, father. Perhaps—perhaps, the little unknown maid in the kitchen may save her. Who knows?”

“As thou wilt, child, as thou wilt. But it is lonely without thee in the cave on the Campagna.”

He started on his long walk homeward and Lidia watched his strange, wild-looking figure until it was out of sight.

“Our God protect thee,” she said in her heart and going inside, closed and barred the door.

Before she went to bed she sought out a woman called *The Old One*. What her real name was, or whence she had come, even Aurelius himself did not know. She had come into his possession as a legacy from his father, who had said: “Guard and care for her well, for she has view of the future beyond that of human kind.” Now, she was very aged, her form was bowed and her face covered with tiny wrinkles. Some said that she had passed the century limits; but no one knew, and her secrets were buried in her own heart.

The Old One was reputed to be very wise. Her expression was almost queenly in its dignity, and placid and kindly.

To her, Lidia poured out the news brought her by Lucius, adding to these some things that her father did not know, which bore light upon the designs of Alyrus and his daughter, Sahira.

The Old One listened, quietly. Then she laid her withered hand on Lidia's head, very gently.

“Lie down and sleep, my child, and be at peace. The Lord is with thee. What the future holds we fear not.”

There were three Christians in the servants' quarters of the lawyer's home, one was Alexis, the Greek, one was Lidia, the scullery-maid. And the third was the Old One, whose age no man knew, or whence she came.

V. THE OLD ONE SPEAKS.

Aurelius, the lawyer, found his wife crying when he returned from business a fortnight later. It was one of those rainy days, coming early in October, when it seems as though the skies opened to let down streams of water, washing trees and bushes, drenching the heavy dust, which, during a long summer drouth had accumulated so much in the cracks of the stones on the streets, on the roofs and ledges of the houses and on the leaves of vines and flowers that even the thunder-storm on that night when Alyrus made his visit to the temple had not had force enough to remove it.

It was a desolate day. In Rome when it rains the whole aspect changes, it becomes dreary and depressing. Even people are affected by the gloom, nerves are set on edge, and Aurelius, having had a trying morning, was a little irritated to find his wife in this condition.

Remembering her weakness, he sat down beside her, took her cold hand in his and said, gently: "What is the matter, dear one? What has happened to annoy thee?"

"It is that miserable sect of Christians. I cannot bear them. Here is thy son, Martius, acting the fool, stubborn, wilful, and now Virgilia must show the same traits. It is past endurance. Something must be done to break this charm whatever it is, that controls them so. I wish that every Christian in the land would be destroyed by Jupiter. He can do it if he wishes."

The lawyer's face grew stern. One of his troubles that morning had been that everlasting affair of the Lady Octavia, who insisted on freeing her slaves, and by this had succeeded in involving herself in a law-suit which threatened disaster, because of a prior claim to a certain slave who was very valuable.

"What has Virgilia done?" he asked, and his tone boded no good to his daughter.

"She has refused," sobbed his wife, "refused to make the garlands for the gods or offer them the customary libations. Says that she cannot; it is contrary to the law of Christ—as if that mattered! Her disobedience is bad enough in itself, but the worst for us are the punishment and misfortunes which are certain to come upon us if the gods are not placated."

Aurelius grew pale. This was to him, in spite of his general unbelief, a real difficulty. Who knew what might happen?

"Dost thou mean that the gods have been neglected all the day? It must be attended to at once!"

He sprang up, but Claudia held his hand tight in hers.

"It has been attended to. Sahira wove the garlands, a slave, not my own daughter. The gods will be wrathful, of course, but perhaps we can placate them by costly offerings of gold and spices at the temple. It is of Virgilia that I would speak. What is to be done with such an undutiful child? She must be married, or sent away to some lonely place. Perhaps marriage would be better. Then her husband would control her. The Senator Adrian Soderus has asked for her hand, but thou didst send him away. Recall him."

"He is seventy years old and as ugly as night. While Virgilia is so young and sweet."

"So stubborn and rebellious. He is old, but very rich. She will forget this foolishness when she is surrounded by such luxury as he can give her. Send for him." "Where is Virgilia now?"

"In her room, where I sent her to think over her sins and repent."

Aurelius thought of the small, dark cubiculum where his daughter sat alone on this day when the floods descended, and his heart warmed to the culprit.

"I will talk with Virgilia," he said, rising.

"And thou wilt send for the Senator?"

"We shall see."

During the silent meal, eaten by the father and son under the torch-light, so dark was the room, Aurelius did think seriously.

Of the two evils, marriage for Virgilia was, probably the one which would cause her the least suffering. To send her away to a lonely mountain place, to the holy women who dwelt apart, might break her will, but it would ruin her health. Yes, marriage would open out a new life and in the splendid home to which the Senator would be only too happy to welcome her, she would forget this new and detestable religion.

Virgilia

He summoned Virgilia to him in his own private room, the most comfortable in the house, because it opened upon the street, had light and air, was hung with rich silks in green and white and provided with chairs and couches, having soft cushions. On the floor were rugs, the work of the Old One's hands, during these long years. Day by day, hour by hour, the woman had drawn the threads through the warp, inventing the designs, forming beautiful figures with tints that harmonized. Here were the faints—colors of the ever—varying opal; the bright blue of the turquoise, the rose hues of the blossoms on the tea—rose, the aqua—marine tints of the Mediterranean Sea. Truly oriental they were, giving a hint of the Eastern origin of the Old One. Like some godmother in the fairy tale, like some ancient wife of mythological times, the Old One had wrought into these designs her own life. And what had been her thoughts during those long hours and days and years?

Virgilia's face was not streaming with tears, as her father had expected to see her. In fact, her eyes glowed with softness and beauty. Yet there was a set look about her mouth which the lawyer knew by past experience meant wilfulness.

The sympathy which had caused his heart to grow tender, vanished at sight of this radiant young being as beautiful as a goddess who bathes her face in the early morning dew, with the stubborn mouth.

Claudia was right. Something effectual must be done to bring this lovely culprit to her senses.

“Thou hast grieved thy mother very much by thy disobedience and irreverence,” he said, coldly.

“I am truly sorry, dear father. For that I am truly sorry. But, thou seest, I could not help it. It is wrong to offer flowers and prayers to the gods.”

“To whom then wouldst thou offer them?”

“We should bow only to the true God.”

“And he? Who is he? Where is he?”

“He is the one invisible and mighty, the God of Heaven and of all men.”

“That is Jupiter, the all—powerful.”

“It is not Jupiter, it is our God, as revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ.”

“A malefactor.”

Virgilia smiled.

“Crucified for us,” she murmured, “that we might have eternal life. He sitteth now on the right hand of God.”

Her father gazed at her in astonishment. The girl was certainly out of her mind? But, if she were then so was the Lady Octavia and her son and daughter, and Martius, and hundreds, perhaps even thousands of others, if rumor spoke truly. It was a dangerous heresy, and must be destroyed.

It was no use to argue with a person who was really scarcely responsible, as Virgilia now appeared to him to be. He must deal very gently with her.

“Sit down here by me, dearest, I want to talk with thee a little.”

So Virgilia sat down on a little stool at her father's feet and leaned her arm on his knee, and while he stroked her soft hair, bound with fillets of chased gold, set with large turquoises, he strove to calm her and distract her mind from its vagaries.

When he sent her away, he was fully determined on a line of action.

