

***GEORGE  
GISSING***



***VERANILDA***

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**George Gissing**

# **Veranilda**

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# CHAPTER I

## THE VANQUISHED ROMAN

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Seven years long had the armies of Justinian warred against the Goths in Italy. Victor from Rhegium to Ravenna, the great commander Belisarius had returned to the East, Carrying captive a Gothic king. The cities of the conquered land were garrisoned by barbarians of many tongues, who bore the name of Roman soldiers; the Italian people, brought low by slaughter, dearth, and plague, crouched under the rapacious tyranny of governors from Byzantium.

Though children born when King Theodoric still reigned had yet scarce grown to manhood, that golden age seemed already a legend of the past. Athalaric, Amalasuntha, Theodahad, last of the Amal blood, had held the throne in brief succession and were gone; warriors chosen at will by the Gothic host, mere kings of the battlefield, had risen and perished; reduced to a wandering tribe, the nation which alone of her invaders had given peace and hope to Italy, which alone had revered and upheld the laws, polity, culture of Rome, would soon, it was thought, be utterly destroyed, or vanish in flight beyond the Alps. Yet war did not come to an end. In the plain of the great river there was once more a chieftain whom the Goths had raised upon their shields, a king, men said, glorious in youth and strength, and able, even yet, to worst the Emperor's generals. His fame increased. Ere long he was known to be moving

southward, to have crossed the Apennines, to have won a battle in Etruria. The name of this young hero was Totila.

In these days the senators of Rome, heirs to a title whose ancient power and dignity were half-forgotten, abode within the City, under constraint disguised as honour, the conqueror's hostages. One among them, of noblest name, Flavius Anicius Maximus, broken in health by the troubles of the time and by private sorrow, languishing all but unto death in the heavy air of the Tiber, was permitted to seek relief in a visit to which he would of his domains in Italy. His birth, his repute, gave warrant of loyalty to the empire, and his coffers furnished the price put upon such a favour by Byzantine greed. Maximus chose for refuge his villa by the Campanian shore, vast, beautiful, half in ruin, which had been enjoyed by generations of the Anician family; situated above the little town of Surrentum it caught the cooler breeze, and on its mountainous promontory lay apart from the tramp of armies. Here, as summer burned into autumn, the sick man lived in brooding silence, feeling his strength waste, and holding to the world only by one desire.

The household comprised his unwedded sister Petronilla, a lady in middle age, his nephew Basil, and another kinsman, Decius, a student and an invalid; together with a physician, certain freedmen who rendered services of trust, a eunuch at the Command of Petronilla, and the usual body of male and female slaves. Some score of glebe-bound peasants cultivated the large estate for their lord's behoof. Notwithstanding the distress that had fallen upon the Roman nobility, many of whom were sunk into indigence, the chief of the Anicii still controlled large means; and the

disposal of these possessions at his death was matter of interest to many persons—not least to the clergy of Rome, who found in the dying man's sister a piously tenacious advocate. Children had been born to Maximus, but the only son who reached mature years fell a victim to pestilence when Vitiges was camped about the City. There survived one daughter, Aurelia. Her the father had not seen for years; her he longed to see and to pardon ere he died. For Aurelia, widowed of her first husband in early youth, had used her liberty to love and wed a flaxen-haired barbarian, a lord of the Goths; and, worse still, had renounced the Catholic faith for the religion of the Gothic people, that heresy of Arianism condemned and abhorred by Rome. In consequence she became an outcast from her kith and kin. Her husband commanded in the city of Cumae, hard by Neapolis. When this stronghold fell before the advance of Belisarius, the Goth escaped, soon after to die in battle; Aurelia, a captive of the Conquerors, remained at Cumae, and still was living there, though no longer under restraint. Because of its strength, this ancient city became the retreat of many ladies who fled from Rome before the hardships and perils of the siege; from them the proud and unhappy woman, ever held apart, yet she refused to quit the town when she would have been permitted to do so. From his terrace above the Surrentine shore, Maximus gazed across the broad gulf to the hills that concealed Cumae, yearning for the last of his children. When at length he wrote her a letter, a letter of sad kindness, inviting rather than beseeching her to visit him, Aurelia made no reply. Wounded, he sunk again into silence, until his heart could

