

ARACHNE - VOLUME 1.

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Volume 1.

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CHAPTER I.

Deep silence brooded over the water and the green islands which rose like oases from its glittering surface. The palms, silver poplars, and sycamores on the largest one were already casting longer shadows as the slanting rays of the sun touched their dark crowns, while its glowing ball still poured a flood of golden radiance upon the bushes along the shore, and the light, feathery tufts at the tops of the papyrus reeds in the brackish water.

More than one flock of large and small waterfowl flew past beneath the silvery cloudlets flecking the lofty azure vault of heaven; here and there a pelican or a pair of wild ducks plunged, with short calls which ceased abruptly, into the lush green thicket, but their cackling and quacking belonged to the voices of Nature, and, when heard, soon died away in the heights of the tipper air, or in the darkness of the underbrush that received the birds. Very few reached the little city of Tennis, which now, during the period of inundation in the year 274 B.C., was completely encircled by water.

From the small island, separated from it by a channel scarcely three arrow-shots wide, it seemed as though sleep or paralysis had fallen upon the citizens of the busy little industrial town, for few people appeared in the streets, and the scanty number of porters and sailors who were working among the ships and boats in the little fleet performed their tasks noiselessly, exhausted by the heat and labour of the day.

Columns of light smoke rose from many of the buildings, but the sunbeams prevented its ascent into the clear, still air, and forced it to spread over the roofs as if it, too, needed rest.

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Silence also reigned in the little island diagonally opposite to the harbour. The Tennites called it the Owl's Nest, and, though for no especial reason, neither they nor the magistrates of King Ptolemy II ever stepped upon its shores. Indeed, a short time before, the latter had even been forbidden to concern themselves about the pursuits of its inhabitants; since, though for centuries it had belonged to a family of seafaring folk who were suspected of piracy, it had received, two generations ago, from Alexander the Great himself, the right of asylum, because its owner, in those days, had commanded a little fleet which proved extremely useful to the conqueror of the world in the siege of Gaza and during the expedition to Egypt. True, under the reign of Ptolemy I, the owners of the Owl's Nest were on the point of being deprived of this favour, because they were repeatedly accused of piracy in distant seas; but it had not been done. Yet for the past two years an investigation had threatened Satabus, the distinguished head of the family, and during this period he, with his ships and his sons, had avoided Tennis and the Egyptian coast.

The house occupied by the islanders stood on the shore facing the little city. It had once been a stately building, but now every part of it seemed to be going to ruin except the central portion, which presented a less dilapidated appearance than the sorely damaged, utterly neglected side wings.

The roof of the whole long structure had originally consisted of palm branches, upon which mud and turf had been piled; but this, too, was now in repair only on the central building. On the right and left wings the rain which often falls in the northeastern part of the Nile Delta, near the sea, had washed off the protecting earth, and the wind had borne it away as dust.

Once the house had been spacious enough to shelter a numerous family and to store a great quantity of goods and provisions, but it was now long since the ruinous chambers had been occupied. Smoke rose only from the opening in the roof of the main building, but its slender column showed from what a very scanty fire it ascended.

The purpose which this was to serve was readily discovered, for in front of the open door of the dwelling, that seemed far too large and on account of the pillars at the entrance, which supported a triangular pediment—also too stately for its sole occupant, sat an old woman, plucking three ducks.

In front of her a girl, paying no heed to her companion, stood leaning against the trunk of the low, wide-branching sycamore tree near the shore. A narrow boat, now concealed from view by the dense growth of rushes, had brought her to the spot.

The beautiful, motherless young creature, needing counsel, had come to old Tabus to appeal to her art of prophecy and, if she wanted them, to

render her any little services; for the old dame on the island was closely bound to Ledscha, the daughter of one of the principal ship-owners in Tennis, and had once been even more closely united to the girl.

Now, as the sun was about to set, the latter gave herself up to a wild tumult of sweet memories, anxious fears, and yearning expectation.

Not until a cool breath from the neighbouring sea fanned her brow did she throw down the cord and implement with which she had been adding a few meshes to a net, and rising, gaze sometimes across the water at a large white house in the northern part of the city, sometimes at the little harbour or the vessels on the horizon steering toward Tennis, among which her keen eyes discovered a magnificent ship with bright-hued sails.

Drawing a long breath, she enjoyed the coolness which precedes the departure of the daystar.

But the effect of this harbinger of night upon her surroundings was even more powerful than upon herself, for the sun in the western horizon scarcely began to sink slowly behind the papyrus thicket on the shore of the straight Tanite arm of the Nile, dug by human hands, than one new and strange phenomenon followed another.

First a fan, composed of countless glowing rays which spread in dazzling radiance over the west, rose from the vanishing orb and for several minutes adorned the lofty dome of the deep-blue sky like the tail of a gigantic peacock. Then the glitter of the shining plumes paled. The light-giving body from which they emanated disappeared and, in its stead, a crimson mantle, with gold-bordered, crocus-yellow edges, spread itself over the space it had left until the gleaming tints merged into the deeper hues of the violet.

But the girl paid no heed to this splendid spectacle. Perhaps she noticed how the fading light diffused a delicate rose-hued veil over the light-blue sails, embroidered with silver vines, of the approaching state galley, making its gilded prow glitter more brightly, and saw one fishing boat after another move toward the harbour, but she gave the whole scene only a few careless glances.

Ledscha cared little for the poor fishermen of Tennis, and the glittering state galley could scarcely bring or bear away anything of importance to her.

The epistrategus of the whole province was daily expected. But of what consequence to the young girl were the changes which it was rumoured he intended to introduce into the government of the country, concerning which her father had expressed such bitter dissatisfaction before he set out on his last trip to Pontus?

A very different matter occupied her thoughts, and as, pressing her hand

upon her heart, she gazed at the little city, gleaming with crimson hues in the reflection of the setting sun, a strange, restless stir pervaded the former stillness of Nature. Pelicans and flamingoes, geese and ducks, storks and herons, ibises and cranes, bitterns and lapwings, flew in dark flocks of manifold forms from all directions. Countless multitudes of waterfowl darkened the air as they alighted upon the uninhabited islands, and with ear-splitting croaking and cackling, whistling and chirping, clapping and twittering, dropped into the sedges and bushes which concealed their nests, while in the city the doors of the houses opened, and men, women, and children, after toiling at the loom and in the workshop, came out to enjoy the coolness of the evening in the open air.

One fishing boat after another was already throwing a rope to the shore, as the ship with the gay sails approached the little roadstead.

How large and magnificent it was!

None of the king's officials had ever used such a galley, not even the epistrategus of the Delta, who last year had given the banking and the oil trade to new lessees. Besides, the two transports that had followed the magnificent vessel appeared to belong to it.

Ledscha had watched the ships indifferently enough, but suddenly her gaze—and with it the austere beauty of her face—assumed a different expression.

Her large black eyes dilated, and with passionate intentness she looked from the gaily ornamented galley to the shore, which several men in Greek costume were approaching.

The first two had come from the large white house whose door, since sunset, had been the principal object of her attention.

It was Hermon, the taller one, for whom she was waiting with old Tabus. He had promised to take her from the Owl's Nest, after nightfall, for a lonely row upon the water.

