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THE BARRIERS ARE DOWN,

THE BARRIERS ARE DOWN

A Tale of the Collapse of a
Civilisation

by

JACK LINDSAY

LONDON

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To ANN

*Through the jagged lines of a world breaking
the clear arc of renewal burns.
Deep in the renouncing heart
the new union is earned.
I came this way alone, by night,
and yet when I review
the scene, its many planes of meaning,
in the focus of redeeming light
I find (O hope come true)
the new life found in you.*

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As the period is one little known save to the specialist, I had better mention that the general background closely follows history, and the social details and episodes are all closely based on contemporary documents. The main sources for social life of the period are in the *Letters of Sidonius*, and I wish to acknowledge the aid of O. M. Dalton's version and commentary.

J. L.

THE MAIN CHARACTERS

(given by the names mainly used to describe them)

Audax, son of Gallo-Roman landowner.

Zonaras, doctor, a freedman of Audax's father.

Phoebe, Zonaras's daughter.

Sollius, a great land-owner of Auvergne.

Hesperius, his elder son.

Paulinus, his younger son.

Basilus, brother of Sollius.

Prosper, his son.

THE TOWNS

(their Latin names and modern equivalents)

Agedincum, Sens.

Altinum, Altino.

Antipolis, Antibes.

Aquæ Tarbellicæ (in southern Aquitaine).

Aquileia, Aquileia.

Aquincum, Buda.

Arelate, Arles.

Augustodunum, Autun.

Barcino, Barcelona.

Benacus (Lake), Garda.

Brixia, Brescia.

Burdigala, Bordeaux.

Cenabum, Orleans.

Concordia, Concordia

Cremona, Cremona

Divodurum, Metz.

Egytna, Cannes.

Forum Julii, Frejus.

Genua, Genoa.

Gergovia (probably near Clermont).
Lugdunum, Lyons.
Mantua, Mantua.
Massilia, Marseilles
Matisco, Macon.
Mauriac Plain (near Chalons).
Mediolanum, Milan.
Morgontiacum, Maintz.
Nemausus, Nîmes
Osca, Huesca.
Patavium, Padua.
Pisæ, Pisa.
Pompælo, Pampeluna.
Sontiates (in Aquitaine).
Tolosa, Toulouse.
Ugernum, Beaucaire
Uxellodunum, Capdenac.
Valentia, Valence.
Verona, Verona.
Vesontio, Besançon.
Vienna, Vienne (on the Rhone).

THE COMING OF THE HUNS (A.D. 451)

1. *At Lugdunum on the Rhone*

THERE WAS THE usual clamour of morning voices in the front part of the house. He stood idly listening for a moment, and seemed to hear the calm tones of the doctor Zonaras flowing through the shrill excitement, a cool but unavailing undercurrent of sanity in a world of perturbation; and then recognised that he was listening to the echoes in his mind of yester-eve's conversation. He was uncertain again, but ceased lounging against the pillar with the lower part painted blue, and went towards the door into the garden. The house had belonged to a prosperous tradesman a couple of centuries ago; but it was mouldering now, and the smells of medicine and of sick folk had mixed with the damp. There was something that he wanted to ask Zonaras, but it evaded his thoughts.

"Crescens!" he called half-heartedly, and after pausing for a moment went on into the small garden.

The sunlight was stronger than he had expected; the river mist was almost entirely gone. The rose-bush planted in the splitting tub thrust a handful of white roses at his senses, dazzling him with a burst of sweetness in which scent and colour were fused into a single glow, a gesture of welcome. He took a deep breath, and decided not to wait for Crescens. He walked quietly across the small garden-closc. There was no reason why he shouldn't be going out the back way; indeed, the back way was obviously the more sensible exit, especially in the morning, when there was generally a press of poor patients besieging the front of the house. But he was always afraid that Zonaras would guess his real reason for slipping out through the garden gate into the lane, where he would be sure to meet none of his friends. He didn't like to admit that his father's fortunes had had a bad jar during the last year, and that the only lodgings open to him came from the semi-charity of a freedman; even if a master still had claims on a freedman's goodwill, one didn't like to admit having sunk to dependence on such things.

He was almost at the gate before he saw Phoebe sitting behind the patchy myrtle-bush, in the decrepit trellis arbour. She was seated sideways on the bench, with her knees drawn up and the roll rested on them.

"Have you seen Crescens?" he asked; but her mind was full of the words that she had been reading. She shook her copper-coloured ringlets, to bring herself back to the world in which he stood; and smiled. And he felt for a moment as he had felt when he came unexpectedly on the

warmly gleaming branch of roses. Because of the clear welcome of her smile.

She hadn't heard his words. She said, "Yes, it's a nice morning, isn't it?"

"They take advantage of your father." He nodded towards the house. The voices could be faintly heard, shrill and complaining; and in his mind he heard the calm and unavailing reply of Zonaras.

"Of course," she answered. "He is always ready to help them. He wants them to take advantage of him." Her eyes took on a soft remoteness; her voice for a moment echoed her father's voice.

"And yet——" he began, but thought better of it. "Has any news come in? Anything certain, I mean."

"I believe there's a crowd in the Forum. A rumour got round. . . ."

"O yes, there's always rumours." He shrugged his shoulders. The pleasant morning sunlight drifted in pale gold over the small untidy courtyard, a sparrow clung snugly to a tiny projection of the broken plaster on the wall; some flowers in the bit of a rock-garden raised spires of such a rich blue that they blurred in his eyes, seeped with deep vitreous dyes. . . . There was a profound peace in the moment of hesitation, a warm crest of billowing yet serene life; and he was upbuoyed so easily on the sweeping breadth, securely poised. He felt time as a sudden and subtle poignancy, as he had never felt it before; an intensity in which loss and achievement seemed equally implicated, necessary to one another. "I have a deep respect for your father," he said, and saw the flush of pleasure tingling the girl's face, tenderly warm about her eyes. And mocked at himself. Yes, there is no man in the city whom I respect like Zonaras, and so I slink out of his back door in fear that any others of the students might know that I lodge with him. "What are you reading?" he asked, to escape from his discomfort.

She handed him the roll, and he glanced at it. A treatise by one of the early Stoics on the Law of Nature. His mind refused to take in the Greek words, but he pretended to read a paragraph, unwilling to lose altogether the warm spell of peace which he had felt ever since he entered the garden. He handed the roll back, and studied the young girl's face. She was about fourteen years old, slim and a little ungainly, shy and impulsive. Her face was long and irregular and freckled; but her mouth was nice, despite a slight coarseness of the lower lip, and her soft-brown eyes were even nicer, when she smiled.

"Well, I must be getting on, or I'll be late," he said, and lifted the latch of the gate. Reluctantly he stepped out into the slushy lane, feeling the curious detached benevolence which contact with Zonaras or his daughter imparted to him. By what right did he mix that touch of mockery with the friendliness? Of course Zonaras was only a freedman, and poor. . . . But he lost his train of thought, noticing *Crescens* a short way down the lane. "*Crescens!*"

The slave turned his cropped head and muttered something to the rather wild-looking fellow with whom he had been conversing. The fellow spat and went off with a rapid shuffling gait, and Crescens drew himself up, his left eyelid falling half across its eye. He was getting old; he was almost blind in that eye. He mumbled something.

Audax framed a rebuke in his mind, but did not utter it. "I was looking for you. Come on. The lecture will have started. Who was that ugly-faced fellow? Has any definite news come along?"

Walking a little behind his master, at the side, Crescens answered in a low voice, "They say . . . they say he's crossed the Rhine."

"They say anything," said Audax testily "I'm sick of rumours. Besides . . ." He began walking more briskly. "Have you had word from the farm? Who was that ugly-faced rascal? It's nonsense to say that the law can't do anything. My father gives up too easily. For myself, I do hope that the Huns have crossed the Rhine. Perhaps then something will happen here. They said the Magister was coming. I'll see about an appeal direct to him." He went on formulating plans, growing more emphatic and optimistic as he felt the old slave's impassive resistances focused against his right shoulder-blade—as though it were his father, and not the old slave, whom he was addressing and who was trotting along with obstructive fatalism behind him. He wanted to insist on the need for action, persistence, daring. Something in the world, which at the moment he identified with both his father and Crescens, was holding him back, spoiling his hopes, stolidly preventing the right and natural movement of things. No wonder the family fortunes were in such a bad way. The blank submissiveness of the slave, covering what seemed a totally obstructive resistance, irritated him and made him want to say something crushing, violent. "Doesn't anything ever interest you—outside the filling of your stomach?"

Crescens did not answer; and they came to the end of the lane. The slave Crescens had been the first tutor of Audax, had taught him to read and write, and had ever since been attached to him as a personal attendant, mixing the functions of valet and moral overseer, but for some time now he had been little more than a shadow ambling at the youth's right shoulder; scarcely noted for the most part, and then used as the target for monologues in which Audax expressed his increasing sense of the world's inadequacy. Something would have to be done, or there would be no estate left at all. Eborslacum, once a fair-sized estate of the middling kind, had shrunk between the pressures of the great senatorial landlord on the east and the Burgundians on the west of its boundaries; and Audax's father merely groaned and gave himself up to the petty farming problems of what was left. There must be justice somewhere, Audax insisted.

The doctor's house was on the lowest levels of the city. Coming out into a main street, Audax strode up towards the city's centre. He un-

clenched his fists, forgetting the family difficulties and trying to overhear what was being said. At last his curiosity overcame him, and he stopped near a group of men outside a barber's shop. Was it certain that the Huns had turned west and had crossed the Rhine?

They all answered him at once. Yes, it was certain. They had seen the despatch-rider come in; they had seen the sweat on the horse's flanks; they knew everything. Attila had bled the Eastern Empire to its limits, and now he was loosed on the West. All the rumours had been true. "He crossed north of Mogontiacum. He's making for Divodurum. . . ." All the talkers were excited, voluble, ready to quarrel over the details. "It's exactly what I said. Besides, there was a wise woman at Matisco who prophesied it all. My brother wrote to me. A dog coupled with a sheep. We can't say we weren't warned. . . ." They seemed pleased, as if something fated and long expected was at last coming true, giving the world a meaning; and Audax forgot that his own mood a few moments before had been much the same. He grew annoyed. Didn't the fools understand what the irruption would really mean? And yet he, too, couldn't believe it; it was only a rumour of world-end fading out in soft spring sunlight and an echo of tragic voices from the mind's theatre. He smiled to himself, thinking of that foolish young learned girl Phoebe, and abruptly left the men outside the barber's shop, with Crescens trotting shadowily along behind his right shoulder-blade.

"The Patrician Aetius is coming, eh?" he said, almost without turning his head. The thought gave him energy. Perhaps the local administration would get a needed kick. He imagined himself composing a perfect speech in defence of the family estate, charming Aetius, winning renown as a declaimer, the lost land would be restored and he himself would be invited to take up a position in the Palatine bureaucracy. "Of course," he added loudly, and Crescens gave a meek grunt. The crowd was thickening as they neared the Forum; a town-crier was announcing a tradesman's bankruptcy, but for once nobody had ears for such matters.

Professor Eusebius was taking a class in the rooms of the municipal academy. Not that, strictly speaking, there was any longer a municipal academy. The academy had died off amid an elaborate and extended correspondence between the local authorities and the imperial bureaux. Each party expressed the keenest desire to see the Schools flourishing in their pristine vigour, but refused to pay the salaries of the professors. Various *agentes in rebus*, in the intervals of spying on the postal service, had tried extortions and intimidation, harassing the town council to the betterment of their own pockets without developing any solution of the debate; and had been sorry to see the complicated business at last lost to view amid the pigeon-holes in the office of the Quaestor of the Sacred Palace at Rome—some obscure question in relation to petitionary rights having suspended the matter in mid-air, disclaimed by all the various

bureaus. In the end the town council had compromised by agreeing to pay the wages of a caretaker, and let the main lecture-rooms out to teachers with large classes. The number of such teachers had dwindled; but a few still hired the rooms at intervals. And every now and then one of the landed aristocracy gave a reading of his latest literary works, a summary of someone else's summary of someone else's summary of a translation from the Greek.

Audax was not one of the youths who lived at the house of Professor Eusebius, the inner circle of his students; and as he loitered at the doors of the academy, he ostentatiously ignored the well-dressed group who were chattering and tittering on the steps. He stared over their heads, looking out for his own particular friend, Prosper. He had been on good terms with Prosper for three or four years; but during the last year they had come especially close. Prosper was the only student whom Audax had taken home to his lodgings in the house of Zonaras. For Prosper's family, too, was having its troubles, and Audax felt that there was no need for shame in his presence; they could talk together on the way they would pull their family fortunes up as soon as they had a chance to assert themselves. Or perhaps they would go off and enlist under the King of the Burgundi, rise to high positions at his Court and return home laden with wealth; or perhaps they would try their luck at Rome, find some way of getting into the corps of Palatine Guards, or perhaps . . . Well, who could tell?

He saw Prosper walking hastily across the square, stalwart and eager as usual; and went down to meet him.

"I've had a message that my father is coming," said Prosper, grasping Audax's arm in salutation. "You've heard about the Huns?" He glared at the group among which his two cousins were standing. "I'm going to try to get the money for equipment from my father. I don't suppose there's much chance. If only it had happened last year, before this new lawsuit, things would have been different. I'll try to get enough for you too," he added dutifully. "But I haven't much hope. Still, why is my father coming if it isn't—" He paused to push past his cousin Hesperius, for whom he had a special dislike.

They went on into the lecture-room and sat on a bench at the side, talking about the latest news. As they talked, the news began to become real, urgent, impressive. Not across some intangible distance of rumour, it now seemed, were the Hun horsemen riding into Gaul, but within earshot, a horde of terror that threatened to loom up outside the city walls at any moment. It was going to happen again, all that tumult and fury which lived so vehemently, so dully, in the talk of their elders. There had been peace in central and southern Gaul now for some seventeen years—the lifetime of these youths. Certainly the Franks had been pressing in on the north, and the Visigoths in the south-west, and the Burgundians in the east had been a continual source of anxious dis-

cussion ; and Spain and Africa had fallen under other barbarians ; and the Saxon sea-pirates had ravaged the more northern coastal areas ; and the Huns and others had been giving the Balkans and Central Europe a bad time. But at Lugdunum and the area round about it had seemed only talk, a ceaseless talk about the invasions and disasters of the previous generation, a ceaseless shifting of menace which ended only in minor family troubles and feuds. The Empire still remained—surely the one question was how long would pass before it absorbed the barbarian groups who had settled as troublesome and land-grabbing allies in the various provinces?

But now at last something was happening that brought the dim menace of the talking down to earth. In the distance they could hear the beating of the hooves of the horses of the Huns ; and their hearts beat faster, in time to that drumming. Was it fear or delight? "We've got to raise the price of our equipment somehow," Prosper said, setting his resolute chin. "It's our chance." What kind of a chance they had no clear idea ; but they were none the less sure that an emergency was going to arise in which they would be enabled to do something remarkable.

"I'll write to my father, if you like," said Audax dubiously. "But I know it won't be any use."

"You leave it to me," replied Prosper.

The other students were sauntering in, and the rhetor, Eugenius, had taken his place on the dais, a small stringy man, counting the heads of his discourse on his restless fingers. He was lecturing today on Astronomy, expounding *Scipio's Dream* by Macrobius. With a rapid movement of the arm he signed to a slave to shut the door, cleared his throat, stretched his long, thin neck, smiled beatifically at a point in the ceiling, and launched into his discourse in a high-pitched voice. He was a capable man—by far the most capable of the teachers—but he had been irritating Audax for some weeks now. Perhaps that was the effect of the conversations with Zonaras, Audax thought with a start.

Smiling complacently and jerking his eyebrows, Eusebius went on explaining that Mind issued from the Superabundance of the Cause, and so on, resulting in a hierarchical system of gradations ; the external system of varying status in society had its internal reflection in the system of varying degrees among faculties and powers, the noble and the base "And that is the true meaning of the Golden Chain of which Homer sings, stretching from heaven to earth." He wriggled and stretched his neck, and his restless fingers ticked off that important point.

Audax ceased to listen. His mind was drifting back over the impressions of the morning, and the only aspect of the rhetor's discourse that affected him were the motions of the hands. The sceptical introverted mood that had been coming over him for some days grew sharper, and it seemed that some solution, simplifying all the difficulties which had been slowly ravelling his life, was hovering at the back of his mind ; he felt a growing excitement.

Eugenius was talking about the music of the spheres. "The sounds of the octave are produced by their motion in relation to one another. The seven below the sphere of the fixed stars move in the opposite direction to that of the heaven. . . ."

Audax was roused from his reverie by a raucous voice that leaped up close behind him and interrupted the rhetor. A cry like a wild bird's, it seemed to him as he heard it without grasping the meaning of the words; and then, turning, he saw that a thin-faced man in a cloak was shouting with uplifted hands and eyes ghastly out of focus, "Where is the Blood of Christ?" He felt ashamed, wanted to put his hands to his ears, moved closer to Prosper, who was watching the interrupter with a calm grin.

Eugenius was jerking his eyebrows and his hands, trying to get a word in. "My dear sir, this is a theoretical discussion. . . We are training administrators, not ecclesiastics . . ." But as the man refused to pause and listen to his nicely adjusted apologetics, he lost his temper, clutched his chin and shouted to the slave attendant, "Turn out this brawling monk! Why did you let him in?"

The slave, who had called in two others to his aid, approached the monk and took him timidly by the arm.

"You teach the compromise with iniquity," the monk screamed in a last burst of rage "You deny the master of life." And then, flinging off the slave's hand, he strode out.

Eugenius watched him go, with raised eyebrows of contempt; and then, when the creaking of the door had died away, he equably resumed his discourse, enjoying the distinction between his own modulated voice and the harsh accents of the ejected monk. "The music of the spheres, we may assert, can only be heard by those who have in their minds the secret of proportion, for it is in fact of this esoteric matter of proportions that I was speaking. . . ." But his voice did take on a slightly ragged edge as he continued, keeping an eye on the door, as if he expected the monk to make another intrusion. None of the students listened; they were furtively eyeing one another, longing for the moment when they would get outside and have a chance to discuss the astonishing event.

It had disturbed Audax considerably, though he did not know exactly why. Not because he had felt any sympathy with the monk. No, he seemed to feel critically aloof from both the rhetor and the monk. What disturbed him was something quite different from the creed of either man. It was a recognition, he felt dimly, that the world existed beyond all words; a detachment from the whole process which he saw going on about him; a desire to escape that detachment and to feel himself at home in the process. For the first time in his life, everything seemed to fall away from him and leave him defenceless; he didn't know what to snatch at for a support. And yet behind his dismay there was that deepening excitement, as if he had been allotted a part in a drama and was at any moment to receive the word, to be pushed on to the stage, to

find himself facing an expectant world. What was the allotted part, the speech, the gesture?

And then Eugenius, shortening his exposition, had raised his eyebrows and his voice in the final involved and consummating sentence; and the students were trooping out of the room, already talking about the event under their breath, asking how the monk had slipped in, losing interest in the subject of the Huns in comparison with that of the monk's surprising bad manners. Audax caught the eye of Paulinus, the younger of Prosper's cousins, and was startled at the melancholy indrawn tenseness which he saw there. Paulinus had once or twice made some tentative moves of friendliness towards him, but Audax had ignored them out of his loyalty to Prosper. Now, as he saw that look of grief and exaltation on the other's face, he had a sharpened wish to speak to him, to find out what had affected him so strongly.

Prosper was preoccupied with mentally formulating the request he was going to broach, he did not notice at first the unusually distraught air which had come over his father as they paced up and down the colonnade. Gaius Basilus was seldom at a loss to utter his opinion of the world and its doings—generally a fiercely denunciatory opinion, full of defiance against the various enemies who were striking to ruin him. But today, despite the many times he coughed and began to settle his toga firmly, with the obvious intention of striking a determined attitude, he said nothing and failed to strike the attitude. Prosper was drawn out of his own preoccupation. What had happened? Had the rest of the estate been lost overnight? But surely the lawsuit—the most recent one, that was, of which he had heard—hadn't yet come off? Perhaps his father had diced the remnant of the estate away, and was ashamed to mention it to his son and heir. Something seemed to be afflicting him.

Prosper took it on himself to put in some remarks. After a few respectful words he started to tell about the intrusive monk of the morning. "The Bishop ought to be informed. Why can't the bishops control the monks?" But not even this assertion brought down on his head a rebuke about youths leaving to elders the criticism and management of an unruly world. He began to feel unsure of himself, unable to plumb his father's mood and to decide whether the moment was specially propitious or unpropitious for an equipment plea. "What is your opinion, sir, about the invasion by the Huns?" he asked hopefully, with a feeling that he had shown considerable tact.

Basilus roused himself. "What's that, boy? The Huns. . . Leave all that to the Master of the Forces. He knows the Huns inside out. He's been on particularly close terms with them for years." His reddish face looked redder than ever. He frowned and gave a quick look at his son. "You've got a lot to say for yourself," he growled. "Far more than I should have dared to have in my father's presence when I was your age.

"Can't you keep quiet when I'm thinking?" he shouted furiously; and though Prosper drew back with something like a reluctant fear agitating his pulse, the noise was after all reassuring, familiar. Basilius was being more like his normal self. But he had hardly finished his shout when he calmed down and spoke in almost apologetic tones. "No harm done. I didn't tell you to cut your tongue out I'm not a tyrant, and don't go saying I am."

Prosper lost his bearings again. "I have never said anything so disrespectful . . . and so untrue." He was rather pleased with the way he'd put that, he felt emboldened to continue, "I've been thinking . . ."

His father took his arm "No, you're a good lad I've always said it. I'd rather have your good-will than your fear of me I'm not saying that for the first time, and you know it. Go on, answer!" he shouted again, as Prosper halted and tried to gather his wits.

"There'll be fighting . . ." Prosper couldn't recall what his father had been saying; but only his own train of thought responded to his worried effort to obey. "I'll . . ." He wanted to boast that he'd distinguish himself somehow and retrieve the family fortunes, if only he were given a good set of accoutrements.

"What's that?" asked Basilius testily, then once more gulped down his anger and spoke in conciliatory tones "Can't you get these Huns out of your head? I'm having a serious family discussion with you You've come to years of discretion I expect you to show your appreciation, not to go wandering off on unimportant side issues"

"Yes, sir," said Prosper, trying to sound appreciative, and more mystified than ever.

"Years of discretion," repeated his father in a mollified voice. "I won't say that I'm disappointed in you. Not at all. In fact I look upon you as in every essential a son of whom I can be proud. . . ."

He gulped again, and Prosper waited for the announcement that had seemed on the point of being made They might be having a family discussion, but he would have liked a little more precise information about the theme. How could he show himself as helpful and mature as he felt if he wasn't given the least clue as to the subject under debate? "I try to be . . ." he muttered, failing to round the sentence off gracefully with a tribute to his father's good example, on which he dutifully modelled his life Not, indeed, that it would be so very tactful to say all that; for what good example had been set by his father's irascibility, his passion for lawsuits, his hasty moments of unbalanced generosity repented at leisure? In fact it would be impossible to emulate his father's career, since there remained so little of the estate to throw away. Considering his father's peculiar manner, Prosper grew more and more depressed, sure that somehow or other even the remnant of the estate had gone the way of the rest. There was certainly something on his father's conscience.

A slave came near with a spouted watering-pot; and once more Basilus subsided on what had seemed the edge of a disclosure. His agitation began to communicate itself to his son, who found himself increasingly depressed and speechless. Something awful must have happened. He couldn't remember having ever seen his father so uncomfortable and irresolute. Usually Basilus could rapidly recover self-esteem by diatribes against the scoundrels plotting to bankrupt him. If he had come past the abuse of his foes, he must be in a bad way. Prosper felt agonisedly sympathetic, wanting to say something to make things easier for his father. He wanted above all to discuss the world with his father as with an equal. Such a concession would be almost exhilarating enough to make up for the loss of the rest of the land.

They were walking in the colonnaded garden of Auxanius, the friend of the family with whom Prosper was staying, their own town house had been given up for two years now. Prosper could hear voices in the atrium, guests had arrived, soon the privacy of their stroll would be ended. Unable to say anything, he tried to will his father to speak out, and this bending of his will upon his father was half an exertion of sympathy, half an utterance of independence. For the first time he was beginning to feel superior to his father.

Basilus seemed to have heard the voices too. He gulped again and resumed his tense grip on Prosper's arm. "I've something to say. . . . If a way turned up whereby our fortunes could be retrieved—at a single blow—if you found that you could put things upright again—give me a chance to get my own back and knock the rogues after all . . ." He broke off huskily. "They think I'm down. They think it's only a matter of time and they'll see me begging a crust from them. They're mistaken about that. I'd choke with my own spit before I'd take a crumb from their dirty hands. But it's not so easy to break me. I've got more than one trick to play yet. Even if this one doesn't come off, I'll find another. It doesn't matter. On second thoughts I decide against it. I'll find some other way. I don't suggest it to you." He spoke with decision and resettled the folds of his toga.

"What is it, father?" Prosper was distressed at the new turn. Though he dreaded the project about him which his father was clearly nursing, he couldn't bear to see it thus set aside. For the shelving of the project meant the shelving of the new sense of importance which Prosper had felt descending upon him. The decisive tones in which his father had spoken when renouncing the project had been the old tones to which Prosper had been accustomed; and though at the start of this difficult conversation those were the tones for which Prosper had been anxiously listening, he now hated to hear them. They signalled the end of the self-importance which had begun to enwrap him, the emancipated position which he had somehow felt emerging for him out of his father's weakened nerve. No matter what the project was, he wanted to get back

to that position.. "Anything that I can do to help the family fortunes . . . you know I would never shrink from my duty."

"I know, I know," answered his father fretfully. "But is it your duty? Probably it is. Still, it's not a matter on which I like to use my authority. I leave it entirely to your own decision . . . I may believe in exacting my own dues—how else could I bring you up as a decent citizen? But not an ounce more, not a speck more than my dues."

Prosper felt his impatience tearing at him, and yet he knew better than to show it. "Anything I can do . . ." he murmured humbly, trying to hide the feeling of dominance that leaped in his mind and blood. "You have only to speak."

"You're a good lad," said his father, with no suspicion of the angry pride that was warring in Prosper's heart. He struck his hand against a fluted column. Prosper could smell the suave sweetness of the lily-clump distilled through the sunlight and the cool earth-smell from the shadows where the slave had been watering out of the black pot. He felt his life expanding harshly, it was all he could do to keep his hands off his father. A terrific antagonism for the first time gripped him. The old fool had wrecked a fine estate, and now he had to come crawling to his son to get him out of his troubles. Basilus was speaking with a note of blithe hoarseness. "I'll get my own back yet. That brother of mine thinks he's thrown me in the ditch. He thinks he's got the lawsuit all rigged in his favour. He's got the Governor on his side. But now I'll have the vicar. . . . And the Governor's a weakling; he can't stand up against any real pressure. I know for a fact that the vicar can break him; he found out a few things that wouldn't smell nicely in the Imperial Council . . . Constantius is thick with the vicar; what he says to him carries weight. . . ."

Prosper was listening closely, seeking for the clue. He stiffened when he heard the name Constantius. How did Constantius come into it all? "Anything I can do. . . ." He was determined to do it, whatever it was, and when it was done, he would know how to assert himself. He thought. I'm not going to rescue the estate to have it thrown away the next moment. The more sure of his coming mastery he was, the more humbly he spoke. Even his impatience went; he had become so sure of his capacity to manage his father

"He dotes on his girl . . ."

Prosper saw the whole scheme at once. The speed with which he realised it was magnificently heartening; it enhanced his conviction of controlling the situation, his determination to extend that control openly at no distant date. "His only daughter—his only child."

Basilus gulped. "Yes, his heir. I believe that her face wasn't so injured as the story went. . . . Anyhow, what does it matter? It was only her face; she's sound elsewhere." He guffawed coarsely. "And her dowry will be sound. And so will her father's testament be."

Prosper felt an overwhelming revulsion for a moment, and then he mastered himself. After all, a rich man's wife was kept shut away in the female apartments of a house, there was no need for her to be even seen by any male guests. What did it matter if her face had been badly gashed by a carriage accident? She would be able to bear sons; and the slave-girls would provide for the master's pleasure. Quickly he made up his mind. He pushed away that part of himself which trembled and irrationally wanted to shrink from the proposed nuptials; he thought only of his need to take the course that would lead him to a position in which he could stand up against his father.

"She'd make a good bride . . . for someone that needed to repair his family fortunes."

