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THE POOR SCHOLAR.

HIS LEGENDS AND TALES.

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NO. 1.—THE SLAVE AND THE HOSTAGE.

CHAPTER I.

At a coarse, rough hewn, small and ill-formed table, and upon chairs, or rather stools, of the worst make, were seated two men with goblets of gold before them filled with wine. The fair face, the delicate skin, the peachy cheek, and the beardless mouth of one of them showed that he was in the earliest dawn of manhood; whilst the dark locks, commingled with flakes of a snow-white hair, proved that the other had passed the middle period of life, although his stalwart form, his huge muscular limbs, and the vigorous action perceptible in every movement he made, demonstrated that neither the chill nor the weakness of old age had come upon him. The garments of both were apparently of the same material—a species of coarse, woollen cloth, which left the arms, and the legs from the knees downward, perfectly bare, with the exception that on the wrists there were rich circles of gold, and on their feet strong sandals fashioned after the manner of the Romans. Both wore short swords, and at the back of each there was a quiver of arrows, whilst bows rested by the side of their respective owners.

These two men looked upon a lovely landscape. They sat in the centre of a wide valley which was shut in on both sides by high hills. The fields before them, wherever they had been cultivated, produced abundant crops; and the vines, wherever they had been attended to, already promised a rich vintage, whilst far away in the distance, as if confining this splendid and extended plain of wild, rich, half-cared for nature, there ran in a thin silver wavy, bright line of silver, the glittering waters of the ever-enchanting Moselle.

Upon the shaggy brows of the elder of these two men there was a dark frown, and his red cheek seemed to be flushed alike with anger and excessive draughts of wine. He appeared to have heard with surprise an observation made by his youthful companion, and then having reflected in silence upon it for a few moments, to have become more incensed by his own reflections, and, at last, no longer able to restrain his rage, he struck the table with his open hand and exclaimed—

It is well!—it is well!—it is fortunate for you, young man—most fortunate for you, Attalus—that I am responsible to the king for your safety in life and limb, or you had not stirred a living man from this spot for having dared to speak to me as you have done. 'What!' added the strong man starting to his feet, and as he did so, cleaving the gold drinking vessel that stood by his side, and dashing it with fury upon the earth—'What, am I the owner—the lord of this wide and rich plain of Treves—is all that I look upon—me, hill, stream and field, cattle, vines, birds and slaves, and yet have I degraded myself by offering in marriage my daughter—my eldest daughter too! to this puny youth—this stout landless nephew of a weak bishop in a distant province; and yet—Heaven and earth! have found my tender of her hand declined. Oh! Attalus! Attalus! that you were not my guest, in order that I might be revenged for having so insulted me.'

A candid answer to a plain question is the homage which an honest man pays to truth, and never should be regarded as an insult,' said Attalus, who despite the vehemence of his elder companion still remained seated, and sipped the wine in his golden goblet, as he looked up with a smile to the angry man, who now paced up and down before him, and cast a glance of fury upon Attalus each time that he passed.

'Wherefore?' cried the impassioned man, stopping suddenly opposite to Attalus, and, as if he felt some difficulty in refraining from laying violent hands upon him, 'Wherefore have you dared to refuse the hand of my daughter?'

'For many reasons Nantin,' answered Attalus. 'It is not, be assured, because you are of Plebeian and I of noble origin. You are far greater by your wealth than I am by my rank, and if I sought your daughter as my wife, I could render to you no marriage-gift worthy of your acceptance: I can not take her as my wife, because I do not love her.'

'Not love her,' cried the passionate Nantin, 'she is not far to the eye, is she—'

beauty prove that I meant not to insult you nor her, and yet this answer content you, Nantin? 'You speak in riddles, Attalus. You praise my daughter's beauty, and yet you can not love her! Wherefore? again I say, wherefore,' said the angry Nantin, grasping the hilt of his sword in his right hand, and stamping with his foot.

'I pray you do not press the question, for the subject is one on which I do not wish to speak,' replied Attalus.

'What!' cried the now wholly infuriated Nantin, drawing his sword and directing the point to the breast of Attalus. 'Does your objection affect the honor of my child. Speak, youth—speak at once, or I may slay you.'