Now he was not coming alone, but with his fellow-artist, the sculptor Myrtilus, the nomarch and the notary—she recognised both distinctly—Gorgias, the rich owner of the second largest weaving establishment in Tennis, and several slaves.

What did it mean?

A sudden flush crimsoned her face, now slightly tanned, to the brow, and her lips were compressed, giving her mouth an expression of repellent, almost cruel harshness.

But the tension of her charming features, whose lines, though sharp, were

delicately outlined, soon vanished. There was still plenty of time before the darkness would permit Hermon to join her unnoticed. A reception, from which he could not be absent, was evidently about to take place.

Yes, that was certainly the case; for now the magnificent galley had approached as near the land as the shallow water permitted, and the whistle of the rowers' flute-player, shouts of command, and the barking of dogs could be heard.

Then a handkerchief waved a greeting from the vessel to the men on shore, but the hand that held it was a woman's. Ledscha would have recognised it had the twilight been far deeper.

The features of the new arrival could no longer be distinguished; but she must be young. An elderly woman would not have sprung so nimbly into the skiff that was to convey her to the land.

The man who assisted her in doing so was the same sculptor, Hermon, for whom she had watched with so much longing.

Again the blood mounted into Ledscha's cheeks, and when she saw the stranger lay her hand upon the shoulder of the Alexandrian who, only yesterday, had assured the young girl of his love with ardent vows, and allow him to lift her out of the boat, she buried her little white teeth deeply in her lips.

She had never seen Hermon in the society of a woman of his own class, and, full of jealous displeasure; perceived with what zealous assiduity he who bowed before no one in Tennis, paid court to the stranger no less eagerly than did his friend Myrtilus.

The whole scene passed like a shadow in the dusk before Ledscha's eyes, half dimmed by uneasiness, perplexity, and suddenly inflamed jealousy.

The Egyptian twilight is short, and when Hermon disappeared with the newcomer it was no longer possible to recognise the man who entered the very boat in which she was to have taken the nocturnal voyage with her lover, and which was now rowed toward the Owl's Nest.

Surely it would bring her a message from Hermon; and as the stranger, who was now joined by a number of other women and two packs of barking dogs, with their keepers, vanished in the darkness, the skiff already touched the shore close at her side.

CHAPTER II.

In spite of the surrounding gloom, Ledscha recognised the man who left the boat.

The greeting he shouted told her that it was Hermon's slave, Pias, a Biamite, whom she had met in the house of some neighbours who were his relatives and had sharply rebuffed when he ventured to accost her more familiarly than was seemly for one in bondage.

True, in his childhood this man had lived near Tennis as the son of a free papyrus raiser, but when still a lad was sold into slavery in Alexandria with his father, who had been seized for taking part in an insurrection against the last king.

In the service of Areluas, his present master's uncle, who had given him to his nephew, and as the slave of the impetuous yet anything but cruel sculptor, Hermon, he had become accustomed to bondage, but was still far more strongly attached to his Biamite race than to the Greek, to whom, it is true, his master belonged, but who had robbed him and his family of freedom.

The man of forty did not lack mother wit, and as his hard fate rendered him thoughtful and often led him to use figurative turns of speech, which were by no means intended as jests, he had been called by his first master "Bias" for the sage of Priene.

In the house of Hermon, who associated with the best artists in Alexandria, he had picked up all sorts of knowledge and gladly welcomed instruction. His highest desire was to win esteem, and he often did so.

Hermon prized the useful fellow highly. He had no secrets from him, and was sure of his silence and good will.

Bias had managed to lure many a young beauty in Alexandria, in whom the sculptor had seen a desirable model, to his studio, even under the most difficult circumstances; but he was vexed to find that his master had cast his eye upon the daughter of one of the most distinguished families among his own people. He knew, too, that the Biamites jealously guarded the honour of their women, and had represented to Hermon what a dangerous game he was playing when he began to offer vows of love to Ledscha.

So it was an extremely welcome task to be permitted to inform her that she was awaiting his master in vain.

In reply to her inquiry whether it was the aristocrat who had just arrived who kept Hermon from her, he admitted that she was right, but added that the gods were above even kings, and his master was obliged to

yield to the Alexandrian's will.

Ledscha laughed incredulously: "He—obey a woman!"

"He certainly would not submit to a man," replied the slave. "Artists, you must know, would rather oppose ten of the most powerful men than one weak woman, if she is only beautiful. As for the daughter of Archias—thereby hangs a tale."

"Archias?" interrupted the girl. "The rich Alexandrian who owns the great weaving house?"

"The very man."

"So it is his daughter who is keeping Hermon? And you say he is obliged to serve her?"

"As men serve the Deity, to the utmost, or truth," replied the slave importantly. "Archias, the father, it is true, imposed upon us the debt which is most tardily paid, and which people, even in this country, call 'gratitude.' We are under obligations to the old man—there's no denying it—and therefore also to his only child."

"For what?" Ledscha indignantly exclaimed, and the dark eyebrows which met above her delicate nose contracted suspiciously. "I must know!"

"Must!" repeated the slave. "That word is a ploughshare which suits only loose soil, and mine, now that my master is waiting for me, can not be tilled even by the sharpest. Another time! But if, meanwhile, you have any message for Hermon—"

"Nothing," she replied defiantly; but Bias, in a tone of the most eager assent, exclaimed: "One friendly word, girl. You are the fairest among the daughters of the highest Biamite families, and probably the richest also, and therefore a thousand times too good to yield what adorns you to the Greek, that it may tickle the curiosity of the Alexandrian apes. There are more than enough women in the capital to serve that purpose. Trust the experience of a man not wholly devoid of wisdom, my girl. He will throw you aside like an empty wine bottle when he has used you for a model."

"Used?" interrupted Ledscha disdainfully; but he repeated with firm decision: "Yes, used! What could you learn of life, of art and artists, here in the weaver's nest in the midst of the waves? I know them. A sculptor needs beautiful women as a cobbler wants leather, and the charms he seeks in you he does not conceal from his friend Myrtilus, at least. They are your large almond-shaped eyes and your arms. They make him fairly wild with delight by their curves when, in drawing water, you hold the jug balanced on your head. Your slender arched foot, too, is a welcome morsel to him."

The darkness prevented Bias from seeing Ledscha's features, but it was easy to perceive what was passing in her mind as, hoarse with indignation, she gasped: "How can I know the object of your accusations? but fie upon the servant who would alienate from his own kind master what his soul desires!"

Then Bias changed not only his tone of voice, but his language, and, deeply offended, poured forth a torrent of wrath in the dialect of his people: "If to guard you, and my master with you, from harm, my words had the power to put between you and Hermon the distance which separates yonder rising moon from Tennis, I would make them sound as loud as the lion's roar. Yet perhaps you would not understand them, for you go through life as though you were deaf and blind. Did you ever even ask yourself whether the Greek is not differently constituted from the sons of the Biamite sailors and fishermen, with whom you grew up, and to whom he is an abomination? Yet he is no more like them than poppy juice is like pure water. He and his companions turn life upside down. There is no more distinction between right and wrong in Alexandria than we here in the dark can make between blue and green. To me, the slave, who is already growing old, Hermon is a kind master. I know without your aid what I owe him, and serve him as loyally as any one; but where he threatens to lead to ruin the innocent daughter of the race whose blood flows in my veins as well as yours, and in doing so perhaps finally destroy himself too, conscience commands me to raise my voice as loud as the sentinel crane when danger threatens the flock. Beware, girl, I repeat! Keep your beauty, which is now to be degraded to feast the eyes of gaping Greeks, for the worthiest husband among our people. Though Hermon has vowed, I know not what, your love-dallying will very soon be over; we shall leave Tennis within the next few days. When he has gone there will be one more deceived Biamite who will call down the curse of the gods upon the head of a Greek. You are not the only one who will execrate the destiny that brought us here. Others have been caught in his net too."