He drew the tablets to him, and wrote a note to the most honorable Senator Adrian Soderus, asking him to make an appointment.

Calling Alexis, he ordered him to carry the message to the house of the Senator and bring him the answer.

The Greek returned, promptly. If it stopped raining, the Senator would come to the house of the lawyer Aurelius Lucanus that evening, after sundown, accompanied by the notary.

Then he summoned Sahira.

“Thou wilt clothe the Lady Virgilia in her most costly garments. Thou wilt bind jewels in her hair and hang strings of pearls about her neck. Her fingers, too, shall be laden with rings. Tell Alexis to decorate the whole house with flowers and make it beautiful for a feast.”

Sahira went away, wondering what new turn affairs were taking, but she did as she was bid, and at sundown in all Rome no more lovely maiden could have been found than Virgilia, in her costly robes and flashing jewels. But more beautiful than all, was the white, pure soul which no man could see.

“Is it for a feast, Sahira?” asked Virgilia, looking at herself in the long metal mirror, and smiling at the reflection. Virgilia was human.

Virgilia

“For a feast, your father said,” replied the slave, leaving Virgilia in her splendor, sitting in the fast-darkening room, alone.

The Senator Adrian Soderus, indeed, lost no time. He arrived at the lawyer's house just at the hour of sundown, when the heavy clouds were scattering and the sun sent shafts of golden light to turn the mists overhanging the towers and pinnacles of Rome's palaces and temples into filmy veils. It looked like a wraith-city, hung with yellow gauze.

The chair stopped at the door and the noted man alighted with much difficulty, for he was very stout from too much indulgence in the good things of the world, and half-crippled with rheumatism, besides. It took two strong slaves to lift him out and support him until he sank, with a groan, on the largest and strongest seat possessed by Aurelius Lucanus.

Claudia was given new life by the prospect of her daughter's marriage to one of the wealthiest men in Rome, a thing which she had tried to bring to pass some months before, but failed because of her husband's opposition. He had said that it was wicked to give so fair a maiden as Virgilia to this old and feeble man. Now, Claudia thanked the gods, the objection had been removed by Virgilia's own fault.

She arrayed herself to receive the Senator with as much care as if she were going to be a guest at Caesar's table. This marriage of Virgilia's would bring her and her husband into the first rank of society, a thing for which her soul had longed for many a year. A lawyer, though a man highly honored and received at the palace, was nevertheless, considered of medium rank. The mother of a Senator took a different position. And all this had been caused merely by a chance meeting with Adrian Soderus, when he had been charmed by Virgilia's lovely face. Well, she was lovely, Claudia acknowledged, in the intervals of scolding her waiting-woman because she did not arrange the curls on her forehead to her satisfaction; no lovelier could be found in the whole province, even the emperor himself had smiled upon her one day, when she had gone with her father and mother to the palace. Emperor's smiles, however, had little value, whereas the Senator's riches were practical.

Claudia greeted the ponderous guest with deepest courtesies, and soon she and the lawyer, with the notary, a little dried-up man who took snuff freely from a golden, bejeweled box, and sneezed so violently thereafter that Virgilia, sitting alone in her room, heard him and laughed outright, had arranged the whole affair. Virgilia was only a child and did not dream that in another part of the house, she was being discussed as if she were a package of merchandise, bargained over as coolly as though the affair concerned the sale of a slave.

This was no unusual thing in ancient Rome. A girl was her father's property, to be disposed of as he saw fit and to his advantage. Neither Aurelius nor Claudia intended to be cruel to Virgilia. It was the custom of the times and her mother, at least, was thoroughly frightened over the fact that Virgilia had been led away by strange doctrines, taught by what she considered a very low class of persons. She actually believed that this disposal of the daughter whom she truly loved, would be in the end for her happiness. The Senator had a kind face. He would be good to Virgilia.

Her father was not, however, so convinced of the right, moral right, of what they were doing. He knew that he was fully within the civil right. He felt very uncomfortable and inclined to throw the whole thing up, if it were possible.

It was too late now, he feared. Claudia had set her heart on this—had been urging it for a long time. She looked brighter this evening, more like herself. Perhaps on the whole, Virgilia would not be any more unhappy in the home which this old man could give her, than she would be married to some young man whom they would choose.

The Senator provided very handsomely for Virgilia, according to the legal document already drawn up by the notary, and this was finally signed by all three contracting parties and by two freedmen brought by the notary to be witnesses.

Then, the little man, after many profound bows and a parting series of sneezes just outside the curtained door, went away. Martius was called and told to bring Virgilia.

A feast was not unusual in the house of Aurelius, and Virgilia anticipated it with pleasure. The memory of her disobedience and daring in the morning had faded from her mind for the moment. Very gaily she took Martius' hand and walked by his side.

“Thou art very beautiful to-night, sister mine,” he said, with a boy's admiration for her finery. Virgilia's laugh rang out and the group waiting silently for her arrival, heard it. The Senator smiled, Claudia drew her draperies

Virgilia

around her with a hand that trembled a little. Aurelius frowned. He wished with all his heart that he had never signed that document which bound her to this man.

"It is my fine clothes," replied Virgilia. "A peacock would be nothing without his gay feathers. What is the feast to-night, Martius?"

"I know not. Perhaps some friends of father's have come to eat and drink with us."

The Senator rose with difficulty as the radiant girl entered, led by Martius.

Amazed, Virgilia looked at her mother.

"I was called," she said, and she grew very pale.

Some time before, her mother had informed her that the great Senator had asked her hand, but, after a conversation with her father she had been assured that negotiations would be dropped. This man, the meaning of the decoration of the rooms with gay Autumn blossoms of yellow and purple; this was to be her betrothal and she had not been told. In a flash, it was revealed to her that it was a result of her refusal to do homage to the gods that morning. Very well, she would suffer the consequences bravely. But, in the house to which she was to go, she would never bow down to the idols, no matter what the result might be. She signed the contract, submitted to the Senator her hand, and sat by his side at the table, decorated his head with the marriage garland and received from him another wreath of fine white orange-blossoms.

Her father saw, with sorrow, that her face was deathly white.

There was eating and drinking and merriment, in which Virgilia, in spite of her sadness, tried to join. It did not occur to her to protest or question her father's judgment. A daughter must accept the husband chosen for her; but she wished with all her heart that it might have been Marcus, the son of Octavia, who was sitting by her side, wearing the bridal garland, rather than this feeble old man. Yet, even the thought was disloyal and unmaidenly. She dismissed it.

The merriment was at its height, and Aurelius began to feel that Virgilia would not suffer much from this necessary solution of a difficult problem, when the curtain of Persian silk at the door was suddenly torn aside and the Old One entered.

Very slowly, leaning on her staff, bowed half over, and with white hair streaming down to her shoulders, she approached the table. Claudia screamed when she saw her and the Senator trembled. People were very superstitious in those days, and the Old One was known to be a prophetess.

Aurelius left his place.

"What dost thou desire, Mother?" he asked.

She lifted to him eyes filled with a strange light. The gray mantle she wore fell away from her skinny arm as she raised it high.

"Woe! woe to the house of Lucanus!" she cried shrilly. "Your feasting shall be turned into sorrow, your rejoicing shall be changed into mourning and the voice of weeping shall be heard, a mother weeping for her daughter, a father bemoaning the loss of his children, a bridegroom grieving over a lost bride. Woe! Woe!"

Virgilia and her mother were clinging to each other. The Senator was pallid and shaking with fear.