'Nantin, I will speak,' said the young man, resting his elbow upon the table, leaning his head upon his hand, and then looking up with perfect calmness in the face of his enraged interrogator, 'I will speak, not because you violate the rights of hospitality, by threatening me with your sword; but because the words I have used have been tortured by you into an unjust imputation upon your daughter. When I declared I could not love her, I intended but to say, that when one so young and so fair, so gentle and so good, could not win my affections, that no other woman could. Nantin, I never will marry. It is my desire to imitate the example of my good uncle, Gregory, the bishop, and to devote myself to the priesthood. Had not accident made me a hostage in your hands, I should ere now have accepted the tonsure. It is that which ambitious men and unfortunate kings regard as a degradation, but that I have ever thought of, from my childhood, as the only mark of honor in this world worthy of possessing.'

'Indeed!' exclaimed Nantin, his anger controlled, but not pacified, by this answer. 'This may be a good excuse, or it may be but a pretext.'

'I have never spoken,' said Attalus, 'anything but the truth all my life, and I would not now.'

Nantin paid no further heed to his observations; for there was seen galloping towards them a troop of armed men, at the head of whom was one whose helmet was adorned with feathers.

'Ha!' cried Nantin, as he looked at the soldier with feathers in his helmet, 'this is a messenger from the king. What tidings, I marvel, brings he to Treves?'

'Do I speak to Nantin of Treves?' said the soldier, riding up to his side.

'You do,' answered Nantin.

Had Nantin been one of the very few men, that might be found even in the rude and barbarous times that we are now describing, a feeling of compassion would have touched his heart for the sudden downfall and undesired degradation of the youth by whose side he had so lately sat, and regarded him not merely as his equal in position but even his superior in rank. In Nantin's heart there was no generosity. Intensely selfish, he only considered what had occurred, as it affected himself, and it was with indignation, that increased the already existing feeling of anger against Attalus, that he thought over the conversation that had just passed between them.

'I am,' he said, 'doubtly dishonored. My daughter's hand has been rejected—rejected! and rejected by whom—a slave! Curses on him, I am degraded by his degradation. Shall I stab him where he stands, in order that I may wash out the remembrance of his infamy in his blood? But, no. That would be a poor revenge—it would be no punishment for himself; and then his relatives, even though the king had made him a slave, might demand a heavy blood fine from me, under the pretence he was the son of a senator. No, no—much better employ him in a menial office, whilst he is my slave, and exact a heavy ransom for him before I grant him his freedom.'

'Hark, sirrah,' he said, addressing Attalus, and as he did so, drawing his sword and cutting the cords that bound the hands of Attalus together. 'Those fetters which the king has placed upon your limbs as a slave, I, your master will loose, in order that you may the more fittingly do my bidding. I know that you are well skilled in the care of horses. Those that are on this farm I confide to your grooming. See that they be fat and sleek, and in good condition whenever I come. Either, or your horse shall answer for it; and stripes compel you to be attentive in the field and stable. Remember, if at any moment you be found outside the bounds of these lands, you shall be punished as a fugitive slave, with the mutilation of your dainty limbs. In the shaven crown of a slave, you shall then obtain that tonsure which you say you have so long desired as a priest. Farewell, proud, pious son of a senator! Farewell, mean, degraded man—my barrier—my groom—my slave!'

Attalus answered not one single word to the harsh language of his new master. The moment however that Nantin had departed, and that he found himself alone, he cast himself on his knees and said—'Thanks be to thee, O God, for all thy mercies; better my limbs be bound with fetters than my soul stained with foul passions.—Better be the slave of man than the slave of sin.'

CHAPTER II.

