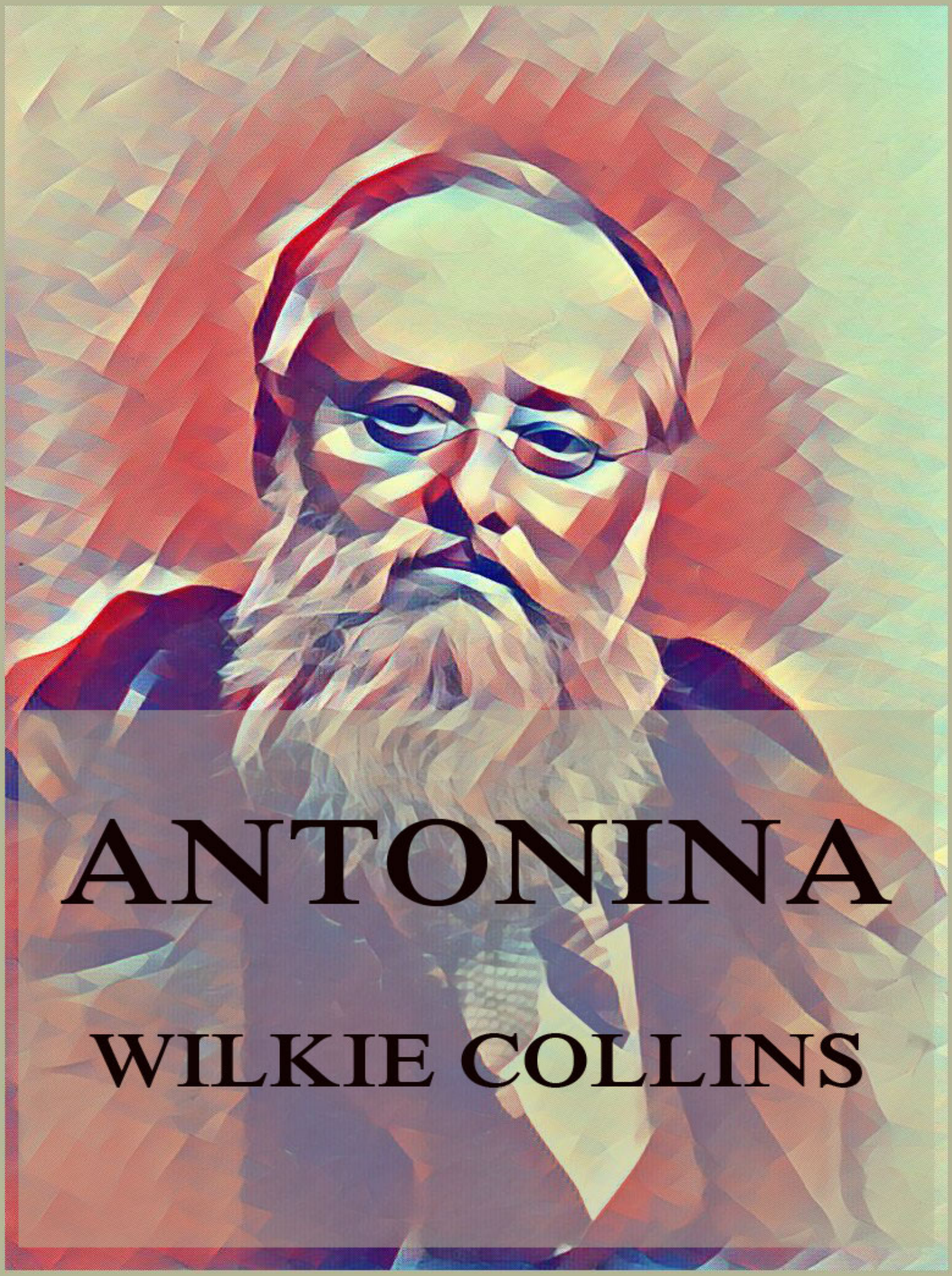

ANTONINA

WILKIE COLLINS

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GOISVINTHA.

The mountains forming the range of Alps which border on the north-eastern confines of Italy, were, in the autumn of the year 408, already furrowed in numerous directions by the tracks of the invading forces of those northern nations generally comprised under the appellation of Goths.

In some places these tracks were denoted on either side by fallen trees, and occasionally assumed, when half obliterated by the ravages of storms, the appearance of desolate and irregular marshes. In other places they were less palpable. Here, the temporary path was entirely hidden by the incursions of a swollen torrent; there, it was faintly perceptible in occasional patches of soft ground, or partly traceable by fragments of abandoned armour, skeletons of horses and men, and remnants of the rude bridges which had once served for passage across a river or transit over a precipice.

Among the rocks of the topmost of the range of mountains immediately overhanging the plains of Italy, and presenting the last barrier to the exertions of a traveller or the march of an invader, there lay, at the beginning of the fifth century, a little lake. Bounded on three sides by precipices, its narrow banks barren of verdure or habitations, and its dark and stagnant waters brightened but rarely by the presence of the lively sunlight, this solitary spot—at all times mournful—presented, on the autumn of the day when our story commences, an aspect of desolation at once dismal to the eye and oppressive to the heart.