no longer bear its secret burden, and he spoke—not to Petronilla, from whose austere orthodoxy little sympathy was to be expected—but to his nephew Basil, whose generous mettle willingly lent itself to such a service as was proposed. On his delicate mission, the young man set forth without delay. To Cumae, whether by sea or land, was but a short journey: starting at daybreak, Basil might have given ample time to his embassy, and have been back again early on the morrow. But the second day passed, and he did not return. Though harassed by the delay, Maximus tried to deem it of good omen, and nursed his hope through another sleepless night.

Soon after sunrise, he was carried forth to his place of observation, a portico in semicircle, the marble honey-toned by time, which afforded shelter from the eastern rays and commanded a view of vast extent. Below him lay the little town, built on the cliffs above its landing-place; the hillsides on either hand were clad with vineyards, splendid in the purple of autumn, and with olives. Sky and sea shone to each other in perfect calm; the softly breathing air mingled its morning freshness with a scent of fallen flower and leaf. A rosy vapour from Vesuvius floated gently inland; and this the eye of Maximus marked with contentment, as it signified a favourable wind for a boat crossing hither from the far side of the bay. For the loveliness of the scene before him, its noble lines, its jewelled colouring, he had little care; but the infinite sadness of its suggestion, the decay and the desolation uttered by all he saw, sank deep into his heart. If his look turned to the gleaming spot which was the city of Neapolis, there came into his mind the sack and massacre

of a few years ago, when Belisarius so terribly avenged upon the Neapolitans their stubborn resistance to his siege. Faithful to the traditions of his house, of his order, Maximus had welcomed the invasion which promised to restore Italy to the Empire; now that the restoration was effected, he saw with bitterness the evils resulting from it, and all but hoped that this new king of the Goths, this fortune-favoured Totila, might sweep the land of its Greek oppressors. He looked back upon his own life, on the placid dignity of his career under the rule of Theodoric, the offices by which he had risen, until he sat in the chair of the Consul. Yet in that time, which now seemed so full of peaceful glories, he had never at heart been loyal to the great king; in his view, as in that of the nobles generally, Theodoric was but a usurper, who had abused the mandate intrusted to him by the Emperor Zeno, to deliver Italy from the barbarians. When his own kinsmen, Boethius and Symmachus, were put to death on a charge of treachery, Maximus burned with hatred of the Goth. He regarded with disdain the principles of Cassiodorus, who devoted his life to the Gothic cause, and who held that only as an independent kingdom could there be hope for Italy. Having for a moment the ear of Theodoric's daughter, Amalasuntha, when she ruled for her son, Maximus urged her to yield her kingdom to the Emperor, and all but saw his counsel acted upon. After all, was not Cassiodorus right? Were not the senators who had ceaselessly intrigued with Byzantium in truth traitors to Rome? It was a bitter thought for the dying man that all his life he had not only failed in service to his country, but had obstinately wrought for her ruin.

Attendants placed food beside him. He mingled wine with water and soothed a feverish thirst. His physician, an elderly man of Oriental visage, moved respectfully to his side, greeted him as Illustrious, inquired how his Magnificence had passed the latter part of the night. Whilst replying, as ever courteously—for in the look and bearing of Maximus there was that *senatorius decor* which Pliny noted in a great Roman of another time—his straining eyes seemed to descry a sail in the quarter he continually watched. Was it only a fishing boat? Raised upon the couch, he gazed long and fixedly. Impossible as yet to be sure whether he saw the expected bark; but the sail seemed to draw nearer, and he watched.