"Woe! woe to the house of Lucanus!" wailed the aged woman, and would have fallen if Martius had not caught her in his strong arms.

The slaves, frightened, had gathered in the doorway. At a sign from Aurelius, they carried her away, while Sahira tried to assist Virgilia to calm her mother.

"She is very aged," explained the lawyer.

"She must be crazy," energetically remarked the Senator, demanding his chair.

When he had gone away, and Claudia was in bed, with Virgilia, by her side, the lawyer sat a long time in his little room and thought.

What was this woe that the Old One had prophesied for him and his household?

As the light of a rosy dawn bathed the world in the beauty of a promised day, he arose.

"She must be crazy," he said, repeating the Senator's words.

But he did not forget.

VI. THE FEAST OF THE GRAPES.

Sunshine and laughter came after clouds and sadness. It was natural that the effects of the Old One's strange words should pass away and be almost forgotten, except by the lawyer, who feared disaster. He did what for him was a novel thing. He made an offering to Jupiter. After all, there might be something in this worship of the gods; it was safer to be on the right side.

It was a gift of money that he made, a large gift, for Lucanus was prosperous and received many sesterces of gold from the imperial treasury, besides having a lucrative practice. Being so large a gift, he decided to present it in person and get full credit for his piety and devotion to the gods.

So, on a morning, a week later, accompanied by Alexis, the Greek slave, who followed Christus—though this was not known—he went to the main door of the temple in the Forum and boldly asked for the Lycidon, chief priest of Jupiter.

“Wait thou here,” he commanded, and Alexis seated himself on the steps, watching the busy crowds passing by.

It was a feast-day, and a white bull, hung with flowers was being led through the Sacred Way to a shrine where the people would worship him as possessing the spirit of a great god. Everything was a god to the Romans, even trees and animals were possessed of spirit.

Alexis looked at the bull and the procession of priests following it; at the dancing girls and the motley crowd of men and women. He prayed to Almighty God that he might show these poor deluded beings the better way to Eternal Life.

The tall superior was more gracious to the lawyer who brought rich gifts than he had been to the slave Alyrus. When he learned the name of the donor, he was still more suave and his eyes were very keen.

“Thy name shall go down to all generations as a faithful follower of the gods,” he said, laying aside the golden chalice and purse of gold pieces. “In these days when Rome is filled with new doctrines and heretics are found on every side, it is cheering to know that the learned lawyer Aurelius Lucanus gives richly to the gods.”

But when Lucanus had gone away, flattered, yet relieved to get out of those dismal corridors into the brilliant October sunshine, the priest smiled, a cruel smile of one who meditates evil. Alexis rose from his seat on the steps and followed his master to his office.

Claudia, in the excitement of preparing a handsome outfit for Virgilia, forgot the Old One's words entirely and recovered her health marvellously. She was very affectionate to Virgilia and her offense was no more mentioned, nor was she required to worship the gods. Her mother left this fever to run its course and be healed by new scenes and costly jewels.

Even Virgilia, herself, grew interested in the preparations for her departure to her husband's house, which had been fixed for a day in November, when the religious ceremony should take place. There were cedar chests to be filled with piles of linen, woven by the slaves. One very handsome oak marriage chest was full of silks and gauzes of much price, brought on the ships which sailed up the Tiber from the port of Ostia, on their return from Egypt.

A copper box held jewels, set in Etruscan gold, exquisitely chased by the cunning hands of workers in the Way of the Goldsmiths. There were opals, shimmering in the sunrays, alive with inner fires of flame-color. There were diamonds, half-cut, and pearls found in the Ganges, with emeralds and sapphires, rubies and garnets, many of them gifts from friends to whom announcements of the betrothal had been sent on ivory tablets engraved in blue.

Claudia lifted out the diadem which the emperor, himself, had caused to be brought to their door by a train of slaves, thus calling attention to their high social standing in the eyes of all the neighbors.

When the Senator gave Virgilia a necklace of diamonds to match those in the diadem sent by Caesar, Claudia felt that her cup was full of happiness. Even Virgilia was pleased and for the moment, being young and fond of pretty things, forgot that the Christian maiden should be unadorned save by her own modesty.

Martius was the gravest of the family. Now that Virgilia was so occupied that she could not go to the meetings of the Christians, although this had always been difficult for her, he went alone, or joined Hermione and Marcus. From them and other Christians he heard news which greatly alarmed him. There were rumors of an uprising

Virgilia

against the followers of Christ. It was said that the priests of Jupiter were arousing the senators and even the emperor to a sense of the danger in which the government would find itself if these heretics were allowed to increase as they were doing at the present time.

The Senator Adrian Soderus, who visited the lawyer and his wife frequently and in view of the coming marriage was permitted to see Virgilia, confirmed the news, entirely unaware of the fact that both his betrothed and her brother Martius belonged to the despised people.

"They multiply like rats," he said, sipping from a silver goblet the sweet orange juice Sahira prepared. "And like rats they live in holes in the ground. There they hold their wicked meetings and form their impious designs. They are a menace to Rome and must be destroyed."

"Ought I to tell him?" Virgilia asked her brother after one of these conversations.

"How do I know, dearest? It is for father to speak, and he does not. I fear—I fear. Yet, if thou art once married to him, he is bound to protect thee. Thou wilt surely be safe."

"But thou—and Hermione—and—Marcus?"

"God is all-powerful. We are in his hands."

There came the messenger from the Lady Octavia bearing a pearl anklet as a wedding gift to Virgilia with many greetings and good wishes. And if it were possible, would they all come "to celebrate the Feast of the Grapes, in five days?"

"I will not go," said Claudia. "The Lady Octavia is not to my liking."

"Nor I," added Aurelius, "but we must not be discourteous, she is a good client. It will be an enjoyable feast in this fine weather. Virgilia's cheeks are too pale. She and Martius shall go."

On the day of the Feast, Virgilia was glad to go out into the fresh air, to leave the seamstresses busy sewing in the inner courtyard. They were embroidering fine garments of silk so soft that it could be drawn through a ring. They were hemming and drawing threads, draping and cutting the rich material from Tyre which was to form part of Virgilia's wedding outfit.

The young girl was sad on this beautiful October day when the air was spicy with the whiffs of ripe grapes and pomegranates in the gardens and vineyards. She was thinking of what it would mean to go away from her home, to leave her parents and Martius, to take up another life, and be obedient to the old Senator, who, kind and indulgent as he might be, was, nevertheless, little more than her master, or she, little better than one of her own slaves. Not once, however, did the thought enter her mind that she was a free being, at liberty to rebel and decline this marriage so suddenly arranged for her. It was for her parents to decide what her future should be, and for her to obey.

Early in the morning of the day which they were to pass in the lovely gardens of Octavia, Virgilia ascended a narrow steep staircase and went out upon the flat roof. It was like a garden up here, with trellises and vines. Some late tea-roses were in bloom. The girl broke off one and placed it in the folds of her gown. She could breathe in its sweetness.

Over at one end of the roof—or terrace, as it is called—sat the Old One, making a carpet. Above her head was a gay scarlet and blue awning, to protect her from the sun, still hot, even in cool October.

The slave looked up and smiled when Virgilia came near, motioning to a pile of cushions.

"Ever busy, Mother?" said the young girl, examining the work.