"Hercules!" cried Basilus, rubbing his hands. "How the boy does jump to conclusions. He's no fool, I'll say that for him. He's a shrewd little rogue." He pinched his son's ear with an access of amiability; and Prosper stood there stupidly, blinking, accepting the indignity and fuming against it. Basilus had now regained all his self-esteem when he found Prosper was going to welcome the suggested marriage. "What's this about your wanting to marry Papianilla? Don't you think you're too young yet for marriage? Ah, you sly dog?" He chuckled. "What haste you're in, snatching up a chance word of your old father like that?"

Prosper, still with the sense of his coming emancipation warm upon him, took stock of the situation. "But I'll want to have a first-rate equipment. And there's Audax too. He's my best friend, and I promised I'd see that he wasn't left out." Craftily he saw the way to put the proposition. "Those two cursed cousins of mine are getting fitted out. I heard them saying that they'd join the staff when Aetius arrived. I'm not going to let them outdo me. I knew you wouldn't like it if they did."

"What's this about equipment, you mad young warrior?"

Basilus was beaming, redder than ever in the face. Prosper could see that he was going to get his way, and as he stood there watching his father out of the corner of his eye, he felt both very childish and very grown-up. He was both a child wheedling for a toy and a determined young man who had shed his awe of the adult world and discovered that where there's a will there's a way. The voices sounded nearer; the guests were coming out to loll and drink wine in the shade of the red-striped awning.

A slave was sticking up a new bill outside the theatre, and a knot of idlers had already gathered round. Audax passed on, and climbed some steps till he reached the small platform beside the aqueduct, from which he had a clear view of the country below. The greens and reds and browns of the earth were drowsily suffused with a dim gold out of the slanted light; the Rhone, strewn with its islands, wound through the softened scene, unglittering, a ribbon of dull yellow and brown; beyond a sprink-

ling of villas the vast chequered plain opened out; and in the farthest distance, lost in a haze of dusty light which deceptively seemed about to yield their known forms, lay the Alpine crests. One moment, as he stared, the river seemed flat and unmoving; then he felt the rush of the waters and the whole scene was pervaded by that unsteadiness, the plain began to heave and curve with flowing forms, a wind of heavy undulating colours. With a start he realised that he had been looking for some sign of menace, some disturbance on the horizon that would slowly gush into vision with the lances of invasion.

He went down the steps and walked on till he came to the temple of Augustus. The sixty conquered nations of Gaul had built it, more than four centuries before; each had contributed a statue to the altar. He stood contemplating the massive architecture, the sculptures depicting the triumph of Rome, the victor legionaries and the bound clansmen, the wailing women with tangled hair; and felt return to him that unquestioning faith in the eternity of Roman *imperium* in which he had been bred. Words of the poets sang into his mind, the hymns of the power that broke the mighty and upraised the humble; and he felt return the old thrill of participation in a tremendous force majestically expanding. Beyond all the setbacks and the confusions, the goal was still shining, *orbis* become *urbs*, the whole earth drawn into civilisation, into the city net.

And yet, as he turned away, he felt equally a counter-thrust, a flaw, a darkness, and this flaw, this darkness, was only partly in the shocks from the outer barbarian world which confused the expansion. It was deeply interlocked with the expansion itself, at the heart of all the life he knew. And the dark sullen face of the monk, who had broken with frenzy on the neat exposition of the rhetor that morning, rose up in his mind with a challenge directed now, not at the rhetor, but at Audax himself. And yet the challenge, the sense of a tremendous outflowing force and of darkening flaws at the heart, the awaited conflict between the known world and the mad powers about to break through the horizon's barrier—all this entangled conviction of great hopes and dangers affected him only in a climbing excitement, as if at this very moment, going on out of the Forum Trajani past the knot of councillors and their hangers-on, he was going to meet some terrible test, some strange ordeal, which would culminate in a full revelation.

The town had got over its morning clamours. The exertion seemed to have exhausted the good citizens, who lounged sleepily at their doorways or mused and spat philosophically in the shadow of porticoes, regarding with wonder but without envy the heroic gestures of over-lifesize statues. Flies were buzzing about the doorway of the milkshop, while a plump young girl crooned and strained some milk through a piece of muslin. The building, which had been the gladiatorial school before the abolition of gladiators, still had circus slogans scrawled on its wall; a mangy dog was sniffing at the doorway; a porter was rolling a barrel in. A clerk of

the mint came pompously out of the public urinal crushed between two shops. In the silversmith's shop someone was giving disheartened taps, stopping and then making another start. At the next door a wandering fortune-teller—felt stockings bound with rags on his legs—was conversing in low hurried tones with a woman who was fingering her scraggy throat. Three municipal slaves were still mending some broken road-stones with bits of iron, arguing without conviction; they had been three days already at that corner. A hinged wooden shutter in a private house opened, and a painted woman looked out, over the broad red panels that filled the lower part of the wall. In the pottery shop next door a man was unpacking some plates, packed in straw, from a crate. A portly priest went by, with a pair of ragged men treading carefully in his shadow—petty fugitives from the law who had ventured out of church sanctuary in the trail of the ecclesiastic, knowing that they would be safe from arrest while within the aroma of his holy person.

The town-life was moving sluggishly on, the same as ever, and to Audax it seemed quite different, because he was looking at it with different eyes. Yet he would have been hard put to explain wherein lay the difference. Only the up-bubbling excitement went on inside him, making him feel at one and the same time both curiously apart from everything around him and curiously close, implicated. It was the new element of aloofness which made him notice the number of decayed or derelict houses, increasing as he moved through the lower quarters of the town. So many houses had obviously been built for more dignified purposes than those to which they were now being put; so many were in need of repairs.

He paused by a drain with an iron grate down which a small boy was tearfully peering, trying to fish out a runaway top with a bit of stick. Two men went lumbering past in file, carrying a large wine-amphora slung from a pole that rested on their shoulders. A cracked oblong bas-relief, turned out of a mould, stood over the door of the nearest house, representing a boy horsed on another's back and undergoing a birching: a sign that once a schoolmaster had held his classes within. The boy with the stick gave a howl of anguish as he succeeded only in pushing the lost top farther out of reach.

Turning the corner, Audax, looking back to see if Crescens, who had been sent to make some purchases, was catching him up, bumped into a quarrelling group. A man was holding another by the arm and calling for aid. "Where's the town jail?" To the group that gathered round he bellowed his story. "I thought I recognised his ugly face. He's Lucius Niraemius, a town-councillor of Arelate, the same as myself. Last year he dodged off, and we couldn't find where he'd gone."

The captured *decurio* hung his head and mumbled away to himself.

"Well, he was a fool not to go farther, once he had the chance," said one of the bystanders, and everyone laughed.

"I did," said the captured man, looking up and gabbling. "I did. I'm not such a fool. I've been at Agedincum. Yesterday was the first time I set my foot in this town. I came on business. There was a chance of good profit. It's just my bad luck. Let me go, Ventrio. I never did you any harm."

"Never did me any harm!" spluttered the other. "Listen to that now. Never did me any harm. It wasn't any harm, of course, to go slithering off and leave us to make up for your default. O, no, that wasn't any harm to us, was it?" He laughed with noisy hollowness. "But now you're going to be sorry you went, eh?"

"Come and have a drink," pleaded the runaway, "and let's talk over old times. There's something I'd like to tell you."

His captor considered the plea with its suggestion of a forthcoming bribe. He licked his lips and looked round at the knowing eyes of the bystanders, spat and decided that there had been too much publicity given to the affair. "You can't get me that way. Come along now."

Audax walked on. The episode wasn't particularly unusual, the crushing burden of tax-collection, with its penalties that compelled the town-councillors to make up all deficits out of their own incomes, was continually sending men into flight. Not even all the laws making the status of *decurio* hereditary and inescapable, and inflicting harsh punishments for efforts to evade, could keep the middle-classes of the town from trying to throw off the burden from which the rich land-owners were free. But, coming just at the moment when he had been haunted by the sense of a breaking world, the sight of the captured town-councillor intensified his mood. No longer did he seem to be walking the familiar streets, in a space of measurable dimensions, amid fixed objects that had accepted definitions attached like labels. This present world, cool with the slanted shadows of late afternoon, was losing its stability, was drifting across entangled shapes of the past and future; he moved into a deepening penumbra of meanings and forces. He had a sickly feeling of being trapped, and yet the growing need to act, to move speedily down through that closing tunnel of anxieties, carried with it a quickening hope, a promise of ultimate unions and escapes.

He began walking faster, and turned into the street where was situated the house of Zonaras. As he neared the door, he saw a group of students turn the farther corner, coming up from the river. The chance meeting which he had dreaded was at last to occur. But at the very moment that his heart sank, a peasant with a laden donkey came out of a lane and blocked him from view of the chattering group. He was sure that they had been too taken up with their own talk to see him; there was time to hurry and slip into the porch before the donkey turned. He was about to run when he heard Zonaras coming out of the house, saying something in his calm soothing voice to a patient, an old woman. "Yes, yes, there is no need to fear . . ."

Instead of running, he stood stone-still. It seemed that he was locked between two dreads, two utter miseries: he had to choose between being shamed before his fellow-students or before Zonaras. And yet why was he sure that Zonaras would guess his motive if he brushed hastily past him in the porch? But it was too late now. The donkey had passed, and the students were coming boisterously on, though they were still too absorbed in their amusement over something to look round. Audax could still have gone inside and escaped their eyes. But he stood there in the street, paralysed by doubt. Had they seen him or not? Zonaras had dismissed the old woman, who went hobbling off, and had turned to Audax; he said something in a pleasant voice, but Audax didn't make out its meaning. He stood there, waiting for the students.

They were almost on top of him before they saw him. Prosper's two cousins were in the group; but it was Pastor, a rich young aristocrat, who said with amiable disdain, "Hello, Audax," and glanced at the house. The sign told him that it was a doctor's establishment. "Being patched up?"

"No, I live here," answered Audax coldly. Then the group had passed on, quite uninterested in his anger or his lodgings, and yet their laughter seemed aimed at him, though he knew quite well they were merely resuming their discussion of the jest which had been amusing them before they noticed him at all. And then suddenly, though his face continued to burn, the matter was totally unimportant. He turned in relief to Zonaras, who had been watching him. He felt as if he had passed through a test of some kind and had made the right choice. What had he chosen? Surely, he told himself, he had chosen Zonaras. I wanted to contrast Zonaras and those others, he thought, I wanted to find out whose respect it was I preferred. And as he thought thus, he felt as if he had lingered in the street only in order to force this conclusion upon himself, to dramatise a conviction which had been seeking to reach his consciousness. He began telling Zonaras about the monk at the rhetor's lecture.

"I think the soup's ready and Phoebe getting angry," said Zonaras, with a smile. He was a short thick-set man, with a square grey beard and blue-grey eyes and a subdued manner; Audax's father had acquired him long past as a slave in part payment of some debt, and had freed him about ten years ago.

They went in through the porch, where an array of herb-medicines and bottles was set out. Old Miccio was pouring, with cautious but unsteady hand, some reddish balsam out of a big glass flask into a phial. He growled when Zonaras told him to go and get his dinner. "And have a thief sneak in? I'll come when I'm ready. You mind your own business." They went on into the dining-room, where faded arabesques decorated the walls. The steaming soup-bowl stood on the table, and Phoebe was waiting for them. Not the least of the shocks which Audax

had met in this house was the discovery that the womenfolk, as represented by Phoebe, did not eat apart from the males, or at least in some posture expressing a lower status. At first he had felt awkward, uncertain of himself, as if something indecorous and peculiar was being enacted when he sat on a stool by the table and ate a meal with Phoebe doing the same. At home his mother had never appeared at meals before guests, and at ordinary family meals she sat on a backless chair while her husband reclined at ease. "I can't afford couches," Zonaras had said, "and I happen to prefer the lack of them, anyway." And Audax had come to feel the same after he had lived a few days in the house; the simple meals were so enjoyable with the discussions that accompanied them. He found himself accepting without question, even without condescension, the part that Phoebe took in the conversation.

And yet, despite the amount of argument that had gone on, he still hadn't any idea what Zonaras believed in—what his ultimate judgments were. Zonaras didn't seem to speak out, to express his deepest thoughts, to draw the full conclusions from his remarks, and Audax, in thinking the matter over, had felt hurt, as if Zonaras didn't altogether trust him. But he couldn't sustain his feeling when he was face to face with Zonaras and they were talking. Then he had only the sense of the man's friendliness, his clear, cool mind, his search for values of a kind that had come to be increasingly important for himself, Audax.

Audax went on talking about the monk as Phoebe served out the soup: "When I heard him challenge Eugenius like that, I felt entirely on his side. And then, when I was looking at the Temple of Augustus, I felt he was all wrong. And then, when I looked down over the plain and the river—I climbed up by the aqueduct—I felt something quite different again. . . ."

Zonaras was nodding, crumbling a piece of bread; but Phoebe, with a serious face, went over to the shelves on which the rolls were kept, and took one down, glancing at its yellow label. "Wait a minute," she said. She was always jumping up in the midst of discussions to find some passage that had been suggested to her, but usually by the time she found it the others were discussing something quite different, and her quotation fell flat. But this time she deftly unrolled the book in time, one end tucked under her chin.

"As it were from a high place to look down upon myriads of flocks, and myriads of sacrifices, and ships of all kinds, some caught in storms and others in placid seas, and the vicissitudes of things coming into birth, mingling with one another, and departing from one another. Bear in mind also the completed life of all the men of past times, and the life of all those to come after you, and the life shared by all the numberless men of barbarian races breathing at this moment, and the host of men who have never even heard your name . . ."

She interrupted her reading to explain, "*Commentaries of Marcus Aurelius.*"

"Yes, something like that," agreed Audax. "Yes, quite a lot like that. But something more too."

She wrinkled up her nose, trying to help him towards his thought.

"Come and finish your soup," said Zonaras.

2. *The War Comes Closer*

The sluggish return to gossip and chaffering, which Audax had noticed on the afternoon after the arrival of the first definite news, had not given a true impression of what was going on in the town. Rather, the surprising irruption of the monk into the lecture-hall had betokened the obscure and devious response among the populace to the news that Attila had invaded Gaul under pretence of settling some dynastic quarrel among the Franks. As further reports came in, the stirring of complex fears and hopes began to show itself openly, at first in timid whisperings at the street corners, in the barbers' shops, in the meeting-rooms of the corporations, and then more loudly and confidently, in the Forum itself.

Strange things were about to happen; old prophecies were going to come true. Had not Romulus at the time of the founding of Rome beheld twelve vultures? and did not those vultures plainly denote the twelve centuries that Rome was fated to endure? and had not those twelve centuries been exactly completed at this moment? Further, why did Attila style himself, among his many titles, *Nurtured in Engaddi*? Plainly the reference was to the twelfth chapter of the book of *Revelations*, which tells of the Woman Clothed with the Sun, who was to bring forth in the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, a man-child that would contend with the dragon having seven heads and ten horns and that would rule all nations with a rod of iron. Was not Attila the Dread of the World, the Scourge of God?

"The words refer to the birth of the Emperor Constantine, who destroyed the paganism of the city built on seven hills," insisted a baker, wiping his floury hands on his apron.

"No, it refers to the mastery of the temporal power of Rome," replied his friend, the ironmonger. "Plainly it refers to Attila."

"Indeed, it must be so," assented the clerk of the tax-office. "Engaddi means a place of palms and vines, in the desert. It was hard by Zoar, the city of refuge, which was saved in the vale of Siddim, meaning Demons, when the rest were destroyed by fire and brimstone from the Lord in heaven. It might therefore be fitly termed a place prepared of God in the wilderness."

They all shook their heads, sure that Antichrist or somebody so like him as to make no difference was about to appear. There was an eagerness in their comments, as though the End of the World, so passionately

expected by the faithful for centuries, was at last going to materialise. But they stopped in their hurried conversation when they saw Audax listening, and stared at him with hostile eyes, till he walked on. The Bishop had preached a reassuring sermon on Sunday; but a few vagrant monks had been moving about among the poorer quarters, raising the hopes and fears of World-end, calling on all hearers to repent and purify themselves.

Audax had tried to pin Zonaras down to a definite opinion, but had found him more evasive even than usual "Great things are going to happen," Zonaras said wearily. "Certainly not the way that these people expect, and yet perhaps they have more wisdom than the wise ones. Perhaps they are trying to find a new language for a world that is struggling to be born and yet cannot break from its womb. . . . But perhaps I use that metaphor because of last night. I didn't get much sleep. The woman died. The obstinate old midwife didn't call me in till it was too late. The child died too." He sighed and went to help Miccio make up some prescriptions.

As Audax was turning to go in search of Phoebe, Prosper came bustling into the hall. "I've fixed everything, as I said I would," he announced importantly. "Father will provide everything for both of us."

"That's fine," answered Audax, pleased at seeing Prosper so pleased. As to the idea of going to fight Attila, it meant nothing to him in his present mood; he simply couldn't visualise it. He felt somehow as if he had to solve a pressing problem on the spot before anything could happen. "Where have you been the last few days?"

Prosper had whole-heartedly made up his mind to accept the marriage offer, but he tried to put off the visit at the house of his future father-in-law. Papianilla's value in the marriage market had of course fallen considerably after the injury to her face; otherwise there would have been no chance for the son of such a failure as Gaius Basilius. Apparently Basilius had managed to carry out negotiations tactfully, for once in his life; and the rich land-owner Constantius had decided that the best thing he could do for his girl was to marry her off to the son of a family which, though on the downward grade, still carried a respectable aroma about it. Better that than to leave the girl unwed, the probable victim of some low-down adventurer when her father died. And maybe Constantius had counted on the fact that she would most likely get kinder treatment from a man who wouldn't ever be in a position to divorce her; who would be dependent on the money she brought, and unable ever to return the dowry. Whatever the exact balance of motives in the head of Constantius, Basilius had certainly played effectively upon it; and he quite deserved to get as drunk as he did the evening after he found himself relieved of his fears that Prosper would refuse the valuable offer.

To mark his appreciation, he invited his son to drink with him; and that was a proud moment for Prosper. They withdrew into one of the garden arbours, and Basilius became ramblingly reminiscent and affectionate, but Prosper drank only a little. He wanted to keep his senses about him; he still had a conviction of the need for wariness. He watched his father get fuzzily drunk and ever more rambling in his accounts of long-past boar-hunts and perpetual attempts by his enemies to ruin him. All his respect for his father had suddenly evaporated, he almost felt himself already the head of the family and was maturing plans for taking over the control of the farmwork. But of course his decisions would depend on what Papianilla's dowry was. He watched his father's face darkening in the evening veils; and it seemed that the gathering dimness was no momentary effect, but the lasting obliteration of that face, with its lines of heavy strength and obstinacy, which he had once so feared. The flow of life was washing out that face. And then, when the lean, shadowy slave brought a lamp, the sudden gush of yellow light across the flushing and relaxed face, the bloodshot, vehement eyes, was like a revealing question. Is this the man whom I have so feared and respected? And Prosper felt strangely hard and bitter.

"There's justice yet to be got," boomed Basilius, smacking his hand on the table—"if a man gets it for himself. But it doesn't come looking for you. I've had many enemies, but none so bad as those of my own family. That brother of mine lives only to get his teeth into my throat. He's a wolf. I'd cut him down without a second thought. It's as well for him that I haven't been pushed to an extremity. I've had some dark thoughts this last year. Everything went wrong. I even had a quarrel with the State surveyor, and he had me assessed double. Every man's hand has been against me. And then I had that idea about Constantius . . . I'll get my own back on everyone yet, all those that have laughed over my downfall. Ha! they laughed too soon."

Prosper felt a hot burst of hatred; and yet he knew that he had nothing for which to blame his father—except the loss of the estate. And except passing uproars of bad temper, which had been compensated for by periods of excessive joviality. Basilius had not grudged any amount of time spent in teaching his son to excel at sports—the hunting of hare or boar by net or spear-work, the tricks of falconry. And a year ago, judging him fully mature, he had taken him to the best brothel in Lugdunum and had him "made a man" by a big-limbed girl with golden hair. But now Prosper sat watching him, noting down all his words and gestures, as if he were noting down insults for which a price was to be exacted at some later date.

There was no way of evading the visit to the house of Constantius. They went there the next morning. Prosper had had himself barbered and dressed as elegantly as possible, and a slight untidiness in his father's clothes outraged him, though he did not yet feel sure enough of his new

position to speak of it. Several times he had to resist an impulse to arrange his father's toga. The house of Constantius was one of the finest in the town, with a fountain playing in the atrium and all the inner walls bright with recent paintings. Prosper stood looking at panels which depicted the Sacrifice of Iphigenia on one side, and the Sacrifice of Isaac on the other, while the steward bowed and chafed with Basilius, who was talking too loudly. A pretty slave-girl peeped round an embroidered curtain, and, catching Prosper's eye, retired in confusion. Perhaps Papiannilla had sent her to have a look at the prospective bridegroom and bring her an account of his appearance, and Prosper felt annoyed at himself for having been gaping at the paintings at the moment the girl peeped out. Had he looked gawkish, rustic? What would the girl say about him? Basilius was booming away so happily that they could probably hear him in the women's quarter, and that would vulgarise the whole visit. A pair of bumpkin adventurers, a rowdy, red-faced father and a lout of a son who was ready to sell himself and his family name for a good dowry. For the first time Prosper realised that his motives might be cheapened on these lines; till this moment he had been so taken up with the aspects of sacrifice on his side that he had forgotten how his part might be maliciously described. He felt so angrily ashamed that he wanted to dash out of the house. If his realisation had come at an earlier stage, he would have withdrawn from the whole thing. But the fact that he had come so far sucked all initiative out of him, and left him only a seething, impotent rage against his father's booming glee.

The steward with his lowered, unctuous voice faded away as the steps of Constantius himself were heard. Prosper went on staring at the pictures, unable to compose his face now that the monstrous possibility of having delivered himself up to contempt had entered his mind. What if his fool of a father had mistaken the business, had rushed to unwarranted conclusions after Constantius had dropped some vague suggestions? Probably Constantius would now be furious when he learned on what an errand Basilius had come with his son. Prosper cursed himself for not having got more explicit details of the negotiations from his father.

His mind failed to take in the first words exchanged by his father and Constantius, and then he heard his father boom, "So, here's the lad," and a strong hand gave him a push. He turned, with heated face, to see Constantius eyeing him, and he bowed awkwardly.

Constantius, a tall man with bulging brows and bulging mouth, gave a sharp but friendly stare at Prosper. "Yes, I thought I recollected him. Well, my young man, we are going to be closer related?"

"I trust so," muttered Prosper. "Yes." He didn't want to annoy Constantius, but he wanted to say something that would express his self-respect, his refusal to carry on if there was any suspicion of contempt for his behaviour in agreeing to marry a girl with a maimed face. But

neither of the elder men was at all interested in his possession or his lack of self-respect. All they wanted was his assent. Constantius had assessed his well-built frame as if he were a stallion being offered for sale by Basilius. Prosper flushed again, but couldn't help drawing himself up. After all, he wasn't ashamed of being well-built—and, yes, quite handsome, with curly, chestnut hair and stubborn, small-nosed face.

"Good stock, that's the main thing," said Constantius, digging at Basilius with his finger. And Prosper had a certain satisfaction; for he knew that nothing irritated his father more than having a finger dug into his ribs. "Good stock. I wouldn't let my little girl be joined to anything else. That's what I've had in mind for her all along. . . ." And Prosper realised that Constantius, for all his wealth, was feeling ill at ease over the agreement, afraid that he'd seem to be demeaning his daughter.

Prosper regained his own wavering self-esteem. He settled his shoulders and stood back. Let the elders finish with the haggling. He was wondering if he could make some excuse to withdraw, when Constantius startled him by bringing him back in the circle of conversation. It was Constantius who this time looked heated and who stammered. "Yes," said Prosper before he knew what the other was saying.

"You would, of course, like to exchange a word with your betrothed," said Constantius; and Prosper understood that the girl had asked her father to send her husband-to-be in. He wanted to refuse; he hadn't expected the ordeal of having to encounter the girl or to have anything to do with her before marriage. "Her aunt is with her."

Prosper bowed; and the next moment was going off behind a slave. He felt angry, as if he had been caught by guile into a situation for which he hadn't bargained. Could it be that he, Prosper, the admirably well-built and handsome bridegroom, had to undergo the inspection of the girl before he was finally accepted as a suitable mate? He felt resentful towards the girl, and all his good intentions, his resolve to treat her with extreme kindness on the few occasions when he would have to come into her presence, began to waver and weaken. Could it be that the girl and her father didn't recognise the sacrifice he was making in order to restore the family fortune?

The slave handed him to the girl, whom Prosper thought the girl who had peeped round the curtain. But as the passage was rather dim, he couldn't be sure. "This way," she murmured in a small, soft voice, with a slightly foreign accent. He felt inclined to take her in his arms and give her a hug—just to show that he was independent. But the next moment she stood aside and pulled at a silken curtain, and he stepped into a room where he guessed his future wife awaited him. The room was even more dimly lighted than the passage-way, and when he made a movement towards the window, through which a faint pearly light was filtering, he stumbled on some rugs

"Take care," said a girl's voice.

The rugs slid on the smooth mosaic, and he almost fell. This affront to his dignity increased his uncertainty and his annoyance; and he could not speak. Walking more carefully, he approached the girl, who was seated on a couch under the window, which was paned with the thinnest of split shell. Not till he was quite close could he make her out at all distinctly. She seemed slim and graceful as she reclined there in the soft light that diffused its pallid bloom over her. A creamy scarf was wound round her face and across her mouth; but he could see the dark gleam of her eyes.

He stood there, speechless, and she, after her appeal to him to take care, seemed abashed. On his part, it was not shyness which now held him silent, but obstinacy. He hadn't asked to see her. The whole interview was of the girl's making. If she wanted to cause them both an unnecessary unpleasantness, let her take charge of things. At last she said in a low voice, "You came with your father?"

"Yes," he answered coldly. If she hadn't anything more intelligent than that to say, why had she made him come to stand there, inconveniently looking and feeling a fool?

"I think I saw you once before," she said after another pause, speaking with increased faintness. "Two years ago, at a church festival . . . at the Tomb of Saint Justus . . ." Her voice died away, as if she had difficulty in breathing. She dropped her head over her chest.

Suddenly Prosper was afraid. If he went on behaving so callously, perhaps she'd start disliking him and insist on her father breaking off the engagement. He forced himself to speak amiably. "Did you? Yes, I remember the festival. But I'd killed my first boar only the day before, and I couldn't think of anything else. I didn't notice anyone." Perhaps it was because she'd given him a chance to speak about the boar, or perhaps it was because the effort to be nice made him break through his irritation to the tenderness with which he had determined to treat her; he certainly did feel quite as amiable as he was trying to seem. The truth was that he hadn't killed the boar himself, but the dog that ran it down after Hector the huntsman had wounded it was his special dog, named Ulas; and so he had felt as if he himself had practically done the killing. Especially as it might have been the wound from his spear, in the left haunch, that really weakened it, at the turn by the alder-trees. Hector naturally took as much credit for himself as possible; and admittedly he, Prosper, had faced its rush. . . .

"O, have you killed boars?" asked Papianilla, with the proper awe; and Prosper warmed towards her.

"There's quite a lot on the hills near our place," he said carelessly. "When I was quite young, I used to go with father and watch. He used to make me get up a tree, so I'd be safe. That was when I was quite young, of course—years ago."

"O, that would be fine," she said, with a timid laugh. "I'd like to do that myself. They couldn't gnaw the tree and make it fall down, could they?"

But he couldn't accept the idea of women intruding on anything so important as boar-hunting. "No, it wouldn't be the right place for women-folk. Everyone to their proper tasks. Now, you wouldn't like to see me sitting at a loom," he suggested, to show her how utterly ridiculously she had been talking.

She clapped her hands and laughed a small, merry laugh. "O, that would be a funny sight."

He felt that she perceived, albeit with feminine frivolity, the cogency of his objections. "I think we'll get on well together, don't you?" he remarked generously, coming closer to her.

She was silent and hung her head again, her little flame of laughter quenched. After a while she said, "I hope so. I'm sure I know my duty." She added weakly, "I do hope so."

He had almost forgotten about her face. "Of course we will," he replied, with something of his father's testiness. "There's no doubt about it. And there's nothing to be said on the subject. I take it for granted." Since he was going to be a good husband, he naturally took her gratitude for granted; and as long as she was properly grateful, how could there be any jars between them?

She drew the scarf tighter about her face, and was silent. Then she said, "Are you sure you want to marry me?" Her voice dwindled.

