
Callista
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Historical Novel - A Tale of the Third Century

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CHAPTER I.
SICCA VENERIA.

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In no province of the vast Roman empire, as it existed in the middle of the third century, did Nature wear a richer or a more joyous garb than she displayed in Proconsular Africa, a territory of which Carthage was the metropolis, and Sicca might be considered the centre. The latter city, which was the seat of a Roman colony, lay upon a precipitous or steep bank, which led up along a chain of hills to a mountainous track in the direction of the north and east. In striking contrast with this wild and barren region was the view presented by the west and south, where for many miles stretched a smiling champaign, exuberantly wooded, and varied with a thousand hues, till it was terminated at length by the successive tiers of the Atlas, and the dim and fantastic forms of the Numidian mountains. The immediate neighbourhood of the city was occupied by gardens, vineyards, corn-fields, and meadows, crossed or encircled here by noble avenues of trees or the remains of primeval forests, there by the clustering groves which wealth and luxury had created. This spacious plain, though level when compared with the northern heights by which the city was backed, and the peaks and crags which skirted the southern and western horizon, was discovered, as light and shadow travelled with the sun, to be diversified with hill and dale, upland and hollow; while orange gardens, orchards, olive and palm plantations held their appropriate sites on the

slopes or the bottoms. Through the mass of green, which extended still more thickly from the west round to the north, might be seen at intervals two solid causeways tracking their persevering course to the Mediterranean coast, the one to the ancient rival of Rome, the other to Hippo Regius in Numidia. Tourists might have complained of the absence of water from the scene; but the native peasant would have explained to them that the eye alone had reason to be discontented, and that the thick foliage and the uneven surface did but conceal what mother earth with no niggard bounty supplied. The Bagradas, issuing from the spurs of the Atlas, made up in depth what it wanted in breadth of bed, and ploughed the rich and yielding mould with its rapid stream, till, after passing Sicca in its way, it fell into the sea near Carthage. It was but the largest of a multitude of others, most of them tributaries to it, deepening as much as they increased it. While channels had been cut from the larger rills for the irrigation of the open land, brooks, which sprang up in the gravel which lay against the hills, had been artificially banked with cut stones or paved with pebbles; and where neither springs nor rivulets were to be found, wells had been dug, sometimes to the vast depth of as much as 200 fathoms, with such effect that the spurting column of water had in some instances drowned the zealous workmen who had been the first to reach it. And, while such were the resources of less favoured localities or seasons, profuse rains descended over the whole region for one half of the year, and the thick summer dews compensated by night for the daily tribute extorted by an African sun.

At various distances over the undulating surface, and through the woods, were seen the villas and the hamlets of that happy land. It was an age when the pride of architecture had been indulged to the full; edifices, public and private, mansions and temples, ran off far away from each market-town or borough, as from a centre, some of stone or marble, but most of them of that composite of fine earth, rammed tight by means of frames, for which the Saracens were afterwards famous, and of which specimens remain to this day, as hard in surface, as sharp at the angles, as when they first were finished. Every here and there, on hill or crag, crowned with basilicas and temples, radiant in the sun, might be seen the cities of the province or of its neighbourhood, Thibursicumber, Thugga, Laribus, Siguessa, Sufetula, and many others; while in the far distance, on an elevated table-land under the Atlas, might be discerned the Colonia Scillitana, famous about fifty years before the date of which we write for the martyrdom of Speratus and his companions, who were beheaded at the order of the proconsul for refusing to swear by the genius of Rome and the emperor.