The rug was very handsome. It had five borders wrought in dull blues, white and yellow, covered with conventional designs, and the centre was exquisite, a white ground on which loose flowers were thrown negligently, carelessly, without regular form, yet the whole was perfect.

"It is almost finished, my child, and when it is done, it shall be for thee, to adorn thy home."

"For me?"

"My wedding gift to thee. On the day that thou wast born, I began it, and all through these seventeen years I have worked at it, thinking that on the day when thou shouldst go away to thy husband, the rug would go with thy household goods to remind thee of the aged woman whose gnarled and withered hands wrought it for thee."

"I shall ever hold it precious."

Virgilia sank down on the cushions, listlessly. Far away she could see the blue lines of mountains, bordering the fields where Lucius the Water-Carrier lived, where were the marvellous tombs of the great on the Appian Way; where stately homes bordered the fashionable Ostian Way, and where were the Catacombs where the

Virgilia

Christians buried their dead and gathered for worship.

She looked with some curiosity at the placid, gentle face of the old woman. That night, when she had burst in upon the betrothal feast with her dire prophecies, she had been transformed, a creature of whom they were afraid. Had she been conscious of what she said then? Virgilia thought not.

“Mother,” she said, “thy many years of life have brought to thee wisdom. Should one tell everything to one's husband? Even when it may be dangerous?”

The Old One held a yellow thread suspended from her ivory hook and looked keenly at Virgilia.

“Thou hast a secret, my child?”

“Yes, mother.”

“One of which thou art ashamed?”

“No, no. But it involves others.”

The bricks were sprinkled with sand. Virgilia stopped and drew a fish in the sand. She had for some time suspected that the Old One was a Christian. If she were, she would recognize the symbol of Christ, the “Icthus.” If she were not, it would do no harm.

“And thou, too, art a little fish,” murmured the Old One. “Thanks be to His holy name, when the Lord Christ was born, I was a Princess in the court of Herod, the King, who was sore afraid, because it was told him that a new King had come to reign over Israel. The angels sang at His birth and the kings from the East brought presents of frankincense and myrrh. I fell into the hands of the Romans, and here I am, a slave. But it was a plan of God. In Rome, I learned to know Christ.”

“Virgilia! Virgilia!” Martius called. “It is time to go. Hurry! The chair is at the door.”

“If the time comes when for conscience' sake thou must disclose that thou art a follower of Christ, do so. If not, keep silence and worship Him in thine heart lest evil come upon the thousands who love Him,” said the Old One. Her eyes grew filmy and she stretched out her hands, tremblingly. “I see—I see—a shadow of death—approaching. But in the shadow—shines the face—of our—Risen Lord.”

“Mother, Mother!” said Virgilia, alarmed.

“Was I speaking? What did I say? This work must be finished soon, for the marriage.”

“Virgilia!” came Martius' peremptory summons.

“Yes, I am coming.”

Stopping only to call Sahira to bring the Old One a refreshing drink, Virgilia veiled herself, entered her chair, and with Martius walking by her side, was borne out of the city gate guarded by men in full uniform, armed with staves and knives, and through the road leading to the Lady Octavia's house.

What a day that was! The vines, festooned gracefully between dwarf mulberry trees, were loaded with huge bunches of purple and white grapes. The men and women slaves were gathering them and heaping them up in baskets. The red juice escaped and ran in streams over the yellow earth.

Laughing and merry the four young people passed among the servants eating grapes to their heart's content, telling stories of other days, leaving the future to unfold for itself. They did not try to foresee it.

At noon, they went to the cool, shady room overlooking the garden and ate the cold meats and fresh green salad, luscious fruit and white goat's cheese, finishing the meal with sweet cakes and a delicious drink made from the fresh juice of the grapes just gathered.

Before they ate, the freedmen stood, respectfully waiting, while Octavia, in a low voice, offered a prayer of thanksgiving for the food so bountifully provided. Only a small part of the servants, formerly slaves, were Christians, and Octavia had often been warned that her life and that of her children was in danger through her open defiance of the priests and declaration of her own Christian faith.

“I trust in God,” was all that she would say.

In her house were no gods, no images. Flowers there were, in abundance, the rooms were bowers of beauty, the table, with its spotless cloth of fine white linen, bore silver vases filled with roses and autumn blossoms, but there were no shrines and no statues.

On this Feast of the Grapes around Rome Bacchus was worshipped and much wine was drunk, until the people lost their senses and became brutes. In Octavia's home, the feast was observed with games and songs and merriment, but all was done decently and in order. It was because her views were not theirs that many of the friends who had visited them when the Senator was alive—now refused to associate with the Lady Octavia,

Virgilia

although they could not openly ignore her on account of her great wealth.

It drew toward evening. The days were still long, and Martius planned to return home by moonlight. At seven o'clock, they were eating supper in an arbor at the side of the Villa. The big, round moon was rising over the Alban Hills, soon it would be a great lamp in the sky.

All over the Campagna the Feast of the Grapes had been celebrated that day. The sounds of boisterous laughter, of loud singing, came to their ears from the crowds who were passing outside the high walls surrounding the entire estate.

"There is more noise than usual," remarked Octavia.

The sounds had changed. They grew menacing. People were quarreling with each other. "It is nothing," replied Marcus. "Always on this Feast, there is much drunkenness and revelry."

But his mother was uneasy.

"It is wiser for thee to return home at once, Martius," she said. "I will carry thy chair, Virgilia. The bearers have been resting long."

"I have a strong stick," Martius said, laughing, "and Alexis is armed. We can easily protect Virgilia."

"Is it not better for you to remain here," suggested Marcus. "We will send a messenger to thy father."

"Nonsense. There is no danger. But it is wiser that we should start at once. Later, there will be thousands returning home."

At that moment, the porter from the gate came running toward the arbor. He was, plainly, very much excited. With him was a man of dark swarthy skin, and a scar across his forehead.

"Thou, Alyrus?" exclaimed Martius, surprised to see the Moor here.

"I have a message for you, my young master." Martius failed to observe the bitterness in which he spoke the last words, or the glow of his dark eyes, resting by turns on each member of the group. "You and the Lady Virgilia are to return home at once. Your father desired me to tell you that the people are enraged at an insult offered by some Christians to one of the holy gods."

"Go, go!" said Octavia.

Martius stopped a moment to speak to Hermione, while Marcus assisted Virgilia into her chair.

"Is it safe for thee?" he asked. "We cannot tell what may happen."

She smiled at him.

"God is with us, Martius, my friend."

"I would that I had thy great faith, Hermione. We part but to meet again."

"If God will?"

The chair, carried by four men, passed out of the iron gate, which swung shut behind them. The heavy bolts were shot quickly into place by the frightened porter. Riots were not unknown in Rome, but riots which were against Christians were very serious matters.

If glances full of meaning were exchanged between Alyrus and the bearers, neither Martius nor Alexis noticed them.

The crowd in front of Octavia's gate was now very menacing. The men were throwing stones over the wall and crying: "Down with the Christians!"

"Way! Way for the daughter of Aurelius Lucanus, worshipper of the gods" cried Alyrus, and the crowd parted to let them through.

VII. ENTER, LYCIAS, THE GLADIATOR.

Lidia, the scullery maid, stole out of the back door of her master's house. Bare-foot she was and her black hair streamed out behind her as she ran swiftly through the streets of Rome. Few noticed her, for the people were still excited from the doings of the night before. Groups stood at the places where roads crossed, or in the shadows of the columns and discussed what had occurred. When such important matters as the arrest of a few hundreds of Christians were concerned, the little maid with frightened eyes and ragged clothes was not of any moment.