The voice of a servant, who stood at a respectful distance, announced: 'The gracious Lady'; and there appeared a little procession. Ushered by her eunuch, and attended by half a dozen maidens, one of whom held over her a silk sunshade with a handle of gold, the sister of Maximus approached at a stately pace. She was tall, and of features severely regular; her dark hair—richer in tone and more abundant than her years could warrant—rose in elaborate braiding intermingled with golden threads; her waistless robe was of white silk adorned with narrow stripes of purple, which descended, two on each side, from the shoulders to the hem, and about her neck lay a shawl of delicate tissue. In her hand, which glistened with many gems, she carried a small volume, richly bound, the Psalter. Courtesies of the gravest passed between her and Maximus, who, though he could not rise from his couch, assumed an attitude of graceful deference, and Petronilla seated herself

in a chair which a slave had placed for her. After many inquiries as to her brother's health, the lady allowed her eyes to wander for a moment, then spoke with the smile of one who imparts rare tidings.

'Late last night—too late to trouble you with the news—there came a post from the reverend deacon Leander. He disembarked yesterday at Salernum, and, after brief repose, hopes to visit us. Your Amiability will, I am sure, welcome his coming.'

'Assuredly,' answered Maximus, bending his head, whilst his eyes watched the distant sail. 'Whence comes he?'

'From Sicily. We shall learn, I dare say, the business which took him there,' added Petronilla, with a self-satisfied softening of her lips. 'The deacon is wont to talk freely with me of whatever concerns the interests of our holy Church, even as I think you remember, has now and then deigned—though I know not how I have deserved such honour—to ask, I dare not say my counsel, but my humble thoughts on this or that. I think we may expect him before morning. The day will not be too warm for travel.'

Maximus wore an anxious look, and spoke after hesitation.

'Will his reverend leisure permit him to pass more than one day with us?'

'Earnestly I hope so. You, beyond doubt, dear lord, my brother, will desire long privacy with the holy man. His coming at this time is plainly of Heaven's direction.'

'Lady sister,' answered Maximus, with the faintest smile on his sad features, 'I would not willingly rob you of a moment's conference with the good deacon. My own

business with him is soon despatched. I would fain be assured of burial in the Temple of Probus where sleep our ancestors.'

'Of that,' replied Petronilla, solemnly and not unkindly, 'doubt not for a moment. Your body shall lie there, by the blessed Peter's sanctuary, and your tomb be honoured among those of the greatest of our blood. But there is another honour that I covet for you, an honour above all that the world can bestow. In these sad times, Maximus, the Church has need of strengthening. You have no children—'

A glance from the listener checked her, and, before she could resume, Maximus interposed in a low voice:

'I have yet a daughter.'

'A daughter?' exclaimed Petronilla, troubled, confused, scarce subduing indignation.

'It is better I should tell you,' continued her brother, with some sternness, resulting from the efforts to command himself, 'that Basil is gone to Cumae to see Aurelia, and, if it may be, to lead her to me. Perhaps even now'—he pointed to the sea—'they are on the way hither. Let us not speak of it, Petronilla,' he added in a firmer tone. 'It is my will; that must suffice. Of you I ask nothing save silence.'

The lady arose. Her countenance expressed angry and bitter feeling, but there was no danger of her uttering what she thought. Gravely, somewhat coldly, she spoke good wishes for her brother's ease during the day, and so retired with her retinue. Alone, Maximus sighed, and looked again across the waters.

In a few minutes the servant who guarded his privacy was again heard announcing the lord Decius. The Senator

turned his eyes with a look of good-humoured greeting.

'Abroad so early, good cousin? Did the oil fail you last night and send you too soon to bed?'

'You have not chanced to remember, dear my lord, what day it is?' returned Decius, when he had bestowed a kiss on his kinsman's cheek. 'Had I but vigour enough, this morning would have seen me on a pilgrimage to the tomb.' He put out a hand towards Neapolis. 'I rose at daybreak to meditate the Fourth Eclogue.'

'The ides of October—true. I take shame to myself for having lost the memory of Virgil in my own distresses.'