If the spectator now takes his stand, not in Sicca itself, but about a quarter of a mile to the south-east, on the hill or knoll on which was placed the cottage of Agellius, the city itself will enter into the picture. Its name, Sicca Veneria, if it be derived (as some suppose) from the Succoth benoth, or “tents of the daughters,” mentioned by the inspired writer as an object of pagan worship in Samaria, shows that it owed its foundation to the Phœnician colonists of the country. At any rate, the Punic deities retained their hold

upon the place; the temples of the Tyrian Hercules and of Saturn, the scene of annual human sacrifices, were conspicuous in its outline, though these and all other religious buildings in it looked small beside the mysterious antique shrine devoted to the sensual rites of the Syrian Astarte. Public baths and a theatre, a capitol, imitative of Rome, a gymnasium, the long outline of a portico, an equestrian statue in brass of the Emperor Severus, were grouped together above the streets of a city, which, narrow and winding, ran up and down across the hill. In its centre an extraordinary spring threw up incessantly several tons of water every minute, and was inclosed by the superstitious gratitude of the inhabitants with the peristylium of a sacred place. At the extreme back, towards the north, which could not be seen from the point of view where we last stationed ourselves, there was a sheer descent of rock, bestowing on the city, when it was seen at a distance on the Mediterranean side, the same bold and striking appearance which attaches to Castro Giovanni, the ancient Enna, in the heart of Sicily.

And now, withdrawing our eyes from the panorama, whether in its distant or nearer objects, if we would at length contemplate the spot itself from which we have been last surveying it, we shall find almost as much to repay attention, and to elicit admiration. We stand in the midst of a farm of some wealthy proprietor, consisting of a number of fields and gardens, separated from each other by hedges of cactus or the aloe. At the foot of the hill, which sloped down on the side furthest from Sicca to one of the tributaries of the rich and turbid river of which we have

spoken, a large yard or garden, intersected with a hundred artificial rills, was devoted to the cultivation of the beautiful and odoriferous khennah. A thick grove of palms seemed to triumph in the refreshment of the water’s side, and lifted up their thankful boughs towards heaven. The barley harvest in the fields which lay higher up the hill was over, or at least was finishing; and all that remained of the crop was the incessant and importunate chirping of the cicadæ, and the rude booths of reeds and bulrushes, now left to wither, in which the peasant boys found shelter from the sun, while in an earlier month they frightened from the grain the myriads of linnets, goldfinches, and other small birds who, as in other countries, contested with the human proprietor the possession of it. On the south-western slope lies a neat and carefully dressed vineyard, the vine-stakes of which, dwarfish as they are, already cast long shadows on the eastern side. Slaves are scattered over it, testifying to the scorching power of the sun by their broad petasus, and to its oppressive heat by the scanty subligarium, which reached from the belt or girdle to the knees. They are engaged in cutting off useless twigs to which the last showers of spring have given birth, and are twisting those which promise fruit into positions where they will be safe both from the breeze and from the sun. Everything gives token of that gracious and happy season which the great Latin poets have hymned in their beautiful but heathen strains; when, after the heavy rains, and raw mists, and piercing winds, and fitful sun-gleams of a long six months, the mighty mother manifests herself anew, and pours out the resources of her innermost being for the life and

enjoyment of every portion of the vast whole;—or, to apply the lines of a modern bard—

> “When the bare earth, till now
> Desert and bare, unsightly, unadorned,
> Brings forth the tender grass, whose verdure clads
> Her universal face with pleasant green;
> Then herbs of every leaf, that sudden flower,
> Opening their various colours, and make gay
> Her bosom, swelling sweet; and, these scarce blown,
> Forth flourishes the clustering vine, forth creeps
> The swelling gourd, up stands the corny reed
> Embattled in her fields, and the humble shrub,
> And bush with frizzled hair implicit; last
> Rise, as in dance, the stately trees, and spread
> Their branches hung with copious fruit, or gem
> Their blossoms; with high woods the hills are crowned
> With tufts the valleys, and each fountain side
> With borders long the rivers; that earth now
> Seems like to heaven, a seat where gods might dwell,
> Or wander with delight, and love to haunt
> Her sacred shades.”

A snatch from some old Greek chant, with something of plaintiveness in the tone, issues from the thicket just across the mule-path, cut deep in the earth, which reaches from the city gate to the streamlet; and a youth, who had the appearance of the assistant bailiff or procurator of the farm, leaped from it, and went over to the labourers, who were

busy with the vines. His eyes and hair and the cast of his features spoke of Europe; his manner had something of shyness and reserve, rather than of rusticity; and he wore a simple red tunic with half sleeves, descending to the knee, and tightened round him by a belt. His legs and feet were protected by boots which came half up his calf. He addressed one of the slaves, and his voice was gentle and cheerful.