The first gray streaks of approaching day had spread themselves over the darkness of night, and as they momentarily increased in brightness, served to indicate that the black and seemingly impenetrable obscurity which had lain for so many hours over a deep and profound ravine in the neighborhood of the city of Langres must speedily be dispersed. It was at this period of time, which may still be truly called the night, although so soon to be succeeded by morning, that there crept, with cautious steps down the rocky sides of the ravine, a young man, whose skin was dark as that of a Carthaginian, but whose features were as nobly defined as if he were of the purest Roman blood, and in whose noble form and agile motions were displayed all the graces of youth and all the vigor of manhood. His black hair was shaven close to his head—his arms and the upper part of his person down to the waist, were completely bare, and he wore nothing but a pair of loose dark trousers which only reached to the knee, and were fastened around his middle by a girdle of undressed leather. He carried with him no weapon, and yet there was manifested in every gesture the courage of a warrior, and, when he stopped, as he did from time to time, in his descent, there was about him the proud bearing and the upright attitude of an accomplished soldier.

With cautious steps, for the descent was difficult, this young man proceeded towards the bottom of the ravine, and when at last the gurgling murmur of the stream that forced its way through the rocks along its sides, reached his ears, he paused, and placing his hand upon his breast, as if to pacify its beatings, he exclaimed, as if in voluntarily—'My wife! my child! perchance to look upon them for the last time. Oh God be merciful to us!'

These were the only words to which he gave utterance. The emotions of the spirit seemed to overmaster the strength of the body, for having so spoken, he seemed to cling for support to the rugged point of a cliff by which he stood. The struggle between mental suffering and physical courage was severe, but it was brief—for even whilst his eyes glistened with tears, his rosy lips were wreathed with a smile of confidence and hope as he resumed his descent down the ravine.

upwards as if he would examine the path by which he had descended and detect the trace of his having been followed and watched by any stranger. His keen eye in an instant glanced up that tedious way, which it had taken him an hour or more to travel over and reach, and whilst he congratulated himself on perceiving that he had got thus far undetected, he also noticed that the topmost point of the ravine was beginning to glow with the red rays of the coming day. Observing this, he pushed aside a few thick-set brambles and crept into the narrow entrance of a cave which nature itself had hollowed out in the rocks.

In the wide cave into which this young man was treading his way, there were two persons buried at the moment in profound repose, and closely clasped in each others arms. They were a young mother and her infant daughter. The mother was apparently about eighteen or nineteen years of age, the daughter not more than seven months. The mother fair as the snow-white lily, the daughter as dark skinned as if she were of a different race from her, on whose fair bosom her glowing and carnation-tinted cheek rested.

Mother and child thus slept, the deep, calm, balmy and refreshing sleep which heaven seems to reserve as an especial blessing that can alone be enjoyed by the young and innocent, when it was on the instant broken, as the first step of the young man stirred the leaves with which the cave had been thickly strewn. The timid tenderness of the mother for her child seemed to be wakeful while she herself slept, for that light rustling which came but a mother's ears could detect alarmed her; and clutching rather than grasping her baby within her arms, she started up, and gazed in terror around her. The look of fear vanished as speedily as it had appeared, for holding the child to her with one arm, she held forth the other to him who had thus unexpectedly disturbed her in her sleep, and exclaimed—

'Leo, my husband! my beloved! welcome! thrice welcome!'

'My wife! my child!' cried Leo, as he clasped both those loved objects to his heart, and gave expression to his feelings in his kisses.

'Thrice welcome, Leo,' said his wife to him, as he glanced with love and admiration upon her and her daughter; 'but wherefore have you ventured to come again so soon to see us? Consider how full of danger is every visit, and what peril besets us all if you were discovered?'

'I do, I do,' answered Leo, in bitter agony.—'I know that in obeying the laws of God we have violated the cruel laws of man. I know, too well I know that I am a slave, a born slave, and yet that heaven has been pleased to make me stronger in body, and more potent in intellect than thousands of those who call themselves free. I know, too, my beloved, my wife, my Veronica, that in giving to me your priceless affections, and in becoming my wife, you are liable to be degraded to the condition of a slave, because you are the wife of a slave—and, good heavens! I also know that this young and innocent being, your child, the child of a free woman, would be also a slave if we were discovered; she too, would be a slave! Such is the accursed law of man, because she is my daughter, the daughter of Leo the slave. These things do I know, and therefore am I here, in order that I may put an end to them.'