"Here?" asked Ledscha in a hollow tone; and the slave eagerly answered: "Where else? And that you may know the truth—among those who visited Hermon in his studio is your own young sister."

"Our Taus? That child?" exclaimed the girl, stretching her hands toward the slave in horror, as if to ward off some impending disaster.

"That child, who, I think, has grown into a very charming girl—and, before her, pretty Gula, the wife of Paseth, who, like your father, is away on his ship."

Here, in a tone of triumphant confidence, the answer rang from the Biamite's lips: "There the slanderer stands revealed! Now you are detected, now I perceive the meaning of your threat. Because, miserable slave, you cherish the mad hope of beguiling me yourself, you do your

utmost to estrange me from your master. Gula, you say, visited Hermon in his studio, and it may be true. But though I have been at home only a short time, Tennis is too full of the praises of the heroic Greek who, at the risk of his own life, rescued a child from Paseth's burning house, for the tale not to reach my ears from ten or a dozen different quarters. Gula is the mother of the little girl whose life was saved by Hermon's bold deed, and perhaps the young mother only knocked at her benefactor's door to thank him; but you, base defamer—"

"I," Bias continued, maintaining his composure with difficulty, "I saw Gula secretly glide into our rooms again and again to permit her child's preserver to imitate in clay what he considered beautiful. To seek your love, as you know, the slave forbade himself, although a man no more loses tender desires with his freedom than the tree which is encircled by a fence ceases to put forth buds and blossoms. Eros chooses the slave's heart also as the target for his arrows; but his aim at yours was better than at mine. Now I know how deeply he wounds, and so, as soon as yonder ship in the harbour bears our visitor away again, I shall see you, Schalit's daughter, Ledscha, standing before Hermon's modelling table and behold him scan your beauty to determine what seems worth copying."

The Biamite, panting for breath, had listened to the end. Then, raising her little clinched hand menacingly, she muttered through her set teeth: "Let him try even to touch my veil with his fingers! If I had not been obliged to go away, this would not have happened to my Taus and luckless Gula."

"Scarcely," replied Bias calmly. "If the chicken runs into the water, the hen can not save it. For the rest—I grew up as a boy in freedom with the husband of your sister, who summoned you to her aid. His father's brick-kiln was next to our papyrus plantation. Then we fared like so many others—the great devour the small, the just cause is the lost one, and the gods are like men. My father, who drew the sword against oppression and violence, was robbed of liberty, and your brother-in-law, in payment for his honest courage, met an early death. Is the story which is told of you here true? I heard that soon after the poor fellow's burial the slaves in the brick-kiln refused to obey his widow. There were a dozen rebellious brick-moulders, and you—one can forgive you much for it—you, the weak girl—"

"I am not weak," interrupted Ledscha proudly. "I could have taught three times twelve of the scoundrels who was master. Now they obey my sister, and yet I wish I had stayed in Tennis. Our Taus," she continued in a more gentle tone, "is still so young, and our mother died when she was a little child; but I, fool, who should have warned her, left her alone, and if she yielded to Hermon's temptations the fault is mine, wholly mine."

During this outburst the light of the fire, which old Tabus had fed with fresh straw and dry rushes, fell upon the face of the agitated girl. It

revealed her thoughts plainly enough, and, pleased with the success of his warning, Bias exclaimed: "And Ledscha, you, too, will not grant him that from which you would so gladly have withheld your sister. So I will go and tell my master that you refuse to give him another appointment."

He had confidently expected an assent, and therefore started indignantly at her exclamation: "I intend to do just the contrary." Yet she eagerly added, as if in explanation: "He must give me an account of himself, no matter where, and, since it can not be to-day, to-morrow at latest."

The slave, disappointed and anxious, now tried to make her understand how foolish and hard to accomplish her wish was, but she obstinately insisted upon having her own way.

Bias angrily turned his back upon her and, in the early light of the moon, walked toward the shore, but she hastened after him, seized his arm and, with imperious firmness, commanded: "You will stay! I must first know whether Hermon really means to leave Tennis so soon."

"That was his intention early this morning," replied the other, releasing himself from her grasp. "What are we to do here longer, now that his work is as good as finished?"

"But when is he going?" she urged with increased eagerness.

"Day after to-morrow," was the reply, "in five, or perhaps even in six days, just as it suits him. Usually we do not even know to-day what is to be done to-morrow. So long as the Alexandrian remains, he will scarcely leave her, or Myrtilus either. Probably she will take both hunting with her, for, though a kind, fair-minded woman, she loves the chase, and as both have finished their work, they probably will not be reluctant to go with Daphne."

He stepped into the boat as he spoke, but Ledscha again detained him, asking impatiently: "And 'the work,' as you call it? It was covered with a cloth when I visited the studio, but Hermon himself termed it the statue of a goddess. Yet what it represents—Does it look like my sister Taus—enough like her, I mean, to be recognised?"

A half-compassionate, half-mocking smile fitted over the Biamite's copper-coloured visage, and in a tone of patronizing instruction assumed by the better informed, he began: "You are thinking of the face? Why no, child! What that requires can be found in the countenance of no Biamite, hardly even in yours, the fairest of all."

"And the goddess's figure?" asked Ledscha eagerly.

"For that he first used as a model the fair-haired Heliadora, whom he summoned from Alexandria, and as the wild cat could endure the loneliness only a fortnight, the sisters Nico and Pagis came together. But Tennis

was too quiet for them too. The rabble can only be contented among those of their own sort in the capital. But the great preliminary work was already finished before we left Alexandria."

"And Gula—my sister?"

"They were not used for the Demeter," said the slave, smiling. "Just think, that slender scarcely grown creature, Taus, and the matronly patroness of marriage. And Gula? True, her little round face is fresh and not ill-looking—but the model of a goddess requires something more. That can only be obtained in Alexandria. What do not the women there do for the care of the body! They learn it in the Aphrodision, as the boys study reading and writing. But you! What do you here know even about colouring the eyelids and the lips, curling the hair, and treating the nails on the hands and feet? And the clothes! You let them hang just as you put them on, and my master's work is full of folds and little lines in the robe and the peplos—But I have staid too long already. Do you really insist upon meeting Hermon again?"

"I will and must see him," she eagerly declared.

"Well, then," he answered harshly. "But if you cast my warning to the winds, pity will also fly away with it."

"I do not need it," the girl retorted in a contemptuous tone.

"Then let Fate take its course," said the slave, shrugging his shoulders regretfully. "My master shall learn what you wish. I shall remain at home until the market is empty. There are plenty of servants at your farm. Your messenger shall bring you Hermon's answer."

"I will come myself and wait for it under the acacia," she cried hastily, and went toward the house, but this time it was Bias who called her back.

