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BRENNUS—THE BARBARIAN.

A TALE OF ROME IN THE DAYS OF PAGANISM

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(From the Banner of the South.)

CHAPTER I.

Beautiful in its lonely grandeur rose the palace near the mountain pass, and graceful were the forms of beauty that fitted around its walls; but, lovelier far than all, Oh! Aruns, was thy fair daughter. Lovely were the flowers that bloomed around the fairy fountain; but Virgilia was the queen of beauty. Yet the chill wind will fade the delicate flowers, or the parching sun crumble them into dust; guard well, then, thy flower, Oh! Aruns, from the chill winds of poverty and the scorching sun of luxury.

Far enough removed from the city to avoid its attendant noise and bustle, the stately palace of Aruns, a wealthy citizen of Clusium, afforded a most delightful retreat for his only child. A rare loveliness had been bestowed upon this favored child of fortune, and many were the suitors who knelt before her; yet, still, the sweet Virgilia turned away, and would even fly in alarm from one of them, the impetuous Lucius, a young noble of Clusium. Proud and haughty in spirit, Lucius swore by his gods not to be turned from his purpose; and most dangerous is a man when he yields himself a slave to his own evil passions.

"Why, why does the fair Virgilia turn from me?" he asked of his friend Caius. "Look at me; am I not fair and tall in stature? Are not my eyes bright, my muscles strong? Is not my form perfect? Have I ever been defeated in single combat? Have not the gods showered wealth, youth, and beauty upon me? Why then does the fairest of the fair despise me?"

"Venus alone knows," answered Caius, with a slight grimace; "you forget, Lucius, that Virgilia, also, possesses these gifts of the gods in abundance, and can see a more graceful form than thine at any time, by consulting her mirror. It may be that some more favored lover hides thy perfections from her eyes."

"There is no truth in thee, Caius!" exclaimed Lucius, angrily; "full well thou knowest she has no favored lover. Closely have I searched with my eyes those who come near her, and, by Eros! I am willing to swear she loves none of them!"

"Nay, let us not make many words about the matter," answered Caius; "let me fall into a disagreement. I know not if she loves, for in truth I care not if she loves, for my heart bows not before her!"

"Aye! thou lovest and art happy; and, in the sunshine of that happiness, overlook thy friend's distress," said Lucius sullenly.

"Thou wiltfully misunderstand me, Lucius," said Caius kindly; "I would do much for my friend, but thou dost not bear patience with me. I believe that Virgilia loves. We may not, yet, have seen her in company with the favored one, but—"

"Whom does she love?" interrupted Lucius impatiently, "thinkest thou of any one?"

"No, no, of no one," replied Caius; "I have never yet seen her with the one she loves, yet, still, I say I doubt not there is a favored lover!"

"I will watch, and if there is — let him beware!" cried Lucius. "Come, Caius, let us seek the house of Aruns, or rather of Virgilia, for to tell the truth, though Virgilia is most dear to me, yet the noble Aruns is no favorite of mine, nor of any of us; he is too lenient with those low Plebians, and will soon fall into disgrace among the Patricians."

the altar, and then looks eagerly up the mountain path, as if awaiting some one. She is; and, behold, he comes! Bounding over rock and ravine, with hardy grace, the young warrior soon reaches her side. He is large and strong, with flowing flaxen hair, and ruddy complexion. His attire is a rude armor, which he wears as easy as if it were quilted silk.

He, too, has come to sacrifice on the shrine of Love, for his hands are full of flowers.—Virgilia moves, smilingly, away, and the offering is made.

Turning from the cold image of Love, to the living, breathing, reality before him, the warrior kneels before Virgilia. And she? Oh, we see by the very blush, the speaking eye, that Virgilia loves, and the loved one is before her.

"Dearest Virgilia," murmured the young man, gazing up into her face. The words were common enough, for the tale of love is as old as the world, and ever uses the same language.

"Not at my feet, Brennus," said Virgilia, resting her hand on his head; "come sit here beside me, and tell me why thou didst not come yesterday."

As the moments sweep by and they sit there conversing, we detect a difference in their speech, for he speaks her language with an accent on his tongue as if he were of a different race.

"But my father is kind, and is not proud," said Virgilia, in answer to an expressed fear of her lover, that her father might look with angry eyes upon their love.

"Yet, he is a wealthy Patrician, as thou callest it, and I—thou knowest not what I am, Virgilia."

"Oh, I am sure thou art good and brave, what more is required?" asked the maiden fondly.

"A noble name," answered Brennus. "Thou canst win one!" cried Virgilia.

"But, listen to me, Virgilia," answered her lover; "I will tell thee more of myself than thou hast yet heard. Thou art an Etruscan, I am—a Gaul! Our nations are not friends."

"Oh! but we are friends," cried Virgilia, clinging to his arm; "Etruscan, Gaul, or Roman, what is it to me? If thou wert a Roman, then, indeed, my father might look angrily upon me, for he hates these Romans, who have wrested so many of our cities from us.—But I, who love you, care nothing for these things."

"But knowest thou what we are called, Virgilia?"

"Barbarians!" murmured the girl.