"Of course," he said gruffly. Now she was behaving badly. He hadn't wanted to meet her, for fear that she'd go on like this. "Would I be here otherwise?"

"Why do you want to marry me?" Her voice was frail but persistent. He disliked the inquisition. "Why does any man marry any woman?"

"I don't know. I don't care why they do it. I want to know if you want to marry me." Her grief seemed to give her stubbornness. Her voice lost something of its weakness, and she raised her head.

"Why? Men marry to have children, of course. And because it's the natural thing to do. And they need a head of the household."

"But why me?"

"Because our fathers have talked together, of course. Who would fix my marriage up if not my own father? I've always taken for granted that he'd do it. Of course."

He felt his anger rising again. Why did she want to torment him in so silly a way? There was another pause, during which her head sank down again. Then abruptly, startling Prosper and making him step back, she stood up on the couch and banged with all the might of her thin arms on the shell-windows. The panes gave way, broke, scattered outside, and the daylight streamed through. Somebody called out in dismay, and the aunt, whom Prosper had totally forgotten, rushed across

the room from the corner where she had been lurking on a stool. Blood was trickling down one of the slight girlish arms. "Go away, Euphronia," screamed the girl in a shrill voice quite unlike her previous tones. She tore at the scarf and pulled it off. "Look at me," she said more quietly, though her voice was still shrill and repulsive. Prosper saw the scar running across her cheekbone and down to the corner of her mouth; he saw her pale eyes with reddened rims and her small, shapely ear, from which she drew back a bunch of curls. It was only when she opened her mouth to scream again that the scar became actively unpleasant, twitching, hooking the mouth up and crevassing her cheek. He looked away. The aunt ran in and caught hold of the girl, who beat furiously at her.

Prosper backed away. The sobbing ceased, and Papiantilla let her aunt wrap the end of the scarf round her wrist. "Answer me," she said in a thick, unhappy voice.

Prosper felt that he would have to speak after all. "There was no need . . ."

"Yes, there was need," she broke in.

And then he was really sorry for her. The disgust he had felt passed quite away, and he was able to approach the couch. "I kiss the hand of my future wife," he said, and took her hand and kissed it. He was aware, though he did not look directly at her, that she was once more pressing the loose end of the scarf over the injured side of her face. Feeling that he hadn't done so badly, he turned and walked out of the room, and a powerful hatred of his father welled up acridly in him, merging with a deep pity for the girl. And at the same time he swore to himself that after he had dominated his father and taken charge of the family affairs, he would set himself to crush, one after another, the various enemies that had brought his father down. At the turn in the passage he found the pretty young slave-girl waiting, with a subdued beam from a skylight playing over her flawless little round face between the braids coiled over her ears; and it seemed to him that she was waiting there for a caress from him, the clandestine embrace which he had been tempted to give her as she led the way into her mistress's room. "Go to your mistress at once," he said sternly. "She needs you."

The news was vague but threatening. The Huns were making a sweeping movement into the territory held by the Burgundians, burning, killing, ravishing, plundering. Clashes had occurred between them and the Burgundian forces, but it was hard to learn on what scale. Everything was magnified in the telling, swollen with dim but vast apprehensions. Audax was worried by the turn that the Huns had taken. The thrust of the war was making for his family estate. All the Lugdunienses were waiting impatiently for the arrival of the Commander-in-Chief of the Western Empire, Aetius. Every time a dusty detachment was sighted marching from some outlying station for the town, no matter from what

point of the compass, the rumour ran round that the Army was arriving at last.

The feeling of pressure had increased, and yet the whole thing was scarcely rendered any more real in his mind. Perhaps, he thought, that is why the populace keep translating it into fantastic terms of hope and fear. And that thought gave him a strange but evanescent sense of contact with the whisperers and declaimers in the street, the shag-haired raftmen and the wild-eyed monks; and yet this sense of contact brought with it an increased sense of distance, of clouded unreality filtering across the known scene.

The Schools had ceased to function under the growing stress; and he was thrown back on the companionship with Prosper, who was full of energy and excitement about the coming campaign. They spent a lot of time in the workshop of the armourer who was making them corselets and helmets. The swords, belts, military harness, and other oddments they were able to buy ready-made. Prosper's father, continually half-drunk, superintended their gathering of equipment, and more than once Audax wondered why he suddenly seemed in funds. He made a few half-comments on the subject, but Prosper grew uncomfortable and constrained. "O, he managed to raise some more money on the estate," he said, and then talked of something else. Audax knew that a few months previously Basilus had failed to borrow even a small sum, and he had a feeling that Prosper was hiding something. But it was certainly true that Basilus had raised a new loan at last, for Audax and Prosper came on him one morning while he was talking in a portico near the Forum with a well-to-do priest, and Audax heard enough of what was being said to learn that Basilus had got a fair sum out of the priest at the usual twelve per cent, arrangements were being made for the transfer of part of the cash.

"It's hard to get in money at such a moment," the priest was grumbling. "Everyone hoards. I shall have to call in several accounts, you see. You don't think that I'd have all that money on hand in bulk, do you? But I'm making a special effort to oblige you . . ."

He rolled his poached-looking eyes and ambled off. Certainly something had raised the credit of Basilus. And Basilus advertised the fact beyond a doubt, booming and blustering, slapping Audax on the back and remarking on the wild lad he'd been himself at Audax's age. "And as for my enemies," he declared to the interested circle that was already gathering round, "I'll put them in their proper place yet. They thought they'd got me down . . ." He shook his fist at the bankers' rooms over on the left. "There's men over there that refused me when they had the chance." Prosper had to take his arm fiercely and lead him off; and to Audax's surprise he went without protest, congratulating himself on the son he'd got, a son that would carry on the good work of his old father and damn the world.

Audax left Prosper to his work of taking Basilius home, and wandered down by the wharfs on the river. There was still a deal of coming and going there, a traffic of barges and wherries, a bustle of customs-officers with stamps and steelyards and documents; but Audax, in his new critical mood, noted the number of docks that were decaying amid a mess of broken crates and weeds, rat-scurry and reddish rust-smears like the evidence of a forgotten murder. As he turned into an alley of ramshackle houses, he encountered yet another debate. A lank man with long black greasy hair was shouting something about Nimrod, while a monk was answering him in a falsetto babble. Still the debate as to the identity and meaning of Attila. "He styles himself the Descendant of the Great Nimrod. He carries the unconquerable power of the snake-haired head. He will uproot the mighty of the world and regain the Babylonian kingdom."

"Heretic!" the monk screamed. "Marcionite! You worship the Face of Charon, the basilisk of evil, the petrifier, the secret eyes of horror."

"The mighty hunter before the Lord will restore the Garden of Eden," shouted back the lank man. He paused as a shell-trumpet sounded, announcing the arrival of a barge; then he went on rapturously, "He will end the bondage of buying and selling, even the buying and selling of flesh and blood. He will wipe away the stigma of Cain from the brow of all of us." He pointed at the brow of the monk, and then slowly moved his finger to point in turn at the brows of the others standing round. Even the monk was silenced. A woman gave a deep, voluptuous sigh as the finger found her out, and slid down in a slow faint on the ground, then began to grovel and weep. Audax had pressed forward into the group, deeply stirred by the voices; but as he felt the accusing finger travel his way, he was filled with an unreasoning panic, and moved back. A heavy dull force seemed holding him to the spot, draining the life out of him. He shoved against a sailor who was impeding him, and got free of the group. For a moment he couldn't turn his back. Then he managed to turn, he found himself running.

Next day the Patrician, Aetius, did arrive. He entered the town with full pageantry, dressed in scarlet embroidered thickly with gold, riding on a white horse led by two page-boys in blue cloaks. Life-guards, armed with large round shields and gilt spears, accompanied him; and trumpeters with great trumpets curved round their bodies marched behind. Some Huns among the bodyguard attracted special attention as they rode impassively along. Then the spectators lining the streets craned their necks for a view of the army that was to save Gaul and drive Attila headlong; but they didn't see it. Instead they saw a confused cavalcade of dignitaries, with personal attendants on horse and foot. Carriages with silken curtains revealed the presence of ladies among the procession;

then came a detachment of cavalry, mostly Germans, and a medley of commissariat waggons and over-laden donkeys

Lugdunum woke to sudden life; the price of vegetables rose; in fact the price of everything rose. The shopkeepers lost all interest in the Huns before the engrossing topic of easy profits; and the lower orders were content for the moment to gape at the brilliantly clad groups who were to be seen moving about the streets. All the richer citizens had offered their houses for the use of the highborn arrivals, and thus escaped the serving of a governmental order. Not that there was any reluctance; the chance of getting into possibly lucrative contacts with important officials was more than enough to grease the wheels of hospitality. Counts, Most-Eminents, Most-Perfects, and various other notabilities were to be encountered on all sides; the palm-decorated consular toga was common in the Forum. The troops, cooks, and donkey-drivers were quartered on the houses of tradesmen and the like; Zonaras had two life-guardsmen, Vandals who spoke a halting guttural Latin, posted on his house.

The expectation of the townsfolk that something dramatic would at once result was not satisfied. Except for the continuing high prices and the bright clothes in the streets, Lugdunum settled back to normal. Aetius, who had accepted the hospitality of the magnate Avitus, was seldom seen out of doors; but a continual flow of messengers, to and fro, signalled the spot where he was lodged. More and more officials from the towns of central Gaul kept arriving, with their suites, and the town's accommodation was getting strained. The war was assuming for the Lugdunienses the aspect of a problem in bedrooms. Zonaras now had two muleteers posted on him as well as the Vandals; the only place to put them was in the store-room above the kitchen, where they managed to steal food even when mud-seals were stamped over the bins and chests. The Vandals, however, were honourable, if melancholy, men, who offered to beat and torture the muleteers to make them confess and to deter them from showing their cleverness in fabricating seal-impressions.

Then a detachment of a couple of hundred soldiers did arrive from the south, but after one night's camping outside Lugdunum they moved on along the river-bank to Matisco. Audax forgot his unformulated personal distresses in the interest of the spectacles which Lugdunum now provided; and through Prosper he got some idea of what was actually going on in the counsels of the Patrician. It seemed that the Roman forces were totally inadequate to hold back the Huns; in fact the invasion was a serious setback for Aetius in various ways, since he had for so many years recruited his imperial troops mainly from the Huns themselves! The only hope lay in gaining the active support of the Visigothic "allies" settled in Aquitaine. Aetius was exerting all his considerable diplomatic skill to rouse the Visigoth king to a sense of his own danger unless a common stand was made against Attila, but the Visigoths did not seem

to be responding. The magnate Avitus set off with an ambassadorial retinue glittering in silk and embroideries for Tolosa.

The news from the north was more definite now. Attila had certainly defeated the Burgundi. He had then divided his army into two, and sent one half north-west to attack the towns lying in that direction, while he himself marched up the Moselle and sacked Vesontio and other towns round about. He was now less than a hundred and fifty miles from Lugdunum. Audax began to fear for his parents, for the family estate lay about fifty miles north of Lugdunum, in the direction of the Hun advance. He discussed his fears with Prosper, who agreed to ride out with him and see what was happening. But as they were finalising arrangements a letter was delivered to Audax from his father, by the hands of a deacon who had passed a night at the estate while travelling to Lugdunum on some church business.

My son, I am writing to allay any fears that you may have of the safety of myself and your mother. My latest news is that the heathen deluge has not come further south than Vesontio but is turning westward. However, ease your mind, for we shall not stay here to test the truth of these rumours, but tomorrow or the next day will set off for Lugdunum. Do not fret if we are a few days on the journey, as your mother is not well, and I shall probably stay awhile with Gaius Elaphius on the way.

My heart is heavy. I thought that I should never be forced to leave the boundaries of my own land again. There is nothing in the outer world to entice me. I have seen that world visibly decay, till now it seems to me a pithless reed. I have seen the ignoble come to the fore and bleed my unhappy Gaul, unruly and insatiate men, who cross the good ways of sound custom in all things, wearing furs to church and listening to a litany in a beaver, harpies in exaction, battenning on all that seek quietly to do the world's work. Creatures who control the law-courts, spinning out a case if they are called in, blocking its progress if they are kept out; offensive if reminded of their duty, and, once they pocket their fee, forgetful of obligation. Creatures who buy themselves a lawsuit to sell their mediation; who control the appointment of arbitrators, dictate the sentence, and tear it up when it suits them; who incite litigants to sue, and hold the hearing in suspense, who hale off the convicted and force back into court those who would fain escape by settlement.

Into the hands of such has my country fallen, and I ask myself humbly if the rule of any of the barbarians could bring us a worse curse. You will pardon an old man's anger. My blessing on you. Farewell.

Audax smiled as he read. How often had he heard his father talk like that among his few old friends, carefully weighing the antitheses despite

the strength of his indignation. Who was it that had annoyed him by wearing costly vestments at a church service? Decimus Domnicus had always disliked any show among the clergy.

And yet, though the words were familiar enough, Audax read them as if for the first time; for he read them with comprehension. Previously such denunciations had sounded far above his head, odd comments coming out of the adult world and returning into it, without relevance to his own thoughts and experiences. Now they came closely home to his bosom, translating at least a part of his own gathering discontent into intelligible terms.

One of the Vandals was playing a small kind of lute, while the other was singing in a monotonous voice, out in the garden. They had a small jar of cheap pitchy wine, and had courteously offered to share it with Audax, he had accepted a mouthful, so as not to appear rude, and the harsh taste still clung to his lips and palate. Phoebe, coming down the stairs with her arms full of clothes for washing, bumped into him. "Where's your father?" he asked.

"He was called out unexpectedly. A woman was run over." She stood looking at him with her large calm eyes, clasping the bundle of clothes against her stomach. "Do you want to see him about something?"

"No." He felt that he wanted to ask Phoebe a question, to show her the letter. "My father's all right. Would you like to see what he wrote?"

"Must I read it in a hurry?"

"O no, take your time."

"I can't drop these clothes. Push it down my dress." She pressed her chin down to show him where to tuck the letter.

He pushed the piece of folded paper down the front of her dress. "Everything's so bustled and noisy nowadays. We don't seem to get the time for any of our old talks. Zonaras is working too hard. He can hardly keep his eyes open after dinner."

She bit her lip, still regarding him with what he thought was unusual sharpness. "Yes," she said at last, and turned away.

Audax went out into the street, wanting to find Prosper as quickly as possible. Where had Crescens gone? He walked off down the street, and as he passed the corner, he found that Crescens had come up behind him, unheard, to attach himself in his wonted position, a pace to the rear on the right. As they neared the Forum, Audax saw Prosper, who had been talking with one of the Dux's page-boys, and waved to him. They strolled off down the side of the Theatre, and Audax told Prosper that the journey to the estate was now unnecessary.

"They think that Attila is aiming for Cenabum," said Prosper. "It's the best thing that could have happened."

"Why?"

But before Prosper answered, they came on a rowdy group collected before a wine-bar. Everyone was pressing in to the doorway, and Audax

and Prosper could not see what was the centre of interest. A brawl, no doubt. They were on the point of passing on, when one of the men spoke to them. "They've caught him. One of the Bagaudae. Lucius Aquilinus recognised him."

They halted. One of the Bagaudae? The Bagaudae were the peasant rebels, for generations there had been Bagaudae prowling about in the wilder parts, ready to launch attacks on the big estates, swelling their bands at moments of crisis, chased and defeated by legionaries or by barbarian bands, crushed and then again re-forming their groups, half brigands and half warriors of a devoted war of revenge. Their insurrection had reached large proportions for the last time about fifteen years before; but Aetius had gathered an effective punitive force and with Visigothic aid had rounded up the main sections. Still, the peasants had never been altogether broken. Not for over a hundred years. And within the last few years there had been many signs of a recrudescence of insurrection. One of the Bagaudae? Both Audax and Prosper felt curious, and began pushing into the crowd.

But at that moment the crowd heaved and parted. The captive Bagauda, pinioned between two dishevelled men, was seen being led out. He had a cut above one eye, and his tunic was almost ripped off his back. The blood from the cut gushed over the whole of the left side of his face "Kill him!" some of the tradesmen shouted. "Rip his guts out!" One of them spat at him, another ran up behind and wrenched at his hair, jerking his head back. Audax saw the man's teeth flash in a snarl of pain. "Leave him for the torture, you fool!" screeched another of the townsmen.

Audax, backing away from the press, suddenly recognised the man. It was the fellow whom he had found Crescens talking with on the morning when the monk interrupted the lecture "I know him," he said excitedly to Prosper. "I saw him a while back in close conference with Crescens." It wasn't with any thought of giving Crescens away that he spoke; he was merely pleased at having something to say, something that gave him a sense of importance and related him to the unusual event concentrating the attention of everyone.

Prosper turned and looked for Crescens, who had left his usual place behind Audax's shoulder and was trying to efface himself in a doorway "Come here," commanded Prosper roughly. His suspicions were aroused "Why are you trying to skulk away there?" Crescens didn't answer; he dropped his head. Prosper turned and shouted to the men who were leading off the Bagauda. "Here's another of them. This scoundrel here was seen hatching mischief with that fellow you've caught."

Audax stood dumbfounded. He wanted to take back what he had said, to rescue Crescens, to knock Prosper down; but he did nothing. "Crescens," he called feebly. Crescens gave him one quiet look, but whether pleading or accusing, reproaching or asking aid, forgiving or

questioning, Audax could not tell. In any event it was too late now for Audax to interfere. The crowd had turned on Crescens and were pulling him about, slapping his face and tearing his clothes. Crescens made no effort at resistance. Audax saw his head lolling foolishly about, as the blows knocked it from side to side or crashed it up against the wood of the doorway. Then he could bear it no longer. He flung the nearest tormentor away, and yelled, "Leave him alone! He's my slave."

It seemed now that the crowd were going to turn on Audax. He saw their mad white eyes, their slavering mouths; and an overwhelming hatred and nausea possessed him. "You swine, you foul swine," he muttered. His sense of impotence prevented him from raising his voice, from hurling himself on the men before him. But Prosper thrust himself between Audax and the others.

"Behave yourselves, you louts!" he shouted. "Arrest that slave as an accomplice. At any event he's got to be questioned. Take them off to the quaestor's office."

Audax saw a slow trembling fit come over Crescens, who had lowered his head and refused to look up again. He knew what had caused that fit; it was the dread word *questioned*. That meant torture. He stood aside, helpless, and then, overcome by misery and shame, strode off. He was half-way home when Prosper, panting, caught him up.

"You're a strange fellow," said Prosper. "Running off like that. Aren't you feeling well? And why did you go on the way you did? You almost brought the crowd about your own ears."

Audax walked on in silence; he felt dazed, utterly wretched. At last he said with a fury that surprised himself, "Why did you do it?"

"What? Inform on that slave of yours? Why, it was you yourself that told me. And didn't you see his face? There's no question of his guilt. You wouldn't want a criminal like that to escape, would you?"

The words meant nothing. Crescens a criminal? It was impossible to make the words coincide. "All right . . ." He merely wanted to get alone.

"I'm sorry, of course, if you were attached to the fellow. But that's hardly my fault. And he was only a slave. And a criminal one at that. In touch with those brigands." Prosper was beginning to feel affronted.

"Of course. You couldn't have done otherwise. I'm feeling sick, that's all." What was it that he felt about Crescens? Simply an affection based on habit? He felt only an unavailing regret. Why didn't I bite out my tongue before I spoke?

Prosper was definitely aggrieved. "I can't understand you, Audax. If any of my slaves turned out rogues of that sort . . . Let's go and have another look at the armour," he suggested magnanimously, deciding to forgive Audax, after all. Audax was always a bit queer, unexpected in the way he took things. "There are so many orders for swords and breastplates that the only time they work on one's things is while one's standing over them."

"No, I feel ill."

Prosper, with chagrined face, let him go on alone. Audax felt the need to get back to the house. For a moment he had a leap of hope. I can forbid them to torture him. And then he remembered that the owner had no say in the matter when such charges as treason were concerned. Even a freeman wasn't safe when meeting such a charge.

He felt a blind need to find Zonaras and tell him what had happened. As if Zonaras would be able to heal the wound—rescue Crescens or save Audax's misery. "Is he in?" he asked Miccio, as he hurried in the doorway. Miccio wiped his eyes with his sleeve and pondered; he was getting old and vague about everything except prescriptions.

"What is that?" He muttered over the scrap of paper before him. "Scissile alum, yes, nitre, yes; now the acetabulum of powdered dry myrtle. What did you say?" He reached for a small box.

Unable to wait, Audax passed into the house. There was no one in the room used both for eating and for reading in. An open roll was lying on the window-sill, he went over and glanced at it, registering without interest that it was a copy of *The Letters of Epicurus*. Zonaras had an unusual library. Besides medical works, there was a collection of early Stoic, Epicurean, and Cynic treatises, and a large number of the plays of Aristophanes. Nothing else; none of the writings that were treated with such infinite and superficial dissection in the Schools. Audax leaned out of the window, to see if there was anyone in the garden. He saw Zonaras, and climbed up out of the window.

Both Zonaras and Phoebe were there; and for a moment he was annoyed at the girl's presence. He had wanted to be alone with Zonaras; he felt uncertain how to speak otherwise. He saw the intent, concerned eyes of Zonaras fixed upon him, and felt that he would never be able to speak. But he spoke. "They've arrested Crescens . . ."

Zonaras took him by the arm and drew him over to the seat in the arbour. "Sit down. You're looking ill."

"It's all my fault," said Audax, putting his hands over his face. It was pleasant to feel Phoebe at his side; their thighs were touching. "I didn't mean to do it." He wanted to be told that he wasn't to blame.

At the time it didn't strike him as strange that Zonaras asked him no questions. Suddenly he began to weep, feeling safe behind his hands, which shut out the faces of the world. Phoebe put her arms around him and held him close. The tears, after the first spasm, seemed to come without effort or meaning, a mere expression of weakness, filling him with a vague wonder; he hadn't shed tears since he was a child. But it was comforting to be held like that, against Phoebe's young body. She stroked his head. What had shaken him so badly? It wasn't for Crescens; it was for something baffled, arrested, shut up inside himself, that he wept. And then he realised what had been most staggering in the whole episode—the discovery that Crescens had interests outside the *familia*,

deep interests for which he had been ready to risk his life. The hidden depths, which this discovery implied, had left him totally uncertain; all faces had become masks behind which unknown fears and hopes burned obscurely in the slotted eyeholes. He found that he had ceased weeping. He sat up, and Phoebe's arms unclasped him. Zonaras had gone.

3. *The Opening of the Campaign*

The arrested Bagauda fell ill of a fever, and his questioning-by-torture was postponed. But while the judiciary was waiting, Crescens was racked. He protested that he knew nothing; and though his knee-joints were badly damaged, he managed to hang himself that night with a piece of rope. How he got the rope, the officers of the law were unable to ascertain. There was much talk during those days of unrest among the slaves and labourers of the town; it was even suggested that some kind of organisation was being set up among them to work in collaboration with the Bagaudae. According to Prosper, who got the information from one of the lesser Counts, Attila had been partly drawn into the invasion by invitations from the Bagaudae, who had sent one of their leaders to promise support if the Huns attacked Gaul. Prosper was full of indignation over this story; but Audax was so miserable and confused about himself that he felt nothing at all about the alleged complicity between Attila and the Bagaudae. He no longer trusted the appearance of things. What consumed him with a kind of remorse was not any thought of the sufferings of Crescens—who perhaps had deserved to suffer—but the fact that the slave's motives, his hidden life, were now beyond the reach of inquiry. Death had left Crescens forever enigmatic, ruthlessly pointing at Audax the finger of an unknown question.

Then the matter of his father's non-arrival began to worry him. He debated again with Prosper whether they should ride out and find what had happened. However, unless all the reports were totally wrong, there could not have been any threat to the estate from the Huns, who had swerved off west long before they had penetrated far into the Burgundian region.

Audax felt less friendly to Prosper; the episode of Crescens had left him chilled and unresponsive. But his desire to avoid talking about it made him try to hide from Prosper the changing state of his emotions. And Prosper himself was changing—becoming more self-confident and emphatic, even less than ever interested in probing into the thoughts of others. He took for granted that Audax would be extremely grateful over the gift of armour, and extended to him an increased warmth of manner, as to one on whom he had bestowed benefits. Audax now knew all about the forthcoming marriage; Prosper inclined to suggest that the idea of it had been his own, a brilliant stroke for the redemption of the family fortunes.

Efforts were being made to recruit for the army, but the citizens of Lugdunum had shown no great enthusiasm. Apart from some of the students, only two tradesmen who had been on the point of bankruptcy enlisted during the first week; then a baker's son and two of the more hard-pressed town-councillors gave in their names, in the hope that the service would enable them to get outside their hereditary castes. But a detachment of Burgundian cavalry arrived, as allies, and several men from the dock quarters were rounded up by a press-gang to serve as light-armed troops. Lack of equipment prevented any large-scale pressings.

Everything depended on the decision taken by Theodoric, the King of the Visigoths. Couriers rode, coming and going between Lugdunum and Tolosa. Luckily, the sweep of Attila into Central Gaul now seemed to be rousing the Visigoths, who would soon be in the line of attack if the Huns crossed the Loire, and Avitus's embassy appeared to be bearing fruit. For the moment the Huns were held up before the walls of Cenabum; they were weak as stormers of walled cities. The Bishop of Cenabum was organising the defence, while Sangiban, King of the Alans who were settled in that area, was suspected of a treacherous understanding with Attila.

One party of the magnates, gathered at Lugdunum, Prosper said, were working hard for a *rapprochement* between Roman and Visigoth. They declared that the invasion was a heaven-sent chance to create a unity on which the Western Empire could regain its energy and administrative competence. There was a suggestion of conspiratorial whispers in their plans; but Aetius seemed to have lent a benevolent half-ear.

The situation was sufficiently complicated, at any rate. Audax was walking home, thinking about the various bits of news and strategy that he had heard discussed. He saw Phoebe ahead of him, with a red shawl over her head; and he hurried to overtake her. There could be no mistake about recognising her walk; she had a quick way of passing along the street, a little bent forwards, at once graceful and angular. He came up behind her and touched her arm. She turned large frightened eyes and stopped.

"I'm so glad we met." She drew him aside out of the press into the doorway of a house where a small girl was playing with a clay doll. "Gaius . . . your father has arrived."

"Is he at your place? Of course, there's nowhere else."

She raised her head to stop him from hurrying on. "He's not very well. . . ."

A premonition of evil seized him. "And where's my mother?"

Tears came into her eyes. "I wanted to make things easier for you. And I've only made them worse . . . How useless I am!"

He took her hand and pressed it; then he turned and hastened off.

He had only a short way to go now, and he ended it almost at a run. He rushed into the house. There was nobody in the living-room. "Where is he?" he called, rushing back to the front and taking hold of Miccio

Miccio was busy setting out a series of small boxes on the shelf inscribed Detergents. "Don't push me," he complained. "You've made me spill some of the olibanum bark into the bdellum. What did you say? Hartshorn, ox-glue, nut-galls, ivory dust, omphacium. What did you say? It's years since we had such a good supply. I got them from one of the Dux's physicians—out of the imperial stores—at a reasonable price too. Look at that arsenic, now. . . . What did you say?"

Audax heard someone coming down the stairs. He went into the hall and encountered Zonaras. "Your father is upstairs, in the front bedroom," said Zonaras. "He's not at all well," he added warningly, as Audax turned to go up the stairs. "He's had a bad shock."

"And my mother?"

Audax merely muttered the question and did not wait for an answer. He hurried up to the front bedroom. The door was shut. He paused and knocked gently, and then entered. His father was lying on the bed, with his eyes closed. "No, it doesn't matter," he said, taking Audax for someone else.

Audax tiptoed up to the bed. "Father "

His father opened his eyes, and stared at him a moment, blankly. "My son," he said, and reached out both his hands, weakly. Audax gave him his right hand, which was eagerly but weakly seized and held. He feared to ask what had happened, and wanted to get out of the room. His father had closed his eyes again.

At last he had to say something. "Can I do anything for you, father?"

His father again looked at him in that blank hopeless way. How gaunt and sunken was his face, how old he was—he seemed aged many years since Audax had last seen him. "You know? . . ." Audax shook his head, and after a while his father went on, "We thought the danger was over . . . the Huns had turned westwards. Your mother was ill and didn't want to be moved. We delayed longer than I had meant." He closed his eyes again, and Audax saw two large tears slowly well out from under the lids and run down sideways over the ears. "She . . ." Audax felt sick, and wanted to wrench his hand away and run out. Why had he rushed back to undergo this misery? His father went on, "It wasn't the Huns. They had turned westwards. It wasn't the Huns." He repeated the statement, as if it exonerated him, proved his decisions to have been sound, wiped out what had befallen. The Burgundi were broken in their efforts to bar Attila. Some of their bands were driven southwards out of hand, enraged . . . wanting to kill, plunder, do something in rétors. . . . About fifty men came up. At first they only asked leave to water their horses, to be given some bread.