It was near noon; but no sun appeared in the heaven. The dull clouds, monotonous in colour and form, hid all beauty

in the firmament, and shed heavy darkness on the earth. Dense, stagnant vapours clung to the mountain summits; from the drooping trees dead leaves and rotten branches sunk, at intervals, on the oozy soil, or whirled over the gloomy precipice; and a small steady rain fell, slow and unintermitting, upon the deserts around. Standing upon the path which armies had once trodden, and which armies were still destined to tread, and looking towards the solitary lake, you heard, at first, no sound but the regular dripping of the rain-drops from rock to rock; you saw no prospect but the motionless waters at your feet, and the dusky crags which shadowed them from above. When, however, impressed by the mysterious loneliness of the place, the eye grew more penetrating and the ear more attentive, a cavern became apparent in the precipices round the lake; and, in the intervals of the heavy rain-drops, were faintly perceptible the sounds of a human voice.

The mouth of the cavern was partly concealed by a large stone, on which were piled some masses of rotten brushwood, as if for the purpose of protecting any inhabitant it might contain from the coldness of the atmosphere without. Placed at the eastward boundary of the lake, this strange place of refuge commanded a view not only of the rugged path immediately below it, but of a large plot of level ground at a short distance to the west, which overhung a second and lower range of rocks. From this spot might be seen far beneath, on days when the atmosphere was clear, the olive grounds that clothed the mountain's base, and beyond, stretching away to the distant horizon, the plains of fated Italy, whose destiny of defeat and shame was now hastening to its dark and fearful accomplishment.

The cavern, within, was low and irregular in form. From its rugged walls the damp oozed forth upon its floor of decayed moss. Lizards and noisome animals had tenanted

its comfortless recesses undisturbed, until the period we have just described, when their miserable rights were infringed on for the first time by human intruders.

A woman crouched near the entrance of the place. More within, on the driest part of the ground, lay a child asleep. Between them were scattered some withered branches and decayed leaves, which were arranged as if to form a fire. In many parts this scanty collection of fuel was slightly blackened; but, wetted as it was by the rain, all efforts to light it permanently had evidently been fruitless.

The woman's head was bent forwards, and her face, hid in her hands, rested on her knees. At intervals she muttered to herself in a hoarse, moaning voice. A portion of her scanty clothing had been removed to cover the child. What remained on her was composed, partly of skins of animals, partly of coarse cotton cloth. In many places this miserable dress was marked with blood, and her long, flaxen hair bore upon its dishevelled locks the same ominous and repulsive stain.

The child seemed scarcely four years of age, and showed on his pale, thin face all the peculiarities of his Gothic origin. His features seemed to have been once beautiful, both in expression and form; but a deep wound, extending the whole length of his cheek, had now deformed him for ever. He shivered and trembled in his sleep, and every now and then mechanically stretched forth his little arms towards the dead cold branches that were scattered before him.

Suddenly a large stone became detached from the rock in a distant part of the cavern, and fell noisily to the ground. At this sound he woke with a scream—raised himself—endeavoured to advance towards the woman, and staggered backward against the side of the cave. A second wound in the leg had wreaked that destruction on his vigour which the first had effected on his beauty. He was a cripple.

At the instant of his awakening the woman had started up. She now raised him from the ground, and taking some herbs from her bosom, applied them to his wounded cheek. By this action her dress became discomposed: it was stiff at the top with coagulated blood, which had evidently flowed from a cut in her neck.

All her attempts to compose the child were in vain; he moaned and wept piteously, muttering at intervals his disjointed exclamations of impatience at the coldness of the place and the agony of his recent wounds. Speechless and tearless the wretched woman looked vacantly down on his face. There was little difficulty in discerning from that fixed, distracted gaze the nature of the tie that bound the mourning woman to the suffering boy. The expression of rigid and awful despair that lowered in her fixed, gloomy eyes, the livid paleness that discoloured her compressed lips, the spasms that shook her firm, commanding form, mutely expressing in the divine eloquence of human emotion that between the solitary pair there existed the most intimate of earth's relationships—the connection of mother and child.

For some time no change occurred in the woman's demeanour. At last, as if struck by some sudden suspicion, she rose, and clasping the child in one arm, displaced with the other the brushwood at the entrance of her place of refuge, cautiously looking forth on all that the mists left visible of the western landscape. After a short survey she drew back as if reassured by the unbroken solitude of the place, and turning towards the lake, looked down upon the black waters at her feet.

'Night has succeeded to night,' she muttered gloomily, 'and has brought no succour to my body, and no hope to my heart! Mile on mile have I journeyed, and danger is still behind, and loneliness for ever before. The shadow of death deepens over the boy; the burden of anguish grows weightier than I can bear. For me, friends are murdered,

defenders are distant, possessions are lost. The God of the Christian priests has abandoned us to danger and deserted us in woe. It is for me to end the struggle for us both. Our last refuge has been in this place—our sepulchre shall be here as well!'