Ledscha reluctantly fulfilled his wish, but she soon regretted it, for though what he had to say was doubtless kindly meant, it contained a fresh and severe offence: the slave represented to her the possibility that, so long as the daughter of Archias remained his guest, Hermon might rebuff her like a troublesome beggar.

Then, as if sure of her cause, she indignantly cut short his words: "You measure him according to your own standard, and do not know what depends upon it for us. Remind him of the full moon on the coming night and, though ten Alexandrians detained him, he would escape from them to hear what I bring him."

With these words Ledscha again turned her back upon him, but Bias, with a low imprecation, pushed the boat from the shore and rowed toward the city.

CHAPTER III.

When Ledscha heard the strokes of the oars she stopped again and, with glowing cheeks, gazed after the boat and the glimmering silver furrow which it left upon the calm surface of the moonlit water.

Her heart was heavy. The doubts of her lover's sincerity which the slave had awakened tortured her proud soul.

Was Hermon really only trifling mischievously with her affection?

Surely it was impossible.

She would rather endure everything, everything, than this torturing uncertainty.

Yet she was here on the Owl's Nest to seek the aid of old Tabus's magic arts. If any one could give her satisfaction, it was she and the demons who obeyed her will, and the old woman was glad to oblige Ledscha; she was bound to her by closer ties than most people in Tennis knew.

Ledscha had no cause to be ashamed of her frequent visits to the Owl's Nest, for old Tabus had no equal as a leech and a prophetess, and the corsair family, of which she was the female head, stood in high repute among the Biamites. People bore them no ill-will because they practised piracy; many of their race pursued the same calling, and the sailors made common cause with them.

Ledscha's father, too, was on good terms with the pirates, and when Abus, a handsome fellow who commanded his father's second ship and had won a certain degree of renown by many a bold deed, sought the hand of his oldest daughter, he did not refuse him, and only imposed the condition that when he had gained riches enough and made Ledscha his wife, he would cease his piratical pursuits and, in partnership with him, take goods and slaves from Pontus to the Syrian and Egyptian harbours, and grain and textiles from the Nile to the coasts of the Black Sea.

Young Abus had yielded to this demand, since his grandmother on the Owl's Nest thought it wise to delay for a time the girl's marriage to him, the best beloved of her grandsons; she was then scarcely beyond childhood.

Yet Ledscha had felt a strong affection for the young pirate, in whom she saw the embodiment of heroic manhood. She accompanied him in imagination through all his perilous expeditions; but she had been permitted to enjoy his society only after long intervals for a few days.

Once he remained absent longer than usual, and this very voyage was to have been his last on a pirate craft—the peaceful seafaring life was to begin, after his landing, with the marriage.

Ledscha had expected her lover's return with eager longing, but week after week elapsed, yet nothing was seen or heard of the ships owned by the Owl's Nest family; then a rumour spread that this time the corsairs were defeated in a battle with the Syrian war-galleys.

The first person who received sure tidings was old Tabus. Her grandson Hanno, who escaped with his life, at the bidding of his father Satabus, who revered his mother, had made his way to her amid great perils to convey the sorrowful news. Two of the best ships in the family had been sunk, and on one the brave Abus, Ledscha's betrothed husband, who commanded it, had lost his life; on the other the aged dame's oldest son and three of her grandchildren.

Tabus fell as if struck by lightning when she heard the tidings, and since that time her tongue had lost its power of fluent speech, her ear its sharpness; but Ledscha did not leave her side, and saved her life by tireless, faithful nursing.

Neither Satabus, the old woman's second son, who now commanded the little pirate fleet, nor his sons, Hanno and Labaja, had been seen in the neighbourhood of Tennis since the disaster, but after Tabus had recovered sufficiently to provide for herself, Ledscha returned to Tennis to manage her father's great household and supply the mother's place to her younger sister, Taus.

She had not recovered the careless cheerfulness of earlier years, but, graver than the companions of her own age, she absented herself from the gaieties of the Biamite maidens. Meanwhile her beauty had increased wonderfully, and, attracting attention far and wide, drew many suitors from neighbouring towns to Tennis. Only a few, however, had made offers of marriage to her father; the beautiful girl's cold, repellent manner disheartened them. She herself desired nothing better; yet it secretly incensed her and pierced her soul with pain to see herself at twenty unwedded, while far less attractive companions of her own age had long been wives and mothers.

The arduous task which she had performed a short time before for her widowed sister had increased the seriousness of her disposition to sullen moroseness.

After her return home she often rowed to the Owl's Nest, for Ledscha felt bound to old Tabus, and, so far as lay in her power, under obligation to atone for the injury which the horror of her lover's sudden death had inflicted upon his grandmother.

Now she had at last been subjugated by a new passion—love for the Greek sculptor Hermon, who did his best to win the heart of the Biamite girl, whose austere, extremely singular beauty attracted his artist eyes.

To-day Ledscha had come to the sorceress to learn from her what awaited her and her love. She had landed on the island, sure of favourable predictions, but now her hopes lay as if crushed by hailstones.

If Bias, who was superior to an ordinary slave, was right, she was to be degraded to a toy and useful tool by the man who had already proved his pernicious power over other women of her race, even her own young sister, whom she had hitherto guarded with faithful care. It had by no means escaped her notice that the girl was concealing something from her, though she did not perceive the true cause of the change.

The bright moonbeams, which now wove a silvery web over every surrounding object, seemed like a mockery of her darkened soul.

If the demons of the heights and depths had been subject to her, as to the aged enchantress she would have commanded them to cover the heavens with black clouds. Now they must show her what she had to hope or to fear.

She shook her head slightly, as if she no longer believed in a favourable turn of affairs, pushed the little curls which had escaped from the wealth of her black hair back from her forehead with her slender hand, and walked firmly to the house.

The old dame was crouching beside the hearth in the middle room, turning the metal spit, on which she had put the ducks, over the freshly kindled fire.

The smoke hurt her eyes, which were slightly inflamed, yet they seemed to serve their purpose better than her half-dulled ear, for, after a swift glance at Ledscha, she stammered in her faltering speech: "What has happened? Nothing good, certainly. It is written on your face."

The girl nodded assent, pointed with a significant gesture to her eyes and the open air, and went down to the shore again to convince herself that no other vessel was approaching.

What she had to confide to Tabus was intended for her alone, and experience taught how far spoken words could be heard at night over the water.

When she had returned to the hut, she bent down to the old woman's ear and, holding her curved hand to her lips, cried, "He is not coming!"

Tabus shrugged her shoulders, and the smile of satisfaction which flitted over her brown, wrinkled face showed that the news was welcome.

For her murdered grandson's sake the girl's confession that she had given her heart to a Greek affected her painfully; but Tabus also had something else on her mind for her beautiful darling.

Now she only intimated by a silent nod that she understood Ledscha, and her head remained constantly in motion as the latter continued: "True, I shall see him again to-morrow, but when we part, it will hardly be in love. At any rate—do you hear, grandmother?—to-morrow must decide everything. Therefore—do you understand me?—you must question the cords now, to-night, for to-morrow evening what they advised might be too late."