Decius, whose years were scarce thirty, had the aspect and the gait of an elderly man; his thin hair streaked with grey, his cheeks hollow, his eyes heavy, he stooped in walking and breathed with difficulty; the tunic and the light cloak, which were all his attire, manifested an infinite carelessness in matters of costume, being worn and soiled. Than he, no Roman was poorer; he owned nothing but his clothing and a few books. Akin to the greatest, and bearing a name of which he was inordinately proud—as a schoolboy he had once burst into tears when reciting with passion the Lay of the Decii—felt content to owe his sustenance to the delicate and respectful kindness of Maximus, who sympathised with the great wrong he had suffered early in life. This was no less than wilful impoverishment by his father, who, seeking to atone for sins by fanaticism, had sold the little he possessed to found a pilgrims' hospice at Portus, whither, accompanied by the twelve-year-old boy, he went to live as monk-servitor. In a year or two the penitent died; Decius, in revolt against the tasks to which he was

subjected, managed to escape, made his way to Rome, and appealed to Maximus. Nominally he still held the post of secretary to his benefactor, but for many years he had enjoyed entire leisure, all of it devoted to study. Several times illness had brought him to the threshold of death, yet it had never conquered his love of letters, his enthusiasm for his country's past. Few liked him only one or two understood him: Decius was content that it should be so.

'Let us speak of it,' he continued, unrolling a manuscript of Virgil some two hundred years old, a gift to him from Maximus. 'Tell me, dear lord, your true thought: is it indeed a prophecy of the Divine Birth? To you'—he smiled his gentle, beautiful smile—'may I not confess that I have doubted this interpretation? Yet'—he cast his eyes down—'the doubt is perhaps a prompting of the spirit of evil.'

'I know not, Decius, I know not,' replied the sick man with thoughtful melancholy. 'My father held it a prophecy his father before him.—But forgive me, I am expecting anxiously the return of Basil; yonder sail—is it his? Your eyes see further than mine.'

Decius at once put aside his own reflections, and watched the oncoming bark. Before long there was an end of doubt. Rising in agitation to his feet, Maximus gave orders that the litter, which since yesterday morning had been in readiness, should at once be borne with all speed down to the landing-place. Sail and oars soon brought the boat so near that Decius was able to descry certain female figures and that of a man, doubtless Basil, who stood up and waved his arms shoreward.

'She has come,' broke from Maximus; and, in reply to his kinsman's face of inquiry, he told of whom it was he spoke.

The landing-place was not visible from here. As soon as the boat disappeared beneath the buildings of the town, Maximus requested of his companion a service which asked some courage in the performance: it was, to wait forthwith upon the Lady Petronilla, to inform her that Aurelia had just disembarked, to require that three female slaves should be selected to attend upon the visitor. This mission Decius discharged, not without trembling; he then walked to the main entrance of the villa, and stood there, the roll of Virgil still in his hand, until the sound of a horse's hoofs on the upward road announced the arrival of the travellers. The horseman, who came some yards in advance of the slave-borne litter, was Basil. At sight of Decius, he dismounted, and asked in an undertone: 'You know?' The other replied with the instructions given by Maximus, that the litter, which was closed against curious eyes, should be straightway conveyed to the Senator's presence, Basil himself to hold apart until summoned.

And so it was done. Having deposited their burden between two columns of the portico, the bearers withdrew. The father's voice uttered the name of Aurelia, and, putting aside the curtains that had concealed her, she stood before him. A woman still young, and of bearing which became her birth; a woman who would have had much grace, much charm, but for the passion which, turned to vehement self-will, had made her blood acrid. Her great dark eyes burned with quenchless resentment; her sunken and pallid face told of the sufferings of a tortured pride.

'Lord Maximus,' were her first words, as she stood holding by the litter, glancing distrustfully about her, 'you have sworn!'

'Hear me repeat my oath,' answered the father, strengthened by his emotion to move forward from the couch. 'By the blessed martyr Pancratius, I swear that no harm shall befall you, no constraint shall be put upon you, that you shall be free to come and to go as you will.'

It was the oath no perjurer durst make. Aurelia gazed into her father's face, which was wet with tears. She stepped nearer to him, took his thin, hot hand, and, as in her childhood, bent to kiss the back of the wrist. But Maximus folded her to his heart.

