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ARACHNE

By Georg Ebers

Volume 3.

CHAPTER X.

"When the moon is over Pelican Island." How often Ledscha had repeated this sentence to herself while Hermon was detained by Daphne and her Pelusinian guests!

When she entered the boat after nightfall she exclaimed hopefully, sure of her cause, "When the moon is over Pelican Island he will come."

Her goal was quickly reached in the skiff; the place selected for the nocturnal meeting was a familiar one to her.

The pirates had remained absent from it quite two years. Formerly they had often visited the spot to conceal their arms and booty on the densely wooded island. The large papyrus thicket on the shore also hid boats from spying eyes, and near the spot where Ledscha landed was a grassy seat which looked like an ordinary resting place, but beneath it the corsairs had built a long, walled passage, that led to the other side of the island, and had enabled many a fugitive to vanish from the sight of pursuers, as though the earth had swallowed them.

"When the moon is over the island," Ledscha repeated after she had waited more than an hour.

The time had not yet come; the expanse of water lay before her motionless, in hue a dull, leaden gray, and only the dimly illumined air and a glimmering radiance along the edges of the waves that washed the island showed that the moon was already brightening the night.

When its full orb floated above the island Hermon, too, would appear, and the happiness which had been predicted to Ledscha would begin.

Happiness?

A bitter smile hovered around her delicately cut lips as she repeated the word.

Hitherto no feeling was more distant from her; for when love and longing began to stir in her heart, it seemed as though a hideous spider was

weaving its web about her, and vague fears, painful memories, and in their train fierce hate would force glad expectation into the shadow.

Yet she yearned with passionate fervour to see Hermon again, and when he was once there all must be well between them. The prediction of old Tabus, who ruled as mistress over so many demons, could not deceive.

After Ledscha had so lately reminded the lover who so vehemently roused her jealous wrath what this night of the full moon meant to her, she could rely upon his appearance in spite of everything.

Various matters undoubtedly held him firmly enough in Tennis--she admitted this to herself after she grew calmer--but he had promised to come; he would surely enter the boat, and she--she would submit to share the night with the Hellene.

Her whole being longed for the bliss awaiting her, and it could come from no one save the man whose lips would seek hers when the moon rose over the Pelican Island.

How tardily and sluggishly the cow-headed goddess who bore the silver orb between her horns rose to-night! how slowly the time passed, yet she did not move forward more certainly that the man whom Ledscha expected must arrive.

Of the possibility of his non-appearance she would not think; but when the fear that she was perhaps looking for him in vain assailed her, the blood crimsoned her face as if she felt the shame of a humiliating insult. Yet why should she make the period of waiting more torturing than it was already?

Surely he must come!

Sometimes she rested on the grassy seat and gazed across the dull gray surface of the water into the distance; sometimes she walked to and fro, stopping at every turn to look across at Tennis and the bright torches and lights which surrounded the Alexandrian's tent.

So one quarter of an hour after another passed away.

A light breeze rose, and gradually the tops of the rushes began to shine, and the leafage before, beside, and above her to glitter in the silvery light.

The water was no longer calm, but furrowed by countless little ripples, on whose crests the rays from above played, sparkling and flashing restlessly. A web of shimmering silvery radiance covered the edges of every island, and suddenly the brilliant full moon was reflected in argent lustre like a magnificent quivering column upon the surface of the water, now rippled by the evening breeze.

The time during which Ledscha could repeat "When the moon is over Pelican Island" was past; already its course had led it beyond.

The island lay behind it, and it continued its pilgrimage before the young girl's eyes.

The glittering column of light upon the water proved that she was not mistaken; the time which she had appointed for Hermon had already expired.

The moon in calm majesty sailed farther and farther onward in its course, and with it minute after minute elapsed, until they became a half hour, then a whole one.

"How long is it since the moon was over Pelican Island?" was the question which now pressed itself upon her again and again, and to which she found an answer at every glance upward, for she had learned to estimate time by the position of the stars.

Rarely was the silence of the night interrupted by the call of a human being or the barking of a dog from the city, or even the hooting of an owl at a still greater distance; but the farther the moon moved on above her the fiercer grew the uproar in Ledscha's proud, cruelly wronged soul. She felt offended, scorned, insulted, and at the same time defrauded of the happiness which this night of the full moon contained for her. Or had the demons who promised happiness meant something else in their prediction than Hermon's love? Was she to owe the bliss they had foretold to hate and pitiless retribution?

When the midnight hour had nearly arrived she prepared to depart, but after she had already set her foot on the edge of the boat she returned to the grassy seat. She would wait a little longer yet. Then there would be nothing which could give Hermon a right to consideration; then she might let loose upon him the avenging powers at her command.

Ledscha again gazed over the calm landscape, but in the wild tumult of her heart she no longer distinguished the details upon which her eyes rested. Doubtless she saw the light mists hovering like ghosts, or the restless shades of the unburied dead, over the shining expanse before her, and the filmy vapours that veiled the brightness of the stars, but she had ceased to question the heavenly bodies about the time.

What did she care for the progress of the hours, since the constellation of Charles's Wain showed her that it was past midnight?

The moon no longer stood forth in sharp outlines against the deep azure of the vaulted sky, but, robbed of its radiance, floated in a circle of dimly illumined mists.

Not only the feelings which stirred Ledscha's soul, but the scene around her, had gained a totally different aspect.

Since every hope of the happiness awaiting her was destroyed, she no longer sought to palliate the wrongs Hermon had inflicted upon her. While dwelling on them, she by no means forgot the trivial purpose for

which the artist intended to use her charms; and when she again gazed up at the slightly-clouded sky, the shrouded moon no longer reminded her of the silver orb between the horns of Astarte.

She did not ask herself how the transformation had occurred, but in its place, high above her head, hung a huge gray spider. Its gigantic limbs extended over the whole firmament, and seemed striving to clutch and stifle the world beneath. The enormous monster was weaving its gray net over Tennis, and all the islands in the water, the Pelican Island, and she herself upon the seat of turf, and held them all prisoned in it.

It was a horrible vision, fraught with terrors which, even when she shut her eyes in order to escape it, showed very little change.

Assailed by anxious fears, Ledscha started up, and a few seconds later was urging her boat with steady strokes toward the Owl's Nest.

Even now lights were still shining from the Alexandrian's tent through the sultry, veiled night.

There seemed to be no waking life on the pirates' island. Even old Tabus had probably put out the fire and gone to sleep, for deathlike silence and deep darkness surrounded it.

Had Hanno, who agreed to meet her here after midnight, also failed to come? Had the pirate learned, like the Greek, to break his promise?

Only half conscious what she was doing, she left the boat; but her slender foot had scarcely touched the land when a tall figure emerged from the thicket near the shore and approached her through the darkness.

"Hanno!" she exclaimed, as if relieved from a burden, and the young pirate repeated "Hanno" as if the name was the watchword of the night.

Her own name, uttered in a tone of intense yearning, followed. Not another syllable accompanied it, but the expression with which it fell upon her ear revealed so plainly what the young pirate felt for and expected from her that, in spite of the darkness which concealed her, she felt her face flush.

Then he tried to clasp her hand, and she dared not withdraw it from the man whom she had chosen for her tool. So she unresistingly permitted him to hold her right hand while he whispered his desire to take the place of the fallen Abus and make her his wife.

Ledscha, in hurried, embarrassed tones, answered that she appreciated the honour of his suit, but before she gave full consent she must discuss an important matter with him.

Then Hanno begged her to go out on the water.

His father and his brother Labaja were sitting in the house by the fire with his grandmother. They had learned, in following the trade of

piracy, to hide the glimmer of lights. The old people had approved his choice, but the conversation in the dwelling would soon be over, and then the opportunity of seeing each other alone would be at an end.