"Now?" repeated Tabus in surprise, letting her gaze rest inquiringly upon the girl. Then she took the spit from the fire, exclaiming angrily: "Directly, do you mean? As if that could be! As if the stars obeyed us mortals like maids or men servants! The moon must be at the full to learn the truth from the cords. Wait, child! What is life but waiting? Only have patience, girl! True, few know how to practise this art at your age, and it is alien to many all their lives. But the stars! From them, the least and the greatest, man can learn to go his way patiently, year by year. Always the same course and the same pace. No deviation even one hair's breadth, no swifter or slower movement for the unresting wanderers. No sudden wrath, no ardent desire, no weariness or aversion urges or delays them. How I love and honour them! They willingly submit to the great law until the end of all things. What they appoint for this hour is for it alone, not for the next one. Everything in the vast universe is connected with them. Whoever should delay their course a moment would make the earth reel. Night would become day, the rivers would return to their sources. People would walk on their heads instead of their feet, joy would be transformed to sorrow and power to servitude. Therefore, child, the full moon has a different effect from the waxing or waning one during the other twenty-nine nights of the month. To ask of one what belongs to another is to expect an answer from the foreigner who does not understand your language. How young you are, child, and how foolish! To question the cords for you in the moonlight now is to expect to gather grapes from thorns. Take my word for that!"

Here she interrupted the words uttered with so much difficulty, and with her blackish-blue cotton dress wiped her perspiring face, strangely flushed by the exertion and the firelight.

Ledscha had listened with increasing disappointment.

The wise old dame was doubtless right, yet before she ventured to the sculptor's workshop the next day she must know at every cost how matters stood, what she had to fear or to hope from him; so after a brief silence she ventured to ask the question, "But are there only the stars and the

cords which predict what fate holds in store for one who is so nearly allied to you?"

"No, child, no," was the reply. "But nothing can be done about looking into the future now. It requires rigid fasting from early dawn, and I ate the dates you brought me. I inhaled the odor of the roasting ducks, too, and then—it must be done at midnight; and at midnight your people will be anxious if you are not at home by that time, or perhaps send a slave to seek you here at my house, and that—that must not be done—I must prevent it."

"So you are expecting some one," Ledscha eagerly replied. "And I know who it is. Your son Satabus, or one of your grandsons. Else why are the ducks cooked? And for what is the wine jar which I just took from its hiding place?"

A vehement gesture of denial from Tabus contradicted the girl's conjecture; but directly after she scanned her with a keen, searching glance, and said: "No, no. We have nothing to fear from you, surely. Poor Abus! Through him you will always belong to us. In spite of the Greek, ours you are and ours you will remain. The stars confirm it, and you have always been faithful to the old woman. You are shrewd and steadfast. You would have been the right mate for him who was also wise and firm. Poor, dear, brave boy! But why pity him? Because the salt waves now flow over him? Fools that we are! There is nothing better than death, for it is peace. And almost all of them have found it. Of nine sons and twenty grandsons, only three are left. The others are all calm after so much conflict and danger. How long ago it is since seven perished at once! The last three their turn will come too. How I envy them that best of blessings, only may they not also go before me!"

Here she lowered her voice, and in a scarcely audible whisper murmured: "You shall know it. My son Satabus, with his brave boys Hanno and Labaja, are coming later in the evening. About midnight—if ye protect them, ye powers above—they will be with me. And you, child, I know your soul to its inmost depths. Before you would betray the last of Abus's kindred—"

"My hand and tongue should wither!" Ledscha passionately interrupted, and then, with zealous feminine solicitude, she asked whether the three ducks would suffice to satisfy the hunger of these strong men.

The old woman smiled and pointed to a pile of fresh leaves heaped one above another, beneath which lay several fine shad. They were not to be cooked until the expected visitors arrived, and she had plenty of bread besides.

In the presence of these proofs of maternal solicitude the morose, wrinkled countenance of the old sorceress wore a kind, almost tender expression, and the light of joyous anticipation beamed upon her young

guest from her redrimmed eyes.

"I am to see them once more!" cried Tabus in an agitated tone. "The last—and all three, all! If they— But no; they will not set to work so near Pelusium. No, no! They will not, lest they should spoil the meeting with the old woman. Oh, they are kind; no one knows how kind my rough Satabus can be. He would be your father now, girl, if we could have kept our Abus—he was the best of all—longer. It is fortunate that you are here, for they must see you, and it would have been hard for me to fetch the other things: the salt, the Indian pepper, and the jug of Pelusian zythus, which Satabus is always so fond of drinking."

Then Ledscha went into the ruinous left wing of the house, where she took from a covered hole in the floor what the old woman had kept for the last of her race, and she performed her task gladly and with rare skill.

Next she prepared the fish and the pan, and while her hands were moving busily she earnestly entreated the old woman to gratify her wish and look into the future for her.

Tabus, however, persisted in her refusal, until Ledscha again called her "grandmother," and entreated her, by the heads of the three beloved ones whom she expected, to fulfil her desire.

Then the old dame rose, and while the girl, panting for breath, took the roasted ducks from the spit, the former, with her own trembling hands, drew from the little chest which she kept concealed behind a heap of dry reeds, branches, and straw, a shining copper dish, tossed the gold coins which had been in it back into the box, and moistened the bottom with the blackish-red juice of the grape from the wine jar.

After carefully making these preparations she called Ledscha and repeated that the cords possessed the power of prophecy only on nights when the moon was full, and that she would use another means of looking into the future.

Then she commanded the girl to let her hands rest now and to think of nothing except the questions whose answer she had at heart. Lastly, she muttered into the vessel a series of incantations, which Ledscha repeated after her, and gazed as if spellbound at the dark liquid which covered the bottom.

The girl, panting for breath, watched every movement of the sorceress, but some time elapsed ere the latter suddenly exclaimed, "There he is!" and then, without removing her eyes from the bottom of the vessel, she went on, with faltering accents, as though she was describing a scene close before her eyes. "Two young men—both Greeks, if the dress does not deceive—one is at your right hand, the other at your left. The former is fair-haired; the glance of his eyes is deep and constant. It is he, I think—But no! His image is fading, and you are turning your back upon

him. You do it intentionally. No, no, you two are not destined for each other. You think of the one with the waving black hair and beard—of him alone. He is growing more and more distinct—a handsome man, and how his brow shines! Yet his glance—it sees more than that of many others, but, like the rest of his nature, it lacks steadfastness.”

Here she paused, raised her shaking head, looked at Ledscha’s flushed face, and in a grave, warning tone, said: ”Many signs of happiness, but also many dark shadows and black spots. If he is the one, child, you must be on your guard.”

”He is,” murmured the girl softly, as if speaking to herself.

But the deaf old crone had read the words from her lips, and while gazing intently at the wine, went on impatiently: ”If the picture would only grow more distinct! As it was, so it has remained. And now! The image of the fair man with the deep-blue eyes melts away entirely, and a gray cloud flutters between you and the other one with the black beard. If it would only scatter! But we shall never make any progress in this way. Now pay attention, girl.”

The words had an imperious tone, and with outstretched head and throbbing heart Ledscha awaited the old woman’s further commands.

They came at once and ordered her to confess, as freely and openly as though she was talking to herself, where she had met the man whom she loved, how he had succeeded in snaring her heart, and how he repaid her for the passion which he had awakened.