"It is the priests who stirred up this trouble," said one man looking up at the grim grayish-white walls of Jupiter's temple. "I am no follower of Christus, but I employed a man who was, and he was ever industrious and sober. They are not such a bad lot. It is a pity—"

"Whist!" exclaimed another man. "Speak not so loud. Even the walls of yonder temple have ears. They say that there are speaking tubes hidden in every room so that the Superior may know just what goes on. I'll tell you the one thing, my friend, if the priests are in it there's gold somewhere. They don't do things for nothing."

"That they do not. Didst hear that the splendid villa of Octavia, widow of Aureus Cantus, the Senator, was raided by a mob last night? The freedmen are scattered or seized again as slaves and the family, the lady and two children have entirely disappeared. Her home and all its treasures have already been confiscated, as belonging to a traitor and I'll venture that the priests in yonder get a good share of the wealth."

"She was an honorable woman. It is a shame."

"Shame, yes, but it pleases the people and gratifies the priests, two things very essential to him who sits upon the throne."

"Dost think—"

"Aye, I think much that I do not say. Hundreds of Christians have been herded into the prisons, the uprising of the multitude yesterday was but part of the game. It was all planned. They say, too, that a dark man, with great gold rings in his ears and a scar on his face, has been tracking these Christians for weeks. No doubt he was an emissary of the priests."

"I have seen him myself. There he goes, now."

Alyrus walked through the crowd like a king, as if he expected them to bow before him.

"I've seen him before," said the first man. "Where was it? I remember now. It was he who sat in the ante-chamber of Aurelius Lucanus' office. He is his slave."

"And is the honorable lawyer mixed up in this business?"

"Who knows? One thing is certain. The people will be amused and forget the cruelties of the Emperor, for there will be a grand show in the amphitheatre, far grander than any gladiatorial show."

"Thou meanest—"

"That these Christians must be disposed of, or they will rebel. The lions are even now growling in the underground cages."

Lidia sped on, though her feet grew very weary before she reached the cave where Lucius dwelt. He was standing in front of it, blowing into a flame some charcoal in a small iron brazier. She approached him unseen. He looked up, startled when he heard her calling him.

"Ah, Lidia, is it thou? Hast come to have supper with thy father? Thou art welcome. There is a tender kid roasted and I have gathered some fresh greens in the field. I will make thee a salad."

"Please do, dear father. I am very weary and have tasted no food since morning."

Sitting down on the grass, they gave thanks and ate. The shepherd gave her a large plantain leaf for a plate. Their food was such as Jacob ate in days of old, long before Rome was built.

"Thou art very weary, my child."

"And heart-sick. Thou hast not been in the city for two days."

"No. The rains have been so heavy that the sprinkling from my sheepskin bag was not needed. So I stayed here to care for the herds."

"Then thou dost not know what has happened. Father, my master and the Lady Claudia are in deep distress. Martius and the Lady Virgilia went to visit the widow of Cantus outside the gate, on the day when the Feast of the

Virgilia

Grapes was celebrated. They have never returned. Nor has Alyrus, who was sent on an errand by Aurelius that afternoon, nor Alexis, the Greek. Not one has come back to tell of their fate. This morning, Sahira, my Lady Claudia's waiting-maid disappeared and the mistress lies there moaning and crying. It is pitiful. Everyone is in disorder of spirit. I, even though I am but a scullery-maid, did creep into my Lady's room and put cold cloths on her head and fanned her face. No one else thought of her. The servants go here and there, without a head; the whole house is in confusion. Some of the slaves have already run away. It is rumored, father, that many Christians have been arrested. No doubt Martius and Virgilia are among them."

"But thou?"

"I am safe. Who cares for so humble a person as I? The Old One is very ill. I think she is going to die. No one cares for her but me. But I am safe. No one notices me, for I am little and ugly, thank God. I soothe the Old One, who moans and cries: 'Woe. Woe! to this household,' I must go back now. It is but four and twenty hours, father, since the home of Aurelius was full of joy and gladness. Now it is desolate."

The shepherd rose and picked up his staff.

"Lidia, it is Alyrus who has wrought all this. He and the priests of Jupiter. I will seek out Lycias, the gladiator. He will know what to do."

A warm red shone in Lidia's thin, sallow cheeks.

"Thou wilt greet him from me, father?"

He nodded, and walked rapidly away, while Lidia, taking another path, ran toward the gates of Rome. Inside the walls, she almost collided with Alyrus, the Moor, who strode by not recognizing her. Slipping along in the shadows, she followed him eagerly, as intently as her father would have done, through the streets, into the Forum to the Temple of Jupiter, and saw him enter the side door.

Then she hastened back to her duties, going into the house which was very still and deserted. Only a few of the many slaves owned by Aurelius the lawyer, remained to guard his interests. When the displeasure of an emperor falls on a man, it means disaster.

She looked in at her mistress' door and found her sleeping, moaning as she slept. She went to the servant's quarters. On her humble couch lay the Old One, who had been a Princess in the court of Herod sixty years before, beautiful, admired. Her face was very quiet and the expression was sweet. Death had touched her lightly when he bore her into the presence of the Lord whom she had loved. The finished rug which she had made for Virgilia's wedding present lay under the scarlet and white awning on the Terrace.

Alyrus had come into his reward. He was free, and Sahira his daughter was free, a purse of gold was in his hand and a ship lay waiting in the harbor, to carry them away to their home by the desert.

Alyrus was not ready to go, yet. He wanted first to see all the amusement which there would be in Rome. He could not miss the climax of what he had intrigued for. He knew nothing of that Judas who had sold his Lord for thirty pieces of silver, or he might have likened himself to this traitor.

No, he would not leave until the games were over. The scheme had worked well. There had not been the slightest hitch from the moment that they left the gate of Octavia's villa, until the bearers, who were in the plot, carried Virgilia into the Temple of Jupiter, and Martius and Alexis, little noticed in the unusual excitement stirred up by the priests, were easily overpowered and cast into one of the lowest dungeons.

Yes, it had been most successful. Alyrus returned to the temple now to see Sahira who was in charge of the holy women and sallied forth again to sit in one of the shops and drink a glass of grape juice. He was a thoroughly temperate man, knowing that wine muddles the brain and perverts the judgment.

It was now late in the evening. Proclamations were already on the walls announcing that on the fourth day, there would be grand games in the Circus. Gladiatorial contests would be the first thing on the program, followed by the lions and Christians. The learned ones were reading this notice aloud to the ignorant and the women, and all seemed to be much pleased.

Alyrus sat down and ordered his cup of fresh grape juice, with snow from Mt. Hermon to cool it in. As he sipped it, he saw the great gladiator, Lycias, come into the circle of light from the flaring torches, but he did not perceive the shepherd, who remained outside, in the shadow.

Now, Lycias was a great man in the eyes of the Romans. He had been a poor boy, but by reason of his strength had risen to be the first gladiator. He and Lidia the kitchen-maid, had grown up together in the cave of Lucius, for Lycias had been found, a tiny baby, lying at the door of the sheepfold. For the love and care bestowed

upon him, Lycias had always been grateful.

Therefore, at the request of Lucius, was he here.

At the entrance of the famous gladiator, a shout arose from the men seated at the small tables.