With one last look at the cold and comfortless sky, she advanced to the very edge of the lake's precipitous bank. Already the child was raised in her arms, and her body bent to accomplish successfully the fatal spring, when a sound in the east—faint, distant, and fugitive—caught her ear. In an instant her eye brightened, her chest heaved, her cheek flushed. She exerted the last relics of her wasted strength to gain a prominent position upon a ledge of the rocks behind her, and waited in an agony of expectation for a repetition of that magic sound.

In a moment more she heard it again—for the child, stupefied with terror at the action that had accompanied her determination to plunge with him into the lake, now kept silence, and she could listen undisturbed. To unpractised ears the sound that so entranced her would have been scarcely audible. Even the experienced traveller would have thought it nothing more than the echo of a fallen stone among the rocks in the eastward distance. But to her it was no unimportant sound, for it gave the welcome signal of deliverance and delight.

As the hour wore on, it came nearer and nearer, tossed about by the sportive echoes, and now clearly betraying that its origin was, as she had at first divined, the note of the Gothic trumpet. Soon the distant music ceased, and was succeeded by another sound, low and rumbling, as of an earthquake afar off or a rising thunderstorm, and changing, ere long, to a harsh confused noise, like the rustling of a mighty wind through whole forests of brushwood.

At this instant the woman lost all command over herself; her former patience and caution deserted her; reckless of

danger, she placed the child upon the ledge on which she had been standing; and, though trembling in every limb, succeeded in mounting so much higher on the crag as to gain a fissure near the top of the rock, which commanded an uninterrupted view of the vast tracts of uneven ground leading in an easterly direction to the next range of precipices and ravines.

One after another the long minutes glided on, and, though much was still audible, nothing was yet to be seen. At length the shrill sound of the trumpet again rang through the dull, misty air, and the next instant the advance guard of an army of Goths emerged from the distant woods.

Then, after an interval, the multitudes of the main body thronged through every outlet in the trees, and spread in dusky masses over the desert ground that lay between the woods and the rocks about the borders of the lake. The front ranks halted, as if to communicate with the crowds of the rearguard and the stragglers among the baggage waggons, who still poured forth, apparently in interminable hosts, from the concealment of the distant trees. The advanced troops, evidently with the intention of examining the roads, still marched rapidly on, until they gained the foot of the ascent leading to the crags to which the woman still clung, and from which, with eager attention, she still watched their movements.

Placed in a situation of the extremest peril, her strength was her only preservative against the danger of slipping from her high and narrow elevation. Hitherto the moral excitement of expectation had given her the physical power necessary to maintain her position; but just as the leaders of the guard arrived at the cavern, her over-wrought energies suddenly deserted her; her hands relaxed their grasp; she tottered, and would have sunk backwards to instant destruction, had not the skins wrapped about her bosom and waist become entangled with a point of one of the jagged rocks immediately around her. Fortunately—for

she could utter no cry—the troops halted at this instant to enable their horses to gain breath. Two among them at once perceived her position and detected her nation. They mounted the rocks; and, while one possessed himself of the child, the other succeeded in rescuing the mother and bearing her safely to the ground.

The snorting of horses, the clashing of weapons, the confusion of loud, rough voices, which now startled the native silence of the solitary lake, and which would have bewildered and overwhelmed most persons in the woman's exhausted condition, seemed, on the contrary, to reassure her feelings and reanimate her powers. She disengaged herself from her preserver's support, and taking her child in her arms, advanced towards a man of gigantic stature, whose rich armour sufficiently announced that his position in the army was one of command.

'I am Goisvintha,' said she, in a firm, calm voice—'sister to Hermanric. I have escaped from the massacre of the hostages of Aquileia with one child. Is my brother with the army of the king?'

This declaration produced a marked change in the bystanders. The looks of indifference or curiosity which they had at first cast on the fugitive, changed to the liveliest expression of wonder and respect. The chieftain whom she had addressed raised the visor of his helmet so as to uncover his face, answered her question in the affirmative, and ordered two soldiers to conduct her to the temporary encampment of the main army in the rear. As she turned to depart, an old man advanced, leaning on his long, heavy sword, and accosted her thus—

'I am Withimer, whose daughter was left hostage with the Romans in Aquileia. Is she of the slain or of the escaped?'

'Her bones rot under the city walls,' was the answer. 'The Romans made of her a feast for the dogs.'

No word or tear escaped the old warrior. He turned in the direction of Italy; but, as he looked downwards towards the

plains, his brow lowered, and his hands tightened mechanically round the hilt of his enormous weapon.

The same gloomy question was propounded to Goisvintha by the two men who guided her to the army that had been asked by their aged comrade. It received the same terrible answer, which was borne with the same stern composure, and followed by the same ominous glance in the direction of Italy, as in the instance of the veteran Withimer.

Leading the horse that carried the exhausted woman with the utmost care, and yet with wonderful rapidity, down the paths which they had so recently ascended, the men in a short space of time reached the place where the army had halted, and displayed to Goisvintha, in all the majesty of numbers and repose, the vast martial assemblage of the warriors of the North.