These commands were so confused and mingled in utterance that any one less familiar with the speaker would scarcely have comprehended what they required of her, but Ledscha understood and was ready to obey.

CHAPTER IV.

This reserved, thoroughly self-reliant creature would never have betrayed to any human being what moved her soul and filled it some times with inspiring hope, sometimes with a consuming desire for vengeance; but Ledscha did not shrink from confiding it to the demons who were to help her to regain her composure.

So, obeying a swift impulse, she threw herself on her knees by the old woman’s side. Then, supporting her head with her hands, she gazed at the still glimmering fire, and, as if one memory after another received new life from it, she began the difficult confession:

"I returned from my sister's brick-kiln a fortnight ago," she commenced, while the sorceress leaned her deaf ear nearer to her lips.

"During my absence something—I know not what it was—had saddened the cheerful spirits of my young sister Taus. At the recent festival of Astarte she regained them, and obtained some beautiful bright flowers to make wreaths for herself and me. So we joined the procession of the Tennis maidens and, as the fairest, they placed us directly behind the daughters of Hiram.

"When we were about to go home after the sacrifice, two young Greeks approached us and greeted Hiram's daughters and my sister also.

"One was a quiet young man, with narrow shoulders and light, curling hair; the other towered above him in stature. His powerful figure was magnificently formed, and he carried his head with its splendid black beard proudly.

"Since the gods snatched Abus from me, though so many men had wooed me, I had cared for no one; but the fair-haired Greek with the sparkling light in his blue eyes and the faint flush on his cheeks pleased me, and his name, 'Myrtilus,' fell upon my ear like music. I was glad when he joined me and asked, as simply as though he were merely inquiring the way, why he had never seen me, the loveliest among the beauties in the temple, in Tennis.

"I scarcely noticed the other. Besides, he seemed to have eyes only for Taus and the daughters of Hiram. He played all sorts of pranks with them, and they laughed so heartily that, fearing the strangers, of whom there was no lack, might class them with the Hieroduli who followed the sailors and young men in the temple grottoes, I motioned to Taus to restrain herself.

"Hermon—this was the name of the tall, bearded man—noticed it and turned toward me. In doing so his eyes met mine, and it seemed as though sweet wine flowed through my veins, for I perceived that my appearance paralyzed his reckless tongue. Yet he did not accost me; but Myrtilus, the fair one, entreated me not to lessen for the beautiful children the pleasure to which we are all born.

"I thought this remark foolish—how much sorrow and how little pleasure I had experienced from childhood!—so I only shrugged my shoulders disdainfully.

"Then the black-bearded man asked if, young and beautiful as I was, I had forgotten to believe in mirth and joy. My reply was intended to tell him that, though this was not the case, I did not belong to those who spent their lives in loud laughing and extravagant jests.

"The answer was aimed at the black-bearded man's reckless conduct; but the fair-haired one parried the attack in his stead, and retorted that I seemed to misunderstand his friend. Pleasure belonged to a festival, as light belonged to the sun; but usually Hermon laboured earnestly, and only a short time before he had saved the little daughter of Gula, the sailor's wife, from a burning house.

"The other did not let Myrtilus finish, but exclaimed that this would only confirm my opinion of him, for this very leap into the flames had afforded him the utmost joy.

"The words fell from his bearded lips as if the affair was very simple, a mere matter of course, yet I knew that the bold deed had nearly cost him his life—I said to myself that no one but our Abus would have done it, and then I may have looked at him more kindly, for he cried out that I, too, understood how to smile, and would never cease doing so if I knew how it became me.

"As he spoke he turned away from the girls to my side, while Myrtilus joined them. Hermon's handsome face had become grave and thoughtful, and when our eyes met I could have wished that they would never part again. But on account of the others I soon looked down at the ground and we walked on in this way, side by side, for some distance; but as he did not address a word to me, only sometimes gazed into my face as if seeking or examining, I grew vexed and asked him why he, who had just entertained the others gaily enough, had suddenly become so silent.

"He shook his head and answered—every word impressed itself firmly upon my memory: 'Because speech fails even the eloquent when confronted with a miracle.'

"What, except me and my beauty, could be meant by that? But he probably perceived how strangely his words confused me, for he suddenly seized my hand, pressing it so firmly that it hurt me, and while I tried to withdraw it he whispered, 'How the immortals must love you, that they lend you so large a share of their own divine beauty!'"

"Greek honey," interposed the sorceress, "but strong enough to turn such a poor young head. And what more happened? The demons desire to hear all—all—down to the least detail—all!"

"The least detail?" repeated Ledscha reluctantly, gazing into vacancy as if seeking aid. Then, pressing her hand on her brow, she indignantly exclaimed: "Ah, if I only knew myself how it conquered me so quickly! If I could understand and put it into intelligible words, I should need no stranger's counsel to regain my peace of mind. But as it is! I was driven by my anxiety from temple to temple, and now to you and your demons. I went from hour to hour as though in a burning fever. If I left the house firmly resolved to bethink myself and, as I had bidden my

sister, avoid danger and the gossip of the people, my feet still led me only where he desired to meet me. Oh, and how well he understood how to flatter, to describe my beauty! Surely it was impossible not to believe in it and trust its power!"

Here she hesitated, and while gazing silently into vacancy a sunny light flitted over her grave face, and, drawing a long breath, she began again: "I could curse those days of weakness and ecstasy which now—at least I hope so—are over. Yet they were wonderfully beautiful, and never can I forget them!"

Here she again bowed her head silently, but the old dame nodded encouragingly, saying eagerly; "Well, well! I understand all that, and I shall learn what more is coming, for whatever appears in the mirror of the wine is infallible—but it must become still more distinct. Let me—first conjure up the seventy-seven great and the seven hundred and seventy-seven little demons. They will do their duty, if you open your heart to us without reserve."

This demand sounded urgent enough, and Ledscha pressed her head against the old woman's shoulder as if seeking assistance, exclaiming: "I can not—no, I can not! As if the spirits who obey you did not know already what had happened and will happen in the future! Let them search the depths of my soul. There they will see, with their own eyes, what I should never, never succeed in describing. I could not tell even you, grandmother, for who among the Biamites ever found such lofty, heart-bewitching words as Hermon? And what looks, what language he had at command, when he desired to put an end to my jealous complaints! Could I still be angry with him, when he confessed that there were other beauties here whom he admired, and then gazed deep into my eyes and said that when I appeared they all vanished like the stars at sunrise? Then every reproach was forgotten, and resentment was transformed into doubly ardent longing. This, however, by no means escaped his keen glance, which detects everything, and so he urged me with touching, ardent entreaties to go with him to his studio, though but for one poor, brief hour."

"And you granted his wish?" Tabus anxiously interrupted.

"Yes," she answered frankly, "but it was the evening of the day before yesterday—that was the only time. Secrecy—nothing, Grand mother, was more hateful to me from childhood."

"But he," the old woman again interrupted, "he—I know it—he praised it to you as the noblest virtue."

A silent nod from Ledscha confirmed this conjecture, and she added hesitatingly: "'Only far from the haunts of men,' he said, 'when the light had vanished, did we hear the nightingale trill in the dark thickets. Those are his own words, and though it angers you, Grandmother, they are true.'"