"Yes, Barbarians! And wouldst thou, Virgilia, the daughter of a haughty noble, give thyself in marriage to a rude barbarian?—Wouldst thou cross those lofty mountains to seek a home with me?"

"I would, dear Brennus; thou dost wrong my faithful heart by the doubt. I know not how far away thy home is, I know not what thy station is there, but this I do know, Brennus, I know that I love thee, and am willing to share thy lot whatever that may be."

most breathless when they entered the large entrance hall. There, reclining at his ease upon the silken cushion, was Lucius, awaiting the appearance of Virgilia. Near him stood his friend Caius, who looked a little apprehensively at the lowering brow of Aruns—Lucius sprang to his feet, and catching the hand of Virgilia, in softly spoken words besought her to remove her veil.

"The veil is not out of place, most noble Lucius," replied Virgilia; "I have been walking."

"Aye, but thou has now entered the house, and there is no reason why thou shouldst now conceal thy face!" said Lucius, seizing the veil, and trying to remove it with gentle hand.

"My will is sufficient reason," answered Virgilia, holding its folds closely against her face.

"Assuredly," answered Lucius, withdrawing his hand.

At this moment a wide door was thrown open, and a slave summoned them to partake of the evening meal. Lucius had eaten in the house of Aruns many times, and well knew the delicate wines and costly luxuries that would be set before him. Lucius was a devoted slave to wine, and even now hesitated not to turn from the lovely Virgilia to follow Aruns to the supper-room. This was the largest and most elegant room in the house. The floor was paved with blocks of marble, and rare mosaic, the ceiling painted with glowing colors, and upon one of the walls hung a large mirror of polished steel. A long table stood in the centre of the room, with two couches on either side. Lucius immediately threw himself upon one of these, with his friend at his left hand.—A young slave advanced with a silver basin, into which Lucius dipped his fingers, and then turned his whole attention to the table. Soft music filled the air while they ate, yet no softness entered the heart of Lucius. While partaking of the bread of Aruns, he was plotting against his happiness.

CHAPTER II.

The bright sky bore in its limpid blue the still brighter sun. The dew was scarcely dried upon the flowers, yet Virgilia was already abroad. To-day she is to see Brennus, for he has sent a special message to her. Well may you think that her steps were not slow, for the birds were scarcely swifter than she. Early as she was Brennus was there before her, and clasped her in his arms as she entered the cave.

"Oh! dearest Virgilia, I must leave thee! Too long have I lingered here, and now I must go. Yet I will return, trust me, I will return!"

"I will not try to keep thee here," said Virgilia, tears sparkling in her eyes; "yet, I will live upon thy promise to return. Thou wilt come back, Brennus, wilt thou not?"

"Shall I swear it, Virgilia?"

"No! oh no!" I know thou wilt return; I did but ask to hear once more the sweet assurance. Art thou going now? Will I not see thee again?"

"Once more, dearest," answered Brennus; "meet me here to-morrow morning; after I have seen thee I will go hence, for a time only; when I come back again I will ask thy father for thee, and thou shalt go home with Brennus the Barbarian."

"Do not call thyself such names, Brennus, thou art no barbarian!" said Virgilia, reproachfully.

"Deceive not thyself, dearest," replied Brennus; "my countrymen are indeed rude, and if my manner seems soft to thee, 'tis only because I cannot be rude in thy dear presence. I am a warrior, Virgilia, and my hand is more used to grasp the spear than flowers."

"And, yet, thou dost hold the flowers tenderly, Brennus," said Virgilia, smiling, "as if thy hands were used to them, thou dost not cast them aside, as Lucius doth."

Yet, no! The thought is that of a fool! He would not consent, for he knows not but that Brennus may be the vilest of the vile."

"I, also, sometimes tremble," said Virgilia; "but I will keep within the house, for only last night, after he had broken bread in my father's house, he urged me, with threats to promise myself to him. He spoke then of his suspicions; he told me that I loved another.—I did not deny it. Brennus, for I knew he could not harm thee, and I hoped he would would then leave."

"And did he so?" asked Brennus.

"No; he became angry, and swore by the gods that no other should have me. Oh! he was very angry, Brennus, and I trembled before his rage."

"Tremble no longer, sweet one, I will think over this until to-morrow morn. For not; and now, farewell."

"I will not fear; but didst thou say this farewell was for the last?" asked Virgilia.

"For the last time! The gods forbid!—Nay, I said not so, sweet flower. I will return."

"Ah! 'twas thus I meant it," said Virgilia, smiling faintly; "and now—" she bent her head on his shoulder, and her farewell was lost in the heavy sigh that broke from her heart.

"To-morrow," whispered Brennus, and placing his love in the arms of Nyda, he ascended the mountain path with fleet steps.

"The flowers are fading on the altar," said Nyda, striving to attract her mistress' attention.

"Aye, even as my hopes are!" replied Virgilia, with a heavy sigh.

"Be not so sad," said Nyda, kneeling beside her fair owner; "remember the noble Brennus hath promised to see thee again to-morrow. Look! The place is in disorder; let us bring fresh flowers and sweet perfumes, that, when my lord return, he may find all to his pleasure."