“Ah, Sansar!” he cried, “I don’t like your way of managing these branches so well as my own; but it is a difficult thing to move an old fellow like you. You never fasten together the shoots which you don’t cut off, they are flying about quite wild, and the first ox that passes through the field next month for the ploughing will break them off.”

He spoke in Latin; the man understood it, and answered him in the same language, though with deviations from purity of accent and syntax, not without parallel in the talkee-talkee of the West Indian negro.

“Ay, ay, master,” he said, “ay, ay; but it’s all a mistake to use the plough at all. The fork does the work much better, and no fear for the grape. I hide the tendril under the leaf against the sun, which is the only enemy we have to consider.”

“Ah! but the fork does not raise so much dust as the plough and the heavy cattle which draw it,” returned Agellius; “and the said dust does more for the protection of the tendril than the shade of the leaf.”

“But those huge beasts,” retorted the slave, “turn up great ridges, and destroy the yard.”

“It’s no good arguing with an old vinedresser, who had formed his theory before I was born,” said Agellius good-humouredly; and he passed on into a garden beyond.

Here were other indications of the happy month through which the year was now travelling. The garden, so to call it, was a space of several acres in extent; it was one large bed of roses, and preparation was making for extracting their essence, for which various parts of that country are to this day celebrated. Here was another set of labourers, and a man of middle age was surveying them at his leisure. His business-like, severe, and off-hand manner bespoke the villicus or bailiff himself.

“Always here,” said he, “as if you were a slave, not a Roman, my good fellow; yet slaves have their Saturnalia; always serving, not worshipping the all-bounteous and all-blessed. Why are you not taking holiday in the town?”

“Why should I, sir?” asked Agellius; “don’t you recollect old Hiempsal’s saying about ‘one foot in the slipper, and one in the shoe.’ Nothing would be done well if I were a town-goer. You engaged me, I suppose, to be here, not there.”

“Ah!” answered he, “but at this season the empire, the genius of Rome, the customs of the country, demand it, and above all the great goddess Astarte and her genial, jocund month. ‘Parturit almus ager;’ you know the verse; do not be out of tune with Nature, nor clash and jar with the great system of the universe.”

A cloud of confusion, or of distress, passed over Agellius’s face. He seemed as if he wished to speak; at length he merely said, “It’s a fault on the right side in a servant, I suppose.”

“I know the way of your people,” Vitricus replied, “Corybantians, Phrygians, Jews, what do you call yourselves? There are so many fantastic religions now-a-days. Hang yourself outright at your house-door, if you are tired of living—and you are a sensible fellow. How can any man, whose head sits right upon his shoulders, say that life is worth having, and not worth enjoying?”

“I am a quiet being,” answered Agellius, “I like the country, which you think so tame, and care little for the flaunting town. Tastes differ.”

“Town! you need not go to Sicca,” answered the bailiff, “all Sicca is out of town. It has poured into the fields, and groves, and river side. Lift up your eyes, man alive, open your ears, and let pleasure flow in. Be passive under the sweet breath of the goddess, and she will fill you with ecstasy.”

It was as Vitricus had said; the solemn feast-days of Astarte were in course of celebration; of Astarte, the well-known divinity of Carthage and its dependent cities, whom Heliogabalus had lately introduced to Rome, who in her different aspects was at once Urania, Juno, and Aphrodite, according as she embodied the idea of the philosopher, the statesman, or the vulgar; lofty and intellectual as Urania, majestic and commanding as Juno, seductive as the goddess of sensuality and excess.

“There goes the son of as good and frank a soldier as ever brandished pilum,” said Vitricus to himself, “till in his last years some infernal god took umbrage at him, and saddled him and his with one of those absurd superstitions which are as plentiful here as serpents. He indeed was too

old himself to get much harm from it; but it shows its sour nature in these young shoots. A good servant, but the plague's in his bones, and he will rot."