No brightness gleamed from their armour; no banners waved over their heads; no music sounded among their ranks. Backed by the dreary woods, which still disgorged unceasing additions to the warlike multitude already encamped; surrounded by the desolate crags which showed dim, wild, and majestic through the darkness of the mist; covered with the dusky clouds which hovered motionless over the barren mountain tops, and poured their stormy waters on the uncultivated plains—all that the appearance of the Goths had of solemnity in itself was in awful harmony with the cold and mournful aspect that the face of Nature had assumed. Silent—menacing—dark,—the army looked the fit embodiment of its leader's tremendous purpose—the subjugation of Rome.

Conducting Goisvintha quickly through the front files of warriors, her guides, pausing at a spot of ground which shelved upwards at right angles with the main road from the woods, desired her to dismount; and pointing to the group that occupied the place, said, 'Yonder is Alaric the king, and with him is Hermanric thy brother.'

At whatever point of view it could have been regarded, the assemblage of persons thus indicated to Goisvintha must have arrested inattention itself. Near a confused mass of weapons, scattered on the ground, reclined a group of warriors apparently listening to the low, muttered conversation of three men of great age, who rose above them, seated on pieces of rock, and whose long white hair, rough skin dresses, and lean tottering forms appeared in strong contrast with the iron-clad and gigantic figures of their auditors beneath. Above the old men, on the highroad, was one of Alaric's waggons; and on the heaps of baggage piled against its clumsy wheels had been chosen resting-place of the future conqueror of Rome. The top of the vehicle seemed absolutely teeming with a living burden. Perched in every available nook and corner were women and children of all ages, and weapons and live stock of all varieties. Now, a child—lively, mischievous, inquisitive—peered forth over the head of a battering-ram. Now, a lean, hungry sheep advanced his inquiring nostrils sadly to the open air, and displayed by the movement the head of a withered old woman pillowed on his woolly flanks. Here, appeared a young girl struggling, half entombed in shields. There, gasped an emaciated camp-follower, nearly suffocated in heaps of furs. The whole scene, with its background of great woods, drenched in a vapour of misty rain, with its striking contrasts at one point and its solemn harmonies at another, presented a vast combination of objects that either startled or awed—a gloomy conjunction of the menacing and the sublime.

Bidding Goisvintha wait near the waggon, one of her conductors approached and motioned aside a young man standing near the king. As the warrior rose to obey the demand, he displayed, with all the physical advantages of his race, and ease and elasticity of movement unusual among the men of his nation. At the instant when he joined the soldier who had accosted him, his face was partially

concealed by an immense helmet, crowned with a boar's head, the mouth of which, forced open at death, gaped wide, as if still raging for prey. But the man had scarcely stated his errand, when he started violently, removed the grim appendage of war, and hastened bare-headed to the side of the waggon where Goisvintha awaited his approach.

The instant he was beheld by the woman, she hastened to meet him; placed the wounded child in his arms, and greeted him with these words:—

'Your brother served in the armies of Rome when our people were at peace with the Empire. Of his household and his possessions this is all that the Romans have left!'

She ceased, and for an instant the brother and sister regarded each other in touching and expressive silence. Though, in addition to the general characteristics of country, the countenances of the two naturally bore the more particular evidences of community of blood, all resemblance between them at this instant—so wonderful is the power of expression over feature—had utterly vanished. The face and manner of the young man (he had numbered only twenty years) expressed a deep sorrow, manly in its stern tranquility, sincere in its perfect innocence of display. As he looked on the child, his blue eyes—bright, piercing, and lively—softened like a woman's; his lips, hardly hidden by his short beard, closed and quivered; and his chest heaved under the armour that lay upon its noble proportions. There was in this simple, speechless, tearless melancholy—this exquisite consideration of triumphant strength for suffering weakness—something almost sublime; opposed as it was to the emotions of malignity and despair that appeared in Goisvintha's features. The ferocity that gleamed from her dilated, glaring eyes, the sinister markings that appeared round her pale and parted lips, the swelling of the large veins, drawn to their extremest point of tension on her lofty forehead, so distorted her countenance, that the brother and sister, as they stood

together, seemed in expression to have changed sexes for the moment. From the warrior came pity for the sufferer; from the mother, indignation for the offence.

Arousing himself from his melancholy contemplation of the child, and as yet answering not a word to Goisvintha, Hermanric mounted the waggon, and placing the last of his sister's offspring in the arms of a decrepid old woman, who sat brooding over some bundles of herbs spread out upon her lap, addressed her thus:—

'These wounds are from the Romans. Revive the child, and you shall be rewarded from the spoils of Rome.'

'Ha! ha! ha!' chuckled the crone; 'Hermanric is an illustrious warrior, and shall be obeyed. Hermanric is great, for his arm can slay; but Brunechild is greater than he, for her cunning can cure!'

As if anxious to verify this boast before the warrior's eyes, the old woman immediately began the preparation of the necessary dressings from her store of herbs; but Hermanric waited not to be a witness of her skill. With one final look at the pale, exhausted child, he slowly descended from the waggon, and approaching Goisvintha, drew her towards a sheltered position near the ponderous vehicle. Here he seated himself by her side, prepared to listen with the deepest attention to her recital of the scenes of terror and suffering through which she had so recently passed.