Without uttering a word in reply, Ledscha stepped back into the boat, but Hanno plied the oars with the utmost caution and guided the skiff without the slightest sound away from the island to an open part of the water far distant from any shore.

Here he took in the oars and asked her to speak. They had no cause to fear being overheard, for the surrounding mists merely subdued the light of the full moon, and no other boat could have approached them unobserved.

The few night birds, sweeping swiftly on their strong pinions from one island to another, flew past them like flitting shadows. One hawk only, in search of nocturnal booty, circled around the motionless skiff, and sometimes, with expanded wings, swooped down close to the couple who were talking together so eagerly; but both spoke so low that it would have been impossible, even for the bird's keen hearing, to follow the course of their consultation. Merely a few louder words and exclamations reached the height where it hovered.

The young pirate himself was obliged to listen with the most strained attention while Ledscha, in low whispers, accused the Greek sculptor of having basely wronged and deceived her; but the curse with which Hanno received this acknowledgment reached even the bird circling around the boat, and it seemed as if it wished to express its approval to the corsair, for this time its fierce croak, as it suddenly swooped down to the surface of the water behind the boat, sounded shrilly through the silent night. But it soon soared again, and now Ledscha's declaration that she would become Hanno's bride only on condition that he would aid her to punish the Hellenic traitor also reached him.

Then came the words "valuable booty," "slight risk," "thanks and reward."

The girl's whispered allusion to two colossal statues made of pure gold and genuine ivory was followed by a laugh of disagreeable meaning from the pirate.

At last he raised his deep voice to ask whether Ledscha, if the venture in which he would willingly risk his life were successful, would accompany him on board the Hydra, the good ship whose command his father intrusted to him. The firm "Yes" with which she answered, and her indignant exclamation as she repulsed Hanno's premature attempt at tenderness, might have been heard by the hawk even at a greater distance.

Then the pirate's promised bride lowered her voice again, and did not raise her tones until she saw in imagination the fulfilment of the judgment which she was calling down upon the man who had torn her heart with such pitiless cruelty.

Was this the happiness predicted for her on the night of the full moon?

It might be, and, radiant with secret joy, her eyes sparkling and her bosom heaving as if her foot was already on the breast of the fallen foe, she assured Hanno that the gold and the ivory should belong to him, and to him alone; but not until he had delivered the base traitor to her alive, and left his punishment in her hands, would she be ready to go with him wherever he wished--not until then, and not one moment earlier.

The pirate, with a proud "I'll capture him!" consented to this condition; but Ledscha, in hurried words, now described how she had planned the attack, while the corsair, at her bidding, plied the oars so as to bring the boat nearer to the scene of the assault.

The vulture followed the skiff; but when it stopped opposite to the large white building, one side of which was washed by the waves, Ledscha pointed to the windows of Hermon's studio, exclaiming hoarsely to the young pirate: "You will seize him there--the Greek with the long, soft black beard, and the slender figure, I mean. Then you will bind and gag him, but, you hear, without killing him, for I can only inflict what he deserves upon the living man. I am not bargaining for a dead one."

Just at that instant the bird of prey, with a shrill, greedy cry, as if it were invited to a delicious banquet, flew far away into the distance and did not return. It flew toward the left; the girl noticed it, and her heavy black eyebrows, which already met, contracted still more. The direction taken by the bird, which soon vanished in the darkness of the night, indicated approaching misfortune; but she was here only to sow destruction, and the more terrible growth it attained the better!

With an acuteness which aroused the admiration of the young corsair, who was trained to similar plots, she explained hers.

That they must wait until after the departure of the Alexandrian with her numerous train, and for the first dark night, was a matter of course.

One signal was to notify Hanno to hold himself in readiness, another to inform him that every one in the white house had gone to rest, and that Hermon was there too. The pirates were to enter the black-bearded Greek's studio. While some were shattering his statues to carry away in sacks the gold and ivory which they contained, others were to force their way into Myrtilus's workroom, which was on the opposite side of the house. There they would find the second statue; but this they must spare, because, on account of the great fame of its creator, it was more valuable than the other. The fair-haired artist was ill, and it would be no difficult matter to take him alive, even if he should put himself on the defensive. Hermon, on the contrary, was a strong fellow, and to bind him without injuring him severely would require both strength and skill. Yet it must be done, for only in case Hanno succeeded in delivering both sculptors to her alive would she consider herself--she could not repeat it often enough--bound to fulfil what she had promised him.

With the exception of the two artists, only Myrtilus's servant, the old doorkeeper, and Bias, Hermon's slave, remained during the night in the house which was to be attacked, and Hanno would undertake the assault

with twenty-five sturdy fellows whom he commanded on the Hydra if his brother Labaja consented to share in the assault, this force could be considerably increased.

To take the old corsair into their confidence now would not be advisable, for, on account of his mother's near presence, he would scarcely consent to enter into the peril. Should the venture fail, everything would be over; but if it succeeded, the old man could only praise the courage and skill with which it had been executed.

Nothing was to be feared from the coast guard, for since Abus's death the authorities believed that piracy had vanished from these waters, and the ships commanded by Satabus and his sons had been admitted from Pontus into the Tanite arm of the Nile as trading vessels.

CHAPTER XI.

While Hanno was discussing these considerations, he rowed the boat past the landing place from which the "garden" with the Alexandrian's tent could be seen.

The third hour after midnight had begun. Smoking flames were still rising from the pitch pans and blazing torches, and long rows of lanterns also illumined the broad space.

It was as light as day in the vicinity of the tent, and Biamite huntsmen and traders were moving to and fro among the slaves and attendants as though it was market time.

"Your father, too," Hanno remarked in his awkward fashion, "will scarcely make life hard for us. We shall probably find him in Pontus. He is getting a cargo of wood for Egypt there. We have had dealings with him a long time. He thought highly of Abus, and I, too, have already been useful to him. There were handsome young fellows on the Pontine coast, and we captured them. At the peril of our lives we took them to the mart. He may even risk it in Alexandria. So the old man makes over to him a large number of these youths, and often a girl into the bargain, and he does it far too cheaply. One might envy him the profit--if it were not your father! When you are once my wife, I'll make a special contract with him about the slaves. And, besides, since the last great capture, in which the old man allowed me a share of my own, I, too, need not complain of poverty. I shall be ready for the dowry. Do you want to know what you are worth to me?"

But Ledscha's attention was attracted by other things, and even after Hanno, with proud conceit, repeated his momentous question, he waited in vain for a reply.

Then he perceived that the girl was gazing at the brilliantly lighted square as if spellbound, and now he himself saw before the tent a shed

with a canopied roof, and beneath it cushioned couches, on which several Greeks--men and women--were half sitting, half lying, watching with eager attention the spectacle which a slender young Hellenic woman was presenting to them.

The tall man with the magnificent black beard, who seemed fairly devouring her with his eyes, must be the sculptor whom Ledscha commanded him to capture.

To the rude pirate the Greek girl, who in a light, half-transparent bombyx robe, was exhibiting herself to the eyes of the men upon a pedestal draped with cloths, seemed bold and shameless.

Behind her stood two female attendants, holding soft white garments ready, and a handsome Pontine boy with black, waving locks, who gazed up at her waiting for her signs.

"Nearer," Ledscha ordered the pirate in a stifled voice, and he rowed the boat noiselessly under the shadow of a willow on the bank. But the skiff had scarcely been brought to a stop there when an elderly matron, who shared the couch of an old Macedonian man of a distinguished, soldierly appearance, called the name "Niobe."

The Hellene on the pedestal took a cloth from the hand of one of the female attendants, and beckoned to the boy, who obediently drew through his girdle the short blue chiton which hung only to his knees, and sprang upon the platform.

There the Greek girl manipulated in some way the red tresses piled high upon her head, and confined above the brow by a costly gold diadem, flung the white linen fabric which the young slave handed to her over her head, wound her arm around the shoulders of the ravenlocked boy, and drew him toward her with passionate tenderness. At the same time she raised the end of the linen drapery with her left hand, spreading it over him like a protecting canopy.