"Until the secrecy is over, and the sun shines upon misery," the sorceress answered in her faltering speech, with menacing severity.

"And beneath the tempter's roof you enjoyed the lauded secret love until the cock roused you?"

"No," replied Ledscha firmly. "Did I ever tell you a lie, that you look at me so incredulously?"

"Incredulously?" replied the old woman in protest. "I only trembled at the danger into which you plunged."

"There could be no greater peril," the girl admitted. "I foresaw it clearly enough, and yet—this is the most terrible part of it—yet my feet moved as if obeying a will of their own, instead of mine, and when I crossed his threshold, resistance was silenced, for I was received like a princess. The lofty, spacious apartment was brilliantly illuminated, and the door was garlanded with flowers.

"It was magnificent! Then, in a manner as respectful as if welcoming an illustrious guest, he invited me to take my place opposite to him, that he might form a goddess after my model. This was the highest flattery of all, and I willingly assumed the position he directed, but he looked at me from every side, with sparkling eyes, and asked me to let down my hair and remove the veil from the back of my head. Then—need I assure you of it?—my blood boiled with righteous indignation; but instead of being ashamed of the outrage, he raised his hand to my head and pulled the veil. Resentment and wrath suddenly flamed in my soul, and before he could detain me I had left the room. In spite of his representations and entreaties, I did not enter it again."

"Yet," asked the sorceress in perplexity, "you once more obeyed his summons?"

"Yesterday also I could not help it," Ledscha answered softly.

"Fool!" cried Tabus indignantly, but the girl exclaimed, in a tone of sincere shame: "You do well to call me that. Perhaps I deserve still harsher names, for, in spite of the sternness with which I forbade him ever to remind me of the studio by even a single word, I soon listened to him willingly when he besought me, if I really loved him, not to refuse what would make him happy. If I allowed him to model my figure, his renown and greatness would be secured. And how clearly he made me understand this! I could not help believing it, and at last promised that, in spite of my father and the women of Tennis, I would grant all, all, and accompany him again to the work room if he would have patience until the night of the next day but one, when the moon would be at the full."

"And he?" asked Tabus anxiously.

"He called the brief hours which I required him to wait an eternity," replied the girl, "and they seemed no less long to me—but neither entreaties nor urgency availed; what you predicted for me from the cords last year strengthened my courage. I should wantonly throw away—I constantly reminded myself—whatever great good fortune Fate destined for me if I yielded to my longing and took prematurely what was already so close at hand; for—do you remember?—at that time it was promised that on a night when the moon was at the full a new period of the utmost happiness would begin for me. And now—unless everything deceives me—now it awaits me. Whether it will come with the full moon of to-morrow night, or the next, or the following one, your spirits alone can know; but yesterday was surely too soon to expect the new happiness."

"And he?" asked the old dame.

"He certainly did not make it easy for me," was the reply, "but as I remained firm, he was obliged to yield. I granted only his earnest desire to see me again this evening. I fancy I can still hear him exclaim, with loving impetuosity, that he hated every day and every night which kept him from me. And now? Now? For another's sake he lets me wait for him in vain, and if his slave does not lie, this is only the beginning of his infamous, treacherous game."

She had uttered the last words in a hoarse cry, but Tabus answered soothingly: "Hush, child, hush! The first thing is to see clearly, if I am to interpret correctly what is shown me here. The demons are to be fully informed they have required it. But you? Did you come to hear whether the spirits still intend to keep the promise they made then?"

Ledscha eagerly assented to this question, and the old woman continued urgently: "Then tell me first what suddenly incenses you so violently against the man whom you have so highly praised?"

The girl related what had formerly been rumoured in Tennis, and which she had just heard from the slave.

He had lured other women—even her innocent young sister—to his studio. Now he wanted to induce Ledscha to go there, not from love, but merely to model her limbs so far as he considered them useful for his work. He was in haste to do so because he intended to return to the capital immediately. Whether he meant to leave her in the lurch after using her for his selfish purposes, she also desired to learn from the sorceress. But she would ask him that question herself to-morrow. Woe betide him if the spirits recognised in him the deceiver she now believed him.

Hitherto Tabus had listened quietly, but when she closed her passionate threats with the exclamation that he also deserved punishment for alienating Gula, the sailor's wife, from her absent husband, the

enchantress also lost her composure and cried out angrily: "If that is true, if the Greek really committed that crime—then certainly. The foreigners destroy, with their laughing levity, much that is good among us. We must endure it; but whoever broke the Biamite's marriage bond, from the earliest times, forfeited his life, and so, the gods be thanked, it has remained. This very last year the fisherman Phabis killed with a hammer the Alexandrian clerk who had stolen into his house, and drowned his faithless wife. But your lover—though you should weep for sorrow till your eyes are red—"

"I would denounce the traitor, if he made himself worthy of death," Ledscha passionately interrupted, with flashing eyes. "What portion of the slave's charge is true will appear at once—and if it proves correct, to-morrow's full moon shall indeed bring me the greatest bliss; for though, when I was younger and happier, I contradicted Abus when he declared that one thing surpassed even the raptures of love—satisfied vengeance—now I would agree with him."

A loud cry of "Right! right!" from the old crone's lips expressed the gray-haired Biamite's pleasure in this worthy daughter of her race.

Then she again gazed at the wine in the vessel, and this time she did so silently, as if spellbound by the mirror on its bottom.

At last, raising her aged head, she said in a tone of the most sincere compassion: "Poor child! Yes, you would be cruelly and shamefully deceived. Tear your love for this man from your heart, like poisonous hemlock. But the full moon which is to bring you great happiness is scarcely the next, perhaps not even the one which follows it, but surely and certainly a later one will rise, by whose light the utmost bliss awaits you. True, I see it come from another man than the Greek."

The girl had listened with panting breath. She believed as firmly in the infallibility of the knowledge which the witch received from the demons who obeyed her as she did in her own existence.

All her happiness, all that had filled her joyous soul with freshly awakened hopes, now lay shattered at her feet, and sobbing aloud she threw herself down beside the old woman and buried her beautiful face in her lap.

Completely overwhelmed by the great misfortune which had come upon her, without thinking of the vengeance which had just made her hold her head so proudly erect, or the rare delight which a later full moon was to bring, she remained motionless, while the old woman, who loved her and who remembered an hour in the distant past when she herself had been dissolved in tears at the prediction of another prophetess, laid her trembling hand upon her head.

Let the child weep her fill.

Time, perhaps vengeance also, cured many a heartache, and when they had accomplished this office upon the girl who had once been betrothed to her grandson, perhaps the full moon bringing happiness, whose appearance first the cords, then the wine mirror in the bottom of the vessel had predicted, would come to Ledscha, and she believed she knew at whose side the girl could regain what she had twice lost—satisfaction for the young heart that yearned for love.

”Only wait, wait,” she cried at last, repeating the consoling words again and again, till Ledscha raised her tear-stained face.

Impulse urged her to kiss the sufferer, but as she bent over the mourner the copper dish slipped from her knees and fell rattling on the floor.

Ledscha started up in terror, and at the same moment the Alexandrian’s packs of hounds on the shore opposite to the Owl’s Nest began to bark so loudly that the deaf old woman heard the baying as if it came from a great distance; but the girl ran out into the open air and, returning at the end of a few minutes, called joyously to the sorceress from the threshold, ”They are coming!”