'You,' she began, 'born while our nation was at peace; transported from the field of war to those distant provinces where tranquility still prevailed; preserved throughout your childhood from the chances of battle; advanced to the army in your youth, only when its toils are past and its triumphs are already at hand—you alone have escaped the miseries of our people, to partake in the glory of their approaching revenge.

'Hardly had a year passed since you had been removed from the settlements of the Goths when I wedded Priulf. The race of triflers to whom he was then allied, spite of

their Roman haughtiness, deferred to him in their councils, and confessed among their legions that he was brave. I saw myself with joy the wife of a warrior of renown; I believed, in my pride, that I was destined to be the mother of a race of heroes; when suddenly there came news to us that the Emperor Theodosius was dead. Then followed anarchy among the people of the soil, and outrages on the liberties of their allies, the Goths. Ere long the call to arms arose among our nation. Soon our waggons of war were rolled across the frozen Danube; our soldiers quitted the Roman camp; our husbandmen took their weapons from their cottage walls; we that were women prepared with our children to follow our husbands to the field; and Alaric, the king, came forth as the leader of our hosts.

'We marched upon the territories of the Greeks. But how shall I tell you of the events of those years of war that followed our invasion; of the glory of our victories; of the hardships of our defences; of the miseries of our retreats; of the hunger that we vanquished; of the diseases that we endured; of the shameful peace that was finally ratified, against the wishes of our king! How shall I tell of all this, when my thoughts are on the massacre from which I have just escaped—when these first evils, though once remembered in anguish, are, even now, forgotten in the superior horrors that ensued!

'The truce was made. Alaric departed with the remnant of his army, and encamped at AEmona, on the confines of that land which he had already invaded, and which he is now prepared to conquer. Between our king and Stilicho, the general of the Romans, passed many messages, for the leaders disputed on the terms of the peace that should be finally ordained. Meanwhile, as an earnest of the Gothic faith, bands of our warriors, and among them Priulf, were despatched into Italy to be allies once more of the legions of Rome, and with them they took their wives and their

children, to be detained as hostages in the cities throughout the land.

'I and my children were conducted to Aquileia. In a dwelling within the city we were lodged with our possessions. It was night when I took leave of Priulf, my husband, at the gates. I watched him as he departed with the army, and, when the darkness hid him from my eyes, I re-entered the town; from which I am the only woman of our nation who has escaped alive.'

As she pronounced these last words, Goisvintha's manner, which had hitherto been calm and collected, began to change: she paused abruptly in her narrative, her head sunk upon her breast, her frame quivered as if convulsed with violent agony. When she turned towards Hermanric after an interval of silence to address him again, the same malignant expression lowered over her countenance that had appeared on it when she presented to him her wounded child; her voice became broken, hoarse, and unfeminine; and pressing closely to the young man's side, she laid her trembling fingers on his arm, as if to bespeak his most undivided attention.

'Time grew on,' she continued, 'and still there came no tidings that the peace was finally secured. We, that were hostages, lived separate from the people of the town; for we felt enmity towards each other even then. In my captivity there was no employment for me but patience—no pursuit but hope. Alone with my children, I was wont to look forth over the sea towards the camp of our king; but day succeeded to day, and his warriors appeared not on the plains; nor did Priulf return with the legions to encamp before the gates of the town. So I mourned in my loneliness; for my heart yearned towards the homes of my people; I longed once more to look upon my husband's face, and to behold again the ranks of our warriors, and the majesty of their battle array.

'But already, when the great day of despair was quickly drawing near, a bitter outrage was preparing for me alone. The men who had hitherto watched us were changed, and of the number of the new guards was one who cast on me the eyes of lust. Night after night he poured his entreaties into my unwilling ear; for, in his vanity and shamelessness, he believed that I, who was Gothic and the wife of a Goth, might be won by him whose parentage was but Roman! Soon from prayers he rose to threats; and one night, appearing before me with smiles, he cried out that Stilicho, whose desire was to make peace with the Goths, had suffered, for his devotion to our people, the penalty of death; that a time of ruin was approaching for us all, and that he alone—whom I despised—could preserve me from the anger of Rome. As he ceased he approached me; but I, who had been in many battle-fields, felt no dread at the prospect of war, and I spurned him with laughter from my presence.

'Then, for a few nights more, my enemy approached me not again. Until one evening, as I sat on the terrace before the house, with the child that you have beheld, a helmet-crest suddenly fell at my feet, and a voice cried to me from the garden beneath: 'Priulf thy husband has been slain in a quarrel by the soldiers of Rome! Already the legions with whom he served are on their way to the town; for a massacre of the hostages is ordained. Speak but the word, and I can save thee even yet!'