His subordinate's reflections were of a different character: "The very air breathes sin to-day," he cried; "oh that I did not find the taint of the city in these works of God! Alas! sweet Nature, the child of the Almighty, is made to do the fiend's work, and does it better than the town. O ye beautiful trees and fair flowers, O bright sun and balmy air, what a bondage ye are in, and how do ye groan till you are redeemed from it! Ye are bond-slaves, but not willingly, as man is; but how will you ever be turned to nobler purpose? How is this vast, this solid establishment of error, the incubus of many thousand years, ever to have an end? You yourselves, dear ones, will come to nought first. Anyhow, the public way is no place for me this evening. They'll soon be back from their accursed revelry."

A sound of horns and voices had been heard from time to time through the woods, as if proceeding from parties dispersed through them; and in the growing twilight might be seen lights, glancing and wandering through the foliage. The cottage in which Agellius dwelt was on the other side of the hollow bridle-way which crossed the hill. To make for home he had first to walk some little distance along it; and scarcely had he descended into it for that purpose, when he found himself in the front of a band of revellers, who were returning from some scene of impious festivity. They were arrayed in holiday guise, as far as they studied dress at all; the symbols of idolatry were on their foreheads and arms;

some of them were intoxicated, and most of them were women.

“Why have you not been worshipping, young fellow?” said one.

“Comely built,” said another, “but struck by the furies. I know the cut of him.”

“By Astarte,” said a third, “he’s one of those sly Gnostics! I have seen the chap before, with his hangdog look. He is one of Pluto’s whelps, first cousin to Cerberus, and his name’s Channibal.”

On which they all began to shout out, “I say, Channibal, Channibal, here’s a lad that knows you. Old fellow, come along with us;” and the speaker made a dash at him.

On this Agellius, who was slowly making his way past them on the broken and steep path, leapt up in two or three steps to the ridge, and went away in security; when one woman cried out, “O the toad, I know him now; he is a wizard; he eats little children; didn’t you see him make that sign? it’s a charm. My sister did it; the fool left me to be one of them. She was ever doing so” (mimicking the sign of the cross). “He’s a Christian, blight him! he’ll turn us into beasts.”

“Cerberus, bite him!” said another, “he sucks blood;” and taking up a stone, she made it whiz past his ear as he disappeared from view. A general scream of contempt and hatred followed. “Where’s the ass’s head? put out the lights, put out the lights! gibbet him! that’s why he has not been with honest people down in the vale.” And then they struck up a blasphemous song, the sentiments of which we are not going even to conceive, much less to attempt in words.

CHAPTER II.
CHRISTIANITY IN SICCA.

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The revellers went on their way; Agellius went on his, and made for his lowly and lonely cottage. He was the elder of the two sons of a Roman legionary of the Secunda Italica, who had settled with them in Sicca, where he lost their mother, and died, having in his old age become a Christian. The fortitude of some confessors at Carthage in the persecution of Severus had been the initial cause of his conversion. He had been posted as one of their guards, and had attended them to the scene of their martyrdom, in addition to the civil force, to whom in the proconsulate the administration of the law was committed. Therefore, happily for him, it could not fall to his duty to be their executioner, a function which, however revolting to his feelings, he might not have had courage to decline. He remained a pagan, though he could not shake off the impression which the martyrs had made upon him; and, after completing his time of service, he retired to the protection of some great friends in Sicca, his brother's home already. Here he took a second wife of the old Numidian stock, and supported himself by the produce of a small piece of land which had been given to him for life by the imperial government. If trial were necessary in order to keep alive the good seed which had been sown in his heart, he found a never-failing supply of that article in the companion of his declining years. In the hey-day of her youth she might have been fitted to throw a