“Hail, Lycias! Hail, Lycias!” came from every side.

The tall man bowed to one friend and then another, smiled and walked through the room, seeking a place to sit. With a smile, he declined proffered seats with groups of men, and finally took a place near Alyrus, the Moor.

“If it does not inconvenience you,” he said.

“Not in the least,” replied Alyrus, flattered at the attention thus drawn to him.

The gladiator laid aside his silver helmet, unloosed his short sword and ordered light refreshment from the proprietor who came himself to serve so noted a guest.

Had some great philosopher entered, he would have been greeted with respect but would not have aroused anything like so much interest or enthusiasm as did the victorious gladiator. Even the boys in the streets knew his name and tried to imitate him.

For some time, while he had satisfied a very hearty appetite, Lycias did not open a conversation, and Alyrus, a little awed, had hesitated to speak.

Apparently for the first time, the gladiator examined the Moor's face.

Springing to his feet, he saluted in a military fashion.

“Your pardon, my lord, I knew not that I had ventured to presume upon the kindness of Claudius Auranus, governor of Carthage.”

Alyrus stammered.

“Be seated, sir, I—I am not his excellency the governor of Carthage. I am a much humbler man, a chieftain of Tripoli.”

“Ah! I knew that you were some distinguished person, from your bearing and dress.”

When Alyrus smiled, he was uglier than ever.

“A brute!” muttered Lycias, under his breath. Then aloud: “Are you on some mission to the Emperor?”

“Ahem. Not so. But very high in the secrets of the chief priest of Jupiter.”

“One might call him the power behind the throne.”

“Thou hast said truly.”

“And it is really true that thou art admitted to those holy precincts?”

“Behold!” Alyrus drew from the folds of his garment the bronze lizard. “Not only does this admit me to the temple itself but to any place in the city of Rome. Thou seest. It is the symbol of the priests of Jupiter.”

“I see,” Lycias' eyes gleamed, as he watched Alyrus placing the precious symbol in a safe place.

Then, Alyrus, intoxicated by the events of the past few moments, by his sudden transition from slavery to freedom, at the prospect opening before him of a speedy return to the home he loved, flattered at the homage shown him by the gladiator, poured out the whole story into ears only too willing to hear. He narrated everything except that he had been a slave, representing himself as a client of Aurelius Lucanus, who had been grievously wronged by him. He told how he had discovered, one day in the public Forum, that the son and daughter of the lawyer were Christians, and Aurelius sympathized with them; how, by the chief priest's desire, he had assisted in tracking many more of the despised sect, of whom several hundred were now languishing in prison, among them, Octavia the widow of the proud Senator Aureus Cantus, and her son and daughter.

Lycias passed his big hand over his smoothly shaven face to hide his expression of disgust. He rose.

“If you permit, honored sir, I will now retire, with the hope that we shall meet again.”

“Willingly will I continue the conversation. Perhaps—” Alyrus was swelling with importance, “it would interest you to visit the prisons and see these Christians before they are thrown into the arena. I understand that you are first on the program.”

“Yes. I had thought of asking such a privilege as a visit to these prisoners. By the way, where is the daughter of Aurelius?”

Alyrus shot a keen glance at him, but the face of Lycias was guileless as that of a child.

“She is well guarded. I can tell you that, and her brother Martius, with Alexis the Greek slave—who ever looked down upon me,” he added, unguardedly, continuing in haste, as he perceived his mistake, “I should have said, who was impertinent to me one day, lie in a dungeon far in the earth below the temple. From there, is a

Virgilia

private underground passageway to the Circus. They will never see the light of day again.”

“A faithless friend, a bitter enemy,” was Lycias' thought as striding forth from the room, he joined Lucius.

“It is worse than I feared,” Lucius said. “There is little hope.”

“We shall see,” responded the gladiator, thoughtfully. “Art thou willing to take great risks to save the son and daughter of Aurelius?”

“For the sake of Lidia, who loves them, I am.”

“Await my instructions, then,” and they parted.

The next afternoon, Alyrus let Lycias through the dark prisons in which the Christians were herded like beasts. The guards opened every door at the sight of the symbol of priestly authority, the bronze lizard.

Lycias, brave and strong man, grew sick at the dreadful suffering of delicate women, frail young girls accustomed to luxury, who were so suddenly thrown into surroundings and as they had never dreamed of.

All because of their faith? Lycias began to wonder what the power was which enabled these feeble creatures to face death with calmness and courage.

“There must be something in this religion of Jesus Christ which makes them forget themselves,” he thought. “I will ask Lidia to tell me the secret.”

In one corner of a dark, damp cell, several persons were kneeling in prayer. The voice of an old man could be heard, petitioning God, for Christ's sake, to lead them through this valley of the shadow of death and bring them to the holy city in its beauty and into the presence of their Lord and Master.

“There, that is Virgilia, the fair one, yonder, with face upraised,” said Alyrus.

Lycias took a long look at the young girl, so that he would know her again.

“Next to her is Hermione, and Octavia, widow of Aureus Cantus and her son. All three are there!”

The laugh of the Moor was hideous in its coarseness. The young girls shivered and drew closer to Octavia.

“Fear not,” Octavia whispered, smiling at them. God had given her great courage.

It was on this day that Alyrus, growing more confidential, told Lycias of the vessel lying in the River Tiber, ready to set sail as soon as he and Sahira went on board.

“I have only to show them the symbol,” he quoted, “and the sailors and officers are subject to my orders.”

That evening, the gladiator went to the cave, and finding Lidia with her father, ate the supper of coarse bread and goat's cheese with them.

“Thou art accounted of much wisdom,” he said to Lidia, “thy little head hath been ever steady on thy shoulders. Tell us what to do.”

“I am only a kitchen-maid,” Lidia replied, blushing at the compliment, “but I should think that we might do thus.”

And a plan was made to their satisfaction, a very difficult plan involving great danger for all of them, perhaps death to Lycias and Lucius. It hung to a large degree on one thing which seemed to be unattainable.

“With God, all things are possible,” said wise little Lidia.

“Let us pray,” said the shepherd, and he and Lidia fell upon their knees on the grass in front of the cave, where even now in late Autumn, some tiny pink-tipped daisies were blooming.

After a moment's hesitation, Lycias, who had never knelt to any but heathen gods, bent his knee also and uncovered his head in the presence of the unseen but powerful Ruler of the Universe.

He and Lidia walked back to Rome together.

As they parted, the big gladiator looked down into her earnest little face, with the clear, honest eyes.

“I should like to learn about Christ,” he said.

“I will teach thee, Lycias, though I am but a weak follower of my Master.”

The next day, the one before the games were to take place in the Circus, two things happened.

Alyrus, met again by Lycias, took him to the marble quarry by the Tiber, where, on the slowly flowing river, were moored great ships. There was a veritable forest of masts, cut from the strong cedars of Lebanon, and the groves of Mt. Hermon.

“That is my ship, yonder,” he said. As they emerged from the wharf, Alyrus was suddenly jostled by a rough-looking shepherd. Lycias caught the Moor in his arms to prevent his falling. The draperies Alyrus wore were disarranged and a small object fell, unnoticed by him, to the ground. Lycias placed his big, sandaled foot over this object.

Virgilia

“Dog of a shepherd!” raved Alyrus, running after the man.

Lycias stooped, picked up the small object and thrust it into his gown and soon reached the Moor by a few long strides.