'I looked on the crest. It was bloody, and it was his! For an instant my heart writhed within me as I thought on my warrior whom I had loved! Then, as I heard the messenger of death retire, cursing, from his lurking-place in the garden, I recollected that now my children had none but their mother to defend them, and that peril was preparing for them from the enemies of their race. Besides the little one in my arms, I had two that were sleeping in the house. As I looked round, bewildered and in despair, to see if a

chance were left us to escape, there rang through the evening stillness the sound of a trumpet, and the tramp of armed men was audible in the street beneath. Then, from all quarters of the town rose, as one sudden sound, the shrieks of women and the yells of men. Already, as I rushed towards my children's beds, the fiends of Rome had mounted the stairs, and waved in bloody triumph their reeking swords! I gained the steps; and, as I looked up, they flung down at me the body of my youngest child. O Hermanric! Hermanric! it was the most beautiful and the most beloved! What the priests say that God should be to us, that, the fairest one of my offspring, was to me! As I saw it mutilated and dead—I, who but an hour before had hushed it on my bosom to rest!—my courage forsook me, and when the murderers advanced on me I staggered and fell. I felt the sword-point enter my neck; I saw the dagger gleam over the child in my arms; I heard the death-shriek of the last victim above; and then my senses failed me, and I could listen and move no more!

'Long must I have lain motionless at the foot of those fatal stairs; for when I awoke from my trance the noises in the city were hushed, and from her place in the firmament the moon shone softly into the deserted house. I listened, to be certain that I was alone with my murdered children. No sound was in the dwelling; the assassins had departed, believing that their labour of blood was ended when I fell beneath their swords; and I was able to crawl forth in security, and to look my last upon my offspring that the Romans had slain. The child that I held to my breast still breathed. I stanched with some fragments of my garment the wounds that he had received, and laying him gently by the stairs—in the moonlight, so that I might see him when he moved—I groped in the shadow of the wall for my first murdered and my last born; for that youngest and fairest one of my offspring whom they had slaughtered before my eyes! When I touched the corpse, it was wet with blood; I

felt its face, and it was cold beneath my hands; I raised its body in my arms, and its limbs already were rigid in death! Then I thought of the eldest child, who lay dead in the chamber above. But my strength was failing me fast. I had an infant who might yet be preserved; and I knew that if morning dawned on me in the house, all chances of escape were lost for ever. So, though my heart was cold within me at leaving my child's corpse to the mercy of the Romans, I took up the dead and the wounded one in my arms, and went forth into the garden, and thence towards the seaward quarter of the town.

'I passed through the forsaken streets. Sometimes I stumbled against the body of a child—sometimes the moonlight showed me the death-pale face of some woman of my nation whom I had loved, stretched upward to the sky; but I still advanced until I gained the wall of the town, and heard on the other side the waters of the river running onward to the Port of Aquileia and the sea.

'I looked around. The gates I knew were guarded and closed. By the wall was the only prospect of escape; but its top was high and its sides were smooth when I felt them with my hands. Despairing and wearied, I laid my burdens down where they were hidden by the shade, and walked forward a few paces, for to remain still was a torment that I could not endure. At a short distance I saw a soldier sleeping against the wall of a house. By his side was a ladder placed against the window. As I looked up I beheld the head of a corpse resting on its top. The victim must have been lately slain, for her blood still dripped slowly down into an empty wine-pot that stood within the soldier's reach. When I saw the ladder, hope revived within me. I removed it to the wall—I mounted, and laid my dead child on the great stones at its top—I returned, and placed my wounded boy by the corpse. Slowly, and with many efforts, I dragged the ladder upwards, until from its own weight one end fell to the ground on the other side. As I had risen

so I descended. In the sand of the river-bank I scraped a hole, and buried there the corpse of the infant; for I could carry the weight of two no longer. Then with my wounded child I reached some caverns that lay onward near the seashore. There throughout the next day I lay hidden—alone with my sufferings of body and my affliction of heart—until the night came on, when I set forth on my journey to the mountains; for I knew that at AEmona, in the camp of the warriors of my people, lay the only refuge that was left to me on earth. Feebly and slowly, hiding by day and travelling by night, I kept on my way until I gained that lake among the rocks, where the guards of the army came forward and rescued me from death.'

She ceased. Throughout the latter portion of her narrative her demeanour had been calm and sad; and as she dwelt, with the painful industry of grief, over each minute circumstance connected with the bereavements she had sustained, her voice softened to those accents of quiet mournfulness, which make impressive the most simple words, and render musical the most unsteady tones. It seemed as if those tenderer and kinder emotions, which the attractions of her offspring had once generated in her character, had at the bidding of memory become revivified in her manner while she lingered over the recital of their deaths. For a brief space of time she looked fixedly and anxiously upon the countenance of Hermanric, which was half averted from her, and expressed a fierce and revengeful gloom that sat unnaturally on it noble lineaments. Then turning from him, she buried her face in her hands, and made no effort more to attract him to attention or incite him to reply.

This solemn silence kept by the bereaved woman and the brooding man had lasted but a few minutes, when a harsh, trembling voice was heard from the top of the waggon, calling at intervals, 'Hermanric! Hermanric!'

At first the young man remained unmoved by those discordant and repulsive tones. They repeated his name, however, so often and so perseveringly, that he noticed them ere long; and rising suddenly, as if impatient of the interruption, advanced towards the side of the waggon from which the mysterious summons appeared to come.