sort of sunshine, or rather torchlight, on a military carouse; but now, when poor Strabo, a man well to do in the world, looking for peace, had fallen under her arts, he found he had surrendered his freedom to a malignant, profligate woman, whose passions made her better company for evil spirits than for an invalided soldier. Indeed, as time went on, the popular belief, which she rather encouraged, went to the extent that she actually did hold an intercourse with the unseen world; and certainly she matured in a hatred towards God and man, which would naturally follow, and not unnaturally betoken, such intercourse. The more, then, she inflicted on him her proficiency in these amiable characteristics, the more he looked out for some consolation elsewhere; and the more she involved herself in the guilt or the repute of unlawful arts, the more was he drawn to that religion, where alone to commune with the invisible is to hold intercourse with heaven, not with hell. Whether so great a trial supplied a more human inducement for looking towards Christianity, it is impossible to say. Most men, certainly Roman soldiers, may be considered to act on mixed motives; but so it was in fact, that, on his becoming in his last years a Christian, he found, perhaps discovered, to his great satisfaction, that the Church did not oblige him to continue or renew a tie which bound him to so much misery, and that he might end his days in a tranquillity which his past life required, and his wife’s presence would have precluded. He made a good end; he had been allowed to take the blessed sacrament from the altar to his own home on the last time he had been able to attend a synaxis of the faithful, and thus had communicated at least six

months within his decease; and the priest who anointed him at the beginning of his last illness also took his confession. He died, begging forgiveness of all whom he had injured, and giving large alms to the poor. This was about the year 236, in the midst of that long peace of the Church, which was broken at length by the Decian persecution.

This peace of well-nigh fifty years had necessarily a peculiar, and not a happy effect upon the Christians of the proconsulate. They multiplied in the greater and the maritime cities, and made their way into positions of importance, whether in trade or the governmental departments; they extended their family connections, and were on good terms with the heathen. Whatever jealousy might be still cherished against the Christian name, nevertheless, individual Christians were treated with civility, and recognised as citizens; though among the populace there would be occasions, at the time of the more solemn pagan feasts, when accidental outbursts might be expected of the antipathy latent in the community, as we have been recording in the foregoing chapter. Men of sense, however, began to understand them better, and to be more just to the reasonableness of their faith. This would lead them to scorn Christianity less, but it would lead them to fear it more. It was no longer a matter merely for the populace to insult, but for government deliberately to put down. The prevailing and still growing unbelief among the lower classes of the population did but make a religion more formidable, which, as heathen statesmen felt, was able to wield the weapons of enthusiasm and zeal with a force and success unknown even to the most fortunate impostors

among the Oriental or Egyptian hierophants. The philosophical schools were impressed with similar apprehensions, and had now for fifty years been employed in creating and systematising a new intellectual basis for the received paganism.

But, while the signs of the times led to the anticipation that a struggle was impending between the heads of the state religion and of the new worship which was taking its place, the great body of Christians, laymen and ecclesiastics, were on better and better terms, individually, with the members of society, or what is now called the public; and without losing their faith or those embers of charity which favourable circumstances would promptly rekindle, were, it must be confessed, in a state of considerable relaxation; they often were on the brink of deplorable sins, and sometimes fell over the brink. And many would join the Church on inferior motives as soon as no great temporal disadvantage attached to the act; or the families of Christian parents might grow up with so little of moral or religious education as to make it difficult to say why they called themselves members of a divine religion. Mixed marriages would increase both the scandal and the confusion.

“A long repose,” says St. Cyprian, speaking of this very period, “had corrupted the discipline which had come down to us. Every one was applying himself to the increase of wealth; and, forgetting both the conduct of the faithful under the Apostles, and what ought to be their conduct in every age, with insatiable eagerness for gain devoted himself to the multiplying of possessions. The priests were

wanting in religious devotedness, the ministers in entireness of faith; there was no mercy in works, no discipline in manners. Men wore their beards disfigured, and woman dyed their faces. Their eyes were changed from what God made them, and a lying colour was passed upon the hair. The hearts of the simple were misled by treacherous artifices, and brethren became entangled in seductive snares. Ties of marriage were formed with unbelievers; members of Christ abandoned to the heathen. Not only rash swearing was heard, but even false; persons in high place were swollen with contemptuousness; poisoned reproaches fell from their mouths, and men were sundered by unabating quarrels. Numerous bishops, who ought to be an encouragement and example to others, despising their sacred calling, engaged themselves in secular vocations, relinquished their sees, deserted their people, strayed among foreign provinces, hunted the markets for mercantile profits, and tried to amass large sums of money, while they had brethren starving within the Church; took possession of estates by fraudulent proceedings, and multiplied their gains by accumulated usuries.”1