Then they broke into the wine-store. "That scoundrel Meleager—I'd put him in charge of the stables since you left—he led them to the cellar. They began drinking. In the dusk they came out yelling and entered the house . . . looting, looking for women. . . . When I tried to stop them, one of them knocked me out of the window. That saved my life. I fell into a bush and lay stunned for a while. The house was blazing when I crawled away. . . . It was too late to do anything."

Audax wanted nothing in the world except that the story should cease. He didn't want to know. His father's loose grasp grew looser, and fell away. Audax stood motionless, silent, watching his father close his eyes again and sink into a stupor. Then he tiptoed out of the room.

Now all that remained of the family—father and son—were living on the charity of the freedman. The family house had been burnt down, the slaves killed or scattered, the estate generally ravaged. The very possibility of claiming the land at some future date was dim. Even if things settled back to something like normal, no doubt the magnate on the west side or the Burgundi on the east side would be found in possession, and the family resources would certainly be unable to dislodge them. The family had no patronage among the magnates and thus could not hope to win any important lawsuit.

But Audax did not think the situation out; he was merely aware of an increased confusion, a benumbing of his thoughts. His father had fallen into a fever, and was getting weaker daily. Prosper, to be sure, had repeated even more confidently his promises of aid. But, though not breaking with him, Audax was resolved not to owe him anything further. The matter of the armour was different, it had been fixed up weeks before, and Audax felt the need to go ahead with the project of soldiering in order to escape from his own desolating thoughts. Then, after the campaign, he would make a new start, he would stand on his own feet, he would break away from Prosper. What he would do he had no idea, except that it would be quite different from what he was doing now. Prosper, who had been formally betrothed to Papanilla, was, however, as clear in his plans as Audax was unclear, he was going to use his father-in-law's wealth and position to turn the tables on his father's persecutors, and would then enter on a public career, he was already in touch with some of the dignitaries in the train of Aetius.

Then one morning he came breezily into the house of Zonaras, to announce that the campaign was really going to start at last. Aetius had come to terms with Theodoric. Gallo-Romans and Visigoths were to advance with all speed, with their respective forces, on Cenabum, which was still holding out.

Audax felt a pleasant relief at the news, his burden seemed lifted as he joyfully answered Prosper and felt the wind of action in his hair. But he was gripped with a slight constraint as he went out into the garden

to find Zonaras and tell him. Zonaras, without saying anything definite, had given him the impression of not favouring the expedition with Prosper

"He's gone out," said Phoebe, who was pulling up some weeds by a bush of rosemary, her hair falling over her face.

"By the way," said Prosper, who had followed Audax out, "you know that Bagauda they caught. He's escaped. There's no question but that he had accomplices in the town. Somebody at the jail must have helped him."

"I'll be going off tomorrow," said Audax.

Phoebe nodded and kneeled down again to get on with the weeding. Audax felt hurt. He turned and took Prosper's arm, and they went back into the house, cheerily discussing the arrangements.

The cavalcade was more military-looking this time; the wives and the more decorative officials were left behind at Lugdunum; Aetius was wearing a red army-cloak instead of a mantle glittering with gold thread. And the force, though woefully small, was much larger than Audax had expected; so many dribbles of reinforcement had been coming in for some time to Lugdunum. And as they marched, they picked up further contingents. The lads thought that they were members of quite a respectable army till they listened to the contemptuous remarks of veterans about the camp-fires. Obviously the hopes of the campaign rested on the Visigoths.

Prosper and Audax had been attached to a section of the Palatine Guards which was accompanying Aetius—a section of the School of the Shield-bearers. And they were very proud of the distinction, though the more legitimate members of the corps, mostly sons of Italian magnates, treated them and the handful of other Gallo-Roman recruits with a certain scorn and distance. Prosper was particularly upset at this treatment, and kept trying to dare the scorners into some test of horsemanship or arms, until he brought down on his head a strong rebuke from the officer in charge. Among the other recruits attached to the section were his two cousins; and he was galled most of all by the fact that they, as the sons of a particularly rich Gallic magnate, managed to get on closer terms with the real Guardsmen than he himself could achieve.

Their first important stop was at Augustodunum. There Aetius expected to receive messages from the Alans, Burgundians, Visigoths, and from various Bishops of Central Gaul, as well as to pick up further reinforcements before moving up the Loire valley. Audax had never visited this town, and the sight of it on the heights above the river, flanked by a background of thickly wooded hills, raised his heart. It reminded him concretely that Lugdunum was only one of the many cities, strongly walled and full of splendid buildings, arches, theatres, amphitheatres, aqueducts, temples now turned into churches or public monuments,

which the Romans had built throughout the country. And those cities were only a small part of the number which had been built all over the Mediterranean basin. The irruptions of the barbarians, despite all the problems and unsettlements which they had caused and were still causing, receded into the distance, to become irrelevant to the Roman eternity, the powerfully rooted forms which were capable of absorbing and civilising so vast an area, so vast a multitude of differing folks.

They entered the town by the ceremonial gate, used only on State occasions, with its double row of arcades that formed galleries with fluted pilasters and richly carved capitals and string-courses. The noble bas-reliefs seemed almost to shout to him; to proclaim the mood of triumph and confidence which had suddenly woken in his heart. The walls were strongly fortified, guarded by semicircular turrets, and recently another line of fortifications had been set up on the summit of the hill, constructed out of the remnants of old buildings. That last detail, which emphasised the shrinking of the original town, jarred on Audax's mood, suggesting that all was not so well as the sturdy bas-reliefs of might and mercy had proclaimed, but he did not learn it till the next morning, when he and Prosper were drinking in a tavern with a student of the famous Maenien Schools of the town, who had shown them the big map of the world in the imposing academy buildings. The Schools here, too, had shrunk, had come on bad days and financial difficulties. But the magnificent gates still reared their arches, the great temple of Apollo still received votive offerings from the faithful who had been cured by the ministering waters of the spring, though now a saint had displaced the god, the Baths were still thronged; races were still held in the Amphitheatre, even if no more slaves, cased in armour from head to foot, fought to the death on the sands; there were still men working in the foundries, though the number of abandoned furnaces seemed more than that of furnaces smoking and clattering.

They stayed in the town for three days, and the rumour went round that the news was good. The townsfolk were full of stories about how various tutelary saints had saved cities threatened by Attila. The saints of other cities had failed, however, to do their duty, and the Huns had burned the cities down. Still, the bishop of Divodurum had gallantly managed at the last moment to baptise all the infants recently born, so that, when the Huns burst in to burn priests and infants together, the worse danger of damnation had been averted. Meanwhile Bishop Amanus, at Cenabum, was praying on the ramparts and saving the city from attack.

Aetius was held up at Augustodunum by the case of the chief imperial official of the locality, who for years had been known as organiser of thieves and highwaymen, but who had now overstepped the mark by entering into treasonable correspondence with the Huns. One of his letters to Attila had been intercepted, in which he offered to betray the

city if guaranteed a sufficient percentage of the spoils. He had therefore been put under arrest, his judicial crimes raked up against him, and was being sent under guard to Rome for trial.

Prosper got rather drunk the third day, and started to quarrel with his cousin Hesperius outside a lupanar; but Audax dragged him away in time. Again he had the impression that the other cousin, Paulinus, felt friendly towards him. Paulinus had been standing at the back, looking depressed and weary, but when Audax drew Prosper off, he summoned up the energy to catch hold of his brother and begin talking hurriedly. Audax saw him standing there dark-browed, scowling, as if repelled by the whole affair; and wished that his loyalty to Prosper didn't stop him from trying to get in touch with this youth who seemed somehow akin to him.

The advance-guard of cavalry had galloped half a dozen miles ahead and then halted at a village, where they found an old woman ready to sell them wine. A sentinel was posted to look back down the road and report as soon as a cloud of white dust showed the main body of the army was approaching. The rest took the wine under the shade of some elms, and went on telling tales. Audax began to doze; dream-figures waved filmily against his closed eyelids, like puppets jerking to the rhythm of the hoarse voice talking insistently on. The world seemed continually falling away, jolting him; he could neither go to sleep nor wake up; and the jerky figures were mocking. He felt a dim conscience-protest against the way in which the squad were carrying out their supposed scouting work. A female shriek notified him that one of the village girls had ventured up and then thought better of it.

He tried to focus his anxiety. A dislike for the way that the squad were guarding the van? a feeling that he shouldn't have left his father? a doubt still felt about the arrest of Crescens? a wish to extort a fuller measure of cordiality from Zonaras? a growing repugnance for Prosper and his ways? Surely all those matters couldn't affect him enough to leave this continual corrosion of uncertainty. The excitement of the military work had worn off—not altogether, but sufficiently to start his qualms aching once more. Suddenly he thought: That Bagauda escaped; perhaps I'll meet him again some day; I'll be able to make him explain about Crescens. And he sat up, looking round for the black roughly-fired pot, with criss-cross hatchings, from which they had all been drinking. He heard a lark singing, heard it clear and limpid, scattering sparks of song, despite the chatter, and then the next moment could hear only the chatter. "Where's the wine?" His voice sounded thick.

There were two girls hiding behind a broken-down shed, clasping one another and trying to keep out of the line of vigilant village eyes while giggling at the handsome young guardsmen. "Leave this to me," said Prosper, and started to get up, but the wine and heat had made him

dizzy and he lost his balance, sitting down with a bump. The girls giggled loudly, forgetting caution at so exquisite a sight. Prosper flushed hotly, that dark-red flush that made him look so like his father. He got up and ran for the girls, who lost their nerve and scrambled under the bit of a hedge behind them, making for the nearest house in panic. Prosper yelled furiously at them.

A clatter of hooves was heard. Prosper ran for the roadway, and stared eastward, cursing. The other guardsmen jumped up. The sound of horses was coming from the west. "It's the Huns!" cried one of the older men. They all went running for the end of the tree-clump, where the horses had been tied. The man who had been put on sentry, to watch for the van of their own main forces, gave a startled halloo and rode off. The others were tugging at halters, leaping into saddles, getting in one another's way along the narrow track that led back to the road. A piercing trumpet-call rang out, fearfully near.

Prosper had stayed in the road, probably out of stupefaction, though he declared afterwards that he was the only one who didn't lose his head. Audax, wheeling his horse round, saw three horsemen ride at full speed up to where Prosper stood, and expected to see him cut down. The next moment another of the guardsmen, whose horse was rearing, obstructed his view. Audax backed his horse, and somebody shouted at him. He heard a crash, as one of the horses slipped and fell into the small, but steep reedy water-course. Then they were in the road, and the man in charge of the squad was calling orders. The guardsman ahead of Audax drew his sword. Audax tried to draw his sword, too, but his belt had come loose and tangled the scabbard with some of the leather-ties of his cuirass; for the moment he couldn't make out what had gone wrong, where the hilt was. He felt foolish and defenceless. Then he managed to draw his horse out of the press, down one side of the road. He was about to ride off in the direction they had come, when he realised that nobody was fighting.

"They're friends, you gawks!" Prosper was shouting tipsily. "I knew it. Call yourselves soldiers!"

More of the advancing horsemen had come up, they had reined their horses and were grinning amiably. The scouts of the Visigoths had come into contact with the scouts of the Roman army.

"Here, quick!" called the adjutant to Audax, who happened to be the man farthest down the road. "Ride off as fast as you can. Catch Ventidius up at all costs. He's ridden off to say the Huns are coming."

Audax nodded and kicked at his horse's ribs, and as he felt the horse breaking into a gallop and he leaned forward into the wind, he grew utterly happy; he seemed to hear the lark-song again.

4. *The Battle of the Mauriac Plain*

The combined armies advanced on Cenabum, and the Huns withdrew.

The relief had come only just in time. The Huns had already entered some sections of the city, which they left plundered and smoking. The Roman vanguard, as they entered the city, encountered the citizens cautiously putting out fires and clambering among charred debris. Then in the main part of the city, the Bishop, clustered about by clergy and civic officers, received them amid victorious trumpets, hymns, and cheers. Shortly afterwards messengers came from the Alans, protesting that they had not aided the Huns in any way. Aetius replied that of course they would then at once add their host to the Allied Army, and next day, while the Allies were mustering to the north of the city, King Sangipan appeared with a considerable Alan force, tawny-haired horsemen with dried scalps hanging to their saddle-bows. During the afternoon, drawn by the smell of booty, some Armoricans from the west, and a further detachment of Ripuarian Franks, who had slipped round Attila's eastern flanks, arrived to swell the Allied Army and to increase the variety of its constituents.

Attila had continued to withdraw. Scouts announced that he had crossed the Seine; he was making for open country, where the shock tactics of his cavalry would have their best chance. The Allied army continued in pursuit. Only a small portion of it (Audax noted as he rode in the bodyguard of an official sent by Aetius to Theodoric) were marching in correct legionary fashion, six abreast, under centurion and eagle-standard, though Aetius was doing his best to get some kind of unified discipline into the heterogeneous mass. The commissariat was rather primitive and uncertain, with the result that the various sections of the army lived off the country as much as possible, requisitioning food wherever they met it. Sporadic episodes of more serious looting had occurred during the night spent in Cenabum, and no doubt the citizens were glad enough to see the departure of their saviours.

The lead in the pursuit was being taken by the Visigoths and Franks. The third night out from Cenabum, as Prosper and Audax were lying on some brushwood round the camp-fire and still feeling hungry after the millet porridge, the noise of an extended encounter could be heard over on the north-east—a long low roaring clash and clanging. The army was called to arms, but nobody seemed to know what was happening. Couriers wandered about, getting lost and returning on their own traces; sudden rumours of attack sprang up, and were passed from mouth to mouth; the starry darkness was filled with looming menaces, amid which the snort of the next man's horse sent one's heart thudding. Somebody trod barefoot on ashes that hid a heart of glowing wood, and yelled like a hundred Huns. A man stumbled and pricked the rump of a horse with a spear he was lugging along, and the horse plunged neighing off, knocking two soldiers over and ending tangled in a tent, kicking and rolling, amid a scurrying tumult. The groans of the man who had been trampled in the stomach went eerily on, he had fallen under a

baggage-cart and couldn't be found for a while. And all the time the battle-noise seemed coming nearer, receding, coming nearer.

Next morning, after a mile's advance, they began to pass over a road cumbered by the corpses of Franks and Gepidae who had fallen during the night. A detachment of Huns swooped round a small forest of oaks and beeches, and threw the van into confusion. Audax's squad was among the force ordered up in support, but the Huns were in retreat before they reached the point of conflict. Altogether, the war was ceasing to be a joke, an episode of wine and brag; and Audax had doubts about the wisdom of his choice in enlisting. But Prosper was at home in the new developments, he looked sterner, harsher, with set jaw, in several small details he showed initiative. Audax decided to hang on at his side, a little behind him.

The first serious tussle occurred over the control of a piece of rising ground in the plain, near to which Attila had moved and camped. The Visigoths, who were incomparably the most actively disciplined of the Allied troops, made a quick and daring sortie, and flung back the advance-line of Huns who were seeking to occupy the heights. A courier, hurrying past, gave the word to Audax's squad that the operation had been successfully carried out; and Audax could see, on the edge with a clump of firs, the gathering body of skin-clad Visigoths. Then the order came for the Roman cavalry to gallop round farther to the left and take up a position at the extreme end of the wing.

Audax now had his first full view of the Hunnic encampment—a large round of waggons and carts, with the army collected within it. Continual movements in the camp were visible, but from the distance their purpose could not be made out. It seemed sure, however, that the Huns and their auxiliaries were being drawn up in battle-array, and that the decisive encounter would come off that day. Audax felt alternations of courage and fear, like currents of heat and cold striking his body; a desperate effort was going on in his mind to get something clear. Two entwined thoughts accompanied this perturbed effort. I must get the matter clear, for this is my last chance, I am going to die, and death will be too bitter if I die with the riddle unsolved. And then: If I get it clear, I won't die. He saw the man next to him fingering an amulet that was strung round his neck; and he felt that the unsolved difficulty in his mind, the ache as of something essential but forgotten, was a kind of spiritual amulet. It made him different, singled him out from the others with an unfulfilled destiny, assured him that he had something to give to life; therefore he would not die; he was outside this mad clash of bloody and predatory needs which was going to happen in a few moments. And then the certainty fell away; the gap in his thoughts widened like the abyss into which he was going to tumble, a foretaste of death. He had nothing to which to cling; nothing in which he believed.

He had not even the anger pledged to take revenge for family misfortunes, such as Prosper had.

A hulking mass of cloud toppled over the sun unexpectedly, darkening the whole plain with a racing shadow. A horse pawed the ground. Suddenly the noise from the Hun camp seemed to come closer. All the forms clotted, surged, began opening out, in the darkening sweep of wind, the chill of the blood. He felt for his sword. The man on the left was having trouble in fixing the side-pieces of his helmet; the lace was rotten. "My cursed helmet will slip off as soon as we charge," he muttered to Audax. "I meant to get a new lace yesterday." Over towards the centre some Alans had stuck a naked scimitar in the ground and were howling adorations at it. Then the squad moved farther out again, and Audax lost sight of the centre. He saw Visigothic and Roman reinforcements trudging up the narrow track at the back of the hillock. A detachment of Frankish horsemen came thundering gaily over to take up their position next to Audax's squad. They were led by a nobleman in a flame-red mantle over a white silken tunic, gold bracelets and torques harmonised with his bright yellow hair, all his accoutrements and harness gleamed with gold. His followers wore high, close-fitting, short-sleeved tunics that reached only about half-way down their thighs, their knees were bare; their feet were shod in low hide-boots that had the bristles showing. Each had a green cloak with purple border, and a skin mantle over it, brooched on the right shoulder to leave the sword-arm free. The sword was carried on a baldric. Each man had also a round shield silver-chased with a gold boss. Some had barbed lances, others had the characteristic axe, *francisca*, stuck in their belts, ready to split open the foeman's skull or be flung at him from a distance. Audax felt easier when this redoubtable detachment had taken up its station close at hand.

Prosper leaned across to stroke his horse's neck and say something soothing. The horse whinnied and threw up its head, then quieted. The man on the other side was muttering charms, invoking various saints. He threw a suspicious glance at the Franks, and then asked Audax. "Are they heretics? Are they Arians like the Goths?"

"I don't know." Audax found it hard to think of anything outside the ring of battle that was enclosing them. "No, they're Catholic, I think. Unless they're pagans."

The man spat uneasily, and went on fingering his amulet. Audax had another glimpse of Prosper's face; the stern, resolute set of it gave him a sense of comfort and drove away his doubts for the moment. He felt a strong affection for Prosper and tried to expel from his mind all the hostile thoughts about him that had come so thickly the last few weeks; it seemed now that his safety lay in keeping close to Prosper, in maintaining harmony with him. And then suddenly, as he felt himself successfully expel all those hostile thoughts, he was overcome with a gush of

love, not only for Prosper, but for the whole world, for the earth itself and for the manifold forms of life arising and falling away, the faces of men and women, the least wildflower lifting its crumb of beauty. He wanted to live.

The cloud had blown over. The sunlight came back over the plain, in a great billowing sweep. And abruptly the waggon-round of the Hun encampment seemed to break, to expand, to exude men on foot or horseback from a myriad pores, section after section were deploying to counter the threat of the mustering Allies. Now he felt both fear and resolution, the two impulses struggling in his blood as if the battle had already been opened, and in the depths of his mind, like a foreboding of grief and death, the remembered voice of his old nurse, now long dead, repeating in her drowsy, affectionate voice, "March-born, born for tears and sorrow, poor dear child, born when the vines are covered with little tears, born when the vines weep." Trumpets were snarling, bursting, outswinging their terrific banners of power and exultation. Why do I fight? And he was sure that his father was dead—left to die in a poverty-stricken house, thrown on a freedman's hands, with everything lost, everything darkened.

Prosper turned and smiled at him, saying something that Audax could not distinguish; and again the feeling of safety came over him. For a moment he rejoiced in the coming battle, gripping his sword-hilt, wanting to strike and to see the blood spout, himself invulnerable. The Hunnic army was massing into its final positions, the reserves coming up behind the wings and centre, a movement of groups which, though hurried in its details, gave an impression of slow vast interweavings of ominous concentration. Hesperius, whose horse had got a little out of control, pulled in ahead of Prosper without noticing him; but Prosper leant forward and called in a hard subdued voice, "Out of my way!"

Hesperius looked round, with narrowed brows. He did not hear what Prosper called, but saw his gesture of impatience. His face flushed darkly, showing a family resemblance to Prosper, and he was about to answer angrily. But one of the older men shouted to him; and, guiltily aware that he was getting out of line, he dragged brutally at his reins, pulling the horse back on its haunches. Audax sheered away, thinking that the horse was going to roll over; but the next moment, choking and coughing, it struggled up and submitted to its rider's guidance. Audax thought: I shouldn't have left my father when he was so broken-down, needing me for the first time.

A tremendous shout came from the Hunnic army, beginning at the centre, near the entrance to the camp, and spreading in rolls of sound out to the wings. Audax watched closely the long wavering front-line of the enemy, wondering where the attack would first be launched. The line seemed extending, seeking to curve in on the flanks as more reserves came up. A detachment of Burgundi, sent from the rear of the

hill, came dashing up to reinforce the extreme left-wing of the Allies; their long hair, greased with rancid butter, streamed over their shoulders. Footmen, Visigothic and Gallo-Roman, were getting into battle-line along the hillside. Between the two armies small sections of light-armed troops, archers and slingers, were manoeuvring, stringing out and running up to discharge their missiles. A Frankish warrior, not far from Audax, nonchalantly lifted his round shield to intercept a coming shaft; the arrow splintered on the metal, and the Frank then turned the shield round to make sure that the decorative work on its face hadn't been damaged. Audax saw the grinning face of a Scythian archer who had run impudently close; the fellow seemed to be aiming straight at him, but the shaft went wide. "Can't we charge these pests?" growled Prosper.

"You'll get all the charging you want before the day ends," said the older man on his farther side.

The whole battle-line of the enemy was advancing, but at unequal rates. On the right wing the advance had turned into a headlong assault. Audax couldn't see what was going on; the hill was in the way; but the clamour left no doubt as to the joining of battle. Here, on the left, the movements were slower, already the Huns had been hurled back down the slopes in the preliminary engagement, and Attila had no intention of throwing men away on an uphill charge. But the persistent effort to outflank the hill kept on. The two opposing front-lines were closing in at the same time; the light troops had withdrawn, slipped in through the interstices of the ranks, leaving a narrowing space between the armies. The slow, steady manoeuvring for positions began to get intolerable. Some more Visigothic cavalry, with long hair and skin-cloaks trailing in the wind of their speed, came up from the reserves to extend the wing. Now, now, Audax went on saying to himself, agonised by the delay, the withheld shock. Now, now. But still the attack withdrew inside that interweaving movement of menace, extending, gathering, pressing in and out.

Then it came. With a shattering yell, a broadening wedge of Germanic auxiliaries came charging at the base of the hill, and at the same moment a torrent of horsemen came pouring out of the ends of the wing, to swing round on the flanks. Audax saw the powerfully-built young Visigothic Prince, Thorismud, dashing past on horseback to take up his position at the head of the Allied cavalry of the left wing, unhelmeted, with only a ribbon of red round his head to mark his rank. A banner of scarlet and gold swung against the sky. From a point half-way up the hill, where the reserves were specially thick, Visigoths and Romans charged down the bouldered slopes against the flank of the attacking wedge. Trumpets snarled and burst.

That was the last moment that Audax had any coherent picture of events. The next pulse he was moving with the others of his squad, though he had heard no word of command—charging against the massive

wedge that was being driven into the meeting-point of left wing and centre. He had a vague sense of the Frankish squadron on the right taking part in the same movement, and of Prosper ahead of him, slightly on the left, and all around a huge weltering sea of ferocious faces and the flashing points of death. Before he had had time to take thought, they were all in the midst of that sea. A German with great flaxen moustaches lifted a sword at him, but the horse rode him down; and only afterwards was Audax conscious of the danger, a memory of a crash, the horse neighing with terror, a jolted lurch when he almost slipped from the saddle, and then a leap. He had his sword in his hand, and leaned forwards on the right, bringing the sword down on the head of a man with a spear, who was aiming at someone else. "Steady!" he shouted. His only thought was the need to control his horse, to ease its fear. "Steady!" He cut out at another man, but missed, and again all but fell from the saddle. He felt furious because the mad ferocious faces were still seething all around him and would not give him time to quieten his horse. The helmet of the rider ahead of him was knocked off and fell towards him, the crest of red horsehair swished across his left hand; and he shouted, "Prosper!"

But it wasn't Prosper. The man turned, his face set in a grin of rage and terror, and at that moment a spear took him in the throat, passing across the front of Audax. Leaning into a world that seemed suddenly smeared all over with blood, Audax struck again, without seeing what he struck, and hit on something hard, which jarred his hand. A Gepid with a two-handed sword was yelling a battle-song; he swept into Audax's view for a moment, giving a terrible sideways blow at someone. In an interlocking of the press a man with dark matted hair was reaching up from the belly of Audax's horse, striking clumsily with a dagger. The point caught Audax on the upper thigh, slid on the armour-scales into the red leather, gashed the flesh. Audax leaned over and smashed the hilt of his sword on the man's face, his nose and teeth; and the man sank away, was drowned in the mad swaying tide of fury. A cicatrised face, the first Hun face that Audax had seen close at hand in the battle, leaped up before him; and he cut weakly at it; his wrist was hurting, but the face melted away. Three Germans were making for him instead. One of them had his hair done up in a tall topknot, another had his hair in two plaits; their faces were etched on Audax's mind with supernatural clarity, in a hard, brassy light of thunder. He felt powerless, unable to get his bearings; the earth was heaving, space was filled with wild, revolving vanes of uncontrollable motion, a vortex of madness spun by the battle-whoops. Then he made a supreme effort to master his dizziness; the spear struck his horse in the chest.

He managed to jump free. The German with the topknot came at him in a frantic bounding charge, with exalted face, chanting some battle-yell. Audax staggered on something slippery—torn entrails; the spear missed him. Launching himself from a crouched position, he leaped, not

at the German with the topknot, who had swerved aside somehow, but at a flat-faced Hun, who fell backwards. Audax struck at him with his sword, hutting him in the shoulder. Turning, he saw one of the Franks take the axe from his belt and throw it at the big German, crashing the blade full into the chest-bone. A riderless horse came neighing and curvetting, and Audax ran towards it, but it evaded him and plunged off into the battle-press. Audax looked feverishly round, seeking for a line of retreat, but his sense of direction was quite gone, and all around he saw the twisting, upleaping bodies of men in mortal combat. His foot met a small bramble-bush, strangely untrampled, and his heart almost broke with a surge of love for the earth, for the sunlight and the bird-songs of yesterday; it seemed that if he desired strongly enough he could contract his stature and creep in under that bush, hide away for ever from the tumult of murder. A whooping Frank rode past, swinging a great hanger; the toilet articles—scissors, tweezers, bone comb—hanging on laces from his belt almost hit Audax in the face.

A javelin whistled overhead. Again the eddying frenzy was closing in on him. He was filled with the fear that someone was about to strike him down from behind. He turned to meet the attack of a lightly-armed man, who, seeing him prepared, ran with a whoop to the left. He turned again and struck out at the nearest of two Germans who were attacking a dismounted Frank. He seemed to put no force into the blow, but saw to his surprise the German drop his sword, with blood streaming down his arm. Then he struck out sideways, missed, fell, with a confused image of swarming enemy faces, the teeth of mad grins, and the myriad flashing points of death. Now, now, he cried in his heart, and as his last effort he uttered a vow, a prayer, a hope, an oath of self-dedication—but to what or to whom he cried out in his heart, with that infinite yearning for life, for renewal and realisation, he had no idea. Crying that he would not fail if given another chance. Crying amid a hubbub of dwindling faces on the edge of sleep, a cleft of sheltering sweetness, under the bramble refuge, flattened to the eternal earth. A rough hand had him by the throat, turned him over; someone stumbled across him, he felt that his left shinbone was cracked; the uproar was rising, rumbling, crashing like a great wave on the cliff of life, splashed upwards into a last foam-burst, a shrill edge of dissolution. Crying in gratitude. How sweet is life!