The mobile features which had just smiled so radiantly expressed mortal terror, and the pirate, to whom even the name "Niobe" was unfamiliar, looked around him for the terrible danger threatening the innocent child, from which the woman on the pedestal was protecting it with loving devotion.

The mortal terror of a mother robbed by a higher power of her child could scarcely be more vividly depicted, and yet haughty defiance hovered around her slightly pouting lips; the uplifted hands seemed not only anxiously to defend, but also to defy an invisible foe with powerless anger.

The pirate's eyes rested on this spectacle as if spellbound, and the man who in Pontus had dragged hundreds of young creatures--boys and girls--on his ship to sell them into slavery, never thinking of the tears which he thereby caused in huts and mansions, clinched his rough hand to attack the base wretch who was robbing the poor mother of her lovely darling.

But just as Hanno was rising to look around him for the invisible evildoer, the loud shouts of many voices startled him. He glanced toward the pedestal; but now, instead of the hapless mother, he found there the bold woman whom he had previously seen, as radiant as if some great piece of good fortune had befallen her, bowing and waving her hand to the other Greeks, who were thanking her with loud applause.

The sorely threatened boy, bowing merrily, sprang to the ground; but Hanno put his hand on Ledscha's arm, and in great perplexity whispered, "What did that mean?"

"Hush!" said the girl softly, stretching her slender neck toward the illuminated square, for the performer had remained standing upon the pedestal, and Chrysilla, Daphne's companion, sat erect on her couch, exclaiming, "If it is agreeable to you, beautiful Althea, show us Nike crowning the victor."

Even the Biamite's keen ear could not catch the reply and the purport of the rapid conversation which followed; but she guessed the point in question when the young men who were present rose hastily, rushed toward the pedestal, loosed the wreaths from their heads, and offered them to the Greek girl whom Chrysilla had just called "beautiful Althea."

Four Hellenic officers in the strong military force under Philippus, the commandant of the "Key of Egypt," as Pelusium was justly called, had accompanied the old Macedonian general to visit his friend Archias's daughter at Tennis; but Althea rejected their garlands with an explanation which seemed to satisfy them.

Ledscha could not hear what she said, but when only Hermon and Myrtilus still stood with their wreaths of flowers opposite the "beautiful Althea," and she glanced hesitatingly from one to the other, as if she found the choice difficult, and then drew from her finger a sparkling ring, the Biamite detected the swift look of understanding which Hermon exchanged with her.

The girl's heart began to throb faster, and, with the keen premonition of a jealous soul, she recognised in Althea her rival and foe.

Now there was no doubt of it; now, as the actress, skilled in every wile, hid the hand holding the ring, as well as the other empty one, behind her back, she would know how to manage so that she could use the garland which Hermon handed her.

Ledscha's foreboding was instantly fulfilled, for when Althea held out her little tightly clinched fist to the artists and asked Myrtilus to choose, the hand to which he pointed and she then opened was empty, and she took from the other the ring, which she displayed with well-feigned regret to the spectators.

Then Hermon knelt before her, and, as he offered Althea his wreath, his dark eyes gazed so ardently into the blue ones of the red-haired Greek-

like Queen Arsinoe, she was of Thracian descent--that Ledscha was now positively certain she knew for whose sake her lover had so basely betrayed her.

How she hated this bold woman!

Yet she was forced to keep quiet, and pressed her lips tightly together as Althea seized the white sheet and with marvellous celerity wound it about her until it fell in exquisite folds like a long robe.

Surprise, curiosity, and a pleasant sense of satisfaction in seeing what seemed to her a shameless display withdrawn from her lover's eyes, rendered it easier for Ledscha to maintain her composure; yet she felt the blood throbbing in her temples as Hermon remained kneeling before the Hellene, gazing intently into her expressive face.

Was it not too narrow wholly to please the man who had known how to praise her own beauty so passionately? Did not the outlines of Althea's figure, which the bombyx robe only partially concealed, lack roundness even more than her own?

And yet! As soon as Althea had transformed the sheet into a robe, and held the wreath above him, Hermon's gaze rested on hers as though enraptured, while from her bright blue eyes a flood of ardent admiration poured upon the man for whom she held the victor's wreath.

This was done with the upper portion of her body bending very far forward. The slender figure was poised on one foot; the other, covered to the ankle with the long robe, hovered in the air. Had not the wings which, as Nike, belonged to her been lacking, every one would have been convinced that she was flying--that she had just descended from the heights of Olympus to crown the kneeling victor. Not only her hand, her gaze and her every feature awarded the prize to the man at her feet.

There was no doubt that, if Nike herself came to the earth to make the best man happy with the noblest of crowns, the spectacle would be a similar one.

And Hermon! No garlanded victor could look up to the gracious divinity more joyously, more completely enthralled by grateful rapture.

The applause which now rang out more and more loudly was certainly not undeserved, but it pierced Ledscha's soul like a mockery, like the bitterest scorn.

Hanno, on the contrary, seemed to consider the scene scarcely worth looking at. Something more powerful was required to stir him. He was particularly averse to all exhibitions. The utmost which his relatives could induce the quiet, reserved man to do when they ventured into the great seaports was to attend the animal fights and the games of the athletes. He felt thoroughly happy only when at sea, on board of his good ship. His best pleasure was to gaze up at the stars on calm nights, guide the helm, and meanwhile dream--of late most gladly of making the

beautiful girl who had seemed to him worthy of his brave brother Abus, his own wife.

In the secluded monotony of his life as a scar over memory had exalted Ledscha into the most desirable of all women, and the slaughtered Abus into the greatest of heroes.

To win the love of this much-praised maiden seemed to Hanno peerless happiness, and the young corsair felt that he was worthy of it; for on the high seas, when a superior foe was to be opposed by force and stratagem, when a ship was to be boarded and death spread over her deck, he had proved himself a man of unflinching courage.

His suit had progressed more easily than he expected. His father would rejoice, and his heart exulted at the thought of encountering a serious peril for the girl he loved. His whole existence was a venture of life, and, had he had ten to lose, they would not have been too dear a price to him to win Ledscha.

While Althea, as the goddess of Victory, held the wreath aloft, and loud applause hailed her, Hanno was thinking of the treasures which he had garnered since his father had allowed him a share of the booty, and of the future.

When he had accumulated ten talents of gold he would give up piracy, like Abus, and carry on his own ships wood and slaves from Pontus to Egypt, and textiles from Tennis, arms and other manufactured articles from Alexandria to the Pontine cities. In this way Ledscha's father had become a rich man, and he would also, not for his own sake--he needed little--but to make life sweet for his wife, surround her with splendour and luxury, and adorn her beautiful person with costly jewels. Many a stolen ornament was already lying in the safe hiding place that even his brother Labaja did not know.

At last the shouts died away, and as the stopping of the clattering wheel wakes the miller, so the stillness on the shore roused Hanno from his dream.

What was it that Ledscha saw there so fascinating that she did not even hear his low call? His father and Labaja had undoubtedly left his grandmother's house long ago, and were looking for him in vain.

Yes, he was right; the old pirate's shrill whistle reached his ear from the Owl's Nest, and he was accustomed to obedience.

So, lightly touching Ledscha on the shoulder, he whispered that he must return to the island at once. His father would be rejoiced if she went with him.

"To-morrow," she answered in a tone of resolute denial. Then, reminding him once more of the meaning of the signals she had promised to give, she waved her hand to him, sprang swiftly past him to the prow of the boat, caught an overhanging bough of the willow on the shore, and, as she had

learned during the games of her childhood, swung herself as lightly as a bird into the thicket at the water's edge, which concealed her from every eye.

CHAPTER XII.