The relaxation which would extend the profession of Christianity in the larger cities would contract or extinguish it in remote or country places. There would be little zeal to keep up Churches, which could not be served without an effort or without secular loss. Carthage, Utica, Hippo, Milevis, or Curubis, was a more attractive residence than the towns with uncouth African names, which amaze the ecclesiastical student in the Acts of the Councils. Vocations became scarce; sees remained vacant; congregations died

out. This was pretty much the case with the Church and see of Sicca. At the time of which we write, history preserves no record of any bishop as exercising his pastoral functions in that city. In matter of fact there was none. The last bishop, an amiable old man, had in the course of years acquired a considerable extent of arable land, and employed himself principally, for lack of more spiritual occupation, in reaping, stacking, selling, and sending off his wheat for the Roman market. His deacon had been celebrated in early youth for his boldness in the chase, and took part in the capture of lions and panthers (an act of charity towards the peasants round Sicca) for the Roman amphitheatre. No priests were to be found, and the bishop became parochus till his death. Afterwards infants and catechumens lost baptism; parents lost faith, or at least love; wanderers lost repentance and conversion. For a while there was a flourishing meeting-house of Tertullianists, who had scared more humble minds by pronouncing the eternal perdition of every Catholic; there had also been various descriptions of Gnostics, who had carried off the clever youths and restless speculators; and then there had been the lapse of time, gradually consuming the generation which had survived the flourishing old days of the African Church. And the result was, that in the year 250 it was difficult to say of whom the Church of Sicca consisted. There was no bishop, no priest, no deacon. There was the old mansionarius or sacristan; there were two or three pious women, married or single, who owed their religion to good mothers; there were some slaves who kept to their faith, no one knew how or why; there were a vast many persons who ought to be Catholics, but were heretics,

or nothing at all, or all but pagans, and sure to become pagans on the asking; there were Agellius and his brother Juba, and how far these two had a claim to the Christian name we now proceed to explain.

They were about the ages of seven and eight when their father died, and they fell under the guardianship of their uncle, whose residence at Sicca had been one of the reasons which determined Strabo to settle there. This man, being possessed of some capital, drove a thriving trade in idols, large and small, amulets, and the like instruments of the established superstition. His father had come to Carthage in the service of one of the assessors of the proconsul of the day; and his son, finding competition ran too high to give him prospect of remuneration in the metropolis, had opened his statue-shop in Sicca. Those modern arts which enable an English town in this day to be so fertile in the production of ware of this description for the markets of the pagan East, were then unknown; and Jucundus depended on certain artists whom he imported, especially on two Greeks, brother and sister, who came from some isle on the Asian coast, for the supply of his trade. He was a good-natured man, self-indulgent, positive, and warmly attached to the reigning paganism, both as being the law of the land and the vital principle of the state; and, while he was really kind to his orphan nephews, he simply abominated, as in duty bound, the idiotic cant and impudent fee-fa-fum, to which, in his infallible judgment, poor old Strabo had betrayed his children. He would have restored them, you may be quite sure, to their country and to their country’s gods, had they acquiesced in the restoration: but

in different ways these little chaps, and he shook his head as he said it, were difficult to deal with. Agellius had a very positive opinion of his own on the matter; and as for Juba, though he had no opinion at all, yet he had an equally positive aversion to have thrust on him by another any opinion at all, even in favour of paganism. He had remained in his catechumen state since he grew up, because he found himself in it; and though nothing would make him go forward in his profession of Christianity, no earthly power would be able to make him go back. So there he was, like a mule, struck fast in the door of the Church, and feeling a gratification in his independence of mind. However, whatever his profession might be, still, as time went on, he plainly took after his step-mother, renewed his intercourse with her after his father's death, and at length went so far as to avow that he believed in nothing but the devil, if even he believed in him. It was scarcely safe, however, to affirm that the senses of this hopeful lad were his own.