# CHAPTER II

## BASIL'S VISION

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Basil and Decius paced together a garden alley, between a row of quince-trees and a hedge of Christ's-thorn; at one end was a fountain in a great basin of porphyry, at the other a little temple, very old and built for the worship of Isis, now an oratory under the invocation of the Blessed Mary. The two young men made a singular contrast, for Basil, who was in his twenty-third year, had all the traits of health and vigour: a straight back, lithe limbs, a face looking level on the world, a lustrous eye often touched to ardour, a cheek of the purest carnation, a mouth that told of fine instincts, delicate sensibilities, love of laughter. No less did his costume differ from the student's huddled garb; his tunic was finely embroidered in many hues, his silken cloak had a great buckle of gold on the shoulder; he wore ornate shoes, and by his waist hung a silver-handled dagger in a sheath of chased bronze. He stepped lightly, as one who asks but the occasion to run and leap. In their intimate talk, he threw an arm over his companion's neck, a movement graceful as it was affectionate; his voice had a note frank and cordial.

Yet Basil was not quite his familiar self to-day; he talked with less than his natural gaiety, wore a musing look, fell into silences. Now that Aurelia had come, there was no motive for reserve on that subject with Decius, and indeed they conversed of their kinswoman with perfect openness, pitying rather than condemning her, and wondering what

would result from her presence under one roof with the rigid Petronilla. Not on Aurelia's account did Basil droop his head now and then, look about him vacantly, bite his lip, answer a question at hazard, play nervously with his dagger's hilt. All at once, with an abruptness which moved his companion's surprise, he made an inquiry, seemingly little relevant to their topic.

'Heard you ever of a Gothic princess—a lady of the lineage of Theodoric—still living in Italy?'

'Never,' responded Decius, with a puzzled smile. 'Is there such a one?'

'I am told so—I heard it by chance. Yet I know not who she can be. Did not the direct line of Theodoric end with Athalaric and his sister Matasuntha, who is now at the Emperor's court?'

'So I believed,' said Decius, 'though I have thought but little of the matter.'

'I too, trust me,' let fall Basil, with careful carelessness; no actor he. 'And the vile Theodahad—what descendants did he leave?'

'He was a scholar,' said the other musingly, 'deep read in Plato.'

'None the less a glutton and a murderer and a coward, who did well to give his throat to the butcher as he ran away from his enemies. Children he had, I think—but—'

Basil broke off on a wandering thought. He stood still, knitted his brows, and sniffed the air. At this moment there appeared in the alley a serving man, a young and active fellow of very honest visage, who stood at some yards' distance until Basil observed him.

'What is it, Felix?' inquired his master.

The attendant stepped forward, and made known that the lord Marcian had even now ridden up to the villa, with two followers, and desired to wait upon Basil. This news brought a joyful light to the eyes of the young noble; he hastened to welcome his friend, the dearest he had. Marcian, a year or two his elder, was less favoured by nature in face and form: tall and vigorous enough of carriage, he showed more bone and sinew than flesh; and his face might have been that of a man worn by much fasting, so deep sunk were the eyes, so jutting the cheek-bones, and so sharp the chin; its cast, too, was that of a fixed and native melancholy. But when he smiled, these features became much more pleasing, and revealed a kindliness of temper such as might win the love of one who knew him well. His dress was plain, and the dust of Campanian roads lay somewhat thick upon him.

'By Bacchus!' cried his friend, as they embraced each other, 'fortune is good to me to-day. Could I have had but one wish granted, it would have been to see Marcian. I thought you still in Rome. What makes you travel? Not in these days solely to visit a friend, I warrant. By Peter and Paul and as many more saints as you can remember, I am glad to hold your hand! What news do you bring?'

'Little enough,' answered Marcian, with a shrug of the shoulders. The natural tune of his voice harmonised with his visage, and he spoke as one who feels a scornful impatience with the affairs of men. 'At Rome, they wrangle about goats' wool, as is their wont. Anything else? Why, yes; the

freedman Chrysanthus glories in an ex-consulate. It cost him the trifle of thirty pounds of gold.'