'To render that which is the law nugatory, to act in opposition to, and violate what are the settled customs and institutions of a country are not things for your accomplishment, Leo. You talk wildly and incoherently. I do not understand you.'

grief; and I own, it was not the thought of you, nor of my child, which first excited in my mind the project I have now to disclose to you; it was the groans and the tears of the compassionate bishop; it was the desire to assuage his grief which induced me to ask myself the question—could not I do anything to bring consolation to him? I thought over the matter for some hours, and the resolution I came to was to make an effort to rescue Attalus, to relieve him from thralldom, and to restore him to his uncle.'

'It is a dream, Leo, it is the dream of a good man, who in his vision bestows boundless treasures upon the needy, and awakes to find that he has not a crust of bread wherewith to stay the cravings of his own hunger.'

'It is no dream, Veronica; it is a plan full of danger, but with heaven's help, practicable, and so thinks Bishop Gregory himself: for I have his permission, his full and complete sanction to undertake it. If there be failure, as failure there may be, I have the consolation of reflecting that I have done all that becomes me, and that I can be the only sufferer.'

'You the only sufferer,' exclaimed Veronica. 'Have you no wife? no child?' And as she said this she burst into tears and placed the infant in her arms.

'My darling Mary!' said Leo, as he covered the smiling face of his baby, with his glowing kisses, 'It is for your sake, it is to save you and my angel wife, that I expose my limbs to the worst tortures that cruelty may devise against me, because even then, and with the death agony upon me, I would know that you were both in a place of safety.'

'Of safety, Leo,' exclaimed Veronica. 'Oh, where on earth is that to be found, and you far away from us.'

'Alas!' answered Leo, 'though I had the courage of Clovis, I have not the power to secure to you, even a single hour of security. I visit you with fear, and I leave you with apprehension. Such has been our life hitherto. It shall not be so for the future; for the good Bishop, upon being informed by me last night that I was married, and that you were a free-born woman, has, for the purpose of saving you from the persecution of your relations, obtained permission from the pious dame, who now lives as a recluse in a cell attached to the Cathedral of Langres, to receive you and your child. In that cell you can, during my absence, live not only in perfect retirement, but in complete security, for it will afford you all the protection of a sanctuary—so that even if discovered in the cell of the recluse, all proceedings can be stayed against you as long as you are within the verge of the altar. Outside of the precincts of the sanctuary Bishop Gregory promises no human force can draw you, until your husband is restored to you. I say, then, I have provided for you and for our child a place of safety. This day you can repair hither. Disguised in the dark robes and beneath the close black veil of a religious, with which you are long since provided, you can travel in safety. And now, Veronica, as the pious bishop has bestowed upon me his benediction in parting, let me have the benefit of your prayers before I separate from you. Beg the intercession of the Virgin, and of St. Martin of Tours. Their supplications even for prayers will be heard, when the prayers of kings and queens are unheeded.'

CHAPTER III.

Leo had seen his wife and child received within the walls of the Church of Langres and then had journeyed with such speed that he found himself in some days afterwards within a few miles of that city, Treves, whose inhabitants still modestly boast that it is the most ancient city in the world, having been built (as they affirm), no less than 1250 years before Rome itself.

Leo advanced by one of the old Roman roads leading to the city, he saw prostrate upon the earth, the body of an aged man, whose withered hands were grasping his white hairs, and who, with his face close to the ground on which he lay, seemed in his grief a desire to shut out from his sight all the objects around him. The spot on which this old man lay was a green mound, which gently elevating itself on the side of the road, formed the basement, it might be said, to a round pedestal, on which rested the marble and exquisitely formed feet of a broken statue of Venus. The feet and legs to the knees were the only fragments to show that on the spot Paganism had formerly celebrated its diabolical rites, and that the zeal that had abolished those rites, and shattered its emblems, had not yet urged those it influenced to replace what had been destroyed by any image calculated to excite the piety or elicit the prayers of travelers. In the attitude of the old man, as he lay prostrate on the earth, Leo saw portrayed a personification of the most complete despair. His compassionate feelings were at once aroused, and hurrying over to the side of the aged sufferer, he touched him gently on the shoulder and enquired