Agellius, on the other hand, when a boy of six years old, had insisted on receiving baptism; had perplexed his father by a manifestation of zeal to which the old man was a stranger; and had made the good bishop lose the corn-fleet which was starting for Italy from his importunity to learn the Catechism. Baptized he was, confirmed, communicated; but a boy's nature is variable, and by the time Agellius had reached adolescence, the gracious impulses of his childhood had in some measure faded away, though he still retained his faith in its first keenness and vigour. But he had no one to keep him up to his duty; no exhortations, no example, no sympathy. His father's friends had taken him up so far as

this, that by an extraordinary favour they had got him a lease for some years of the property which Strabo, a veteran soldier, had held of the imperial government. The care of this small property fell upon him, and another and more serious charge was added to it. The long prosperity of the province had increased the opulence and enlarged the upper class of Sicca. Officials, contractors, and servants of the government had made fortunes, and raised villas in the neighbourhood of the city. Natives of the place, returning from Rome, or from provincial service elsewhere, had invested their gains in long leases of state lands, or of the farms belonging to the imperial res privata or privy purse, and had become virtual proprietors of the rich fields or beautiful gardens in which they had played as children. One of such persons, who had had a place in the officium of the quæstor, or rather procurator, as he began to be called, was the employer of Agellius. His property adjoined the cottage of the latter; and, having first employed the youth from recollection of his father, he confided to him the place of under-bailiff from the talents he showed for farm-business.

Such was his position at the early age of twenty-two; but honourable as it was in itself, and from the mode in which it was obtained, no one would consider it adapted, under the circumstances, to counteract the religious languor and coldness which had grown upon him. And in truth he did not know where he stood further than that he was firm in faith, as we have said, and had shrunk from a boy upwards, from the vice and immorality which was the very atmosphere of Sicca. He might any day be betrayed into some fatal inconsistency, which would either lead him into sin, or

oblige him abruptly to retrace his steps, and find a truer and safer position. He was not generally known to be a Christian, at least for certain, though he was seen to keep clear of the established religion. It was not that he hid, so much as that the world did not care to know, what he believed. In that day there were many rites and worships which kept to themselves—many forms of moroseness or misanthropy, as they were considered, which withdrew their votaries from the public ceremonial. The Catholic faith seemed to the multitude to be one of these; it was only in critical times, when some idolatrous act was insisted on by the magistrate, that the specific nature of Christianity was tested and detected. Then at length it was seen to differ from all other religious varieties by that irrational and disgusting obstinacy, as it was felt to be, which had rather suffer torments and lose life than submit to some graceful, or touching, or at least trifling observance which the tradition of ages had sanctioned.

CHAPTER III.
AGELLIUS IN HIS COTTAGE.

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The cottage for which Agellius was making, when last we had sight of him, was a small brick house consisting of one room, with a loft over it, and a kitchen on the side, not very unlike that holy habitation which once contained the Eternal Word in human form with His Virgin Mother, and Joseph, their guardian. It was situated on the declivity of the hill, and, unlike the gardens of Italy, the space before it was ornamented with a plot of turf. A noble palm on one side, in spite of its distance from the water, and a group of orange-trees on the other, formed a foreground to the rich landscape which was described in our opening chapter. The borders and beds were gay with the lily, the bacchar, amber-coloured and purple, the golden abrotomus, the red chelidonium, and the variegated iris. Against the wall of the house were trained pomegranates, with their crimson blossoms, the star-like pothos or jessamine, and the symbolical passionflower, which well became a Christian dwelling.

And it was an intimation of what would be found within; for on one side of the room was rudely painted a red cross, with doves about it, as is found in early Christian shrines to this day. So long had been the peace of the Church, that the tradition of persecution seemed to have been lost; and Christians allowed themselves in the profession of their faith at home, cautious as they might be in public places; as

freely as now in England, where we do not scruple to raise crucifixes within our churches and houses, though we shrink from doing so within sight of the hundred cabs and omnibuses which rattle past them. Under the cross were two or three pictures, or rather sketches. In the centre stood the Blessed Virgin with hands spread out in prayer, attended by the holy Apostles Peter and Paul on her right and left. Under this representation was rudely scratched upon the wall the word, “Advocata,” a title which the earliest antiquity bestows upon her. On a small shelf was placed a case with two or three rolls or sheets of parchment in it. The appearance of them spoke of use indeed, but of reverential treatment. These were the Psalms, the Gospel according to St. Luke, and St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, in the old Latin version. The Gospel was handsomely covered, and ornamented with gold.