Without even vouchsafing Hanno another glance, Ledscha glided forward in the shadow of the bushes to the great sycamore, whose thick, broad top on the side toward the tents was striped with light from the flood of radiance streaming from them. On the opposite side the leafage vanished in the darkness of the night, but Myrtilus had had a bench placed there, that he might rest in the shade, and from this spot the girl could obtain the best view of what she desired to see.

How gay and animated it was under the awning!

A throng of companions had arrived with the Pelusians, and some also had probably been on the ship which--she knew it from Bias--had come to Tennis directly from Alexandria that afternoon. The galley was said to belong to Philotas, an aristocratic relative of King Ptolemy. If she was not mistaken, he was the stately young Greek who was just picking up the ostrich-feather fan that had slipped from Daphne's lap.

The performance was over.

Young slaves in gay garments, and nimble female servants with glittering gold circlets round their upper arms and on their ankles, were passing from couch to couch, and from one guest to another, offering refreshments. Hermon had risen from his knees, and the wreath of bright flowers again adorned his black curls. He held himself as proudly erect as if the goddess of Victory herself had crowned him, while Althea was reaping applause and thanks. Ledscha gazed past her and the others to watch every movement of the sculptor.

It was scarcely the daughter of Archias who had detained Hermon, for he made only a brief answer--Ledscha could not hear what it was--when she accosted him pleasantly, to devote himself to Althea, and--this could be perceived even at a distance--thank her with ardent devotion.

And now--now he even raised the hem of her peplos to his lips.

A scornful smile hovered around Ledscha's mouth; but Daphne's guests also noticed this mark of homage--an unusual one in their circle--and young Philotas, who had followed Daphne from Alexandria, cast a significant glance at a man with a smooth, thin, birdlike face, whose hair was already turning gray. His name was Proclus, and, as grammateus of the Dionysian games and high priest of Apollo, he was one of the most influential men in Alexandria, especially as he was one of the favoured courtiers of Queen Arsinoe.

He had gone by her command to the Syrian court, had enjoyed on his return, at Pelusium, with his travelling companion Althea, the hospitality of Philippus, and accompanied the venerable officer to Tennis in order to win him over to certain plans. In spite of his advanced age, he still strove to gain the favour of fair women, and the sculptor's excessive ardour had displeased him.

So he let his somewhat mocking glance wander from Althea to Hermon, and called to the latter: "My congratulations, young master; but I need scarcely remind you that Nike suffers no one--not even goodness and grace personified--to take from her hand what it is her sole duty to bestow."

While speaking he adjusted the laurel on his own thin hair; but Thyone, the wife of Philippus, answered eagerly: "If I were a young man like Hermon, instead of an old woman, noble Proclus, I think the wreath which Beauty bestows would render me scarcely less happy than stern Nike's crown of victory."

While making this pleasant reply the matron's wrinkled face wore an expression of such cordial kindness, and her deep voice was so winning in its melody, that Hermon forced himself to heed the glance of urgent warning Daphne cast at him, and leave the sharp retort that hovered on his lips unuttered. Turning half to the grammateus, half to the matron, he merely said, in a cold, self-conscious tone, that Thyone was right. In this gay circle, the wreath of bright flowers proffered by the hands of a beautiful woman was the dearest of all gifts, and he would know how to value it.

"Until other more precious ones cast it into oblivion," observed Althea.

"Let me see, Hermon: ivy and roses. The former is lasting, but the roses--" She shook her finger in roguish menace at the sculptor as she spoke.

"The roses," Proclus broke in again, "are of course the most welcome to our young friend from such a hand; yet these flowers of the goddess of Beauty have little in common with his art, which is hostile to beauty. Still, I do not know what wreath will be offered to the new tendency with which he surprised us."

At this Hermon raised his head higher, and answered sharply: "Doubtless there must have been few of them, since you, who are so often among the judges, do not know them. At any rate, those which justice bestows have hitherto been lacking."

"I should deplore that," replied Proclus, stroking his sharp chin with his thumb and forefinger; "but I fear that our beautiful Nike also cared little for this lofty virtue of the judge in the last coronation. However, her immortal model lacks it often enough."

"Because she is a woman," said one of the young officers, laughing; and another added gaily: "That very thing may be acceptable to us soldiers. For my part, I think everything about the goddess of Victory is beautiful and just, that she may remain graciously disposed toward us. Nay, I

accuse the noble Althea of withholding from Nike, in her personation, her special ornament--her swift, powerful wings."

"She gave those to Eros, to speed his flight," laughed Proclus, casting a meaning look at Althea and Hermon.

No one failed to notice that this jest alluded to the love which seemed to have been awakened in the sculptor as quickly as in the personator of the goddess of Victory, and, while it excited the merriment of the others, the blood mounted into Hermon's cheeks; but Myrtilus perceived what was passing in the mind of his irritable friend, and, as the grammateus praised Nike because in this coronation she had omitted the laurel, the fair-haired Greek interrupted him with the exclamation:

"Quite right, noble Proclus, the grave laurel does not suit our gay pastime; but roses belong to the artist everywhere, and are always welcome to him. The more, the better!"

"Then we will wait till the laurel is distributed in some other place," replied the grammateus; and Myrtilus quickly added, "I will answer for it that Hermon does not leave it empty-handed."

"No one will greet the work which brings your friend the wreath of victory with warmer joy," Proclus protested. "But, if I am correctly informed, yonder house hides completed treasures whose inspection would give the fitting consecration to this happy meeting. Do you know what an exquisite effect gold and ivory statues produce in a full glow of lamplight? I first learned it a short time ago at the court of King Antiochus. There is no lack of lights here. What do you say, gentlemen? Will you not have the studios lighted till the rooms are as bright as day, and add a noble enjoyment of art to the pleasures of this wonderful night?"

But Hermon and Myrtilus opposed this proposal with equal decision.

Their refusal awakened keen regret, and the old commandant of Pelusium would not willingly yield to it.

Angrily shaking his large head, around which, in spite of his advanced age, thick snowwhite locks floated like a lion's mane, he exclaimed, "Must we then really return to our Pelusium, where Ares restricts the native rights of the Muses, without having admired the noble works which arose in such mysterious secrecy here, where Arachne rules and swings the weaver's shuttle?"

"But my two cruel cousins have closed their doors even upon me, who came here for the sake of their works," Daphne interrupted, "and, as rather Zeus is threatening a storm--just see what black clouds are rising!--we ought not to urge our artists further; a solemn oath forbids them to show their creations now to any one."

This earnest assurance silenced the curious, and, while the conversation took another turn, the gray-haired general's wife drew Myrtilus aside.

Hermon's parents had been intimate friends of her own, as well as of her husband's, and with the interest of sincere affection she desired to know whether the young sculptor could really hope for the success of which Myrtilus had just spoken.

It was years since she had visited Alexandria, but what she heard of Hermon's artistic work from many guests, and now again through Proclus, filled her with anxiety.

He had succeeded, it was said, in attracting attention, and his great talent was beyond question; but in this age, to which beauty was as much one of the necessities of life as bread and wine, and which could not separate it from art, he ventured to deny it recognition. He headed a current in art which was striving to destroy what had been proved and acknowledged, yet, though his creations were undeniably powerful, and even showed many other admirable qualities, instead of pleasing, satisfying, and ennobling, they repelled.

These opinions had troubled the matron, who understood men, and was the more disposed to credit them the more distinctly she perceived traces of discontent and instability in Hermon's manner during the present meeting.

So it afforded her special pleasure to learn from Myrtilus his firm conviction that, in Arachne, Hermon would produce a masterpiece which could scarcely be excelled.

During this conversation Althea had come to Thyone's side, and, as Hermon had already spoken to her of the Arachne, she eagerly expressed her belief that this work seemed as if it were specially created for him.