“Let him go!” he advised. “See, he is already almost out of sight.”

VIII. THE SYMBOL OF THE LIZARD.

The games in the amphitheatre on this, the first day of November attracted an unusual number of persons.

The emperor was there, with all his court, and the Vestals honored the games with their presence. Alyrus sat in a prominent place, with Sahira, former slave of Aurelius Lucanus and maid to Claudia, beside him. The dark-faced girl attracted much attention, so great was her beauty. Freed by special decree of Caesar, at the request of Lycidon, the priest, she had, by her father's desire been dressed like a fashionable girl of the period.

"Dost see them coming?" asked Alyrus, eagerly. "Thine eyes are younger than mine. Dost see them yet?"

"No, father. It is only the gladiators. Ah! that Lycias is a king among men! how strong! how noble!"

A shade passed over the face of Alyrus the Moor.

"Yes. A fine youth, yet—I wish that I had not lost that bronze lizard, Sahira. It bodes misfortune. Rome is not a safe place for us, in spite of the favor of Lycidon. We must go as soon as the games are over. Could it be possible that Lycias—"

"Look, father, see Lycias, the conqueror. The emperor smiles upon him; a lady has thrown him a jewel. He bows. He is gone. How proud he must be!"

"And now, they will come! See, yonder, Sahira, that group of white-robed men and women. Ha! hear the wild beasts, how they growl in their cages, pawing the bars, pleading to be let loose."

Alyrus, wild with gratified hatred, his face as evil as that of a demon, leaned far over that he might lose nothing of the pitiful drama about to be enacted in the arena.

The Christians came forward slowly, the women clinging together in their physical weakness, though their souls were strong in the strength of their faith.

There was Octavia, leading Hermione and Virgilia. The widow's face was bright with a great light. There was Martius almost blinded by the contrast between the terrible darkness of the dungeon beneath Jupiter's temple, where he had spent four days and nights of misery, frantic when he thought of Virgilia and what her fate might be. He and Alexis had only a half hour before been brought through the underground passage—way to the cells where the Christians were waiting. He and Virgilia met here, on the sanded arena, where thousands of persons were gazing at them. Martius stepped to his sister's side, and put his arm around her. He stretched out his hand to clasp that of Hermione.

"We shall meet again, yonder," he whispered, glancing upward.

Now, just as they were being pushed into the arena, a strange thing had happened. A tall man, whom Martius had not recognized as Lycias, the gladiator, approached him and said: "In the arena, I will be near you, standing by one of the gates. If you can be calm enough in the moment of excitement, note where I am. When I give the signal, take your sister in your arms and follow me."

He had said the same to Marcus, telling him to assist Octavia and Hermione and bear them forth.

"Fear not," the stranger had said. "If your God has power, he will save you all out of the lion's mouth."

Opening from the arena were several iron gates. Some of these served as entrances to the prisons or cells, where the Christians had been kept until the moment when they were commanded to come forth and perform their part in amusing the wicked emperor and his impious people. Others, four in number, were the entrances to passageways leading to the open air. There were used by the gladiators and by the employees whose duty it was to arrange the "scenery."

Each gate was guarded, in the arena and at the outer exit, by a soldier, well armed.

It was by one of these open gates that Martius and Marcus obeying the words of the gladiator, eager to seize any chance of escape, kept the women.

The shouts of the multitude arose. "The Christians! The Christians! To the lions!"

It was then that Alyrus shrank back and a deadly fear seized him. What had he done? What had he done? He remembered past kindnesses. He remembered how Sahira had been saved from a life of sorrow and shame by Aurelius Lucanus. How had he repaid him? By treachery and evil. For the first time in his life, Alyrus was conscious of sin. The Christian's God! Who was He? Could he avenge? A horrible coldness enveloped him. He could not move. Then he knew nothing more.

Virgilia

But Sahira, not noticing that her father was ill, was looking down at the white group, now kneeling on the ground, while the white-haired elder prayed, with arms up-raised.

There was another shout.

Martius who had never felt cooler in his life, saw Lycias and touched Marcus on the arm.

“Come,” he said. “We are not far from the entrance. Quick!”

Martius seized Virgilia in his arms; Marcus led his mother and Hermione.

It was but a step, a moment and they were by the side of Lycias. Hermione was fainting. The gladiator lifted her as easily as if she were a child.

“Follow me,” said Lycias, striding before them.

Dazed, scarcely knowing where they were or what they were doing, the women, clinging to the men; walked along the narrow way. In the circus, there were more shouts and cries. Hermione trembled in the strong arms of Lycias. He soothed her gently.

“Pray to your God,” he said, “that He may bring us safely through.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Lycias, a friend of Christians, and I, too would learn of the faith.”

One great danger lay before them. It was the guard at the outer doorway, which opened on the street. He opposed their exit.

“No one passes here,” he said.

“No one except me and my friends,” responded the gladiator, boldly. “Dare you say to Lycias that he may not pass?”

The soldier's face relaxed, but still he stood in the path.

“To-day, I have specially strict orders lest some of the Christians escape. For my part, I would willingly let some of those poor creatures flee, but I value my head.”

“Perhaps thou wilt not gainsay me when thou seest my pass.”

Lycias held up the bronze lizard. Really, the big gladiator himself doubted the power of this symbol. He began to fear that they would all be forced back into the arena, which was sure death, not only for those whom he wished to save, but for himself, also. He would receive no mercy, even though he had been the idol of the people but an hour before and the air had rung with his praises. It would count him little, if he were caught helping the victims to escape.

The soldier looked at him with staring eyes.

“The symbol of the chief-priest,” he whispered. “In the name of Jupiter, go by in peace, and may his wrath not fall upon me and mine.”

A few paces more, and the light of air of the blessed day bathed them in warmth and gave them courage.

The gladiator set Hermione on her feet and wiped his dripping forehead.

“Barely escaped,” he muttered.

No one was in this part of the street by the amphitheatre. All the interest was in the interior. So great had been the number of Christians that Octavia and the others in this little group had not been missed.

Where they were going, they knew not; but that, for the moment, they were safe, they all thankfully realized and that they owed it to this big stranger with the honest face.

“Let us, for one moment, thank God for our deliverance,” said Octavia.

Not daring to kneel, they turned their faces toward Heaven while Octavia breathed forth a fervent prayer.

“We must hurry,” said Lycias, leading the way to the Forum, to-day deserted for the greater amusements of the games, in which the Christians were the chief attraction.

It was a long, hard walk to the marble wharf where the ship lay on which Alyrus and his daughter were soon to set sail, as Lycias well knew. His great fear was lest the Moor might have decided to go earlier and not wait for the conclusion of the games. Suppose they arrived at the wharf and found the ship gone? What should they do?

Lycias' brain studied this problem. All these people were homeless, except the shepherd. Ah! that was it! If the ship had sailed, he would take these delicately nurtured women to the cave on the Campagna.

It grew necessary for the men to help the women, who were very weary and weak from excitement; although Lycias did not wish to call any more attention to them than was necessary, for fear that the ladies, especially Octavia, who was well known, might be recognized. All the Romans had not gone to the Circus, some were

Virgilia

sitting in the eating-places, and women were knitting in the doorways. Fortunately, it was getting toward evening, but that would be a signal for the thousands to leave the amphitheatre and scatter to their homes.

There was need for haste.

They approached the shores of the Tiber, turned into gold by the sunlight from the setting sun. The masts were visible now.