The apartment was otherwise furnished with such implements and materials as might be expected in the cottage of a countryman: one or two stools and benches for sitting, a table, and in one corner a heap of dried leaves and rushes, with a large crimson coverlet, for rest at night. Elsewhere were two millstones fixed in a frame, with a handle attached to the rim of one of them, for grinding corn. Then again, garden tools; boxes of seeds; a vessel containing syrup for assuaging the sting of the scorpion; the asir-rese or anagallis, a potent medicine of the class of poisons, which was taken in wine for the same mischance. It hung from the beams, with a large bunch of atsirtiphua, a sort of camomile, smaller in the flower and more fragrant than our own, which was used as a febrifuge. Thence, too,

hung a plentiful gathering of dried grapes, of the kind called duracinæ; and near the door a bough of the green bargut or psyllium, to drive away the smaller insects.

Poor Agellius felt the contrast between the ungodly turmoil from which he had escaped, and the deep stillness into which he now had entered; but neither satisfied him quite. There was no repose out of doors, and no relief within. He was lonely at home, lonely in the crowd. He needed the sympathy of his kind; hearts which might beat with his heart; friends with whom he might share his joys and griefs; advisers whom he might consult; minds like his own, who would understand him—minds unlike his own, who would succour and respond to him. A very great trial certainly this, in which the soul is flung back upon itself; and that especially in the case of the young, for whom memory and experience do so little, and wayward and excited feelings do so much. Great gain had it been for Agellius, even in its natural effect, putting aside higher benefits, to have been able to recur to sacramental confession; but to confession he had never been, though once or twice he had attended the public homologesis of the Church. Shall we wonder that the poor youth began to be despondent and impatient under his trial? Shall we not feel for him, though we may be sorry for him, should it turn out that he was looking restlessly into every corner of the small world of acquaintance in which his lot lay, for those with whom he could converse easily, and interchange speculation, argument, aspiration, and affection?

“No one cares for me,” he said, as he sat down on his rustic bench. “I am nothing to any one; I am a hermit, like

Elias or John, without the call to be one. Yet even Elias felt the burden of being one against many; even John asked at length in expostulation, ‘Art Thou He that shall come?’ Am I for ever to have the knowledge, without the consolation, of the truth? am I for ever to belong to a great divine society, yet never see the face of any of its members?”

He paused in his thoughts, as if drinking in the full taste and measure of his unhappiness. And then his reflections took a turn, and he said, suddenly, “Why do I not leave Sicca? What binds me to my father’s farm? I am young, and my interest in it will soon expire. What keeps me from Carthage, Hippo, Cirtha, where Christians are so many?” But here he stopped as suddenly as he had begun; and a strange feeling, half pang, half thrill, went through his heart. And he felt unwilling to pursue his thought, or to answer the question which he had asked; and he settled into a dull, stagnant condition of mind, in which he seemed hardly to think at all.

Be of good cheer, solitary one, though thou art not a hero yet! There is One that cares for thee, and loves thee, more than thou canst feel, love, or care for thyself. Cast all thy care upon Him. He sees thee, and is watching thee; He is hanging over thee, and smiles in compassion at thy troubles. His angel, who is thine, is whispering good thoughts to thee. He knows thy weakness; He foresees thy errors; but He holds thee by thy right hand, and thou shalt not, canst not escape Him. By thy faith, which thou hast so simply, resolutely retained in the midst of idolatry; by thy purity, which, like some fair flower, thou hast cherished in

the midst of pollution, He will remember thee in thy evil hour, and thine enemy shall not prevail against thee!

What means that smile upon Agellius’s face? It is the response of the child to the loving parent. He knows not why, but the cloud is past. He signs himself with the holy cross, and sweet reviving thoughts enliven him. He names the sacred Name, and it is like ointment poured out upon his soul. He rises; he kneels down under the dread symbol of his salvation; and he begins his evening prayer.