The Greek matron leaned back comfortably upon her cushions, her wrinkled, owl-like face assumed a cheerful expression, and, with the easy confidence conferred by aristocratic birth, a distinguished social position, and a light heart, she exclaimed: "Lucifer is probably already behind yonder clouds, preparing to announce day, and this exquisite banquet ought to have a close worthy of it. What do you say, you wonder-working darling of the Muses"--she held out her hand to Althea as she spoke--"to showing us and the two competing artists yonder the model of the Arachne they are to represent in gold and ivory?"

Althea fixed her eyes upon the ground, and, after a short period of reflection, answered hesitatingly: "The task which you set before me is certainly no easy one, but I shall rely upon your indulgence."

"She will!" cried the matron to the others.

Then, clapping her hands, she continued gaily, in the tone of the director of an entertainment issuing invitations to a performance: "Your attention is requested! In this city of weavers the noble Thracian, Althea, will depict before you all the weaver of weavers, Arachne, in person."

"Take heed and follow my advice to sharpen your eyes," added Philotas, who, conscious of his inferiority in intellect and talents to the men and women assembled here, took advantage of this opportunity to assert himself in a manner suited to his aristocratic birth. "This artistic yet hapless Arachne, if any one, teaches the lesson how the lofty Olympians punish those who venture to place themselves on the same level; so let artists beware. We stepchildren of the Muse can lull ourselves comfortably in the assurance of not giving the jealous gods the slightest cause for the doom which overtook the pitiable weaver."

Not a word of this declaration of the Macedonian aristocrat escaped the listening Ledscha. Scales seemed to fall from her eyes. Hermon had won her love in order to use her for the model of his statue of Arachne, and, now that he had met Althea, who perhaps suited his purpose even better, he no longer needed the barbarian. He had cast her aside like a tight shoe as soon as he found a more acceptable one in this female juggler.

The girl had already asked herself, with a slight thrill of horror, whether she had not prematurely called down so terrible a punishment upon her lover; now she rejoiced in her swift action. If anything else remained for her to do, it was to make the vengeance with which she intended to requite him still more severe.

There he stood beside the woman she hated. Could he bestow even one poor thought upon the Biamite girl and the wrong he had inflicted?

Oh, no! His heart was filled to overflowing by the Greek--every look revealed it.

What was the shameless creature probably whispering to him now?

Perhaps a meeting was just being granted. The rapture which had been predicted to her for this moonlight night, and of which Hermon had robbed her, was mirrored in his features. He could think of everything except her and her poor, crushed heart.

But Ledscha was mistaken. Althea had asked the sculptor whether he still regretted having been detained by her before midnight, and he had confessed that his remaining at the banquet had been connected with a great sacrifice--nay, with an offence which weighed heavily on his mind. Yet he was grateful to the favour of the gods that had guided his decision, for Althea had it in her power to compensate him richly for what he had lost.

A glance full of promise flashed upon him from her eloquent eyes, and, turning toward the pedestal at the same instant, she asked softly, "Is the compensation I must and will bestow connected with the Arachne?"

An eager "Yes" confirmed this question, and a swift movement of her expressive lips showed him that his boldest anticipations were to be surpassed.

How gladly he would have detained her longer!--but she was already the

object of all eyes, and his, too, followed her in expectant suspense as she gave an order to the female attendant and then stood thoughtfully for some time before the platform.

When she at last ascended it, the spectators supposed that she would again use a cloth; but, instead of asking anything more from the assistants, she cast aside even the peplos that covered her shoulders.

Now, almost lean in her slenderness, she stood with downcast eyes; but suddenly she loosed the double chain, adorned with flashing gems, from her neck, the circlets from her upper arms and wrists, and, lastly, even the diadem, a gift bestowed by her relative, Queen Arsinoe, from her narrow brow.

The female slaves received them, and then with swift movements Althea divided her thick long tresses of red hair into narrower strands, which she flung over her back, bosom, and shoulders.

Next, as if delirious, she threw her head so far on one side that it almost touched her left shoulder, and stared wildly upward toward the right, at the same time raising her bare arms so high that they extended far above her head.

It was again her purpose to present the appearance of defending herself against a viewless power, yet she was wholly unlike the Niobe whom she had formerly personated, for not only anguish, horror, and defiance, but deep despair and inexpressible astonishment were portrayed by her features, which obediently expressed the slightest emotion.

Something unprecedented, incomprehensible even to herself, was occurring, and to Ledscha, who watched her with an expectation as passionate as if her own weal and woe depended upon Althea's every movement, it seemed as if an unintelligible marvel was happening before her eyes, and a still greater one was impending; for was the woman up there really a woman like herself and the others whose eyes were now fixed upon the hated actress no less intently than her own?

Did her keen senses deceive her, or was not what was occurring actually a mysterious transformation?

As Althea stood there, her delicate arms seemed to have lengthened and lost even their slight roundness, her figure to have become even more slender and incorporeal, and how strangely her thin fingers spread apart! How stiffly the strands of the parted, wholly uncurled locks stood out in the air!

Did it not seem as if they were to help her move?

The black shadow which Althea's figure and limbs cast upon the surface of the brightly lighted pedestal—no, it was no deception, it not only resembled the spinner among insects, it presented the exact picture of a spider.

The Greek's slender body had contracted, her delicate arms and narrow braids of hair changed into spider legs, and the many-jointed hands were already grasping for their prey like a spider, or preparing to wind the murderous threads around another living creature.

"Arachne, the spider!" fell almost inaudibly from her quivering lips, and, overpowered by torturing fear, she was already turning away from the frightful image, when the storm of applause which burst from the Alexandrian guests soothed her excited imagination.

Instead of the spider, a slender, lank woman, with long, outstretched bare arms, and fingers spread wide apart, fluttering hair, and wandering eyes again stood before Ledscha.

But no peace was yet granted to her throbbing heart, for while Althea, with perspiring brow and quivering lips, descended from the pedestal, and was received with loud demonstrations of astonishment and delight, the glare of a flash of lightning burst through the clouds, and a loud peal of thunder shook the night air and reverberated a long time over the water.

At the same instant a loud cry rang from beneath the canopy.

Thyone, the wife of Alexander the Great's comrade, though absolutely fearless in the presence of human foes, dreaded the thunder by which Zeus announced his anger. Seized with sudden terror, she commanded a slave to obtain a black lamb for a sacrifice, and earnestly entreated her husband and her other companions to go on board the ship with her and seek shelter in its safe, rain-proof cabin, for already heavy drops were beginning to fall upon the tensely drawn awning.

"Nemesis!" exclaimed the grammateus.

"Nemesis!" whispered young Philotas to Daphne in a confidential murmur, throwing his own costly purple cloak around her to shield her from the rain. "Nowhere that we mortals overstep the bounds allotted to us do we await her in vain."

Then bending down to her again, he added, by way of explanation: "The winged daughter of Night would prove herself negligent if she allowed me to enjoy wholly without drawback the overwhelming happiness of being with you once more."

"Nemesis!" remarked Thoas, an aristocratic young hipparch of the guards of the Diadochi, who had studied in Athens and belonged to the Peripatetics there. "The master sees in the figure of this goddess the indignation which the good fortune of the base or the unworthy use of good fortune inspires in us. She keeps the happy mean between envy and malicious satisfaction." The young soldier looked around him, expecting applause, but no one was listening; the tempest was spreading terror among most of the freedmen and slaves.

Philotas and Myrtilus were following Daphne and her companion Chrysilla

as they hurried into the tent. The deep, commanding tones of old Philippus vainly shouted the name of Althea, whom, as he had bestowed his hospitality upon her in Pelusium, he regarded as his charge, while at intervals he reprimanded the black slaves who were to carry his wife to the ship, but at another heavy peal of thunder set down the litter to throw themselves on their knees and beseech the angry god for mercy.