Basil laughed contemptuously, half angrily.

'We must look to our honours,' he exclaimed. 'If Chrysanthus be ex-consul, can you and I be satisfied with less than ex-Praetorian-Prefect? What will be the price, think you? Has Bessas hung out a tariff yet in the Forum?'

'He knows better than to fix a maximum, as long as a wealthy fool remains in the city—though that won't be much longer, I take it.'

'Why come you hither, dear my lord?' urged Basil, with more seriousness.

Regarding him with a grave eye, his friend replied in an undertone:

'To spy upon you.'

'Ha!—In very truth?'

'You could wish me a more honourable office,' Marcian went on, smiling sadly. 'Yet, if you think of it, in these days, it is some honour to be a traitor to both sides. There has been talk of you in Rome. Nay, who knows how or why! They have nothing to do but talk, and these victories of the Goth have set up such a Greek cackle as was never heard since Helen ran away to Troy,—and, talking of Greek, I bear a letter for you from Heliodora.'

Basil, who had been listening gravely, started at this name and uttered an idle laugh. From a wallet hanging at his girdle, Marcian drew forth the missive.

'That may wait,' said Basil, glancing indifferently at the folded and sealed paper before he hid it away. 'Having said so much, you must tell me more. Put off that sardonic mask

—I know very well what hides beneath it—and look me in the eye. You have surprised some danger?'

'I heard you spoken of—by one who seldom opens his lips but to ill purpose. It was not difficult for me to wade through the shallows of the man's mind, and for my friend's sake to win his base confidence. Needing a spy, and being himself a born traitor, he readily believed me at his beck; in truth he had long marked me, so I found, for a cankered soul who waited but the occasion to advance by infamy. I held the creature in my hand; I turned him over and over, and he, the while, thinking me his greedy slave. And so, usurping the place of some other who would have ambushed you in real enmity, I came hither on his errand.'

'Marcian,' said the listener, 'I could make a guess at that man's name.'

'Nay, I doubt if you could, and indeed it matters nothing. Enough that I may do you some little service.'

'For which,' replied Basil, 'I cannot pay you, since all my love is already yours. And she—Heliodora,' he added, with a careless gesture, 'knows of your mission?'

'Of my mission, no; but of my proposed journey. Though indeed she may know more than I suppose. Who shall say what reaches the ear of Heliodora—?'

'You have not heard perhaps that her husband is dead?'

'The Prefect dead?' exclaimed Basil.

'Three weeks ago.—Rather suddenly—after supper. An indigestion, no doubt.'

Marcian spoke with peculiar dryness, averting his eyes from the listener. Upon Basil's face came a deep flush; he took out the folded paper again, and held it at arm's length.

'You mean—? You think—?' he stammered.

'About women I think not at all,' said the other, 'as you well know. There is talk, talk—what care I?'

Basil tore the letter open. It contained a lock of raven-black hair, tied with gold thread, and on the paper was written, in Greek, 'I am free.' Again his cheek flushed; he crushed paper and hair together in his hand.

'Let us never again speak of her,' he exclaimed, moving away from the spot. 'Before I left Rome, I told you that I would gladly see her no more, and you smiled dubiously. Believe me now. I abhor the thought of her. If she ask you for my reply, repeat those words.'

'Nay, dear my lord, in that I will beg to be excused,' replied Marcian with his melancholy smile.

They were walking silently, side by side, when the servant Felix again presented himself before them. Maximus, having heard of the arrival of Marcian from Rome, requested that he and Basil would grant him a moment of their leisure. At once the young men turned to obey this summons. On the way, Basil communicated to his friend in a whisper the event of the day. A couple of hours having passed since Aurelia's coming, the Senator had in some degree recovered from his agitation; he lay now in a room which opened upon the central court of the villa, a room adorned with rich marbles and with wall-paintings which were fading under the hand of time. Deathly pale, scarce able to raise his head from the cushion of the couch, he none the less showed a countenance bright with joyous emotion. His quivering voice strove to welcome the visitor cheerily.