Paulinus it was, the melancholy younger cousin of Prosper, who lifted him, laid him across the saddle-bow, then jumped back into his saddle. Audax had a last vision of an endless pattern of lashing hooves about his skull before darkness like a hand plucked him, plucked him like a fruit from the bough of life, dropped him, despite the final resisting pull of the stalk, into emptiness. The resistance, the snapping of the stalk, was like a love-contact, as the world went out.

The whispering of waters. A slow cradling movement, a sway of deep tides; and strange monstrous faces of the eddying depths. His body kept rising towards the surface, sinking again down to the dark phosphorescent aisles of flux and reflux in the secret depths. At moments he saw his life like a silver chain of dim bubbles linking him with the lost surface, but he himself was lost, drowned amid the great wavering, seaweed shapes, the cradling shadows. Then suddenly the whispering waters took the rhythm of the song his old nurse used to croon, "Turtle-turtle, what do you there? . . . He drove a white horse and went splash in the sea . . ." And then the crooning voice hoarsened, broke, said, "My toss again." And he opened his eyes and complained with febrile annoyance, asking for a drink. Nobody heard him for a while, and then as he was falling back into a daze of impotent rage he felt his lips moistened with wine. He opened his eyes again and saw Paulinus "You . . . I'd like us to be friends. . . . I'm thirsty. . . . But there's Prosper . . . and I hate him." Again his lips were moistened.

Half an hour later he was sitting up, rested against a couple of saddles, and drinking soup. The wound in his thigh was throbbing; and there were various aches that twinged badly as soon as he moved, especially one on his shin, but otherwise there was nothing wrong with him. And the battle? The battle was won, more or less. King Theodoric had been killed, men were now saying that there'd been a prophecy about Attila losing the battle and his foe losing their bravest leader. Thorismud had led the decisive charge round the flank. Attila's centre, where his Huns were mostly stationed, had held, but the Visigoths had broken the lines opposite. To save his host from being disastrously outflanked, Attila had had to withdraw in mass to the camp. And there he still was.

Leaning on the arm of Paulinus, Audax next morning walked up to the hill to a point from which they could get a good view of the waggon-ringed camp, the plain still mounded and littered with dead, the carrion-crows rising and settling down, the encircling lines of the victors. In the middle of the camp the Huns were busy building a kind of pyramid.

"What's that?" asked Audax.

"Somebody says they're heaping up their wooden saddles. Attila's going to use it as a pyre in case things are hopeless for him. Sit up on the top with all his wives and burn to death rather than be captured."

"Is there any word, after all, of Prosper?"

Paulinus looked around, apparently to make sure that his elder brother, Hesperius, was not lurking near. "No. I've made all enquiries that I can. . . ." He paused and shuddered. "I've even had a look at a large number of the dead. . . . But I can't find him. . . . You know, I don't feel any of the family feuds in myself. I'd have liked to drop them all long ago. And now I feel that way more than ever. This is the first and the last time that I'll ever do any killing. I'm still confused, I don't

know my own meaning—I mean, I don't know where it's leading me . . . but I know I can't go on the same way as I've been going." He beat his breast "There's something inside me that I want to let out, and can't. I must get a new start. . . . Yes, I can speak openly to you I couldn't say to my own brother what I've just said. I always felt that we could understand one another." He spoke without looking at Audax, staring away over the plain, his voice rising and falling with a half-strangled intensity, as if mixing doubt and plea. Then, as Audax was wondering what to say in adequate response, he began singing softly, almost to himself, the *Morning Hymn* of St. Ambrose, "O Splendour of paternal glory . . ." And a mild luminosity came over his gaunt but gentle face.

Audax watched him covertly, with a touch of both envy and irritation. And then, almost against his will, he found the words of the hymn awakening a response "Light of light and Fount of brightness, Shining Day of all the days . . ." For the moment, anyway, the idiom was sufficient to utter that rapture of gratitude which had overcome him in mid-battle, the abrupt joy amid all the roar of murder that among the bare rocks of lonely hills the wild lavender would be yielding its sharp freshness to the kneading hands of sunlight . . . Tears came into his eyes. Again, stabbingly, he was sure that his father had died

"Are they going to attack?" he asked after a while.

"Attack?" Paulinus found difficulty in coming back to the world of war. "I don't know. But Perpeticus, who understands these things, says that there won't be any attack. He says that the last thing Aetius wants is to break Attila's power altogether. That would make the Visigothic kingdom too strong. Aetius has built his power as Dux on Hun mercenaries. He's an old friend of Attila. He's rather in a fix, whatever he does. . . ."

And so it turned out. Thorismud was pressing vehemently for an assault on the Hunnic camp, and Attila, putting his wives on the improvised pyre, prepared to ascend the flames if the attackers broke in through the waggon-ring. Aetius was hard put for a while to hold back the eagerness of the young Visigothic Prince; then he decided to turn his thoughts from the war by pointing out the dynastic difficulties in which he was liable to find himself now that his father Theodoric was dead. The Visigothic kingship was elective; but the heir of the last holder had the best chance of stepping into the position. Thorismud had better regularise his claim to the kingship by appealing to the clansmen—under-arms to elect him, or at least to ratify his assumption of power; and, besides, wouldn't it be as well if he gave a thought to his brother left at Tolosa, where the treasury lay? Aetius knew that a few words about the likelihood of that brother grabbing the treasury and claiming the throne would damp Thorismud's interest in avenging his father and in winning further military renown. Whoever held the

treasury held a strong claim upon the king-making voices of the Visigothic warriors.

So Thorismud wanted to get back to Tolosa without delay. The besieging forces, which had moved all round the doomed camp of the Huns, drew away on the eastern side. Attila had the pyre unbuilt; his men needed their saddles. The wives, reprieved from the flames, were bundled once more into the caravans under the control of the eunuchs. The Hunnic host retreated sullenly eastward, burning the villages and townships that came in their way; and the cavalry of Aetius hung on their rear till they were safely across the Rhine, setting their course once more for the steppes of Central Europe.

But neither Audax nor Paulinus was among the horsemen who saw Attila on his way eastward. An army doctor willingly pronounced them both on the sick list—Audax because he was genuinely unable to campaign further, and Paulinus because he was the son of a great magnate, and humble army doctors naturally agreed with whatever the sons of magnates said. The two youths were making the return journey to Lugdunum by easy stages, while the shattered Hunnic host was trekking into the east.

II

THE REST OF THE YEAR

1. *In Hungary*

WHEN PROSPER FELL with a glancing sword-wound in the head, there was a passing rally of Hunnic cavalry on the left wing. He was dimly aware of the lashing hooves as he lost consciousness. When he opened his eyes again, he thought he was still under the hooves, though the image had become impalpable, it was no longer threatening, it was merely the repetitive expression of a world that had revealed the blind forces ravening at its core. Then, slowly, the image broke up, drifted away, resolved into the flicker of sunlight, the rays coming through the wheels changing with the shadows of men passing by, the great sun-pulse of destruction which proved to be located on the left side of his head, a stone sharply sticking into his ribs, and someone monotonously groaning. Close overhead creaked, and with an effort he realised that he was under a waggon, and begged in a croaking voice for water. Begged the flicker of morning light and changing shadow, the world that seemed turning in the wooden wheel, the ant crawling over the peg hanging from heaven by a leathern string.

There were three other men under the waggon; one of them was dead. The four of them had been dragged there at the orders of Ellak, a Hun noble, in the interval between the defeat and the encircling movement. Ellak wished to have some enemy captives for sacrifice if his master Attila decided to burn on the pyre. It would not be fitting for the flame to be lighted without the slitting of at least a few throats of the enemy. Ellak sent out some of his men with orders to bring in the nearest wounded foemen lying about the camp, preferably those who seemed of better rank. If such a great lord as Attila were to die with only a miserably few captives slaughtered beside his pyre, at least let them be captives of the highest quality possible. The excellent workmanship of Prosper's cuirasse, the gilding and the medallions, saved his life, for while looking out for a handful of captives who would not disgrace the death-pyre of the King, the search-party finished off any wounded foemen of lesser rank that they came across. One of the men, satisfied that Prosper was still breathing, caught him under the armpits and dragged him across the coarse grass towards the waggon-ring; and Ellak, who happened to be standing up on the driving-seat of the waggon to get a view of the plain, was pleased with the gleam of gilding and nodded affably, thinking that the sacrifices mightn't be so inadequate,

after all The man who dragged Prosper under the waggon tied a dirty rag round the head-wound before leaving him.

About noon Prosper managed to creep out from between the wheels. He could smell soup. Nearby sat two Germans of Ellak's retinue, with steaming bowls; and one of them, who wore a collar of amber beads, answered Prosper's moaning pleas by pouring a little of the soup into an earthenware cup and handing it to him with a caution that it was hot. Prosper drowsed over the cup, inhaling the fumes of the soup; he felt increasing nausea and his mouth watered, his stomach wanted to retch. He was no longer aware of hunger, but felt only that his life had been poured into the cup and that he must gulp it down again or he would die, but each time he moved to lift the cup, the nausea came over him, the fumes dizzied him, his arm was nerveless. The struggle seemed to go on for hours, but the soup was still slightly warm when he managed to take the first sip. Finally he found himself staring at an empty cup; and now his whole need was to fight the waves of nausea, to preserve the life that had been handed back to him. A servant came up and lifted him into the waggon, with the one other captive who was still alive. Prosper lay stretched out on a heap of fine carpets which Ellak had looted from a house at Divodurum. Fitfully he saw the piece of sky revealed where the canvas was looped back; a slow darkening of blue. And through the night woke querulously to the moans of the man at his side, who was dead in the morning. Then it was his own voice that disturbed him, speaking from the other side of a veil of fever that hazed the world. What was the fool talking about? jeering, mocking, telling everyone about things that ought to be kept decently hidden. . . .

When the waggons were harnessed for the retreat, the servant who had been attending to Prosper approached his master Ellak with due prostrations and asked what was to happen to the captive, since no sacrifices were required. And Ellak pulled in his wiry horse, and deliberated. Should he have the fellow's throat cut after all, as an informal gift to the gods of blood? or was it worth while to keep him for future negotiations as to ransom? Ellak remembered the gleam of the fellow's armour, and decided that while the space in the waggon wasn't needed for anything else, he might as well keep the captive. The campaign had been unremunerative in comparison with what had been hoped; Ellak was sorry now to think of articles which he had seen given to the flames in the captured cities, at that time he had been so sure that much better booty would be available from the larger cities of the centre and south. Best, then, not to throw away even small sources of profit, since the campaign had ended so ingloriously. And thus, for a second time, Prosper's lavish expenditure over his armour saved his life.

The increasing lack of draught-animals and the pressure from the pursuing troops of Actius meant that more and more of the waggons

and carts were abandoned. It was therefore lucky for Prosper that by the time Ellak was reduced to concentrating all the most valuable articles of his booty in a pair of waggons, he, Prosper, had recovered sufficiently to walk along at the side of the waggons. As he lay at night beside the servants of Ellak he meditated plan after plan of escape. How easy it ought to be to slip away into the darkness. So near—only a few hundred yards away, perhaps, on the other side of the fireglow and the sentries—there awaited the tracks of freedom, thickets in which to lurk, water-courses that would hide his footprints on their pebbled beds, friends who would stow him away in cellars until the Hunnic host had passed on in its retreat. But he felt so weak, he could never bring himself to make the attempt, as soon as he tried to nerve himself to the point of action, the space to be covered stretched out and out, and the fiery sentinel eyes burned vigilantly in the dark. There was no way of getting through. He fretted on an indecisive edge of fear, each moment making him less capable of action, till he dropped uneasily asleep and the flame-eyes haunted his dreams. Tomorrow night I shall feel stronger. With that formula he eased each night his sense of failure; and through the day's march he noted the features of the country, assuring himself that he must get them clear, otherwise he would be unable to carry out his night-flight with success. But again it was only in his dreams that he fled.

Ellak had lost some of his body-servants during the campaign, and Prosper was given various of their duties to do. His status of captive dubiously awaiting ransom passed insensibly into that of slave-retainer. Then the man who looked after Ellak's favourite falcon, which accompanied its master on all his expeditions, died of blood-poisoning caused by an arrow-wound; and Prosper mentioned that he was not unskilled in falconry. Ellak told him that he could take charge of the falcon, adding that if he had bragged untruly of his skill he would be flogged with a whip of hooks or put bound in a cage with crows to have his eyes eaten out. Ellak was very attached to the falcon.

But Prosper had not bragged; he knew as much about falconry as the man who had died of a gangrened wound; the falcon looked as sleekly vigorous as ever, stamping on the leathern band that Prosper wore round his wrist as sign of his promotion. Ellak swore by the tusks of the swine of hell, the falcon approved of its new keeper. Prosper was appointed to the settled position of Ellak's falconer.

They had passed the Rhine, and the anxiety, counselling escape at all costs, had died down in Prosper's blood. Instead there came a torpor; he trudged on, thinking only of the next meal when he would shoulder the others away and snatch at the meat floating in the greasy cauldron. He grew taciturn and morose. Only with one of the Germans—the one who had given him the cupful of soup on the first day of his captivity—did he feel any contact. The man, an Ostrogoth, continued to show friendliness; he protected Prosper during the earlier days when the wound

was still bad, seeing that he got sufficient food and refusing to let the other servants impose on him. Not that many words were exchanged between the pair, though the Ostrogoth knew enough Latin to make himself understood. But sometimes Prosper looked up to find the man looking at him, and then the other would give a slow smile and nod his head.

Then, as Prosper settled to his rôle as falconer, the torpor began to peel off; an interest in the world about him returned. He took extreme care to carry out his duties, not only because Ellak had threatened him. For the first time since his capture he had something at which to catch; he no longer felt himself drifting on a dark current of bafflement. He ceased revolving impotent plans of escape in his mind, he began once more to live in the present, in the immediate tasks and needs. Ellak approved of him and showed him small favours. Prosper was aware of the instant growth of envies and malices among the other servants; and this antagonism stimulated him. He made no concessions to it; he grew even more surly to all the others except the Ostrogoth. He watched and listened with intense care to learn the exact standing of each of the body-servants, the leagues and rivalries among them, the ways in which Ellak's favour could be gained.

And so the host moved on eastward, shedding from point to point detachments of Germanic folk who had come to join the expedition at the bidding of their overlord Attila and who were now dismissed back to their territories. The country became more and more strange to Prosper, who watched with keen eyes. At the back of his mind, despite his abandonment of all active plans at escape, there lurked the thought that some day he would want to make the return journey. Then, on days of cloud, they came to a region of criss-crossing waterways, passing by difficult roads through the marsh-rushes. Small villages of rounded huts humped here and there on mounds. Mist crept out of the dusk and hovered in ghostly forms on the rim of the glow cast by the camp-fires; the men shivered and lay close together on their skin cloaks. There was no glitter on the burnished water, the willows stirred drably in the morning breeze. The men tramped on through soggy patches of mud and sallow grass churned stickily by the cart-wheels.

And then they came out on the edge of the plain, the steppe-lands. The earth rang hard and dry under the hooves, the creak and crack of the heavy vehicles. The road took its last meanders through rotting reeds, and began to run straight on to the end of the world. Dust rose under the hooves, more and more dust. Prosper, feeling the moment ripe for a test of his position, complained to Ellak that he could not carry the falcon on his wrist if he were still to trudge so close to the dust. "And may a man ride in a waggon when he holds so kingly a bird?" Ellak smiled, his dark flat face crinkling complicatedly in a maze of wrinkles and scars that came both from the purposes of ritual and the chances of

war. He agreed with the logic of Prosper's words, he bade one of his bodyguard dismount and surrender his horse to Prosper. Prosper took the horse, pleased at the scowl of the dismounted man. One more enemy against whose malice he must remain wary. Ellak gave him a bright saddle-cloth of red and green with triangular designs.

Out of this steppe flatness the sun rose without ceremonial delays, without changing veils of light and elaborate cloud progresses, and went down in a soft ruddy diffusion of loess-dust. It rose suddenly, making only one effort to drag its white-gold bubble from the clinging horizon, it leaped up over a shadowless landscape. And silence was different on this great expanse, a deep, steady breathing of the earth-bosom.

They came to the place of Attila's settlement, at the foot of a hill where the enormous steppe-lands paused. A big sweep of wooded hills, the turbid breadth of the Danube rippling along the rocky base, and, beyond, the steppes. The settlement was a large area enclosed by a circular fence of palisades. The host entered through the only gates, between two wooden towers, and defiled before the House of the King, which stood in the centre of the enclosure with a fence of its own about it. Then the host broke up, and Ellak's contingent went off behind their master to the house on the right, beside the Prime Minister's. Ellak, as a member of the Council of State, had the right to build near his lord the King; but lesser folk had their houses or huts scattered about nearer the wall. Ellak's house was constructed on the same plan as the King's, though on a smaller scale; it consisted of a single large hall, with parts partitioned off by curtains.

Prosper was allotted a sleeping space near the rear of the hall, with a gilded stand close by for the falcon. Ellak, as a token of his favour, led him to the place with a hand on his shoulder. But, before sleeping, there was a feast to come. Behind the hall, on fireplaces made out of circular heaps of stones, cooking was going on—whole sheep were being roasted and vast cauldrons of soup were seething. As soon as Ellak had come out of the space where his wives were curtained off, eating and drinking began. The household squatted about, and slaves staggered in with the plates and bowls of food. Wine and barley-beer were poured into the pots whenever they were noisily emptied. The warriors began to recount their deeds in an insistent chant, clashing their weapons, showing the notches on swords, stamping and breaking into fierce lilts of song. Jeers and bursts of laughter alternated with the chanted boasts. Only the presence of the smiling lord stopped the warriors from springing at one another's throats. As dusk thickened, pinewood torches were thrust into stanchions and sent their smoke up to blacken the rafters; dogs cracked bones and scratched for fleas amid the rushes; slaves were sucking the brains from sheep-heads matted with fleeces. The clash and clamour echoed on; Prosper sat aside, quietly eating his fill and drinking

beer; he felt heavily and warmly content, listening and watching. In a lull he heard the tinkle of a woman's anklets from behind the curtains across the hall. His slow, deliberate surrender to a fullness of food and drink was like a turning aside from the past, an acceptance of the present in all its details, in the entirety of its meaning. And mixed with his somnolence, his ease, was an unrelenting wariness, which was quite unlike fear. With a sudden access of confidence, he made his way over to Ellak, who was sitting on a block of wood and drinking honey-wine from a carved horn. "Master," he said, kneeling, "we shall have good hunting."

Ellak laid his hand on his head and then gave him to drink out of the horn from which he himself had been drinking. Prosper returned swaggering to his place, passing through the shouting warriors as if they were cattle. The Ostrogoth had come to drink beside him, and lifted his sanguine face with a drunken smile. As Prosper sank down on a skin-rug, he grasped Prosper's arm with both his hands as if he meant to break it. Prosper felt the wrench of sinew and muscle; for a moment it seemed that the bones would crack. Then he flung off the powerful grip. The Ostrogoth put his arm tenderly round Prosper's shoulder. "Some day . . ."—he belched—"we shall kill someone . . . you and I together." The nearest torch crackled, spat out resinous flames that stung a man on the face, whistled upwards in spires of eerie green, then burned yellow again. The man who had been stung by the molten resin thought that a man near, who had been mocking him, had thrown something. He clawed at his cheek and then drew a dagger, hurling himself at the other man with a wolfish howl. The dagger pierced through the man's cheek. At once the others dragged the assailant away, they were going to beat and trample on him, but Ellak's voice rang out above the tumult. In a moment the guilty man was crawling over the floor towards his lord.

"Take him outside and cut off the hand with which he broke the peace," commanded Ellak.

Half a dozen retainers dragged the condemned man up from the floor and carried him over towards the entrance of the hall. Then came the scream of agony. At a motion from Ellak a slave ran over to the door with a leather thong for binding the wrist, another took one of the torches for cauterising. A second shriek rang out. Then the uproar of chant and laughter surged across the hall once more. Prosper reached for his cup; he strained his ears to hear again the tinkling of the women.

2 *A Church Festival in Auvergne*

After so many doubts and fears, to watch the toil of harvest was like an attainment of security, a proof that behind the façade of violence and destruction there had been other processes at work, patiently maturing, and now at last making tangible the promises on which the broken mind had doubtfully based its hope of renewal. Suddenly, amid the dusty

heat, there was certainty, and it seemed that nothing was needed except to climb over the drystone wall and join the men and women in the fields; and there, at once, in the sweat that blinded the stinging eyes, in the immemorial sweep of sickle and in the movements of the girl-fingers twisting the binders, there would be an escape from the horror, an inclusion in the simple yet infinitely entangled rhythms of the earth, the year. And yet, how could one step across that wall, out of a crevice of which his fingers idly detached an empty yellow snail-shell? how become one with the year-spirit visible when the girl, tying a sheaf with one of the twists, drew in her loins before she tossed the sheaf back? The fine dust, drifting upwards, merged with the white pulsations of the sky; the sky was a great cloud of white quivering light which drifted downwards, through arcs of incandescence, to merge with the shaken fleeces of dust.

Audax was alone. And then, afraid as if he had intruded on a privacy, he turned away. Rounding the oak-corner, he encountered the sub-bailiff, who was hunched up on the back of a plodding donkey, with one eye closed as if in secret self-congratulation over some special bit of peculation. But he kept the eye closed as Audax drew near; giving his raised face, with its purplish patches sweatily shining, an appearance of sleepy intoxication. His eyebrow curved upwards, and he coughed, unable entirely to stifle his dislike, but uncertain how safe it would be to declare himself. He spat ahead, over the donkey's ears; and Audax, coming yet closer, saw the blob of spit with the whitish dust climbing its curved surface. Then Audax was level with the donkey's dully nodding head. The sub-bailiff said, "Greetings, master, and are they loafing as usual?" But did not incline his head for an answer; instead, with a raucous effort, he managed to spit ahead a second time, and subsided in a more hunched-up heap than ever, with his felt cap falling forwards over his eyes. Audax, turning to watch him pass, saw the bald part at the back of his head under the felt hat and the donkey's tail flicking from side to side of its small rump, as if making a demonstration of independence out of sight of the despised but feared rider—a demonstration that asked Audax's complicity.

He turned aside to find the short cut behind the beeches, and took the bridle-track over the patch of waste littered with split fragments of granite and basalt, with clumps of gold-yellow broom and the cool glint of forget-me-nots. At once, coming into this rough mound, he felt cut off from his mood of distrust. It was his own thoughts about his position, not the sub-bailiff's thoughts, that he wanted to get clear. He couldn't go on indefinitely attached to Paulinus as a penniless friend, sinking more and more into the status of parasite, dinner-flatterer. He would have to come to some decision, not shelving the question. At least wait until next spring.

On the other side of the mound the track led him down past the cottage of one of the self-farmers, where three pigs were grunting about

in the pitted mud under cankered apple-trees. A young girl appeared at the door of a shed and called in a squeaky voice to someone, then saw Audax coming, and dodged back with her hand to her mouth. For a moment he envied even the *colonus* who lived in that yellow-plastered cottage with trachyte slabs on the roof; the man might have little liberty of choice in any of the major issues of the world, but at least he had a settled home, a settled task, a family circle, and a fairly certain sufficiency of food. Even if a barbarian invasion swept over the region, the status of the *colonus* would scarcely be altered; the services and food-tribute would merely be paid to a new master. Perhaps, even, the cataclysm that would seem so world-shattering to the present masters would be a benefit to the *colonus*, relieving him of various irksome duties and ties, simplifying the debt of service that he would have to pay, for the new masters, by breaking down so much of the old world, would break down in large degree the network of trade, the organisation supplying luxury needs, and thereby would be less impelled to squeeze the land-workers.

The thought was difficult to grasp; for it meant the consideration of the peasantry from the angle of their own little world of needs, not from the angle of the State. And every atom of Audax's education and upbringing had bred into him the attitude that that State was basic, was the only possible form of control ensuring civilisation; and that every relationship, to be viewed justly, must be viewed in connection with the problem of maintaining the State.

The thought blurred, failed to keep a clear focus. It seemed that the hostility he had felt for the sub-bailiff hunched up on his donkey had been the hostility which the men and women at work in the harvest-fields would feel as soon as they saw him coming lazily down the road. And then a myriad incomplete images and half-thoughts flustered his mind, a kind of subterranean upheaval in which he saw the foundations of the massive buildings, triumphal arches and great stretches of aqueduct, granitic quay-works and hillsides turned into theatral areas, the whole powerful Roman achievement slowly rocking and toppling, grinding and swaying on the subtle edge of dissolution. Yet the massive forms did not fall; in a nightmarish moment of vision he saw the process of dissolution spread out along its whole time-curve, its billowing rhythm of recoil and upsurge moving with absolute precision to the final collapse. But meanwhile the forms hung in his mind in awkward and jerky suspensions, pillars sprawling like trampled reeds and yet not falling, jagged chasms yawning in the everyday streets while people stepped over them without noticing. Then the dream-incoherence of that vision of fear faded out, leaving him still unconvinced. The new centre of thought flagged and broke again. Only, he was more than ever worried about his own future.

On the other side of the cherry-orchard the masons were at work

building the new wall; the clink of trowels, the clatter of bricks, the shouts of the foremen, the dull drone of a work-song could be heard from the gate of mossy stone, the statue of the nymph whose coy hand seemed repelling the ivy that had climbed three-quarters way up her sleek thighs. Also, one could just see the tips of the scaffolding. Audax walked hastily along the narrow path of marble-dust that led to the summer-house; he expected to find Paulinus there, or at least the copy of *Tibullus* which he had been reading before he went off on that walk. But as he neared he heard voices, and, in his tensely distracted mood, he paused, unable to make up his mind whether to go on. He thought. Who am I? The problem resolved itself to one of identity. Who am I now, that my identity can no longer be expressed in terms of a piece of land? How can Paulinus introduce me to strangers? I am nobody, I have lost my land.

But it was of his father on his deathbed, not of the lost estate, that he thought. The premonitions about his father's death, which he had felt during the campaign, had not proved true, but when he arrived back at Lugdunum, he found his father sinking fast. Zonaras said that the end was only a matter of days, he had seemed more gentle and weary and friendly than ever, but Phoebe, on whom Audax had counted for sympathy, was strangely cold and hard. She attended the dying man devotedly, but evaded all Audax's efforts to corner her for a talk, and Audax grew indignant, feeling that her coldness was responsible for the bottled-up sense of frustration which deepened in him as he waited for his father to die. "How weak the body is! How strong!" The gentle voice of Zonaras gave him strength once more. But his father, in the intervals of coma, prattled in a thin, childish voice of events and persons in the far past of his life, events and persons of which Audax knew nothing—except when occasionally the dying man uttered the name of his wife. But even then Audax did not feel any contact with him; rather he felt farther apart than ever. For the woman to whom the dying man's remarks were uttered was a young woman, a young and gay woman, a woman with no relation to the mother whom Audax had known—that kindly fretting mother with the slight nervous frown forever trembling above her eyes. And so Audax, with stifled impatience and moments of poignant affection, waited for his father to die, feeling farther and farther apart from him, feeling not so much that his father was dying, as that he was retreating back in time to a tryst of final loss and emptiness. All the while he listened to the quavering voice, he himself was striving to look forward into time, to snatch his safety from the future, from some pledge of contact which only the future could know and ratify. So, his listening by the deathbed became a kind of silent conflict, a deep and tortured wrestling between two aspects of divided life, past and future, till, at moments, the prolonged tension uttered itself in a sharp hatred of his father, a loathing of the body of decay.

And now, as he listened to the voices mixed with the leaf-lisp and the muffled noises from the bricklayers, he heard anew the voice of his father drifting at last inarticulately over the verge of non-existence; and that was one of the reasons, dimly apprehended, which made him pause, as if repudiating a world that had nothing coherent to utter. Then, with a convulsive movement, he straightened his shoulders and resumed his walk. He saw the face of Paulinus first, and felt happier. After all, there was much in common between him and Paulinus. Hesperius was there too, always uneasily suggesting Prosper to him, though less handsome, less clear-lined in his features, his voice too was harsher. Two other youths lounged on the seats beside the oaken table, Pastor and another whom Audax did not know.

"O, there you are," said Paulinus, and motioned Audax to his side.

Hesperius went on talking. "Yes, I've a plan. Anyway, we'll go over to the festival. There'll be some ball-games after the service. And Eripius told me he'd be there. I want to see him." He shook the ivory dice-box that he was holding, and turned the dice out on the table.