Gras, the steward whom Archias had given to his daughter, a Bithynian who had attached himself to one school of philosophy after another, and thereby ceased to believe in the power of the Olympians, lost his quiet composure in this confusion, and even his usual good nature deserted him. With harsh words, and no less harsh blows, he rushed upon the servants, who, instead of carrying the costly household utensils and embroidered cushions into the tent, drew out their amulets and idols to confide their own imperilled lives to the protection of higher powers.

Meanwhile the gusts of wind which accompanied the outbreak of the storm extinguished the lamps and pitch-pans. The awning was torn from the posts, and amid the wild confusion rang the commandant of Pelusium's shouts for Althea and the screams of two Egyptian slave women, who, with their foreheads pressed to the ground, were praying, while the angry Gras was trying, by kicks and blows, to compel them to rise and go to work.

The officers were holding a whispered consultation whether they should accept the invitation of Proclus and spend the short remnant of the night on his galley over the wine, or first, according to the counsel of their pious commandant, wait in the neighbouring temple of Zeus until the storm was over.

The tempest had completely scattered Daphne's guests. Even Ledscha glanced very rarely toward the tents. She had thrown her self on the ground under the sycamore to beseech the angry deity for mercy, but, deeply as fear moved her agitated soul, she could not pray, but listened anxiously whenever an unexpected noise came from the meeting place of the Greeks.

Then the tones of a familiar voice reached her. It was Hermon's, and the person to whom he was speaking could be no one but the uncanny spider-woman, Althea.

They were coming to have a secret conversation under the shade of the dense foliage of the sycamore. That was easily perceived, and in an instant Ledscha's fear yielded to a different feeling.

Holding her breath, she nestled close to the trunk of the ancient tree to listen, and the first word she heard was the name "Nemesis," which had just reached her from the tent.

She knew its meaning, for Tennis also had a little temple dedicated to the terrible goddess, which was visited by the Egyptians and Biamites as well as the Greeks.

A triumphant smile flitted over her unveiled features, for there was no

other divinity on whose aid she could more confidently rely. She could unchain the vengeance which threatened Hermon with a far more terrible danger than the thunder clouds above, under the protection--nay, as it were at the behest of Nemesis.

To-morrow she would be the first to anoint her altar.

Now she rejoiced that her wealthy father imposed no restriction upon her in the management of household affairs, for she need spare no expense in choosing the animal she intended to offer as a sacrifice.

This reflection flashed through her mind with the speed of lightning while she was listening to Althea's conversation with the sculptor.

"The question here can be no clever play upon the name and the nature of the daughter of Erebus and Night," said the Thracian gravely. "I will remind you that there is another Nemesis besides the just being who drives from his stolen ease the unworthy mortal who suns himself in good fortune. The Nemesis whom I will recall to-day, while angry Zeus is hurling his thunderbolts, is the other, who chastises sacrilege--Ate, the swiftest and most terrible of the Erinyes. I will invoke her wrath upon you in this hour if you do not confess the truth to me fully and entirely."

"Ask," Hermon interrupted in a hollow tone. "Only, you strange woman--"

"Only," she hastily broke in, "whatever the answer may be, I must pose to you as the model for your Arachne--and perhaps it may come to that--but first I must know, briefly and quickly, for they will be looking for me immediately. Do you love Daphne?"

"No," he answered positively. "True, she has been dear to me from childhood--"

"And," Althea added, completing the sentence, "you owe her father a debt of gratitude. But that is not new to me; I know also how little reason you gave her for loving you. Yet her heart belongs neither to Philotas, the great lord with the little brain, nor to the famous sculptor Myrtilus, whose body is really too delicate to bear all the laurels with which he is overloaded, but to you, and you alone--I know it."

Hermon tried to contradict her, but Althea, without allowing him to speak, went on hurriedly: "No matter! I wished to know whether you loved her. True, according to appearances, your heart does not glow for her, and hitherto you have disdained to transform by her aid, at a single stroke, the poverty which ill suits you into wealth. But it was not merely to speak of the daughter of Archias that I accompanied you into this tempest, from which I would fain escape as quickly as possible. So speak quickly. I am to serve you in your art, and yet, if I understood you correctly, you have already found here another excellent model."

"A native of the country," answered Hermon in an embarrassed tone.

"And for my sake you allowed her to wait for you in vain?"

"It is as you say."

"And you had promised to seek her?"

"Certainly; but before the appointed hour came I met you. You rose before me like a new sun, shedding a new light that was full of promise. Everything else sank into darkness, and, if you will fulfil the hope which you awakened in this heart--"

Just at that moment another flash of lightning blazed, and, while the thunder still shook the air, Althea continued his interrupted protestation: "Then you will give yourself to me, body and soul--but Zeus, who hears oaths, is reminding us of his presence--and what will await you if the Biamite whom you betrayed invokes the wrath of Nemesis against you?"

"The Nemesis of the barbarians!" he retorted contemptuously. "She only placed herself at the service of my art reluctantly; but you, Althea, if you will loan yourself to me as a model, I shall succeed in doing my very best; for you have just permitted me to behold a miracle, Arachne herself, whom you became, you enchantress. It was real, actual life, and that--that is the highest goal."

"The highest?" she asked hesitatingly. "You will have to represent the female form, and beauty, Hermon, beauty?"

"Will be there, allied with truth," flamed Hermon, "if you, you peerless, more than beautiful creature, keep your word to me. But you will! Let me be sure of it. Is a little love also blended with the wish to serve the artist?"

"A little love?" she repeated scornfully.

"This matter concerns love complete and full--or none. We will see each other again to-morrow. Then show me what the model Althea is worth to you."

With these words she vanished in the darkness, while the call of her name again rang from the tents.

"Althea!" he cried in a tone of mournful reproach as he perceived her disappearance, hurrying after her; but the dense gloom soon forced him to give up the pursuit.

Ledscha, too, left her place beneath the sycamore.

She had seen and heard enough.

Duty now commanded her to execute vengeance, and the bold Hanno was ready to risk his life for her.

CHAPTER XIII.

The following day the sun shone radiantly, with scorching brilliancy, upon Tennis and the archipelago, which at this season of the year surrounded the little city of weavers.

Young Philotas, without going to rest, had set out at dawn in pursuit of game, accompanied by a numerous hunting party, to which several of the Pelusinian officers belonged. He, too, had brought home a great quantity of booty, with which he had expected to awaken Daphne's admiration, and to lay as a token of homage at her feet. He had intended to lead before her garlanded slaves bearing, tied by ropes, bunches of slaughtered wild fowl, but his reception was very different from what he had anticipated.

Instead of praising his exploit, he had been indignantly requested to remove the poor, easily killed victims from her presence; and, wounded and disappointed, he had retired to his magnificent Nile boat, where, spent by his sleepless night, he slumbered so soundly on his soft cushions that he did not appear at the breakfast which the gray-haired commander of Pelusium had invited him to attend on his galley.

While the others were still feasting there, Daphne was enjoying an hour alone with her companion Chryssilla.

She had remained absent from Philippus's banquet, and her pale cheeks showed the ill effects produced by the excitement of the previous night.

A little before noon Hermon came to see her. He, too, had not gone to the Pelusinian's breakfast.

After Althea had left him the evening before he went directly back to the white house, and, instead of going to rest, devoted himself to Myrtilus; for the difficulty of breathing, which during his industrious life in quiet seclusion had not troubled him for several months, attacked him with twofold violence after the gaiety of the previous night. Hermon had not left him an instant until day brought the sufferer relief, and he no longer needed the supporting hand of his kind nurse.

While Hermon, in his own sleeping room, ordered Bias to anoint his hair and beard and put on festal garments, the slave told him certain things that destroyed the last remnant of composure in his easily agitated soul.