As he looked up towards the vehicle the voice ceased, and he saw that the old woman to whom he had confided the child was the person who had called him so hurriedly but a few moments before. Her tottering body, clothed in bear-skins, was bent forward over a large triangular shield of polished brass, on which she leant her lank, shrivelled arms. Her head shook with a tremulous, palsied action; a leer, half smile, half grimace, distended her withered lips and lightened her sunken eyes. Sinister, cringing, repulsive; her face livid with the reflection from the weapon that was her support, and her figure scarcely human in the rugged garments that encompassed its gaunt proportions, she seemed a deformity set up by evil spirits to mock the majesty of the human form—an embodied satire on all that is most deplorable in infirmity and most disgusting in age.

The instant she discerned Hermanric, she stretched her body out still farther over the shield; and pointing to the interior of the waggon, muttered softly that one fearful and expressive word—dead!

Without waiting for any further explanation, the young Goth mounted the vehicle, and gaining the old woman's side, saw stretched on her collection of herbs—beautiful in the sublime and melancholy stillness of death—the corpse of Goisvintha's last child.

'Is Hermanric wroth?' whined the hag, quailing before the steady, rebuking glance of the young man. 'When I said that Brunechild was greater than Hermanric, I lied. It is Hermanric that is most powerful! See, the dressings were placed on the wounds; and, though the child has died, shall

not the treasures that were promised me be mine? I have done what I could, but my cunning begins to desert me, for I am old—old—old! I have seen my generation pass away! Aha! I am old, Hermanric, I am old!'

When the young warrior looked on the child, he saw that the hag had spoken truth, and that the victim had died from no fault of hers. Pale and serene, the countenance of the boy showed how tranquil had been his death. The dressings had been skilfully composed and carefully applied to his wounds, but suffering and privation had annihilated the feebleness of human resistance in their march toward the last dread goal, and the treachery of Imperial Rome had once more triumphed as was its wont, and triumphed over a child!

As Hermanric descended with the corpse Goisvintha was the first object that met his eyes when he alighted on the ground. The mother received from him the lifeless burden without an exclamation or a tear. That emanation from her former and kinder self which had been produced by the closing recital of her sufferings was henceforth, at the signal of her last child's death, extinguished in her for ever!

'His wounds had crippled him,' said the young man gloomily. 'He could never have fought with the warriors! Our ancestors slew themselves when they were no longer vigorous for the fight. It is better that he has died!'

'Vengeance!' gasped Goisvintha, pressing up closely to his side. 'We will have vengeance for the massacre of Aquileia! When blood is streaming in the palaces of Rome, remember my murdered children, and hasten not to sheathe thy sword!'

At this instant, as if to rouse still further the fierce determination that appeared already in the face of the young Goth, the voice of Alaric was heard commanding the army to advance. Hermanric started, and drew the panting woman after him to the resting-place of the king. There, armed at all points, and rising, by his superior stature, high

above the throng around him, stood the dreaded captain of the Gothic hosts. His helmet was raised so as to display his clear blue eyes gleaming over the multitude around him; he pointed with his sword in the direction of Italy; and as rank by rank the men started to their arms, and prepared exultingly for the march, his lips parted with a smile of triumph, and ere he moved to accompany them he spoke thus:—

'Warriors of the Goths, our halt is a short one among the mountains; but let not the weary repine, for the glorious resting-place that awaits our labours is the city of Rome! The curse of Odin, when in the infancy of our nation he retired before the myriads of the Empire, it is our privilege to fulfil! That future destruction which he denounced against Rome, it is ours to effect! Remember your hostages that the Romans have slain; your possessions that the Romans have seized; your trust that the Romans have betrayed! Remember that I, your king, have within me that supernatural impulse which never deceives, and which calls to me in a voice of encouragement—Advance, and the Empire is thine! Assemble the warriors, and the City of the World shall be delivered to the conquering Goths! Let us onward without delay! Our prey awaits us! Our triumph is near! Our vengeance is at hand!'

He paused; and at that moment the trumpet gave signal for the march.

'Up! up!' cried Hermanric, seizing Goisvintha by the arm, and pointing to the waggon which had already begun to move; 'make ready for the journey! I will charge myself with the burial of the child. Yet a few days and our encampment may be before Aquileia. Be patient, and I will avenge thee in the palaces of Rome!'

The mighty mass moved. The multitude stretched forth over the barren ground; and even now the warriors in front of the army might be seen by those in the rear mounting

the last range of passes that lay between the plains of Italy and the Goths.

THE COURT.

The traveller who so far departs from the ordinary track of tourists in modern Italy as to visit the city of Ravenna, remembers with astonishment, as he treads its silent and melancholy streets, and beholds vineyards and marshes spread over an extent of four miles between the Adriatic and the town, that this place, now half deserted, was once the most populous of Roman fortresses; and that where fields and woods now present themselves to his eyes the fleets of the Empire once rode securely at anchor, and the merchant of Rome disembarked his precious cargoes at his warehouse door.

As the power of Rome declined, the Adriatic, by a strange fatality, began to desert the fortress whose defence it had hitherto secured. Coeval with the gradual degeneracy of the people was the gradual withdrawal of the ocean from the city walls; until, at the beginning of the sixth century, a grove of pines already appeared where the port of Augustus once existed.

At the period of our story—though the sea had even then receded perceptibly—the ditches round the walls were yet filled, and the canals still ran through the city in much the same manner as they intersect Venice at the present time.