'What news from the city, dear lord Marcian? How are all our friends? Do they begin to forget us?'

'Not so, Illustrious,' answered the young man, with head bent. 'You are much desired in the Senate, where grave counsel is just now greatly in demand.'

'The Senate, the Senate,' murmured Maximus, as if reminded of something he had long forgotten. 'They must needs lack my voice, I fear. What do men say of the Gothic king?'

Marcian threw a glance at Basil, then towards the curtained portals of the room; lastly, his eyes turned upon the sick man, whom he regarded steadily.

'They say much—or little,' fell from his lips.

'I understand you,' replied the Senator, with a friendly movement of the head. 'Here we may speak freely. Does Totila draw near to Rome?'

'He is still in Tuscany, and rumours come from his army that he will pass into Samnium. All the strongholds of Umbria are his; all the conquests of Belisarius from Ariminum to Spoletium.'

'Where are the Roman captains?'

'Each in his city of the far north, holding the plunder he has got, and looking for the chance of more. In Rome—'

Marcian paused significantly, and the Senator took up his words.

'In Rome rules Bessas.'

'The Thracian,' remarked Basil bitterly.

'And in Ravenna,' added the sick man, 'Alexandros—the coin-clipper.'

The eyes of Basil and of Marcian encountered. Between them came no shadow of distrust, the smile they exchanged told of loyal affection.

'This Totila,' pursued Marcian, 'seems to be not only a brave and capable commander, but a shrewd politician. Everywhere he spares the people; he takes nothing by force; his soldiers buy at market; he protects the farmer against the taxing Greek. As a result, his army grows; where he passes, he leaves a good report, and before him goes a welcome. At this rate he will soon make all Italy his own. And unless the Patricius returns—'

By this title men were wont to speak of Belisarius. Hearing it, Basil threw up an arm, his eyes flashing.

'The Patricius!' he exclaimed fervently. 'There is the man who might have saved us!'

'By the holy Laurentius!' murmured Maximus, looking sadly at his nephew, 'I have all but come to think as you do.'

'Who that knew him,' cried Basil, 'but must have seen him, in thought—not King, for only the barbarians have kings—but Emperor—Emperor of the West, ruling at Rome as in the days gone by! There lives no man more royal. I have seen him day by day commanding and taking counsel; I have talked with him in his privacy. In the camp before Ravenna there was but one voice, one hope, as to what should follow when the city opened its gates, and the Goths themselves only surrendered because they thought to be ruled by him. But for the scruple of his conscience—and should not that have yielded to the general good?'

'Is breach of faith so light a thing?' fell from Marcian, under his breath.

'Nay,' answered the other, with drooping head, 'but he did break faith with *us*. We had his promise; we saw him Emperor—'

'You should have won Antonina,' said Marcian, with a return to his sarcastic humour. 'She must have mused long and anxiously, weighing the purple against Theodora's fury. The Patrician's fidelity stood by his wife's prudence.'

'The one blot upon his noble nature,' uttered Basil, with a sigh. 'His one weakness. How,' he cried scornfully, 'can the conqueror of half the world bend before such a woman?'

Fatigued already by the conversation, Maximus had lain back and closed his eyes. Very soon the two young men received his permission to withdraw, and, as they left the room, the physician entered. Obedient to this counsellor the invalid gave several hours to repose, but midway in the afternoon he again summoned his daughter, with whom he had a long and agitating conversation. He besought Aurelia to cast off her heretical religion, putting before her all the perils to which she exposed herself, by abandonment of the true faith, in this world and the next. His life was hurrying to its end; hour by hour he felt the fever wasting what little strength remained to him; and when he was gone who would protect her against the enmities to which religion and avarice would expose her? Aurelia's resistance was sullen rather than resolute; her countenance, her words, suggested that she was thinking more of what it would cost her pride to become a penitent than of any obstacle in conscience. At length she declared plainly that never would she humiliate herself before her aunt Petronilla, who had offered her no greeting and held scornfully apart. Here, as

Maximus too well knew, lay the great difficulty of the situation; these women hated each other, and their hate would only be exasperated by Aurelia's conversion. He spoke of the deacon Leander, now on his way hither—begged Aurelia to listen to the reverend man, and gave solemn assurance that, the moment she abjured her errors, he would place her in a position of wealth and authority far above that of Petronilla. So utterly did he exhaust himself in entreaty and argument that he fell into a fainting fit. The physician was called for, and Aurelia, she too overcome with violent emotions, again retired to the part of the villa which had been assigned to her.