With the firm resolution to keep the appointment on Pelican Island, Hermon had gone at sunset, in response to the Alexandrian's invitation, to attend her banquet, and by no means unwillingly, for his parents' old friends were dear to him, and he knew by experience the beneficial influence Daphne's sunny, warmhearted nature exerted upon him.

Yet this time he did not find what he expected.

In the first place, he had been obliged to witness how earnestly Philotas was pressing his suit, and perceived that her companion Chrysilla was most eagerly assisting him. As she saw in the young aristocrat a suitable husband for the daughter of Archias, and it was her duty to assign the guests their seats at the banquet, she had given the cushion beside Daphne to Philotas, and also willingly fulfilled Althea's desire to have Hermon for her neighbour.

When Chrysilla presented the black-bearded artist to the Thracian, she would have sworn that Althea found an old acquaintance in the sculptor; but Hermon treated the far-famed relative of Queen Arsinoe as coldly and distantly as if he now saw her for the first time, and with little pleasure.

In truth, he was glad to avoid women of Althea's stamp. For some time he had preferred to associate with the common people, among whom he found his best subjects, and kept far aloof from the court circles to which Althea belonged, and which, thanks to his birth and his ability as an artist, would easily have been accessible to him also.

The over-refined women who gave themselves airs of avoiding everything which imposes a restraint upon Nature, and therefore, in their transparent robes, treated with contempt all that modest Macedonian dames deemed worthy of a genuine woman's consideration, were repulsive to him--perhaps because they formed so rude a contrast to his noble dead mother and to Daphne.

Although he had been very frequently in feminine society, Althea's manner at first caused him a certain degree of embarrassment; for, in spite of the fact that he believed he met her here for the first time, there was something familiar about her, especially in the tone of her voice, and he fancied that her first words were associated with some former ones.

Yet no! If he had ever met her, he would surely have remembered her red-gold hair and the other peculiarities of a personality which was remarkable in every respect.

It soon proved that they were total strangers, and he wished matters to remain so.

He was glad that she attracted him so little, for at least she would scarcely make the early departure to the Biamite, which he considered his duty, a difficult task.

True, he admired from the first the rare milk-white line of her delicate skin, which was wholly free from rouge--his artist eye perceived that and the wonderfully beautiful shape of her hands and feet. The pose of the head on the neck, too, as she turned toward him seemed remarkably fine. This slender, pliant woman would have been an admirable model!

Again and again she reminded him of a gay Lesbian with whom he had caroused for a night during the last Dionysia in Alexandria, yet, on closer inspection, the two were as different as possible.

The former had been as free and reckless in her conduct as Althea was reserved. The hair and eyebrows of the Lesbian, instead of reddish gold, were the deepest black, and her complexion--he remembered it perfectly--was much darker. The resemblance probably consisted merely in the shape of the somewhat too narrow face, with its absolutely straight nose, and a chin which was rather too small, as well as in the sound of the high voice.

Not a serious word had reached his ears from the wanton lips of the Lesbian, while Althea at once desired information concerning his art, and showed that she was thoroughly familiar with the works and the aspirations of the Alexandrian sculptors. Although aware that Hermon had begun his career as an artist, and was the leader of a new tendency, she pretended to belong to the old school, and thereby irritated him to contradiction and the explanation of his efforts, which were rooted in the demands of the present day and the life of the flourishing capital.

The Thracian listened to the description of the new art struggling to present truth, as if these things were welcome surprises, grand revelations, for which she had waited with eager longing. True, she opposed every statement hostile to the old beliefs; but her extremely expressive features soon betrayed to him that he was stirring her to reflect, shaking her opinions, and winning her to his side.

Already, for the sake of the good cause, he devoted himself with the utmost zeal to the task of convincing Althea; she, however, did not make it an easy one, but presented clever arguments against his assertions.

Whenever he or she, by way of example, mentioned any well-known work of art, she imitated, as if involuntarily, its pose and action with surprising fidelity, frequently also in admirable caricature, whose effect was extremely comical. What a woman!

She was familiar with whatever Grecian art had created, and the animated conversation became a bewitching spectacle. When the grammateus Proclus, who as Althea's travelling companion had a certain claim upon her attention, mingled for a while in the discussion and attracted Althea's notice, Hermon felt injured, and answered his sensible remarks with such rudeness that the elder man, whose social position was so much higher, angrily turned his back upon him.

Althea had imposed a certain degree of restraint upon herself while talking to the grammateus, but during the further conversation with Hermon she confessed that she was decidedly of his opinion, and added to the old reasons for the deposition of beauty and ideality in favour of truth and reality new ones which surprised the sculptor. When she at last offered him her hand for a firm alliance, his brain was fevered, and it seemed a great honour when she asked eagerly what would occupy him in the immediate future.

Passionate sympathy echoed in every word, was expressed in every feature,

and she listened as if a great happiness was in store for herself when he disclosed the hopes which he based upon the statue of Arachne.

True, as time passed he had spoken more than once of the necessity of retiring, and before midnight really tried to depart; but he had fallen under Althea's thrall, and, in reply to her inquiry what must shorten these exquisite hours, had informed her, in significant words, what drew him away, and that his delay threatened him with the loss of a model such as the favour of fate rarely bestowed upon an artist.

Now the Thracian for the first time permitted her eyes to make frank confessions. She also bent forward with a natural movement to examine the artistic work on a silver vase, and as while doing so her peplos fell over his hand, she pressed it tenderly.

He gazed ardently up at her; but she whispered softly: "Stay! You will gain through me something better than awaits you there, and not only for to-day and to-morrow. We shall meet again in Alexandria, and to serve your art there shall be a beloved duty."

His power of resistance was broken; yet he beckoned to his slave Bias, who was busied with the mixing jars, and ordered him to seek Ledscha and tell her not to wait longer; urgent duties detained him.

While he was giving this direction, Althea had become engaged in the gay conversation of the others, and, as Thyone called Hermon, and he was also obliged to speak to Daphne, he could not again obtain an opportunity for private talk with the wonderful woman who held out far grander prospects for his art than the refractory, rude Biamite maiden.

Soon Althea's performance seemed to prove how fortunate a choice he had made. Her Arachne appeared like a revelation to him. If she kept her promise, and he succeeded in modelling her in the pose assumed while imagining the process of transformation, and presented her idea to the spectators, the great success which hitherto--because he had not yielded to demands which were opposed to his convictions--he had vainly expected, could no longer escape him. The Alexandrian fellow-artists who belonged to his party would gratefully welcome this special work; for what grew out of it would have nothing in common with the fascination of superhuman beauty, by which the older artists ensnared the hearts and minds of the multitude. He would create a genuine woman, who would not lack defects, yet who, though she inspired neither gratification nor rapture, would touch, perhaps even thrill, the heart by absolute truth.

While Althea was standing on the pedestal, she had not only represented the transformation into the spider, but experienced it, and the features of the spectators revealed that they believed they were witnessing the sinister event. His aim was now to awaken the same feeling in the beholders of his Arachne. Nothing, nothing at all must be changed in the figure of the model, in which many might miss the roundness and plumpness so pleasing to the eye. Althea's very defects would perfect the figure of the restless, wretched weaver whom Athene transformed into the spider.

While devoting himself to nursing his friend, he had thought far less of the new love-happiness which, in spite of her swift flight, was probably awaiting him through Althea than of the work which was to fill his existence in the immediate future.

His healthy body, steeled in the palaestra, felt no fatigue after the sleepless night passed amid so many powerful excitements when he retired to his chamber and committed himself to the hands of his slave.

It had not been possible to hear his report before, but when he at last received it Hermon was to learn something extremely unpleasant, and not only because no word of apology or even explanation of his absence had reached Ledscha.

Bias was little to blame for this neglect, for, in the first place, he had found no boat to reach the Pelican Island, because half Tennis was on the road to Tanis, where, on the night of the full moon, the brilliant festivals of the full eye of Horns and the great Astarte were celebrated by the mixed population of this place. When a boat which belonged to Daphne's galley was finally given to him, the Biamite girl was no longer at the place appointed for the meeting.