On the morning that we are about to describe, the autumn had advanced some days since the events mentioned in the preceding chapter. Although the sun was now high in the eastern horizon, the restlessness produced by the heat emboldened a few idlers of Ravenna to brave the sultriness of the atmosphere, in the vain hope of being greeted by a breeze from the Adriatic as they mounted the

seaward ramparts of the town. On attaining their destined elevation, these sanguine citizens turned their faces with fruitless and despairing industry towards every point of the compass, but no breath of air came to reward their perseverance. Nothing could be more thoroughly suggestive of the undiminished universality of the heat than the view, in every direction, from the position they then occupied. The stone houses of the city behind them glowed with a vivid brightness overpowering to the strongest eyes. The light curtains hung motionless over the lonely windows. No shadows varied the brilliant monotony of the walls, or softened the lively glitter on the waters of the fountains beneath. Not a ripple stirred the surface of the broad channel, that now replaced the ancient harbour. Not a breath of wind unfolded the scorching sails of the deserted vessels at the quay. Over the marshes in the distance hung a hot, quivering mist; and in the vineyards, near the town, not a leaf waved upon its slender stem. On the seaward side lay, vast and level, the prospect of the burning sand; and beyond it the main ocean—waveless, torpid, and suffused in a flood of fierce brightness—stretched out to the cloudless horizon that closed the sunbright view.

Within the town, in those streets where the tall houses cast a deep shadow on the flagstones of the road, the figures of a few slaves might here and there be seen sleeping against the walls, or gossiping languidly on the faults of their respective lords. Sometimes an old beggar might be observed hunting on the well-stocked preserves of his own body the lively vermin of the South. Sometimes a restless child crawled from a doorstep to paddle in the stagnant waters of a kennel; but, with the exception of these doubtful evidences of human industry, the prevailing characteristic of the few groups of the lowest orders of the people which appeared in the streets was the most listless and utter indolence. All that gave splendour to the city at

other hours of the day was at this period hidden from the eye. The elegant courtiers reclined in their lofty chambers; the guards on duty ensconced themselves in angles of walls and recesses of porticoes; the graceful ladies slumbered on perfumed couches in darkened rooms; the gilded chariots were shut into the carriage-houses; the prancing horses were confined in the stables; and even the wares in the market-places were removed from exposure to the sun. It was clear that the luxurious inhabitants of Ravenna recognised no duties of sufficient importance, and no pleasures of sufficient attraction, to necessitate the exposure of their susceptible bodies to the noontide heat.

To give the reader some idea of the manner in which the indolent patricians of the Court loitered away their noon, and to satisfy, at the same time, the exigencies attaching to the conduct of this story, it is requisite to quit the lounging-places of the plebeians in the streets for the couches of the nobles in the Emperor's palace.

Passing through the massive entrance gates, crossing the vast hall of the Imperial abode, with its statues, its marbles, and its guards in attendance, and thence ascending the noble staircase, the first object that might on this occasion have attracted the observer, when he gained the approaches to the private apartments, was a door at an extremity of the corridor, richly carved and standing half open. At this spot were grouped some fifteen or twenty individuals, who conversed by signs, and maintained in all their movements the most decorous and complete silence. Sometimes one of the party stole on tiptoe to the door, and looked cautiously through, returning almost instantaneously, and expressing to his next neighbour, by various grimaces, his immense interest in the sight he had just beheld. Occasionally there came from this mysterious chamber sounds resembling the cackling of poultry, varied now and then by a noise like the falling of a shower of small, light substances upon a hard floor. Whenever these

sounds were audible, the members of the party outside the door looked round upon each other and smiled—some sarcastically, some triumphantly. A few among these patient expectants grasped rolls of vellum in their hands; the rest held nosegays of rare flowers, or supported in their arms small statues and pictures in mosaic. Of their number, some were painters and poets, some orators and philosophers, and some statuaries and musicians. Among such a motley assemblage of professions, remarkable in all ages of the world for fostering in their votaries the vice of irritability, it may seem strange that so quiet and orderly a behaviour should exist as that just described. But it is to be observed that in attending at the palace, these men of genius made sure at least of outward unanimity among their ranks, by coming equally prepared with one accomplishment, and equally animated by one hope: they waited to employ a common agent—flattery; to attain a common end—gain.

The chamber thus sacred, even from the intrusion of intellectual inspiration, although richly ornamented, was of no remarkable extent. At other times the eye might have wandered with delight on the exquisite plants and flowers, scattered profusely over a noble terrace, to which a second door in the apartment conducted; but, at the present moment, the employment of the occupant of the room was of so extraordinary a nature, that the most attentive observation must have missed all the inferior characteristics of the place, to settle immediately on its inhabitant alone.

In the midst of a large flock of poultry, which seemed strangely misplaced on a floor of marble and under a gilded roof, stood a pale, thin, debilitated youth, magnificently clothed, and holding in his hand a silver vase filled with grain, which he ever and anon distributed to the cackling multitude at his feet. Nothing could be more pitiably effeminate than the appearance of this young man. His eyes were heavy and vacant, his forehead low and retiring, his