Pastor and the other youth leaned over on their elbows, but Paulinus rose, taking Audax's arm. "Well, if you're going to dice, we'll leave you to your boredom." Audax knew that Paulinus did not like dicing, but he felt the departure as dictated by tact; Paulinus knew that he, Audax, had nothing to stake. And the tact, while binding him to Paulinus, made him feel less than ever at home among these rich folk. Paulinus, still holding his arm, led the way along the path to the stream. "Well, did you find what you went to find?" he asked with a low laugh.

Audax missed the point of the question. He had been half-listening to the remarks of Pastor's friend about a visit paid to a gourmet whose estates lay westward, in Visigothic territory, on the Garonne, they cruised in barges and ate lobsters, while the boatmen rowed singing chanties specially composed by the host for the occasion. "Pinewood grates in the bottom of the boats so that we didn't wet our feet in the bilge."

Audax stammered to Paulinus, "What did you say?"

"Nothing. . . . It's always silly to repeat trifling words. It makes one realise that one shouldn't have said them in the first place."

They were now out of earshot of the three youths preparing to dice. Audax felt an urgent need to know what Paulinus had said. "No, do tell me. My head's still a bit cloudy from all that heat. I should have stayed in the shade like you others."

"Nothing. I was only chattering."

The fact that Paulinus was now trying to hide his words made them more and more important to Audax. "Do tell me." His voice pleaded.

Paulinus answered with constraint, "I only asked if you'd found what you went after."

"But I didn't go after anything. . . ." Audax felt stupid and sorry;

he knew that he was irritating Paulinus, but couldn't stop. "There's nothing for me to go after . . . here or elsewhere." He feared Paulinus had meant to suggest some ulterior motive in his walk; but he spoke bitterly. The aftermath of the walk in the fierce sun was indeed disturbing his brain, though he hadn't been aware of it when he used it as excuse; suddenly he felt a burning pressure over his thoughts, a need to protest and assert himself. "Yes, I did. You're quite right. I went in search of something. What? I didn't find it. There's nothing to find. Only death at the end of it all."

"I was only chattering," mildly insisted Paulinus.

"No, I did find something," said Audax, wondering at the shrill note of his own voice, he couldn't control his speech. He went on contradicting himself. "But I don't know what it was. I mean, I felt that I understood, and then it all went. I'd like to go up into the higher slopes—I like the smell of the wild herbs, don't you? No, it isn't true that I forgot what I found. Not all of it, I mean. There'll be a storm soon, don't you think? Have you ever watched the women making the binders for the sheafs? What a lot of questions I'm asking."

"And you don't give me any time to answer them," said Paulinus, anxiously scanning his friend's face.

"The world's all wrong. That's what I learned. Do you know, I almost murdered that sub-bailiff of yours, what's his name, Gargilius, the one that fell down the ladder in the barn and broke the girl's arm. You should have seen the look he gave me. There was nobody there to see that I'd done it."

"You don't know what you're saying," Paulinus, troubled, held his arm more tightly. "You shouldn't have walked in that heat. I blame myself for letting you go."

"No, you couldn't have stopped me. I was set on it. I had an idea I'd meet that scoundrel Gargilius. I wanted to see what kind of a look he'd give me when I was all on my own. That's what I found out. I mean, I understand that there's no such thing as peace or love. There are only varying forms of violence. I can't decide whether I really killed anyone in that battle with the Huns. I feel I'd like to kill someone now, in cold blood—someone that deserved to die, of course. But do you think that even then one would be sure? That's the difficulty. I don't think there's any hope for us, do you?"

Suddenly he had talked himself out; the burning wave of semi-delirium passed. He swayed and leaned against Paulinus. They had reached the side of the stream, and though the water was running very low, the shadows were cooler, richer in the gleams of wild flowers. A finch came flying towards them, pulled itself up short with a quick and lovely flutter of yellow wings, then retreated.

"Are you feeling ill?" asked Paulinus mildly.

"I'm better now." Audax drew away, passing his hand over his

brow. "What is going to happen to us all? Can our fate be such pointless misery?"

"No, it isn't pointless. I feel sure of that, at least." Paulinus was trembling slightly. "I feel as if a great hand was pushing me, trying to make me let go of all the familiar things . . . I'm a coward." He smiled, overcoming the tremor; and his lean face, with its indrawn, meditative aspect, assumed the calm, the momentary luminous warmth, which always troubled and charmed Audax. "I don't want to let go. . . . Tomorrow, not today."

The church to which they were going for the festival of Saint Regina had been built a few years ago by the magnate whose lands lay on the east side of those of Lucius Sollius Modestus Basilus. A deacon, travelling on some business for a bishop, had discovered the existence of the Saint—that is, her relics. He had produced, after some mortgage transactions with a farmer, a box full of assorted bones, which had been reverently carried to the Bishop and which were said to have cured a number of cripples, epileptics, and sufferers from eczema. A few bones, however, were left with the magnate in consideration of his promise to build a church on the spot where the Saint had met her death. This spot turned out to be beside a local spring, which had been sacred as long as memory could stretch, it had been the scene of certain ritual mimes in the pagan days. After the word got round that miraculous bones had been dug up at this spot, the peasants began to agree on what had happened to the Saint, she had had an encounter with a dragon, which she led on a halter made out of her virgin girdle, and she had refused to marry the Governor—with the result that she had been subjected to extensive tortures, being burnt and drowned and hanged on a tree. When given to the soldiery to be ravished, she had grown a defensive and impenetrable pelt of hair; but had finally died on having her head chopped off beside the spring. From her gushing blood had been born the spring's waters, which would cure a tendency to colic if the baby was laid in them exactly at the moment of dawn. The Bishop had written a *Letter* on the subject of Regina's Perfect Patience, which was greatly admired among the *littérateurs* of Gaul, since it invoked no less than 256 examples of heroines from pagan fable and holy writ, while proving conclusively by the most involved puns and antitheses that Regina outdid them all. The devout faith of the peasantry in Regina was ensured by the fact that her Passion included (in slightly altered form) the ingredients of the pagan ritual mime which used to be performed on the greensward beside the spring, and which had had as one of its chief characters the Queen of the Harvest.

The five young men rose early and rode off before dawn. They had about eight miles to go, along a main road that was kept in good order—for Sollius and other magnates used it, and the Governor there-

fore saw to its condition; besides, he didn't want to be jolted about when going to stay at their country-houses. They arrived hungry; but Euphronius, the patron and owner of the church, pressed them at once to refresh themselves in one of the galleries where food had already been set out "You have missed the procession," he said; and though he had merely meant to accompany them to the buffets, he stayed to eat some of a special sausage that he recommended. "Perhaps I'll have some of that cold goose too. A slice, Nicias," he informed the carver. "No, two slices, that's such a thin slice." He beamed on the guests "The fellow can cut so finely that he wants to starve me with the thin slices he gives. Come on, Nicias, show the gentlemen how thinly you can cut when you're put to it "

Nicias whistled as he sharpened his long carving-knife.

"That's a blade, sir That's steel for you, sir."

Euphronius beamed. "I bought it in Rome Best Spanish steel. They don't make it nowadays Come on, Nicias, show us what you can do with it "

Nicias, a wizened little man with side-whiskers, swung the knife. "I couldn't make a mistake with such a bit of steel, sir. You've got an eye for steel, sir. Goose or sausage, sir, or some of pig?" He put a pickled onion on the back of the roasted-entire pig, swung his knife tentatively, then slashed at the onion "See there, gentlemen Cut clean in two. But I couldn't help doing it with such a prime bit of steel, I really couldn't," he insisted, sure that his modesty in enhancing the property of his master would only redound in increased laurels for himself

"Excellent, Nicias," said Euphronius "Your wages are doubled. It's most gratifying, I'm sure I picked him up at Massilia," he informed the guests "He wasn't appreciated, working in a mere delicatessen shop I pride myself on discovering talent I happened to be passing in a litter, and I saw him at work. I knew at once that a first-class carver was going to waste. And first-class carvers are not found too easily nowadays. Now you watch the men at Marcus Lupus's house next time you dine there. They're simply hopeless. Not a bit of sense of rhythm. They just cut up the stuff as if they were cat's-meat huxters. It positively turns my stomach Come on, Nicias, show us some more."

Nicias smirked, bowed to the company, and took up a small sausage on the point of the knife. He tossed the sausage in the air and cut it in half as it dropped. "It's an art," he remarked "I won't deny that "

"Perfect, Nicias," cried his master "You give me quite an appetite. I'll have some of the sausage with sage seasoning. Now be careful not to give me the one with mint in it I can't bear mint." He beamed on the guests. "I find nothing gives me an appetite like watching Nicias. If ever my digestion gets out of order, I don't call for my doctor, I call for Nicias Isn't that so, Nicias?"

"That's so, your honour," corroborated Nicias. "Many a time I've

restored your appetite by indulging in my art, as I might say. But to do things proper I need a trumpeter and a couple of pipers. Then I can cut up a pig in style. Then I can really put myself into it, as I might say." He spoke modestly, as a man sure of his merits, and addressed his master with respectful familiarity.

"I wonder if we could have some music," Euphronius pondered. "Some more of that goose, Nicias. No, a bit of partridge. Of course, the Bishop mightn't like us to have a tune played more or less right inside the church and while he's in his retreat. Well, it's a future pleasure for you all. I assure you that there's nothing better than Nicias at the Byzantine Court itself," he concluded impressively, as if he had gone on a journey all the way to Byzantium to make sure. And as they all went out, he mentioned behind his fattish hand sparkling with jewelled rings, "And I bought him for a song. The owner of the shop hadn't the least knowledge of his priceless qualities. That's the way with me."

"You can espy the finished gem under the rough and uncut stone," suggested Pastor, who had literary ambitions.

"Exactly," cried Euphronius. "What a phrase! What a mastery of language! I can see that our poets and declaimers will have to keep an eye on you. Homer and Anacreon themselves will have to watch out for their reputations."

In the fields around the church the large crowd, divided into its class-sections, was enjoying itself. Over by the chestnuts the peasantry were drinking their own wines and eating puddings in booths made out of boughs and greenery, babies were being suckled, and young folk were dancing ring-dances with flower chaplets on their heads. Nearer the church was a group of domestics from the manor-house, who were eating and drinking with more dignity. On the other side of the church-yard were gathered people from the neighbouring town, graded off in groups according to status and the quality of the viands they consumed. The yard itself and the galleries were given up to the gentry, with a portly steward standing at the gateway to make sure that no lower-class intruders sneaked in. Numerous monks and clerics were clustered about the church doorway.

Philagrius, a landowner's son, came up, fanning his face with a painted fan of feather-trimmed parchment. "I saw you fellows going in for a snack. The food's good, but you're too late for the crabs. We ate the lot of them. He had a special courier from the coast with them. Still, we deserved them. We were all keeping the Vigils round the Tomb long before dawn. I went to sleep myself, I don't deny it, though the monks and clergy were bawling the chants, first one and then the other, enough to lift the top off your head. The Bishop brought a whole battalion of them, in bullock-carts, too—not himself, of course: he came in a smart four-horse turn-out. Well, you'll hear them at Tierce; then the priests will be celebrating Mass. I almost stifled, there was such a crowd, and

everyone had torches or candles or something like that. A woman had a fit. She gave one of the monks a black eye, I'll show you the fellow when I see him. She was lashing about like anything."

They strolled over to a group sitting under a gnarled old vine that had had its stems trained into a kind of trellis. Somebody had started a rumour that the woman who had the fit had uttered prophecies during her raving and that the Bishop would make an announcement whether or not there had been a devil inside her. Paulinus was interested in the woman, and Audax went with him to the gallery in which she was lying down. A curious crowd was being kept off by a major-domo with a gold-knobbed stick, who repeated in a snuffling voice, "The Bishop will make any necessary statements; keep off, please." But he let Paulinus and Audax through, recognising Paulinus and remarking *sotto voce*, "She's still stiff, I believe. Mind the way she kicks sudden."

Half a dozen monks were gathered about the woman, who lay on a bench with body rigidly stretched out. Three of the monks were kneeling on the stone-flagged floor and praying with closed eyes; two of them were merely watching; the sixth was muttering exorcisms and turning up the woman's eyelids. The woman's body relaxed, and the exorcising monk jumped backwards, then the body sprang up again into rigidity, this time assuming an even more surprising bend than before. The backbone was arched, and the woman rested only on her head and heels. She began moaning and making spasmodic baby noises. Then she collapsed again, and screamed. "I'm in hell! O you devils, you hard-hearted devils, let me out! I'm burning, you devils, you slanderers of God! You devils, let me out, I'm burning . . ." Then, almost without a break, she cried ecstatically, "O the bliss, O my beloved, I am delivered, O my king, my beloved . . ." A rapture, so intense that it hurt Audax to look on her, gave her face a sudden angelic beauty, a moonburst of radiance which transformed her heavy peasant features. Her voice lost its crudity, it seemed a myriad sweet voices softly harmonised. Then she burst out again with a suddenness that rasped the listener with horror, "O you devils! . . ."

Audax saw Paulinus's eyes light up with a dark rapture that seemed akin to the woman's. Then they went outside. As they passed near the hedge, some peasants called eagerly, "Is it a miracle, good sirs?"

An affable old gentleman came up to them. "A pleasant day, my friends. How happy everyone is, how excellently our good host has arranged everything, how wonderful are the ways of God, how blue the sky is. The Saint is sending us good weather; she has her eye on us." He waved approvingly skywards. Paulinus introduced him to Audax as Germanicus, the father of the Bishop. "And my own father was a priest," added Germanicus. "But he's dead," and he sucked in his teeth and shook his head over the foolishness of his father in dying in such a world. Clearly he visualised no such contingency for himself.

He was dressed in tight-fitting clothes and wore tightly-laced boots; the hair of his head was cut in the wheel-style, and tweezers had plucked every hair from his face. "You have read my son's *Letter* on the Saint whom we honour today? Now, there's literary power for you. I myself am feeling in the best of health." He opened his mouth to show them that none of his teeth was missing. "My digestion is perfect, my circulation even, my heart and lungs sound, my loins free from stiffness, and my liver free from congestion."

With the nimble old man ambling at their side and begging them to slap him on the chest and see how robust he was, they walked across to the vine-arbour. The men there had become bored with conversation. One section was playing the board-game, another had divided into two sides for ball. Germanicus at once rushed among the ball-players, delighted at the chance to vindicate his ever-young frame. While he was still telling everyone of the mighty ball-player that he had been in his youth and declaring that he was just as good still, the game started. Certainly Germanicus proceeded to display sprightliness, though he mostly got in the way of the other players, instead of knocking the ball back. He flung out his arms to intercept the ball and knocked the members of his own side over; and then, panting loudly, he made supreme efforts which still missed the ball but laid him flat. Again and again he ran out of his position among the stationary players and collided with some runner from the middle; and soon he was wandering dazedly in midfield while the ball flew above his head. When he looked up, he fell over backwards. At last he limped off, and, approaching Paulinus and Audax, complained that the game wasn't played in the right way. "I fear the fibres of my liver have been swollen," he panted. "But how can one play with such ignoramuses?"

Pastor stopped playing, and came up with a wink to Paulinus. He pretended to be winded. "Ah, you young men, you've got no stamina," wheezed Germanicus. "I left off in protest against the incorrect way the game's being played. It was not the exercise that injured my liver. It was the way that all the players kept getting out of position. Properly played, the game doesn't exhaust me in the least."

Pastor whispered to Paulinus, "I thought it would be tactful to stop playing and give the old boy a chance of thinking he wasn't the only one puffed out."

"What's that?" asked Germanicus, who certainly had good hearing. He was wiping himself with a shaggy towel that a slave had brought him from a line worked by pulleys near the doors of the porter's lodge. "Come on now; Pastor, you call yourself a poet. Compose some couplets in honour of this cloth that's done me such a good turn. In my young days we improvised poems on much less important occasions. But literature's going downhill." He shook his head. "Except of course for that noble *Letter* by my son the Bishop. Look, there's the secretary

of our host. He's got his writing-tablets all ready. But you must get my name in. And correct metre too."

The listeners applauded. "Come on, Pastor."

Pastor blushed, but managed to achieve an epigram "I'd have you know, Germanicus, the Muses are annoyed if I frequent their company before witnesses"

"Ho, ho," chortled Germanicus. "Take care, lad. Apollo may be still more annoyed if you tempt his pupils to compromising interviews all alone."

Everyone applauded the sally, and Germanicus nodded smilingly in response, then raised his head pensively to give Pastor every chance. Pastor gulped, and declaimed in a dull voice, marking the metre with taps of his forefinger

When'er his brow is beaded from the chase—
For he won't shrink at beasts that simply panic us—
May this same cloth still wipe the shining face
Of that most worthy man yclept Germanicus.

Deafening applause broke out, and Pastor dropped on to the grass in relieved weakness. The secretary had been scribbling the quatrain down in shorthand, and as soon as the clapping died away he read the lines out in a mincing voice. But this exhibition of the high state of the cultivation of the arts was interrupted by a clamour from nearer the church. The Bishop was coming out of his retreat; Mass was going to start. As they all moved towards the church, Hesperius, who had been playing dice, muttered to his brother and friends, "That's the wench." Audax, who didn't know what the reference meant, saw Hesperius covertly indicating a buxom young woman who was coming through the gateway on her husband's arm; the husband seemed of shopkeeper status. The church, with its narrow nave and aisles (which had small projections at their ends to make the plan cruciform) and a narthex at the eastern side, was soon filled up. Audax stood on tiptoe and glanced over the heads at the altar in the apse; somebody squealed loudly, above the chatter. He withdrew to the fountain in the centre of the court, where some townsmen were discussing trade. "Those days are gone . . . snap up for clipped coins tallow and wax at big profit. . . . Waste-paper trade? I'd forgotten there ever was such a thing." They began grumbling at the unfair competition of the priests, who could trade untaxed

After Mass the five young men held a discussion in a nook at the rear of one of the galleries. Audax gathered that the woman whom Hesperius had pointed out was the subject under consideration, but for a while he could not make out what on earth she had to do with Hesperius or why they should all be talking about her in a semi-conspiratorial manner. Paulinus evaded his questioning glance and looked ashamed.

Audax knew that Paulinus, despite his difference in outlook, was very much under his brother's influence—or perhaps control was the better word. Hesperius had the dominating rôle; sometimes he tolerated a certain amount of dissenting argument from Paulinus, but he exacted from him an obedience in all his main projects. It had been Hesperius who insisted on joining the army of Actius against the Huns; and Paulinus, though detesting war in every way, had ended by following him. Now, too, Audax could see, a struggle was going on inside him, a wish to revolt and to cut away, and an inability to assert himself against his elder brother.

"Nobody'll know who we are, you fool," said Hesperius, raising his voice in exasperation at a half-hearted expression of doubt uttered by Paulinus. "They'll think we're Bagaudae on a raid. That's what gave me the whole idea. There's been a number of brigand raids the last month in the district. A deacon who was collecting rents for the Bishop was caught on the highroad and robbed of every penny."

But Pastor, too, was getting nervous. "I didn't think you really meant it, Hesperius. It's the kind of jape that makes a first-rate theme for a drunken evening, but it's not the kind of thing that one carries out in cold blood the next day."

"So you're pigeon-livered too," snarled Hesperius. "I tell you I meant every word of it. I'll carry it out on my own, if you're all a pack of cowards." He turned towards the fifth lad, Probus, "What about you?"

Probus, thick-set and heavy-jawed, with a single line of eyebrow, grunted, "I'm not scared. Only let's have a few more drinks first. Can't do a job like that on a sober stomach."

Hesperius clapped him on the back, "You're a lad after my own heart. What the hell is there to be scared about? Everything's fixed. I took care to bring along only two servants that can be trusted, good fellows. . . ."

"I'm not scared," protested Paulinus weakly. "But I don't feel it's right. Otherwise. . . ."

"O, stop mawling," said Hesperius scornfully. "The piece will be delighted, after she's shed a few tears to keep her value up. I know more about women than you do."

He glared round. Audax, who unintentionally caught his eye, felt that he would have to say something; he had been keeping in the background, but the way that Hesperius ignored him had ended by rousing his anger. "I'm in it if Paulinus is," he said quietly.

"O, you," sneered Hesperius. "I forgot you were there. I take for granted that you'll do whatever your keeper tells you."

Audax flushed with fury, and clenched his hands; but before he could find words to repel the insult, Paulinus had pushed in front of him. "All right, we'll go. But first you've got to apologise to Audax. It's not his fault that his land is gone."

Hesperius stood heavily, with legs apart and head lowered; his nostrils quivered and dark lights flickered in his eyes. Then he collected himself. "You'll come, eh? That's all that matters . . . I'm sorry if I spoke hastily." His good-nature was coming to the fore, now that his brother had weakened. "We're all good friends, I hope. You silly old fool," he clapped Paulinus on the back. "You're sound underneath. . . . Come on now, I'll explain everything."

Pastor made one more attempt to withdraw, claiming that the concentration needed to compose that quatrain for Germanicus had rather exhausted him.

"All you need is a stomachful of wine," said Probus stolidly. "Same for all of us. Speaking personally, I think it's more trouble than any wench is worth, but when I see a friend off his head the way that Hesperius is, of course I'll lend a hand in putting him right."

So they went to say good-bye to Euphronius and plead inability to stay for the remaining two days of the festival.

"Do stay," begged their host. "I've got some new gadgets for the Baths, and a friend of mine at Ravenna who knows my artistic taste sent me a wonderful acrobat that I'd like you to see. Besides, you're conferring such distinction on this poor little festival of mine. Germanicus is going into ecstasies all over the place about that impromptu of yours, Pastor. The Bishop himself says that it's most elegant. I'm going to have it inscribed on the base of a statue. I've got the very thing—an athlete with a strigil. I thought first of setting it up on the exact spot where the Muses inspired you. But on second thoughts I saw that it wasn't quite the thing for a churchyard. I'll put it up at the entry to the Baths. How lucky my secretary was all ready to take down the lines and immortalise us all. He's another of my finds. I picked him up at Rome. In fact you might almost say I stole him from the Records Office, with the nod of the Prumicerius, of course, who's a bosom friend of mine. I'll tell you the whole story some day. But I'm truly distressed you won't stay to see the new chafing-dishes I've got. Anyway, you have ennobled the festival. A grateful posterity will remember . . ."

However, they all drank heartily, and Hesperius took a large flagon "to ease the homeward journey". Audax was feeling cold and bitter; the affair of kidnapping the woman now affected him with a hard and distant amusement. It all seemed outside him—the fatuous voice of Euphronius or the crude plan of the bully Hesperius. He despised every aspect of the world about him: why start despising one part more than another? The kidnapping seemed no more despicable than the festival in which Euphronius gloried, the saddler's business which (Audax had learned) the woman's husband possessed, or any other detail. He felt only a dim aloof curiosity, with perhaps a slight gratitude towards Paulinus, who had, it seemed, fallen in with his brother's plan in the last resort to cover up the insult flung at him, Audax. Paulinus looked

gloomy; he drank with the others, but did not share in the lightening of spirits which the wine provoked. Pastor, after the wine had ratified his assent, began to share the excitement of Hesperius and Probus. "What a day! Do you know, I think I might even have a reading of my poems and essays at Lugdunum next spring. Do you think it's too soon, Paulinus?" He even began to talk warmly with Audax, knowing that he had literary tastes. "That's not a bad idea that Euphronius had about inscribing the verses on a pedestal, eh? We'll all have a party together at his place when he's had a mason along to do the work. I'd like to have a talk with you about the reading I suggested. I value your opinion, you know."

But such chatter ceased as they mounted their horses, and, followed by the two stable-lads whom Hesperius had brought along, set off on the highroad in the direction of home. After they had ridden about a mile and were out of sight of the church, the manor-house and the village cluster, Hesperius called a halt. They took some swigs at the flagon, and ate the pasty that the steward had given the attendants to carry. Hesperius explained a little more of his scheme. The upper-class guests of the festival would be staying in the house of Euphronius that stood across the road from the church, the peasants would be scattering back for the night to their homes, the townsfolk would be returning to the town in various vehicles, sleeping in the galleries, or putting up in the village. The saddler (Hesperius had learned from the man given the job of corrupting the servant-girl in the saddler's house) was going to stay at a village house; he was a gruff, short-tempered man, who had attended the festival only because he wanted Euphronius's custom and because his wife wanted the diversion.

"She played with me," said Hesperius, belching. "She thought it was funny to show me the tip of her tongue between her lips. But she scuttled up the stairs when I took a kiss. She flirts behind her man's back with the customers, and she thinks it can stop at that. Well, it may with others, and be damned to them. But not with Gaius Hesperius. She's going to learn a lesson."

"What's her name?" asked Pastor.

"Eumpina. Wait till you hear her laugh. She's got a laugh that hits you straight in the right place. I've never heard such a laugh. Well, I took an oath she shouldn't get away with it. Look, after we've carried her off, we'll split the party here. I'll take her to the Lucaniac Villa, with one of the boys to attend me. The rest of you can go back home. Then I'll send you a note."

Probus spat. "Lot of fuss over a woman. Doesn't matter. Come on."

They left the two attendants at the cross-roads, telling them to keep well in the shadow of the oaks, and rode down the side-road. Hesperius sang a marching-song in a low voice: I would give the world to a lovely girl and I wouldn't charge her a penny. Probus hiccupped. Pastor, to

feel more at ease, attached himself to Audax, trying to make up for his previous disregard "I value your opinion most highly. . . ." He called to Paulinus, who rode dejectedly on the other side of Audax. "That brother of yours—talk about determination . . . Of course I admire him more than I can say."

"When he wants a thing, he can't rest till he gets it," said Paulinus gloomily.

"What's that?" called Hesperius, who was riding ahead. "Talking about me? It's just that I've got a bit of self-respect. No woman can get away with making a fool of me. No, nor man either."

They rode on through the deepening dusk. Hesperius had said that they would make the attempt about the time that the moon was rising, he'd got all the details worked out. They reached a clump of elms on the farther side of the village, and dismounted. There was still a swig for each of them left in the flagon. Then, while waiting for the moon, Hesperius allotted the parts. Audax was pleased to find that he and Paulinus were to have the easiest share of the exploit, they were to hold the horses while the other three went on into the village and broke into the house where the saddler and his wife were lodged.

Then they waited silently for the moon to rise. Audax closed his eyes and gave himself up to the moment, the soft, starry dark of the dusk, the faint breeze filled with rumour of leaves and with stealthy movements of small wild creatures. As he breathed slowly and deeply and steadily, he felt that he had solved all problems, had cured the malaise of his mind. Let go. Don't hold on. Property, women, family-life, land . . . let it all go. Breathe without desire in the dark quiet, till the rhythm of the softly lifting torso becomes part of the earth, the elastic dip and lift of the bough in the wind, star-flicker, the flow of all waters, the full moon rising amid willow-fountains of still radiance. To possess his own body in contentment, and so to possess all things. The words of the philosophers whose works he had read in Zonaras's library—works that were not read and discussed at the Schools—came flooding into his mind, a tangle of Stoic world unities, Epicurean faith-in-science, Cynic championship of the proletarians . . . with the ultimate insistence: Let go, let it all go, let the ache of greed go. And what have I ever wanted? he asked himself. Only that, only what life has given me.

Hesperius, seeing the first dim glimmers of the moon amid paling stars over the hills, began talking in quick, low, business-like tones. "Now, you, Paulinus, and you too, Audax, don't go to sleep. If by any chance they rally and attack us, you jump on horseback and ride down into the village like mad, yelling your loudest. That'll send them rushing back under their beds again. Not that I think for a moment you'll have to do it. We'll be as quiet as we can at the start . . . At most one of the villagers may have the guts to dodge off and run up to

the manor-house for help. More likely they'll do nothing but cower and make sure their doors are bolted. By the time anybody can come along from the manor-house we'll be back with the piece of goods and off You follow me?"

Audax said, "Yes." Paulinus did not answer. The other three moved off on foot down the lane. Pastor came back for a moment and handed Audax a writing-tablet that he'd had stuck in his belt. "I'm frightened I'll drop it. And then they'd find out who we were." Hesperius called out to him: "What's wrong?" Then cursed himself for the noise. The three figures vanished in the gloom. One of the horses stamped and neighed, and Audax went to lay his hand on its neck; the horse tossed its head and then was quiet. Once more the soft seething of the night was around them, blurred with the first faint waves of moonlight. Vague giant-forms loomed up, wavered, retreated, something scurried in the undergrowth—probably a hedgehog. Audax plucked a leaf from a bush beside him, bent the leaf and crushed it, then raised it to his nose. A coarse, sappy, aromatic smell. He couldn't hear any movement from Paulinus. For a moment he listened, feeling himself back suddenly in childhood, his own stature uncertain in the soft light sifted through the tree-tops, at a game of hide-and-seek . . . and then the childhood game, a lost but familiar landscape revisited under a strange light, was merged with patterns of fear and hope that invested it with new meanings, an entanglement of different levels of experience; and the present quest seemed only a repetition of childhood's mimes, with the terror-theme actualised. "I saw a stake at the cross-roads. A suicide is buried there?"