”They, they,” faltered Tabus, hurriedly pushing her disordered gray hair under the veil on the back of her head, while exclaiming, scarcely able to use her voice in her joyous excitement: ”I knew it. He keeps his word. My Satabus is coming. The ducks, the bread, the fish, girl! Good, loyal heart.”

Then a wide, long shadow fell across the dimly lighted room, and from the darkened threshold a strangely deep, gasping peal of laughter rang from a man’s broad breast.

”Satabus! My boy!” the witch’s shriek rose above the peculiar sound.

”Mother!” answered the gray-bearded lips of the pirate.

For one short moment he remained standing at the door with outstretched arms. Then he took a step toward the beloved being from whom he had been separated more than two years, and suddenly throwing himself down before her, while his huge lower limbs covered part of the floor, he stretched his hands toward the little crooked old woman, who had not strength to rise from her crouching posture, and seizing her with loving impetuosity, lifted her as if she were a child, and placing her on his knees, drew her into a close embrace.

Tabus willingly submitted to this act of violence, and passing her thin left arm around her son’s bull neck with her free hand, patted his bearded cheeks, wrinkled brow, and bushy, almost white hair.

No intelligible words passed the lips of either the mother or the son at

this meeting; nothing but a confused medley of tender and uncouth natural sounds, which no language knows.

Yet they understood each other, and Ledscha, who had moved silently aside, also comprehended that these low laughs, moans, cries, and stammers were the expressions of love of two deeply agitated hearts, and for a moment an emotion of envy seized her.

The gods had early bereft her of her mother, while this savage fighter against the might of the waves, justice, law, and their pitiless, too powerful defenders, this man, already on the verge of age, still possessed his, and sunned his rude heart in her love.

It was some time before the old pirate had satisfied his yearning for affection and placed his light burden down beside the fire.

Tabus now regained the power to utter distinct words, and, difficult as it was for her half paralyzed tongue to speak, she poured a flood of tender pet names and affectionate thanks upon the head of her rude son, the last one left, who had grown gray in bloody warfare; but with the eyes of her soul she again saw in him the little boy whom, with warm maternal love, she had once pressed to her breast and cradled in her arms.

When, in his rough fashion, he warmly returned her professions of tenderness, her eyes grew wet with tears, and at the question what he could still find in her, a withered, good-for-nothing little creature who just dragged along from one day to another, an object of pity to herself, he again burst into his mighty laugh, and his deep voice shouted: "Do you want to know that? But where would be the lime that holds us on the ships if you were no longer here? The best capture wouldn't be worth a drachm if we could not say, 'Hurrah! how pleased the old mother will be when she hears it!' And when things go badly, when men have been wounded or perished in the sea, we should despair of our lives if we did not know that whatever troubles our hearts the old mother feels, too, and we shall always get from her the kind words needed to press on again. And then, when the strait is sore and life is at stake, whence would come the courage to cast the die if we did not know that you are with us day and night, and will send your spirits to help us if the need is great? Hundreds of times they rushed to our aid just at the right time, and assisted us to hew off the hand of the foe which was already choking us. But that is only something extra, which we could do without, if necessary. That you are here, that a man still has his dear mother, whose heart wishes us everything good and our foes death and destruction, whose aged eyes will weep if anything harms us, that, mother dear, that is the main thing!"

He bent his clumsy figure over her as he spoke, and cautiously, as if he were afraid of doing her some injury, kissed her head with tender care.

Then, rising, he turned to Ledscha, whom he always regarded as his dead son's betrothed bride, and greeted her with sincere kindness.

Her great beauty strengthened his plan of uniting her to his oldest son, and when the latter entered the house he cast a searching glance at him.

The result was favourable, for a smile of satisfaction flitted over his scarred features.

The young pirate's stately figure was not inferior in height to the old one's, but his shoulders were narrower, his features less broad and full, and his hair and beard had the glossy raven hue of the blackbird's plumage.

The young man paused on the threshold in embarrassment, and gazed at Ledscha with pleased surprise. When he saw her last his grandmother had not been stricken by paralysis, and the girl was the promised wife of his older brother, to whom custom forbade him to raise his eyes.

He had thought of her numberless times as the most desirable of women. Now nothing prevented his wooing her, and finding her far more beautiful than memory had showed her, strengthened his intention of winning her.

This purpose had matured in the utmost secrecy. He had concealed it even from his father and his brother Labaja, who was still keeping watch on the ships, for he had a reserved disposition, and though obliged to obey his father, wherever it was possible he pursued his own way.

Though Satabus shared Hanno's wish, it vexed him that at this meeting, after so long a separation, his son should neglect his beloved and honoured mother for the sake of a beautiful girl. So, turning his back on Ledscha, he seized the young giant's shoulder with a powerful grip to drag him toward the old woman; but Hanno perceived his error, and now, in brief but affectionate words, showed his grandmother that he, too, rejoiced at seeing her again.

The sorceress gazed at her grandson's stalwart figure with a pleasant smile, and, after welcoming him, exclaimed to Ledscha: "It seems as if Abus had risen from the grave."

The girl vouchsafed her dead lover's brother a brief glance, and, while pouring oil upon the fish in the pan, answered carelessly: "He is a little like him."

"Not only in person," remarked the old pirate, with fatherly pride, and pointing to the broad scar across the young man's forehead, visible even in the dim light, he added by way of explanation: "When we took vengeance for Abus, he bore away that decoration of honour. The blow nearly made him follow his brother, but the youth first sent the souls of half a dozen enemies to greet him in the nether world."

Then Ledscha held out her hand to Hanno, and permitted him to detain it till an ardent glance from his black eyes met hers, and she withdrew it blushing. As she did so she said to Tabus: "You can put them on the fire, and there stands whatever else you need. I must go home now."

In taking leave of the men she asked if she could hope to find them here again the next day. "The full moon will make it damnably light," replied the father, "but they will scarcely venture to assail the right of asylum, and the ships anchored according to regulation at Tanis, with a cargo of wood from Sinope. Besides, for two years people have believed that we have abandoned these waters, and the guards think that if we should return, the last time to choose would be these bright nights. Still, I should not like to decide anything positively about the morrow until news came from Labaja."

"You will find me, whatever happens," Hanno declared after his father had ceased speaking. Old Tabus exchanged a swift glance with her son, and Satabus said: "He is his own master. If I am obliged to go—which may happen—then, my girl, you must be content with the youth. Besides, you are better suited to him than to the graybeard."

He shook hands with Ledscha as he spoke, and Hanno accompanied her to her boat.

At first he was silent, but as she was stepping into the skiff he repeated his promise of meeting her here the following night.

"Very well," she answered quickly. "Perhaps I may have a commission to give you."

"I will fulfil it," he answered firmly.

"To-morrow, then," she called, "unless something unexpected prevents."

But when seated on the thwart she again turned to him, and asked: "Does it need a long time to bring your ship, with brave men on board, to this place?"

"We can be here in four hours, and with favourable winds still sooner," was the reply.

"Even if it displeases your father?"

"Even then, and though the gods, many as there are, should forbid—if only your gratitude will be gained."

"It will," she answered firmly, and the water plashed lightly under the strokes of her oars.