The Anicii of a bygone time, who took their solace here when marbles and mosaics, paintings and tapestries, were yet new, would have looked with consternation on halls so crumbling and bare, chambers so ill-appointed, as these in which the guests of the Senator Maximus had their dwelling. Space there was in abundance, but of comfort in the guest-rooms little enough; and despite her brother's commands, Petronilla had seen to it that Aurelia was not luxuriously lodged. Better accommodation awaited the deacon Leander, whose arrival was announced an hour before sunset by a trotting courier. His journey from Salernum had so wearied the ecclesiastic that he could but give a hand to be kissed by his hostess, and straightway retire into privacy; the repast that was ready for him had to be served beside his couch, and soon after night had fallen, Leander slumbered peacefully. Meanwhile Basil and Decius and their friend from Rome had supped together, making what cheer they might under the circumstances; the Surrentine wine was a little

acid, falling short of its due age, but it sufficed to animate the talk. Presently Decius withdrew, to study or to meditate through some hours of the night, for he slept ill; the others, going apart to a gallery lighted by the full moon, sat wrapped in thick, hooded cloaks, to converse awhile before they slept. With their voices mingled the soft splash of a fountain.

Basil was telling of his journey to Cumae, and of the difficulty he had had in persuading Aurelia to visit her father.

'Does she live alone there?' inquired Marcian.

There was a pause before the reply, and when Basil spoke his voice fell to a note of half-hesitating confidence.

'Alone? yes,' he said, 'in the sense that no relative abode with her; but she had a companion—a lady—very young.' And here he again paused, as if in some embarrassment.

'A Roman?' was Marcian's next question, carelessly thrown out for he had little interest in Aurelia, and was half occupied with other thoughts.

'No,' answered Basil, his voice subdued. 'A Goth; and, she says, of the royal blood, of the line of Theodoric.'

His friend became attentive. 'A Gothic princess? Whose daughter, then?' asked Marcian. And Basil, who desired nothing more than to speak on this subject, little by little threw off his hesitancy, grew rapid and eager in narration. He told how, on his first introduction to Aurelia's presence, he had found sitting with her a young girl, whose aspect proclaimed her of the Gothic race. In a second interview with his cousin, alone, Aurelia had spoken of this companion, bestowing much praise upon her, and declaring that they were united by an affection which nothing could

diminish. She was of Amal blood; more than that Aurelia seemed unwilling to reveal.

'Did you not learn her name?' asked the listener.

'Veranilda.'

Marcian echoed the melodious syllables, but they told him nothing.

'And did you make no inquiry of those with whom you spoke?'

'I conversed as little as might be with strangers, and purposely held apart from our acquaintances in the town; this was my uncle's express command.'

'You had no second sight of her?'

'Indeed I had; and talked with her moreover. Marcian, how can I describe her to you? The words which suffice for common beauty sound meaningless when I would use them to depict Veranilda. Shall I tell you that she has hair of the purest gold, eyes brighter than the sky at noon, lips like the flower of the pomegranate, a cheek so fair, so soft—nay, you may well laugh at these idle phrases—'

'Not your phrases,' said Marcian, 'but your voice as it utters them sets me smiling. Talk on. The chaste goddess who beams above us inspire you with worthy terms!'

'There you speak to the point,' pursued Basil ardently. 'For Veranilda is chaste as she is beautiful. Blessed saints! how my heart shrank in abhorrence when I saw that letter this morning; and how fain I would blot from my memory that baseness of the past! O Marcian, truest of friends, I slighted your counsel, scoffed at your warnings, but now I know how wisely and how honestly you spoke.'