"No, a witch. The peasants drowned her."

The voice of Paulinus sounded unnaturally controlled. Audax was uncertain where it had come from, on the other side of the bush or beyond the horse's rump, on which he could hear the tail uneasily flicked. He wanted to get closer to Paulinus; and he was irritated by the feeling that Paulinus was hiding from him. "Where are you?"

"Here."

The passivity in the voice irritated him further. "This is not exactly the kind of adventure in which I expected you to take part," he said sharply, recalling his suspicion that Paulinus had agreed in order to avert a quarrel between Hesperius and him, Audax.

"No, it isn't." Paulinus's voice still had that falling cadence of helpless misery.

"Why did you agree, then? I was ready to back you. . . ."

Paulinus did not reply. The moon had risen above the tree-tops. Audax, turning from the horses, saw the glint of Paulinus's belt-buckle, then the dim form of Paulinus himself. A long, rustling sigh rolled over the land; a bird cried, like the soul of loneliness abruptly aware of horror.

in the distance of the night. Paulinus recited in a gentle voice some lines of verse :

Not ours those dreams of beauty:
about us error clings
and all our life is warped
with lust of evil things.

"Who wrote that?"

Paulinus waited, as if for the last echo of his words to die into the scene of moonlight, the soft tree-masses draping the darkness with great, fern-like trellises of foliage. "Prudentius" The chill had gone from his voice. "Aren't you afraid to die, Audax? I think there's nothing but that. . . I hadn't seen it so clearly before. I'm frightened of dying. And yet I've yearned to die for a cause The stanza before the one that I just recited.

On the heroic saint
such a strange slumber falls
that in the spirit roaming
he treads heaven's highest halls

Is it only a dream, Audax?" he asked gently.

Audax thought he heard a noise in the direction of the village. He leaned that way, and lost the train of his thoughts. "Death . . . a dream. . . I don't know. I know nothing" Again, as ever, he felt how bafflingly close were his ideas and those of Paulinus, and yet a deep line of division somehow separated them. Why wasn't there any noise from the village? Surely Hesperius would have reached the house long ago. Probably the bragging fool would lose his nerve at the last moment and find some excuse for calling the rape off.

"Somebody's coming," murmured Paulinus

They drew back. One of the horses stamped and pawed. Somebody with a slow, dragging gait was coming down the lane, going towards the village. The man came nearer, they heard his heavy breathing as he passed. He sounded like a man in pain; perhaps he was drunk. They heard him stumble and utter an oath; then his dragging steps receded. A bough cracked near at hand, and Audax gripped hard at the hilt at the short sword which he was wearing—the unsettled state of the roads had made it natural for the party to ride weaponed to the festival

"Don't you feel the need to come to a decision?" he began, resuming their conversation. But at that moment the expected clamour came from the direction of the village. At once Audax felt easier, happier, as if the decision of which he had been vaguely speaking had been taken for him by someone of more compulsive will. He felt an over-brimming affection once more for Paulinus, and wanted to express it. But he said, "Lead the horses out into the road . . . heads the way we're going to ride."

The clamour seemed to have died down. An owl came hooting, swerved, went off on the left. Then a spreading noise of dogs began. "Somebody's coming." They stared down the road; the clay ridge between two ruts broke under Audax's shoe, the noise of dogs was swelling. Then they heard the man with the dragging foot again, he was coming towards them, swearing loudly. He was almost on them before he saw them; with a bellow he crashed off into some bushes. They thought he had managed to creep away, but he had apparently winded himself. His drunken voice rose in exorcising charms, promises of lamps to Saint Regina, then suddenly stopped. Audax lost interest in the wretch, somebody was running down the road. The next moment he saw Pastor, even in the moonlight he could feel the pallid terror of Pastor's face.

"Where are the others?"

Pastor did not answer, but behind him appeared the forms of Hesperius and Probus, Hesperius running heavily with a woman slung over his shoulder, and Probus keeping pace with him, to lend a hand if necessary and to save the woman from slipping.

"Curse the bitch," panted Hesperius. "Where's my horse?" He heaved the woman up over the front of the saddle on the nearest horse and stood for a moment, leaning weakly against the horse and panting more loudly than ever. Then he swung himself up into the saddle. "She's fainted, or pretending." He had regained his strength. "Come on."

"That's my horse," protested Pastor uncertainly.

"Take mine, then, you fool. Come on."

Paulinus had mounted his horse, and he leaned over towards Audax. He began speaking in a low voice, desperately fast, as if he were snatching at the last chance he would ever get to explain himself. "I see no point in half-measures. It's all or nothing. That's why I give in so easily. It's all or nothing. I can't make a stand on minor issues. I have no will unless on ultimates. I'm sure now. . ."

But Audax had ceased to listen. Hesperius gave a yell of exultation and started off. The others followed, except Pastor, who had had difficulty in finding the horse which should have been Hesperius's. "Hey, wait!" he screamed in abject panic, as if he were being abandoned to a horde of pursuers, but nobody took any notice of him, and the next moment he had managed to mount the restive horse.

Hesperius kept the lead, though his horse was carrying a double burden. It seemed to Audax only a few minutes before they were nearing the cross-roads. "Hey!" he shouted to Hesperius, who was riding on. The two attendants, hearing the approach, were coming out into the roadway, leading their horses by the bridles. Hesperius pulled his horse up sharply, and tried to turn at the same time. The horse reared, slithered, fell over with a crash and a flailing of legs. The two

attendants ran to extricate their master. The other riders reined up, jumped down, and ran to help. Hesperius was cursing, holding his left forearm with his right hand. "I've broken my arm, by all the devils in hell. Curse that bitch."

"I told you no woman was worth so much trouble," said Probus stolidly "Serve you right"

Paulinus alone had paid any attention to the woman's fate. She was lying crumpled up at the roadside. He gingerly turned her over. "She's dead," he called in a sinking voice, but nobody heard him at first. "She's dead" Her neck had a ghastly twist, her face was set in a stare of horror, there were scratches all down her left cheek "She's dead." They heard him this time

"What?" roared Hesperius He strode over, still holding his arm. But even a first glance in the moonlight left no doubt. Paulinus began settling the torn and dishevelled clothes "O, leave her alone," said Hesperius peevishly. "Can't you see she's dead? Hell, I feel in a rage" He glowered impotently at the woman who had escaped him. "How's the horse?" He turned and saw that one of the attendants had caught its bridle as it struggled up, and was examining it for injuries "Can she still be ridden?"

"I think so, sir," said the attendant

"Well, that's one relief," said Hesperius. "If the horse had been disabled, we'd have had a difficult problem—they'd have traced us through her. Come on," he called irritably to Paulinus "Leave the bitch's clothes alone." The attendant who was leading the horse over to him stumbled and lurched against him. "Christ, you've hurt my arm!" howled Hesperius, and with his sound right arm he struck out at the man. All his need to find a victim, a scapegoat for the failure of his plans, all his baffled anger and lust flared up in a fury against the man who had jarred his broken arm. He struck again and again, each blow jarring the fractured bone afresh and increasing his fury, while the man crouched and whined for mercy Paulinus had drawn near, his face pinched and distraught, and lifted his hand; but at a livid glance from Hesperius he said nothing and moved away. Tiring suddenly, Hesperius left the cowering slave and beckoned to the other to help him on the horse.

"Will you be able to ride with that injury?" Paulinus asked weakly.

Hesperius did not answer at once. He looked wildly round. His eyes lighted on the corpse of the woman, and he set his jaw "I'll have to," he shouted. "Come on!" And he rode on, holding the bridle in his teeth; he needed his sound arm to support the fracture.

3. *Paulinus at the Cross-Roads*

There was no quarrel between the brothers; but next day Paulinus said that he was going off for a while to the Condatine Villa, which lay

on the northern borders of the estate. "You will come?" he asked Audax in tones of pleading; and Audax wanted to retort angrily: where can I go if I don't go with you? To his father Paulinus said that the noise of the building of the fortifications round the house disturbed him; and Sollius pursed his lips and gave a brief contemptuous glance at the son on whom he set little store

They went to the Villa in a carriage; Paulinus said he didn't feel well enough for riding. "I'm more at home here than anywhere else," he said, as they drove up the avenue of spiring cypresses "It's only a small place, with big orchards round, and olive-plantations on the slopes I spent two summers here with my mother, while the others were in Rome " And Audax, seeing the neat villa with its charming background of trees and olive-planted hills, forgot his resolves on the folly of wanting to possess anything; and he wondered how Paulinus could have any worries when it was possible for him to shut out the world and to live in this secluded spot Paulinus had brought along a large case of books to supplement those already in the villa's library; the songs of the olive harvest sounded on the hills, where the coloured cloths set out under the trees could be seen enriching the landscape, the lush grass of the orchard was thick with ruddy apples

I must come to a conclusion Paulinus repeated the words as he paced along the winding track A wasp, drunken with sweet juices, was hovering about the figwood statue of the old garden-god, from which the rain and the furrowing fingers of decay had failed to obliterate the fat-cheeked smile. And, as usual, his mind returned to the *Confessions* of Augustine, he went over the story of the Saint's progress, comparing it with his own, finding differences and discords, insisting that it fitted and that it didn't fit. If only my mother were still alive He felt sure that she could have given him the clue, because he remembered her quiet, enduring smile of love; he saw her with the light of the lamp behind her head, bending down in the dusk over him. If only I knew what she would have wanted me to do

But I, wretched, most wretched, in the very commencement of my early youth, had begged chastity of Thee, and said: Give me chastity and continency, only not yet. But I feared lest Thou shouldest hear me soon, and soon cure me of the disease of concupiscence, which I wished to have satisfied, rather than extinguished. And I had thought that I therefore deferred from day to day to reject the hopes of this world, and follow Thee only, because there did not appear aught certain, whither to direct my course. Still the words beat on into his mind. Why should they haunt him, spoil for him the whole of what others thought to be life, repeat their rebuke patiently? Why, unless they were in fact the voice of his own conscience, his own deepest need? And now was the day come wherein I was to be laid bare to myself, and my conscience was to upbraid me: where art thou now, my tongue? Thou saidst that for an uncertain truth thou likest not to cast off the baggage of vanity; now, it is certain, and yet that burden still

oppresses thee. But the moment that the resolution seemed rising sweetly into his mind, the conviction went and he was no longer certain. Could he sustain the choice? What if he chose, and then found everything the same as before? What if the waters of mercy and renewal failed to flow for him when he had gone out into the desert in his trust of them? What if he gave himself up, and then found the grip of lust unslackened? No, he would then be unable to live any longer. Better the present struggle, when to fail did not mean the loss of all hope, all self-respect.

He groaned aloud, and his groan merged and was lost among all the busy noises of autumn. He prayed for a sign. If I take an even number of paces to reach that tree with the bough hanging over the path. But he could not cheat his mind with such devices. He multiplied them, but the answer, whatever it was, never satisfied. Always the uneasy mind leaped ahead, demanding a new omen. If that bird settles on that tree. If the bee visits that blue flower first. Never the manifest finger of heaven writing its word of flame. Always he fell back into the body of this death. *Thus soul-sick was I, and tormented, accusing myself much more severely, rolling and turning in my chain, till that were wholly broken whereby I now was but just, but still was, held. And Thou, O Lord, pressed upon me in my inward parts by a severe mercy, redoubling the lashes of fear and shame, lest I should again give way, and not bursting that same slight remaining tie, it should recover strength and bind me the faster. For I said within myself: Be it done now, be it done now. And as I spoke, I all but enacted it. I all but did it, and did it not. O, when would the agony end?*

He clasped his hands tightly till the bones crackled. The great drowsy murmur of autumnal fullness surrounded him, like the fulfilled life into which he could not enter, the sweetness he could not share, the paradise of informed will from which the flaming sword cut him off. *Yet sunk not back to my former state, but kept my stand hard by, and took breath.* Was that true of him? Had his efforts raised him at all? Was he any nearer the attainment? And suddenly he saw that attainment, not as a goal at the end of a journey, but as something that was always within him, that was within him at this moment, struggling to emerge. *Hesitating to die to death, and to live to life.* Between the outer husk and the internally growing and emerging thing there was no unity, no rhythm of agreement; there was only a ceaseless thwarting of each other. And this thought, by making him feel that he was getting clearer despite all his difficulties, eased his mind; he stepped forward more confidently. Yes, it was true of him also. *And the very moment wherein I was to become other than I was, the nearer it approached me, the greater horror did it strike into me; yet did it not strike me back, nor turned me away, but held me in suspense.*

He was aware of some belated bird-song, a cry hoarse with heat; and was happy, holding out his open hand as for the alms of beauty and delight. And then, as if hell struck at him deliberately in this

moment of his unwary ease, he came on the young slave girl who was collecting apples in a low, flat basket, her unbound hair falling down and hiding her face from him; and he saw her discarded ribbon on the grass beside her. No, she had paused from picking up the fallen apples and was inspecting a scratch on her left knee. He stood watching her, and would have turned away, defying the snare, but that he feared to make any sound. He was afraid of her eyes, he was safe while she stood there, bending down, with her hair hanging between him and her face, her eyes. He feared to make any stir which would break the skein of safety, he stood balanced on a precarious ecstasy, joying in the sweetness of his present freedom and yet knowing how soon it was to end. Already, mingled with his thrill of exaltation, the unholy warmth was rising up, the network of leaves held him as in a prison. He waited, and without losing the excitement of his stainless contact with the girl and the whole autumnal world of harvest that had narrowed down into her lean brown body, he was aware of the lustful heat gathering its forces for the moment when its turn would come. And so swayed on his precarious ecstasy, reconciling in dread and delight the depths of good and evil, the release from lust and the submission to it, till he felt as if God and the Devil, pausing for a moment from their war, were striking a compact within his being, resting, a mystery of foreknowledge and freewill.

The girl looked up, he saw the dilation of fear in her eyes, the balance in his mind and blood was lost. Then she straightened her back, and stood staring shyly at him, now it was not so much fear as uncertainty that she showed. He felt acutely jealous of his brother Hesperus, who had no doubts, who turned naturally to the big-limbed, laughing slave-girls, and who took them with laughter. If only this girl standing thin and awkward and uncertain before him had smiled easily and gone on with her work, he would have been released from the intolerable tension and could have continued his walk down the orchard path. He hated her for her fear of him, her weakness that stirred the evil in his blood and made his hands restless and uncontrollable.

"What are you doing?" he asked harshly. And the words, intended to set up a natural relation between them, a relation of attentive master and busy slave-girl, had the effect only of increasing the tension, of making him feel an unnatural relation which could be broken only by violence, by a tearing of the sphingine bonds.

She muttered something, probably about the apples, but the blood was filling his ears with a dull drumming. And, mixed with that reverberation of dark insistences, the drowsy autumn lullaby lost its innocence of childing fulfilment and became the insidious urge of cruel forces blindly demanding satiation. The shyness and surprise in the girl's long hazel eyes were becoming fear again, tightening the bonds that held him to her. The voices said: Flee before the consuming fire descends. The voices said. Only once more, only once more, and then

I shall turn to God. The girl, dazed in her growing fear, drew one bare foot up against the ankle of the other and began scratching a gnatsing with the nail of the big toe. A wasp came circling out of the hole in a fallen apple; he saw the red-brown of the pulp, the russet-skin still keeping its full round curve although half the apple inside was hollow. Hollow inside, eaten away. He put his foot on the apple, he crushed it beneath his sandal-sole. Only once more, he prayed.

The girl had her thin arms hanging helplessly down. A wrench of desire came blindly up through his body. "Get on with your work," he said, recalling in a spasm of horror the body of the woman lying dead by the crossroads in the moonlight, the torn clothes showing her plump murdered flesh. No, I cannot do it. Every woman stretched sacrificially on the altar of lust-submission would henceforth be that broken woman, that uselessly murdered woman. I am free, he thought.

He turned away and strode up the path. His going was a pure exaltation, a victory of God, the light dazzling in the bunches of curled leaves was filled with the uplifted flames of angels chanting hallelujahs. Now I have come through, he thought in humility, wanting to fall flat on the green earth and adore. And then suddenly the thick smell of autumn broke on his opened senses, a mixture of rich juices and the damps of decay, a gust of undeniable warmth and corrosions. He halted, hearing a cry in the green depths, the reddening ripeness smeared blood-guilt on the world. His heart pounced. Where am I going? he thought. He could not take another step away; he faced only a wall of bleakness and skeletal shadows. The need of contact, of forgiving warmth, enfolded him, the terror of death.

He turned and ran down the path. The girl was still there, taking up the basket, she had a small pad on her head, on which she was going to rest the basket; her eyes were burningly large. She did not try to run away. He was sure that she had been expecting his return, wanting him to come. For fear can reach a stage where only by the experiencing of the feared thing can we be sure that it is not a still worse thing we fear; thus the act of ravishment can ease the terror of death. He was sure, in this moment of anguish, that the girl felt the same as himself.

Walking back to the house, he felt himself shaken with incoherent regret and shame, and yet at the same time, despite his reluctance to admit the fact, there was an airy sense of soaring, an escape from the body. Now, now, be it done now, be it done now. And it seemed quite easy to maintain this airy vagueness twinged with starts of delight and of horror. How could the others do it? he asked. Think of all the men at this moment who have found God, who have found chastity. Why was he so different, so cursed? No, he swore to himself, to the purring autumnal day, to the angelic presences, it was the last time, I said that it was going to be the last time, I shall abide by my word. And

the quavering bird-cry, choked into hoarseness, betokened the end of summer, a farewell to desire. The others have done it

He found Audax sprawled on his stomach on a couch in the library, with his chin resting on a brodered cushion as he stared down on a roll spread on the mosaicked floor. The feeling that he had something to announce to Audax disappeared, and his eyes wandered uneasily over the forms of Apollo and the Muses designed in coloured glass-cubes manufactured at Alexandria, with gold for the high-lights. Still, he felt friendly, more at ease than he had felt for weeks. "What are you reading?"

"Plato's *Politeia* I've never seen it before. How did it get into the library here?"

"I don't know I forget if those rolls were bought at Massilia, or if they were left by the former owner—the man who had this place before father got it "

"I wish I could read Greek better."

"I don't know. I always think that it did me harm, being brought up in a bilingual way. We had so many Greek servants. My grandfather on my mother's side had estates in Macedonia—I haven't any idea what's happened to them. He was proconsul of Africa—that was why my mother left Greece, where she was born. I was reared on Homer And now I've forgotten almost all my Greek. Only, I can remember how hard it made Latin for me when I started on Virgil." He paused thoughtfully. "Yes, it has something to do with the feeling I have of not being at home. . . ."

Audax rolled over on the couch "I'm quite hungry, by the way. I like this villa of yours. Let's have a simple supper—olives and bread and wine and some salad . . . I was thinking what a different feeling one gets in reading these philosophers from taking down notes about them at the School."

Paulinus sighed. "Word-spinning. I've given up reading the heathen authors For me there's a deadness in them " With an effort he drew his mind out of the numbness that threatened to invade it. He went over to the shelf and took down a roll. "Wait a moment " He fumbled with the string. "Some lines by a namesake of mine. Paulinus of Nola. You know, the friend of Ausonius It was sixty years ago that he retired to Barcina and gave up his wealth, wife, everything, for the sake of Christ. . . ." He spoke tremulously; and the tears in his eyes made it difficult for him to find the place But when he began to read out the verses, his voice grew in assurance and strength, till it surprised Audax with its passionate sweetness.

. . . why do you send to me the banished Muses?
why bid me rise and follow?

The cloistered heart, that's vowed to Christ, refuses
the Nine and their Apollo

Once we were both harmoniously enthralled
 (your powers outstripping mine),
 the deaf Apollo from his cave we called,
 we thought the Muse divine,
 in love with song we sought from groves and hills
 the gift the god bestowed
 A different force, a greater god, now fills
 my heart; a different mode
 of life he asks. He claims the life he gave,
 to make us live for him
 All sport and social work is vain to save,
 All literary whim
 his word forbids, that we may take his law
 and view its heavenly beams
 which philosophic craft but serves to flaw,
 rhetoric, poet's dreams,
 that steep the heart in lying vanities
 and teach us word-control,
 but have no shred of truth to bring us ease,
 no truth to save the soul

There was a silence after he had finished reading the Epistle. He went over to the window-sill and leant there weakly; the uprush of energy which had given his voice such vibrance had faded out, leaving him empty and sick. It seemed now that he had uttered a plea to Audax, and that his fate depended on what Audax said in response, and at once the airy conviction of bodily release, which had haunted him ever since he took the girl in the orchard, was totally lost. He felt himself sinking inexorably in a quag of filthy evil, hopelessly doomed to sink deeper with each floundering effort to escape. If only the dead could answer our cries for help. He wanted to know what his mother had felt—was it a sheer surrender to fear, or was it a calm integrity of courage, which he had seen burn tenderly in her evening face, her sad and starry eyes? He would never know.

"Yes, it's fine," agreed Audax, speaking in a constrained voice, partly because his head had slipped off the cushion and lay in an uncomfortable position. "I agree with its criticism, but I can't wholly agree with the aim it puts forward. Not wholly," he added, to cover his own vagueness and to seem nearer to Paulinus.

"Yet you're a Christian. . . ." Paulinus stood up. "Yes, we'll have that supper you suggested." He moved towards the table, on which a bronze bell with faun-handle was placed. "But can we call ourselves Christians unless we try to live the apostolic life? Is the world mad, Audax, or is it evil through and through? Why aren't men's hearts moved? What had happened? Nothing at all. That's the dreadful thing; not the death of Christ, but the unmoved hearts. Can you understand it?"

"No, I can't understand the world," said Audax bitterly.

Two days later Paulinus rode over to Uxellodunum. He had learned

from the villa's bailiff that elections for a bishop were to take place and that Bishop Pudens, a distant relation on his father's side, would be present. Audax had offered to accompany him, but in a half-hearted way, and Paulinus had easily got him to stay behind. "No, Audax, it'll be nothing but a dusty trip and a hurried family confabulation. There's really no need. I'll be back in three or four days. Make yourself perfectly at home. I'd rather, in fact, you stayed here and kept your eye on the olive-pressing. I don't think the bailiff is too honest." Audax had liked the request, and now Paulinus felt an elation of freedom as he rode off alone, with one attendant. He was elated because he had the feeling of the ultimate decision coming closer. Why not now? he asked himself. It must come. Why not now? And yet he was not at all clear exactly what he meant to do.

But the indefiniteness of his intentions did not stop him from feeling an increased excitement as he drew nearer to the town. In a kind of distracted intensity he watched the peasantry at work in the fields over the last harvest tasks; he cantered along the red-brown road, sending up a dust of crushed volcanic rock and catching snatches of immemorial song. He had a belief that Bishop Pudens would understand his spiritual state.

An inquiry at the first shop beyond the Gates discovered at once where the Bishop was lodged. At the house of Alethius Minervus, first turning before he entered the Forum; anyone could tell him where Alethius Minervus lived. The shoemaker squinted and began noisily uttering what seemed an election speech in support of Thaumastus the Friend of the People and the need of lowering taxes. Paulinus rode on, found the described turning, and then the house with corinthian pilasters let into the wall on either side of the doors. The porter seemed to take him at first for a citizen with some grievance or other, but realised his mistake after a few grumblings and blinkings. "A man doesn't know which way to turn. . . . Why can't they leave things to their betters? Excuse the delays, sir. . . . Everything's upside down." He handed Paulinus on to some kind of lesser steward, who handed him on to some kind of slightly superior steward, who handed him on to the second secretary, who apologised profusely for the disturbed state of the household, welcomed Paulinus in the name of Alethius Minervus, and deposited him in the third-best reception-room amid frescoes of lobsters and dolphins. During the next hour some seven or eight functionaries entered to bow and apologise and suggest refreshments. Alethius Minervus was having his second bath, and the Bishop was out.

Paulinus sipped some white wine after having had his hands and feet washed by a slave-boy with long dark eyelashes. At moments his heart sank, and then the excitement returned. He was pacing the room when a footman came in to announce that the Bishop had arrived back from the meeting with the deacons and would be free in a few moments.

Then came the Bishop himself, whom Paulinus at once remembered as a person whom he had particularly disliked when he last saw him about ten years previously.

"And what can I do for the son of my old friend Gaius Sollius?" the Bishop asked.

"It's nothing much . . ." stammered Paulinus.

"Anything I can do" The Bishop's face was heavy, deeply lined, not unintelligent, but his voice, so unctuously official in its detachment, repelled Paulinus, who was trying to recall what it was the Bishop had done to hurt him those ten years ago. "Of course I can do much, and yet also very little. So little, anyway, in comparison with what I should like to do."

Paulinus, despite his confusion, realised that the Bishop expected him to make a request about advancing somebody, arranging a remission of taxes, or the like. He wanted to say something to reveal that his mission was purely spiritual in its nature, that he was seeking no temporal advantage for himself or anyone else, but he could not find the words. He stammered again "No, the help I want. . . ."

"How is your illustrious father?" asked the Bishop, trying to put him at his ease. "Is your request a message from him? A man of his greatness can be assured of all possible support . . ." He was growing bored with the inability of Paulinus to speak out and state what favour was required

"No, no," said Paulinus desperately, quite unable to think what it was that had drawn him on this visit. "I was merely passing through the town, I heard of your presence and wished to pay my respects. . . ."

The Bishop was relieved. "I trust you will stay a few days at least. I know that I express the sentiments of my host in thus extending an invitation——"

"Assuredly, assuredly," said a squeaky voice, and Alethus came in. "I overheard, my Lord Bishop. You have taken the words from my mouth. What was my joy in hearing that the son of the magnificent, the great, the inestimable Gaius Sollius had paid a visit to my poor house. The servants who were responsible for failing to notify me sooner, on the paltry pretext that I was sweating in the new steam-bath, have been properly reprimanded, I can assure you. It was touch and go whether I had the rascals whipped. What good fortune, my Lord Bishop! Now I shall have another noble palate to pronounce on those mullet I had brought by special courier."

Paulinus sighed; he had merely landed himself in the social round again. He found it more and more difficult to adopt the correct tone, to answer with the set compliments and florid tautologies of intercourse in good society. For some time he had been finding the conventions irksome; but today, after his high hopes, he felt them unbearably false

and deadly. And there was Alethius grimacing away, talking about the stuffed thrushes for dinner and the charming voice of the young Syrian boy who would sing with the dessert. But after he had had a bath, his agitation slackened; and as he reclined in the dining-room, among the dozen or so guests who were lavishly praising the fare and the decorations and the performers, he began to laugh at his own eagerness. It will come in its due time, the new birth. He even savoured his aloofness, since it convinced him of the deepening change in himself.

And when the talk turned to the forthcoming election of a bishop for the town, he found himself interested. Bishop Pudens, who, as metropolitan, had come over to control the affair, struck him after all as a sensible and well-meaning man, very shrewd, without doubt an excellent administrator; he showed his capacity to grasp the essence of a situation. After the preliminary laudations of the Bishop who had died last month, the conversation dealt with the problems of the election. It was impossible to deny the people their traditional right, but the Bishop had his fears about the wisdom of allowing such a matter of grave choice to continue resting in the hands of the fickle multitude, the *unreasoning commons*. So the question was how to manage the affair so that the commons thought they had exercised a right of election while the actual choosing had been done behind the scenes by men of superior judgment. There were two candidates in the field. Thaumastus the self-styled Friend of the People, who stood on a programme of lowered taxes and increased almsgiving; and Sedatus, who was known, said the Bishop, to have made an underhand agreement with his supporters among the middle-class for the spoliation of the episcopal estate. "Both these men in their varying ways would be disastrous bishops."

"Whom, then, do you propose, my Lord Bishop?" asked Alethius, "if it is not premature to ask you to disclose your plans?"

"Not at all, not at all." The Bishop, a frugal eater, refused a second helping of nightingale-tongue rissoles. "I have discussed things at length with both presbyters and deacons. The Episcopal Conclave has decided against pressing forcibly into the office one of the great men of the town, such as my valued friend here——" he courteously indicated his overjoyed host, who rubbed his hands, grimaced, modestly coughed, tried to swallow a mouthful of fish, and got a bone stuck in his throat. There followed a commotion of slaves wailing and rushing up with napkins, pieces of bread, soothing drinks. After peace was restored, the Bishop resumed, "I myself, you know, was only recently a layman, till by a unanimous voice of my fellow townsmen I was compelled into the episcopate. However, I think I have shown myself tolerably at home in the office."