"Brennus is no noble, good Nyda; yet, thou sayest well. We will trim our altar and scatter the perfumes. Your basket is without, Nyda, bring it in."

"I would give my life a sacrifice to the gods but that Brennus is a noble in his own country!" said Nyda, confidently, as she brought in the basket of flowers.

"My poor girl, I fear thy sacrifice would have to be made," said Virgilia. "I do not think that Brennus hath even wealth in his own country. Didst thou not hear him say he was only a poor barbarian?"

"Aye, I heard the words, and marked the proud look on his brow while he spoke them. He is so grand and beautiful he must be a favorite of the gods."

"Please thyself with bright dreams, Nyda, but they are only dreams, as thou wilt find.—Come, let us away. Brennus is no longer here and the place seems lonely."

Returning to the house Virgilia found the slaves huddled together, with looks of wild alarm in their eyes, and her usually stately father, pacing the outer court with rapid, uneven, footsteps. Hastening to his side, with an undefined fear at her heart, she besought him to tell to her the cause of his troubled looks.

CHAPTER III.

Brennus was prompt to keep his appointment, but, alas! Virgilia was not there to meet him. Nyda, alone, the weeping Nyda, crouched on the floor of the grotto.

"What ails thee, girl, where is thy mistress?" asked Brennus, lifting Nyda to her feet.

"Alas! most noble Brennus, they have taken her away, to place her among the virgins in the temple of Vesta!"

"They! Who?" cried Brennus, his cheeks flushing; "was it her father?"

"Aruns! No, my master weeps for his daughter," said Nyda, indignantly; "my mistress thinks that Lucius hath a hand in this matter."

"Lucius! What the noble who sought her hand? Come Nyda, set me on the road to Clusium; I will tear my love from his hands!"

"But she is not in his hands; said I not that she was to be placed in the temple of Vesta? Alas, my lord! she is lost to thee forever!"

"Not so! cried Brennus, with a scornful laugh; "she is lost to me but for a time, I will try to rescue her with my own hand, Nyda; if I cannot—then we will sacrifice to the gods, and try other means. You can give me a dress, Nyda; see, my clothes are not fashioned like those of your countrymen."

"I can give you all you want," answered Nyda; "Come back here when the day grows late, I will have all things in readiness for thee. Beware lest thy speech betray thee, Brennus, and more grief fall upon my lady's heart!"

"This Lucius, Nyda, how else do you name him?" asked Brennus, not heeding her warning words.

"Lucius Fabius," said Nyda.

"Lucius Fabius," repeated Brennus, slowly, as if to stamp the name upon his memory.—"Go then, Nyda, I will be here before you and await your coming."

Nyda lingered not longer than was absolutely necessary, but still Brennus was there before her, impatiently awaiting the promised dress. The broad mantle flung over his own dress and a change of shoes was all that was necessary to hide the peculiarity of his dress, and as she shades of evening deepened, Brennus followed Nyda down the mountain path.

"Should you not succeed, return to me; if you are pursued, fly thither, I can conceal you," said Nyda, as Brennus turned his face toward Clusium.

"Pray to the Gods for me," were the last words of Brennus.

The strong athletic young warrior felt scarcely any fatigue from his long walk as he entered the streets of Clusium. He soon found the small temple dedicated to Vesta, and for two days hung around the doors, yet not one word could he hear about the idol of his heart. On the third day, 'twas whispered among those who worshipped in the temple, that some of the virgins were to be sent to Rome, in obedience to the command of the Pontifex, who who this year was the father of the young Roman whom we have found at Clusium, Lucius Fabius. Brennus listened intently, but to his anger and confusion, two young nobles entered the temple, and the conversation among the gossips ceased.

"Lucius, thou hast hurried me without cause," said the smaller of the two men.

The name immediately arrested the attention of Brennus, who, bending over one of the gossips, asked in a whisper; "How is your young noble named?"

"Lucius Fabius," answered the person addressed, with a stare of astonishment.

Turning on his heel, Brennus left the temple, and stood in the outer court. In a few minutes, Lucius and Caius came forth. Brennus threw his foot forward, Lucius stumbled over it, but did not fall, for Caius caught his arm.

"Slave!" cried Lucius furiously.

"Slave in thy face!" answered Brennus scornfully. Instantly Lucius drew his short sword from his belt.

"Be not so rash, Lucius; see'st thou not that the man is a stranger, and knows thee not," said the more cautious and humane Caius.

"'Tis Lucius Fabius, the son of the Roman Pontifex, if I mistake not," said Brennus coldly.

"See he knows me! Slave, thou shalt die!" and blind with rage, Lucius rushed upon his foe. Brennus was not armed, yet even so he was a full match for the young Roman. With one sweep of his powerful arm he laid Lucius at his feet, and stood over him, with a smile of contempt flitting around his lips. Not long did our brave Brennus enjoy his triumph, in a moment his arms were seized and bound with heavy thongs. The Gallic warrior, a stranger and alone, stood bound among a group of young nobles who were thirsting for his blood. Cruel men they were, who promised themselves rare sport with the stranger.

"We will take him to the Governor!" cried one.

"No! no! we will not let him out of our