Lycias gave a sigh of satisfaction as he saw, sitting on a grassy bank a man and a woman, who was heavily veiled. Standing beside them was a slender girl. It was Lidia, the daughter of the shepherd, who sprang forward and put her arms around her father's neck, while great tears of happiness rolled down her cheeks.

“At last! at last! thou art come. Thanks be to our God.”

It had not been a difficult matter for the little scullery-maid to persuade the lawyer to venture upon a scheme as bold as it was doubtful in its outcome. Aurelius Lucanus was a broken man. He had lost his children. He had not known how dear they were to him until they disappeared. What mattered it if they were followers of Christians, members of a despised sect? They were his own, and he loved them. His business was ruined, his home deserted, the emperor no longer looked on him with favor. All was gone.

In the room near by, Claudia lay weeping. She, too, was broken-hearted. Her daughter, her ambitions, all those things which formed her life had vanished as suddenly as the dew dries upon the green grass in midsummer.

The lawyer was sitting in the garden. Bright yellow and scarlet dahlias bloomed around him; plummy lavender and rose colored asters nodded cheerfully in the chill breeze of this first of November. The water in the fountain rippled as musically as in those happy days, now gone.

That morning early, Aurelius had gone again to the Senator Adrian Soderus, to whom Virgilia had so cruelly been betrothed. It was a sign that no longer was the lawyer held in high esteem, when he was kept waiting in the outer chamber, and a message was brought him by a young slave that the Senator could no longer receive him. He would have no dealings with the parents of Christians.

Then he, too, knew their disgrace. It must have been noised—abroad in the city. Aurelius hurried home and sitting down where Claudia had rested, looking so beautiful, on her return from the amphitheatre on the Spring day which seemed so long ago, he buried his face in his hands.

An awful fear haunted him. To-day had been fixed for the games. Could it be possible that Virgilia, so fair, so delicate, shielded all her life from the rough and hard things, protected and loved, was among those Christians whom Caesar had, in his cruelty, doomed to death?

And Martius, where was he?

He felt a light touch on his shoulder and looked up with dull eyes, clouded with misery and loneliness, into the dark, sallow face of the kitchen-maid, whom he had never noticed before until he saw her tenderly ministering to his wife.

In a few concise sentences, she told him all.

Virgilia and Martius were to be sacrificed, with hundreds of other Christians that afternoon. It was known that Octavia, and her children were also condemned. Lycias, the gladiator, would try to save them. Perhaps he could succeed; there was a little hope. In any case, he would try. Aurelius and Claudia, with herself, would go to a quiet place near the marble quarry, and wait for them. If they did not come, all was lost, and there remained nothing but to return to this house. If they came, there was a chance of escape for them all. She told him of the ship belonging to Alyrus, his porter, now a freedman. It was he who had wrought the mischief. If possible—God only knew!—they would all sail away together. Whither, who could tell? Away from Rome, away from all this trouble and sorrow.

Lidia possessed a lovely voice, thrilling sweet. As she talked, the lawyer's brain cleared. He was more himself than he had been since the children had disappeared. Now, he knew the worst. Sometimes certainty, even though bad, is better than the agony of suspense. There was a chance, and if they escaped—a thought came to him.

“Thou wilt dress thy Lady.”

Lidia nodded.

“And gather together the jewels. Bring the diadem sent by the emperor to Virgilia and the necklace, the gift of Adrian.”

Even in his anguish of soul, the lawyer smiled, grimly. When the Senator sent to reclaim his valuable gift, he would not find it. At least, he would have contributed that much to Virgilia's future happiness. His wealth was so

great that he would not miss the game.

“I will gather together all the jewels, my master, also those of the Lady Claudia, and will hide them in my bosom. No one will imagine that the kitchen-maid carries such treasures.”

“A quick-witted girl,” muttered Aurelius, “and now for my part. If the gods please, they will escape, and we shall be happy again. If not— then we will never return to this house.”

It took him until noon to examine the papers in his strong-box. Three of the documents he placed in his toga. The others, he burned.

It was a long and difficult matter to bring the Lady Claudia, in her weakness, to the place agreed upon. Here, they waited, while the sun, burning hot in Rome even in October, beat upon them pitilessly, for there was no shade here.

The whole story had not been told Claudia, who was saved that suffering. She knew, only, that they were to set sail in a ship and leave this city where she had been so happy. She was utterly apathetic, caring nothing where they went.

Losing hope, as time passed, Aurelius grew more and more silent. Even Lidia began to fear that the worst had happened. The sun sank and the vessels were shrouded in shadow. No sound was heard save the monotonous singing of a sailor, or the creaking of a sail.

Then around the corner came the forlorn little group, and Lidia threw herself in her father's arms, while her eyes sought Lycias, who smiled at her.

The rest was easy. The bronze lizard worked like magic. No one inquired where was the dark man with the gold rings in his ears. The vessel had been chartered and paid for by the priest of Jupiter. The orders were to sail, when the symbol was shown them. As the tide was high and the wind fresh, the sails were raised and just as the people were swarming out of the Circus, just when the Emperor in his golden chair, was being carried to his marble palace, the fugitives, scarcely knowing where they were and not caring whither they should go, sat on the deck, breathed in the cool air of life, watched the stars come out, one by one, and thanked God for delivering them out of the mouth of the lion.

Day after day they sailed over a blue sea, where the waves danced and broke into froth, which in its turn, dissolved into a million jewel-points of colors as brilliant as those flashed by the diamonds in Virgilia's diadem, the gift of the emperor.

Among the papers brought away by the lawyer was the deed of a small villa on the Island of Cyprus. It had belonged to his father and a revenue was received each year from the steward who cultivated the vineyard.

To Cyprus, the vessel went, landing there a fortnight later, for the winds had been favorable, and they had made a quick voyage.

On the broad terraces, commanding a view of the sea, with passing vessels, Claudia lay on a couch, daily gaining strength. She held Virgilia's hand as if she could never let it go, while the young girl told her of Jesus and His love, and read to her the precious letter of Paul, the Apostle, a copy of which Martius had made in the days of his exile.

Here, they heard of the martyrdom of the Apostle, and his burial in the vineyard of Lucia, the Roman matron. He had “finished his course” and “kept the faith,” and had gone to receive his “crown of righteousness.”

As the days passed, peace and happiness came to them all. The gladiator, forgetting his prowess in the arena, worked diligently in the vineyard, while Lucius guarded the flocks of sheep, grazing beneath the light-green olive-trees. And Lidia cooked for them in a small stone cottage, singing as she worked.

Martius and Marcus, grown to be men, worked also, and when the labors of the day were over, sat on the terrace in the moonlight, while Hermione and Virgilia talked with them, and Claudia and Octavia smiled at their happiness.

One thing, they did not know; that Alyrus, the Moor, justly punished for his misdeeds, never spoke again after the games in the Circus. He died soon afterward. Sahira, robbed of her freedom by the jealousy of a woman high in favor in the imperial court, who envied her beauty and the favor of the emperor, sank again into slavery, and as the years passed, became a drudge in the palace.

When the sun crept lower to the waves of the sea, and as the darkness shrouded all nature, young and old knelt on the terrace and prayed that God would keep them safe.

And Aurelius, the lawyer, with Claudia, his wife, knelt also, for there were no statues of the gods in this home

Virgilia

set among the trailing festoons of the vineyard on the Island of Cyprus.

[FINIS.]