Hoping to find her on the Owl's Nest with old Tabus, he then landed there, but had been so uncivilly rebuffed on the shore by a rough fellow that he might be glad to have escaped with sound limbs. Lastly, he stole to Ledscha's home, and, knowing that her father was absent, had ventured as far as the open courtyard in the centre of the stately dwelling. The dogs knew him, and as a light was shining from one of the rooms that opened upon the courtyard, he peeped in and saw Taus, Ledscha's younger sister. She was kneeling before the statue of a god at the back of the room, weeping, while the old housekeeper had fallen asleep with the distaff in her lap.

He called cautiously to the pretty child. She was awaiting the return of her sister, who, she supposed, was still detained on the Owl's Nest by old Tabus's predictions; she had sorrowful tidings for her.

The husband of her friend Gula had returned on his ship and learned that his wife had gone to the Greek's studio. He had raged like a madman, and turned the unfortunate woman pitilessly out of doors after sunset. Her own parents had only been induced to receive her with great difficulty. Paseth, the jealous husband, had spared her life and refrained from going at once to kill the artist solely because Hermon had saved his little daughter at his own peril from the burning house.

"Now," said Ledscha's pretty little sister, "it would also be known that she had gone with Gula to his master, who was certainly a handsome man, but for whom, now that young Smethis was wooing her, she cared no more than she did for her runaway cat. All Tennis would point at her, and she dared not even think what her father would do when he came home."

These communications had increased Hermon's anxiety.

He was a brave man, and did not fear the vengeance of the enraged husband, against whom he was conscious of no guilt except having persuaded his wife to commit an imprudence. What troubled him was only the consciousness that he had given her and innocent little Taus every reason to curse their meeting.

The ardent warmth with which Gula blessed him as the preserver of her child had given him infinite pleasure. Now it seemed as if he had been guilty of an act of baseness by inducing her to render a service which was by no means free from danger, as though he wished to be paid for a good deed.

Besides, the slave had represented the possible consequences of his imprudence in the most gloomy light, and, with the assurance of knowing the disposition of his fellow-countrymen, urged his master to leave Tennis at once; the other Biamite men, who would bear anything rather than the interference of a Greek in their married lives, might force Gula's husband to take vengeance on him.

He said nothing about anxiety concerning his own safety, but he had good reason to fear being regarded as a go-between and called to account for it.

But his warnings and entreaties seemed to find deaf ears in Hermon. True, he intended to leave Tennis as soon as possible, for what advantage could he now find here? First, however, he must attend to the packing of the statues, and then try to appease Ledscha, and make Gula's husband understand that he was casting off his pretty wife unjustly.

He would not think of making a hasty departure, he told the slave, especially as he was to meet Althea, Queen Arsinoe's art-appreciating relative, in whom he had gained a friend, later in Alexandria.

Then Bias informed him of a discovery to which one of the Thracian's slave women had helped him, and what he carelessly told his master drove the blood from his cheeks, and, though his voice was almost stifled by surprise and shame, made him assail him with questions.

What great thing had he revealed? There had been reckless gaiety at every festival of Dionysus since he had been in the artist's service, and the slaves had indulged in the festal mirth no less freely than the masters. To intoxicate themselves with wine, the gift of the god to whom they were paying homage, was not only permitted, but commanded, and the juice of the grape proved its all-equalizing power.

There had been no lack of pretty companions even for him, the bondman, and the most beautiful of all had made eyes at his master, the tall, slender man with the splendid black beard.

The reckless Lesbian who had favoured Hermon at the last Dionysia had played pranks with him madly enough, but then had suddenly vanished. By his master's orders Bias had tried to find her again, but, in spite of honest search, in vain.

Just now he had met, as Althea's maid, the little Syrian Margula, who had been in her company, and raced along in the procession of bacchanals in his, Bias's, arms. True, she could not be persuaded to make a frank confession, but he, Bias, would let his right hand wither if Hermon's companion at the Dionysia was any other than Althea. His master would own that he was right if he imagined her with black hair instead of red. Plenty of people in Alexandria practised the art of dyeing, and it was well known that Queen Arsinoe herself willingly mingled in the throng at the Dionysia with a handsome Ephebi, who did not suspect the identity of his companion.

This was the information which had so deeply agitated Hermon, and then led him, after pacing to and fro a short time, to go first to Myrtilus and then to Daphne.

He had found his friend sleeping, and though every fibre of his being urged him to speak to him, he forced himself to leave the sufferer undisturbed.

Yet so torturing a sense of dissatisfaction with himself, so keen a resentment against his own adverse destiny had awaked within him, that he could no longer endure to remain in the presence of his work, with which he was more and more dissatisfied.

Away from the studio!

There was a gay party on board the galley of his parents' old friends. Wine should bring him forgetfulness, too, bless him again with the sense of joyous existence which he knew so well, and which he now seemed on the point of losing.

When he had once talked and drunk himself into the right mood, life would wear a less gloomy face.

No! It should once more be a gay and reckless one.

And Althea?

He would meet her, with whom he had once caroused and revelled madly enough in the intoxication of the last Dionysia, and, instead of allowing himself to be fooled any longer and continuing to bow respectfully before her, would assert all the rights she had formerly so liberally granted.

He would enjoy to-day, forget to-morrow, and be gay with the gay.

Eager for new pleasure, he drew a long breath as he went out into the open air, pressed his hands upon his broad chest, and with his eyes fixed upon the commandant of Pelusium's galley, bedecked with flags, walked swiftly toward the landing place.

Suddenly from the deck, shaded by an awning, the loud laugh of a woman's shrill voice reached his ear, blended with the deeper tones of the

grammateus, whose attacks on the previous night Hermon had not forgotten.

He stopped as if the laugh had pierced him to the heart. Proclus appeared to be on the most familiar terms with Althea, and to meet him with the Thracian now seemed impossible. He longed for mirth and pleasure, but was unwilling to share it with these two. As he dared not disturb Myrtilus, there was only one place where he could find what he needed, and this was--he had said so to himself when he turned his back on his sleeping friend--in Daphne's society.

Only yesterday he would have sought her without a second thought, but to-day Althea's declaration that he was the only man whom the daughter of Archias loved stood between him and his friend.

He knew that from childhood she had watched his every step with sisterly affection. A hundred times she had proved her loyalty; yet, dear as she was to him, willingly as he would have risked his life to save her from a danger, it had never entered his mind to give the tie that united them the name of love.

An older relative of both in Alexandria had once advised him, when he was complaining of his poverty, to seek her hand, but his pride of manhood rebelled against having the wealth which fate denied flung into his lap by a woman. When she looked at him with her honest eyes, he could never have brought himself to feign anything, least of all a passion of which, tenderly attached to her though he had been for years, hitherto he had known nothing.

"Do you love her?" Hermon asked himself as he walked toward Daphne's tent, and the anticipated "No" had pressed itself upon him far less quickly than he expected.

One thing was undeniably certain: whoever won her for a wife--even though she were the poorest of the poor--must be numbered among the most enviable of men. And should he not recognise in his aversion to every one of her suitors, and now to the aristocratic young Philotas, a feeling which resembled jealousy?

No! He did not and would not love Daphne. If she were really his, and whatever concerned him had become hers, with whom could he have sought in hours like these soothing, kind, and sensible counsel, comfort that calmed the heart, and the refreshing dew which his fading courage and faltering creative power required?

The bare thought of touching clay and wax with his fingers, or taking hammer, chisel, and file in his hands, was now repulsive; and when, just outside of the tent, a Biamite woman who was bringing fish to the cook reminded him of Ledscha, and that he had lost in her the right model for his Arachne, he scarcely regretted it.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Secluded monotony of his life as a scar over memory

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