Alethius was hastening to make a complimentary remark, but drank his wine too quickly and had another splutter of throat trouble. "There's a bone that won't go down," he complained, clutching his scraggy

throat and gurgling. "Perhaps the doctor ought to see it. Call the doctor, Pheidias. Quick."

While the doctor was being fetched, the Bishop explained that the conclave had decided to appoint Simplicius, a man of good family and noted piety, who had put in a quiet word about desiring the office. "He's built a church—that's the winning throw. And he's only been married once. I feel quite confident that some, ah, fortunate chance will express the will of God in this matter and get Simplicius appointed. . . ."

The doctor came rushing in "Is 'our Marcus Alethius taken ill? What a calamity for our household, for Uxellodunum, for the Universe!" He was a Syrian with profuse exclamations and hyacinthine whiskers. "May I speak familiarly? May I?" he begged anxiously, clasping his beringed fingers

His master graciously signified that he might, and made weak efforts to gulp, overcome by the sense of his own importance and the loss to the world that his death would mean.

"Don't risk yourself, please," begged the doctor. "Don't do it again. Don't risk your precious life. I'll make you a gargle at once." He rushed out, and Alethius lay gasping.

In tones somewhat hushed by the medical crisis, the company applauded the choice of the episcopal conclave and wondered how it was that the will of God was going to manifest itself. Pudens went on to discourse concerning the growing importance of the episcopate in these stormy days and the need to keep it reserved for men with a sense of duty both to Church and State. Paulinus felt a growing conviction of unreality, an unusual scepticism invaded his mind—not an intellectual scepticism, but a sort of dim tickling laughter, a wish to laugh irresponsibly while entirely agreeing with all the Bishop's remarks. He studied the faces of his host and the guests, too, with unusual objectivity; everything seemed impossibly humorous. He watched the changing grimaces of Alethius's mobile face, his moments of panic lest the fish-bone was permanently stuck in his gullet, his pride in having such matters of high policy disclosed confidentially at his dinner, his fear that the programme of dishes would be spoiled by the Bishop's long-drawn account, his anxiety that the dinner would not carry on with the proper crescendo to the baked peacock and the song by the charming Syrian 'boy, his groan as he resumed the stricken part, seeing the doctor enter with the gargle in a silver cup.

The church was packed. The factions were all arguing at the tops of their voices. Men were shaking fists, shouting, climbing up on everything available. A man with a cold was standing on a bench and speechifying against the spiral columns, carved all over with *amorini* and vines, which screened the apse. At the end of the southern aisle a group of priests

were whispering. Fantastic rumours about the council of bishops were spreading: Bishop Graecus had had a fit, and Bishop Ablavius had suddenly declared for the Manichean heresy. There was a feeling that something peculiar was going to happen, though nobody suspected what it was. Paulinus leant against a wall-mosaic of the Last Judgment, still torn by something of that sense of a vast pointless joke—though it was not in the events going on before him that he located the joke, rather it was in himself, in an evanescent frustration linking him to the events and yet leading to no fruition of contact. As if his own life was a commentary on the events, or the events a commentary on his whole life, both of them tragically serious, yet not at all what they thought they were. Somebody said, "The four points of the winds utter the Cross." And somebody said, "Thaumastus is our man. Down with the taxes."

Then the unruly crowd hushed. The Bishops, emerging from their secret conclave, had unexpectedly appeared at the head of the middle aisle, in front of the altar, coming through the side door guarded by the priests. A clear tenor voice began a hymn, "Far from the track he drives the wolf . . ." The crowd swayed, tried to see what was happening; somebody fell off a table. A shout, "The Friend of the People!" was answered by a general hiss for silence. The priests were moving about, doing something. What? Was there to be an announcement? Perhaps Bishop Ablavius had become a heretic, after all; perhaps Bishop Graecus had spoken with voices. . . . There was a swirl up the aisle towards the altar. The Bishops had grabbed hold of somebody; suddenly they had all laid their hands on a man standing close to the body of clergy. They were pronouncing the words that made Simplicius the Bishop of the diocese. A murmur rose up from the people, partly of indignation, partly of interrogation, partly of mere wonder. A shock of awe and tingling participation swept over the whole mass, a recognition of ritual gestures and formulae.

At once the metropolitan Pudens, perceiving his advantage, stepped forward and began an address in his ringing, persuasive tones. "My children, we the Bishops have not acted imprudently and hastily, nor with any intent to intrude upon popular rights and claims. Rather, we have acted in a way that conserves those rights. I might say, a way that raises those rights to a higher level. On consideration, you will perceive the way in which your desires—I mean of course your religious and brotherly desires—have been realised. What is the duty of us, your Bishops, if it is not to lead you along the path of righteousness, and above all out of the path of worldly clamour and discord? Evil forces have been at work—Scylla-mouths of slander, barking mouths of ambition—to drive you into wreck. Oh, my children, consider the difficulties and dilemmas from which you have been rescued. Could you wish for a truer prelate than Simplicius? Do you not all accord in ratifying his election with your love, with the voices of your favour?"

The State will find in him one to admire, and the Church one to love. If birth is still to command respect, as the Evangelist teaches—for St. Luke, beginning his eulogy of St. John, considers it of the highest moment that he sprang from a line of priestly tradition, and exalts the importance of his family before celebrating the nobility of his life—then I shall recall the fact that your new Bishop's relatives have presided alike over the Church and the Tribunal. His family has been distinguished in either career by many bishops and prefects, it had become almost their hereditary privilege to administer the divine and human laws. If we scrutinise rather more narrowly his personal qualifications, we shall find him conspicuous among the most respected. . . . ”

He continued in this vein, lauding the hospitality of Simplicius, and above all the fact that he had built a church at his own charge. Why, Simplicius was superior to King Solomon, who called on the wealth of the Queen of Sheba as well as his own to build the Temple, whereas Simplicius had spent only his own money, despite the fact that he had five young children dependent on him and his parents opposed the project. Skirting the question of the other candidates, the Bishop pointed out that it was unnecessary to mention men who were “excluded by the canon, because each of them has married again”. He remarked in jocular vein, “But someone will ask. How did you learn so much about the good Simplicius in so short a time? My answer is that I have made acquaintance with men of Uxellodunum long before I knew their city. I have travelled with some and served with others. Many I have met in affairs of business and debate. Many, when either they or I were away from our several towns. More, a short cut to knowledge of a man is given by the general opinion about him. . . . ” Then he praised the new Bishop's wife. “She belongs to the Palladian family, which alike in the schools and in the Church has occupied the chief seats with the approbation of its own order. To speak of a woman's life requires both delicacy and reticence. I will say here only that this lady has shown herself worthy of the ecclesiastical dignity enjoyed by her two families, both that in which she was born, and that into which she was married. She is associated with her husband in the education of their sons on sound and careful principles. . . . ” By the time he had concluded, the people in the church acclaimed Simplicius, and only a few resolved malcontents tried to raise any protest. Pudens quickly dissolved the gathering, and the matter was settled.

Paulinus walked out among the dismissed crowd. Most of the people were finding a distinct touch of the miraculous in the election of Simplicius. “Nobody thought of him yesterday, and now look, he's a bishop. It's the finger of God all right. . . . What's the use of bishops if they can't obey the Spirit when it descends on them?” Paulinus suddenly felt weary; his sense of an esoteric joke no longer sustained him. And yet the only part of his thoughts which reached consciousness was

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entirely sympathetic with Bishop Pudens, and considered that he had handled a difficult situation with tact and ability. He wandered on, down side-streets, and found himself in the slum area of the town; rough boarding on doors and windows announced the breakdown of retail shopkeeping; slatternly women and children filled the alleys. And though he could not relate this scene of poverty and degradation to the events which he had been witnessing, he felt a tremor coming over him; the pressure was starting again, the slow quake of horror. *And Thou, O Lord, how long? how long, Lord, wilt Thou be angry, for ever? Remember not our former iniquities. I sent up these sorrowful words: How long? how long, tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? why is there not this hour an end to my uncleanness?* The furtive eyes of a girl with untidy hair burned in slots of flame, the flames of corruption, through a grated window.

4. End of a Lawsuit

The last day of the case was distinguished with several painful scenes, which provided gossip-material for over a week at Lugdunum. Gaius Basilius, realising that his last hope was gone, began to interject, and finally made an attempt to attack the bench. He was removed after kicking one of the apparitors in the stomach, and only the fact that he was, after all, a man of high family saved him from disagreeable consequences. As it was, he was roughly handled by menials and kept for half an hour in confinement in a small room next to the janitor's apartment in the Basilica of Justice, where he expressed his chagrin by breaking a chair and a pot into small pieces. After the court had ceased to sit, he was released through the good offices of Florentinus, a kindly-natured fellow who was his sole remaining friend and who had acted as advocate for him during the lawsuit. "I told you that it was useless," Florentinus remarked, having come to the end of his toleration. "What could you possibly do without any important patronage? It would have been better to drop the whole thing at the start and sue privately for a composition. . . ."

"Never, never, never," vociferated Basilius, and looked round for something else to break.

"Well, it's too late now," Florentinus reminded him tartly. "So don't get worked-up about it."

"No composition. I'd rather die." Having found nothing else to break, Basilius looked as if he was meditating an assault on his officious friend. Florentinus made the definite decision to break with a man who was so determined on his own downfall.

"I'm sorry I can do nothing more. However, I've arranged for your release." He turned and went out.

"Then go to hell and be damned!" Basilius shouted after him, and had at least the pleasure of seeing Florentinus quicken his pace.

D (Barriers are Down)

The door was now open, but Basilus did not hasten to exit. He scowled at the door as if he bore it a grudge; he was peculiarly reluctant to take advantage of the lack of bolts and bars, though only a few moments previously he had been banging and kicking on the panels. He regarded with satisfaction the scars he had made with a jagged piece of the broken pot. It was much better to have the door closed, to have something obvious and tangible on which to wreak his hatred, than to be presented with an open space and enemies in ambush. The more he looked at the door, the less he liked to pass through. "Come on, don't skulk!" he shouted. He took up some of the pottery fragments and threw them through the doorway. He heard somebody moving away, and his suspicions were strengthened. "Thought you could catch me that way!" He charged out through the doorway into the short passage, and saw the door into the janitor's apartment hastily closing. He banged for a while on that door, and then lost interest. Evidently he had put enough fear into the enemies of the immediate neighbourhood, the problem of the enemies over the horizon rose into his mind, drawing him out into the street.

It was then that the full reason for his reluctance to leave the room became obvious. For where was he to go? how on earth was he to utter a protest? what could he break or kick against? The impalpability of the omnipresent attack left him helpless, wanting to raise his voice and roar like a bull. The movement of the passers-by drew him in, made him start walking off across the square, he had a vague notion that somebody in the portico was making a face at him—or perhaps it was somebody in the little business rooms above, where moneylenders were chinking coins. He climbed up the stairs, finding the abrupt turns a little difficult, it was with a sense of problems overcome that he reached the top and leaned against the chipped marble balustrade, looking down on the heads of a group of citizens and the gutter that ran across the paved square. A bald head, glistening between two tufted ears, affronted him, and he spat; then he lurched along the corridor for the door marked M. PHOEBICIUS BANKER MORTGAGES EXPEDITIOUS MONEY-CHANGING; the chinkle of the coins that the clerk was dropping into the scale-pan made him walk straight in. Phoebicius lifted his bulbous brow and hooked nose, and slowly wiped his chin with the sleeve of his gown.

Basilus sniffed. The chinkling had ceased, and he was disconcerted. "Well, you rogue, you cheat . . . I need some more money."

"So do I," said Phoebicius, creasing his cheeks in a smile in which his eyes decidedly took no part. Without looking away from Basilus, he said coldly, "Theon . . ."

The clerk took Basilus by the arm and pushed him gently towards the door. But as Basilus resisted, the grasp grew stronger and less gentle. Phoebicius whistled. A tramp of hasty feet sounded in the corridor. "You cheat, you dog, you abortion of a Paphlagonian harlot!"

shouted Basilus. "You've eaten me up, and now you want to spew me out." Somebody caught him from behind, with a brawny arm that pressed hard against his throat; and after a period of confusion and tumult, he found himself again at the foot of the stairs, holding a piece of somebody's tunic in his hand. The small of his back was hurting; also his left ear. And he had jarred his right elbow, presumably on a hard skull. He turned and shouted up the stairs, "There's no such thing as justice left I was a fool to think it. Go and be damned." The shout echoed about him, restoring something of his self-esteem. A small boy with a parcel was watching him with admiration. Stimulated, Basilus added, "It's my last word." Then he strode out into the square.

But still he had nowhere to go. He found himself wandering over by the Temple of Augustus, as if making for the town-house of Florentinus. But though his memory of his last interview with Florentinus was dim, he was at least sure that he'd been insulted. Even though his only remaining belongings—his clothes and a few knick-knacks—were still in the room he had been using at Florentinus's house, he couldn't bring himself to go and claim them I've washed my hands of the whole damned lot, he repeated to himself; they may think I'll come crawling, but I won't He was not exactly becoming more sober, but he was feeling the need for further wine. Otherwise he would certainly go to sleep in some public place I'm worn out, he thought with self-commiseration; I haven't slept for weeks, worrying about a lot of swine that don't deserve it

He went into a wine-bar with a Bear painted over the door The bar-table was composed of coloured marbles, which a girl was polishing with a rag Basilus put his right hand down on the table and stared at the wall-painting of sausages and hams hanging on a stick

"So you've come to help me polish?" asked the girl, who had a necklace of assorted amulets round her plump throat

"What's this?" asked Basilus, suspecting an affront to his dignity.

The girl pointed to his hand, which still grasped the piece of somebody's tunic. "I thought you were going to give a rub too."

Basilus frowned at the piece of cloth in his hand, then threw it on the floor. Would he, or would he not, order a slice of sausage? "Young woman," he said heavily, "slut, wolfbitch . . . some wine at once. At once." He couldn't decide about the sausage, especially while the girl was looking at him. Then her swollen lower lip attracted his attention; he leaned over the bar. "Have you got any enemies? Tell me You can trust me"

She pouted "O well, one or two. A girl wouldn't be much to look at if she hadn't, would she now?"

"Then do to them what I do to mine. Grind them up." He pressed his thumb down on the bar-table. "Grind them down. As I do Ha, they're scared of me." He glanced back over his shoulder, and sure

enough there was one of his enemies looking at him. It must have been an enemy, or why did the ugly-faced hound dodge away like that? "Quick, some wine," he said hoarsely "I'm in a hurry. I can't stay here talking." He glanced back again, and sure enough there was the same ugly-faced fellow dodging away again by the door, trying to hide behind the imitation ionic pillars painted on the posts "Quick"

"I'm being as fast as I can," answered the girl pettishly, bending under the counter for a jug.

The next moment the enemy was leaning up against the bar at the side of Basilus, who felt faint and blamed the girl for having been slow with the wine. The enemy said cunningly, "I'll have some of that wine too." Basilus took a drink and felt better, but he waited "I think we know one another. At least I know you "

"And I know you," said Basilus in a muffled voice

"All the better, then," the man answered, taking the words of Basilus in a literal sense. "Yes, I'm your brother's secretary I've been trailing you for some time. Let's be frank. I've got a message for you "

"It's no use," muttered Basilus. "No composition All my rights or nothing." He still felt weak; the fellow had unnerved him The way he crept up behind me, he thought; I wasn't ready; nothing's fair

"Well, you know how to keep your end up," said the secretary with hearty *bonhomie*. Basilus looked furtively at him, and saw that he had sandy eyebrows and a long, knobbly nose "Considering that you've got nothing to propose a composition on, we'll ignore that aspect of the proceedings What about another drink?"

Despite all his suspicions and angers, Basilus could not reject the suggestion Time enough afterwards to kick this cockerel out on to the cobbles. There were very few coins left in the small purse which Basilus was carrying in a fold of his gown. He followed the secretary into the inner room and took a seat under a peeling picture of a harvest-home "Now tell me why you've been sent to persecute me?" he said truculently, taking another drink "You'll have to tell me one time or another. You might as well tell me now." He struck the table "You and the others murdered my son. You lured him off and murdered him. I didn't think you'd go as far as that That's why I've had a misfortune. But it isn't for long. O, no "

"Of course not " The secretary was unperturbed. "In fact I've been sent with a proposition that puts you on your feet again. You know the Velusine Villa——"

"It's mine! Of course I know it "

"It's not yours, my dear sir, since the law handed it finally over to your brother this morning." He saw the rising wrath of Basilus and tried to stem it. "We'll omit the question of ultimate rights. The Villa's in your brother's hands. That's all I meant to say. Well, though he— however, I don't think it's necessary to state that part of his comments.

The crux of the matter is that I'm empowered to tell you that he is aware you now have no means of support—and ahem, he is aware further that friendships don't last long when one of the friends is penniless, especially when—well, that also is a matter which doesn't need to be stressed. I beg you not to be angry, sir. I am only an intermediary. The point of my message is that your brother is willing to let bygones be bygones and to offer you the position of sub-bailiff on the Villa on advantageous terms. Only proviso is that you're not to leave the estate."

Basilus controlled himself, set his jaw, and leaned forward. "And what is your opinion, young man? What do you think my reply is going to be?"

The secretary rose and made his way towards the door; the tip of his nose was pale, and twitched. "I can't wait. My opinion, after I've have seen you at close quarters—my opinion, sir, is decidedly that you'll refuse, since you are obviously in the last stages of vinous disintegration. Good-bye."

Basilus, whose mind was not working at all fast, failed for a moment to take in what had been said, he had been frightened the creature was trying to creep behind him once more. "What's that?" He didn't want the creature to go before he had said exactly what he thought of his brother. Events were moving too fast. "Come back. I haven't finished."

"The offer stands open for a week," said the secretary, reaching the door. "Call in at the stables on the left of the church of St. Peter, and a vehicle will carry you to the Villa. Any time during the next week."

"No, I won't take it, damn you!" bellowed Basilus, seeing that he was going to be robbed of the length of time necessary to express his rage in any adequate terms. "Tell him to choke himself—I'd die first—I've never heard of such infamy——"

But the secretary was gone; and Basilus had not uttered the least of the raging phrases that filled his head. He got up, knocking a stool over, and ran after the secretary. But the secretary was young, sober, and agile, and he had not at all liked the look in Basilus's eye. He was round the corner, congratulating himself on having carried out safely a dangerous embassy, before Basilus had reached the street door.

"Now what's all this fuss?" asked the girl. "No brawling here."

Basilus remembered that the secretary had left almost the whole of his wine untouched. He muttered at the girl, and hastened back to the inner room. There he quickly changed his own drained cup for the secretary's full one, and slumped down on the bench. The girl had followed him to the doorway and was looking curiously in.

"What are you staring at?" he howled. Draining the cup, he flung it down on the floor.

"Rufus!" called the girl, turning to the curtained door that led into the kitchen. "Breakages. A roaring drunk."

A burly man with a small squarish head appeared, wiping his hands on a rag. "Come on, pay up, old boy," he said to Basilus. "Break what you like, as long as you pay for it"

Basilus overturned the table and broke the other cup. But he had to pay, all the same. Arms of enormous strength caught hold of him, and ticklish girl-fingers found his purse, and the cost of wine and breakages was extracted before the arms lifted him up and threw him into the street. What was worst was that the secretary, in his haste, had forgotten to pay for his own wine—or perhaps his failure to pay was part of the conspiracy to ruin Basilus. Anyway, Basilus had to pay for his share too. He lay groaning on the cobbles, with a dog sniffing at him. Where was Justice, O where? Why hadn't he jumped on the secretary while he had the chance? Why hadn't he set fire to the Basilica of Justice? Why hadn't he strangled his brother forty years ago? A small boy threw an ancient cabbage at him. "Don't think I'll forget!" he bawled at the tavern, and limped off.

Six days later he limped into the stables near the Church of S. Peter. His clothes were torn and he smelt unpleasantly; his eyes were bloodshot and one was almost bunged up; a shoe was lost and he had a dirty bit of sacking round his foot, some of his hair had been wrenched out and there was a cut across his nose. But his manner was tremendously haughty when he stood swaying in the doorway, with his bandaged foot in a lump of horse-dung, and declared in slow majestic tones

"Harness the carriage at once, dog! Drive me to the Velusinc Villa! No nonsense, now!"

5 *The Year Ends in Hungary*

He did not notice for a while that he had left the others behind; apparently they had taken the other turning by the dead willow. Suddenly he was alone, looking westward over the endless desolation of the sedge. He smelt the harsh smell of the water-plants. Only a few puffs of cloud haunted the sky of cold, hard azure: they faded as one stared, and seemed illusions of the strained eye. The horse was pacing slowly across the damp, soggy ground. He turned and looked back again, but still could see no one.

A ripple came to break among the weeds and matted oddments of rush. He saw a green island appear at the end of an avenue of swaying reeds; a fish leaped, startling his horse. At the same moment something startled the wild geese, they came flocking in a storm of wind and black, a crash of beating wings, out of their water recesses. And following came a smaller swarm of snipe, drumming a hollow noise with their wings, whistling, to dart this way and that and then sink down again towards the waters. A solitary heron rose clumsily, then began its leisurely

majestic flight, with head coiled back and long legs stretched out straight behind.

With a start he realised that there was no impulse to attempt an escape. Was that only because of the hazards of such a long journey as he would need to take to reach Gaul? Or had he really no wish, deep down in his spirit, to leave the Hunnic realm? He could not answer. The thought of Gaul stirred a yearning, a dim welter of nostalgic images, but the thought had not thrust itself irresistibly into his mind. As he pressed his knees against the sturdy sides of his horse, he felt the strength of the forces that were holding him. He watched some small brown waders with spindle shanks and long striking-bills ascend into the air with sure and easy strokes. It was the new physical mastery which he felt that was what held him. He laughed out loud at the water solitude, he looked up at the sun in its bed of crumbling, mealy white-gold, and laughed. He knew that his laughter owned a deeper note.

He turned and rode back the way that he had come.

He picked up the trail of the others beside the blasted willow. In a few moments he had sighted them, and galloped to catch up. Ellak bent a quick look on him, and smiled; and Eutharic, the Ostrogoth, nodded and edged his horse over. "Take care of Sarus. He tried to hint you had disappeared on purpose."

"I'm not scared of Sarus or any of them."

"Still, someday we shall kill him, you and I," Eutharic grinned benevolently. "Him or one of the others. Why not?"

There was no lack of fellow-Gauls at Attila's capital and its environs. Hostages of scores of various Germanic tribes; fugitives from Gaul, Italy, and the Eastern Empire; Latin-speaking settlers of the Danubian area who occupied land that their fathers or grandfathers had occupied under Roman rule, adventurers from every part of the civilised world, bankrupts who had fled from the oppressive taxes of the *Romanum Imperium* for the untaxed lands under Hunnic rule—there was no lack of diversity among the men to be encountered. But Prosper felt no wish to strike up acquaintances among the various Gallo-Romans or Italians that he met. He felt alien from them, and feared that they would be somehow critical of him, contemptuous of his rôle in Ellak's household. To preserve the new balance of forces that had been asserting itself inside him—a balance necessary to the maintenance of his position and of Ellak's favour—he found that he had to cut himself off from the men who suggested too directly the world which he had left.

Not that he had any settled purpose. He merely submitted to the need to find an active footing, to struggle, to grasp out at the facts of the sphere in which he found himself. And there were moments when the hunger for the *Romanum Imperium*, the life in which he had been reared, did rise up powerfully inside him, and then he wandered off amid the

ruins of Aquincum, the town which had led a busy frontier life in the days when Rome still held the Danube. Aquincum lay a little higher up than the spot on which Attila had built his palisaded capital; it had aqueducts, baths, a theatre. But only a ghost of its former life still went on in its streets, where a lack of municipal control had long past allowed weeds to collect. Many of the houses were still inhabited; a certain amount of noisy chaffering went on over heaps of gaudy melons, horses, leatherwork, but the ideal of active municipal organisation, the essential Roman ideal, had passed away.

Quite different was the effect of Attila's capital. Certainly there was nothing of a *municipium* about that. But at least there was abundant energy, there was control and organisation of a kind, though not of the Roman kind. The force that held the community life together was entirely personal, centred in Attila and flowing from him into all lesser delegations, over which he kept a strict hand. All freemen had the right of appeal to him. Even over the affairs of the various remote tribes who had rendered homage he maintained a direct and effective hand, dispensing a justice that was fierce, unfettered by forms, totally without consideration of person.

Prosper had now often drunk and eaten in the King's Great Hall, in the retinue of Ellak. He had even once ridden close behind Attila when Ellak had been hunting with his master, and Attila had complimented him on his falconry. The moment when those dark, piercing eyes had been turned on his face was a memory at once disturbing and stimulating. He had stood with the others in the Hall when Attila had held a court of justice, springing up from a meal to answer at once a call for aid or for condemnation. He had seen Attila, with dark, unchanged face, judging a settler who had tried to run off across the Roman boundary. The man's jaws had been held open and his throat had been stuffed with earth till he died. "Let him have the earth that he sought to abandon." He had seen Attila flog one of the nobles who had cheated a German auxiliary. He had seen him spend an hour to unravel a complicated feud and to heal the hatred, gripping by the throat the man who had refused to accept wergeld. "Will you take the money, or shall I rip your belly open and sew it up inside you?" One way or another you must take it."

One of Ellak's kinsmen died, and a funeral feast was held. A light-coloured horse was chosen for the sacrifice; and as the dusk fell the shaman sat by the fire in the Hall. Ellak clapped his hands and the clamour died abruptly away. Slaves put out all lights, there was only the fire built on the slabs of stone. The sheafs of spears around the walls flickered in the red flames. The shaman stood up and let the smoke of the fire envelop his tambourine. His dark, loose dress was hung with bits of metal, bells, feathers. He began his chant in a low almost inaudible

voice, luring the spirits to his tambourine; and each spirit, as it was snared in the hollow space, the thudding rhythm, answered. "Hail, master, here I am." And when the spirit spoke, a strange intensity invaded the shaman's voice, and Prosper shuddered and drew back closer against the wall. Not even all the wine that he had drunk owned warmth enough to shut out the chill that struck him when that unknown, that cry from another side of life, that hail of an unrealised power, rose sharply, tensely, with a suddenness that could not be prepared for, out of the tambourine, out of the belly of the shaman, the circling, unending dance, the red gleam.

Then the dance grew faster, whirled in wider circles. The shaman was chasing the soul of the sacrificial horse, which neighed in defiance and fear, "*Myyak, myyak*." The shaman danced the chase, the speed, the crafty lure, the leap, and the soul sped through space, answering "*Myyak, myyak*." The shaman became the soul, the sacrificial horse, which he sought. He neighed, he kicked and plunged, he strove to escape the fated death, the redemption. He cried in terror, "*Myyak, myyak*." He caught the soul, he wrestled with it and tamed it. He rode the soul back through the flapping winds of immensity, triumphantly, "*Myyak*." He held the soul in his belly, in the tambourine, in the unending rhythm.

His assistant had brought the light-coloured horse forward, into the level space before the fire. And the shaman, at once both the slayer and the slain, the priest and the victim, took the knife, whirled in an eddy of the red gleams, thudded the unending rhythm, and the blood from the horse's throat gushed across the fire. A wild dance-twirl, a thudding that went faster and faster, a maze of red gleams, and a rising cry that seemed a myriad cries, a cry of appeal and a cry of triumph, a cry of death and a cry of life—wider the circling, quicker the turn. The mad, terrible eyes found him out, seared his thoughts, and were gone. The cries came from deep in the belly, an animal hubbub, horrible and uttering unrealised power. Not even the thought of Kubai, the lean, sinewy gurl who now shared Prosper's bed, could shut out the chill that struck into his very bones. He felt the dead crying in the night. The dancer took on himself the blood-guilt.

"Come to me singing, settle on my right shoulder, settle on my right eyelid. *Ungai gak gak, ungai gak, kikai gak gak, kaikai gak* . . ."

The shaman was calling the bird that would take him to heaven. He was beginning the journey through the elements, in which he would lead the dead man, the journey deep into the bowels of the earth, through the terrors lairing in the cavern of death. . . . Prosper shuddered. He wanted to go outside; above all, he wanted to clasp Kubai in his arms. The light flickering on the sheafs of spears was like a drip of blood. He crept farther along the wall to where Eutharic was sitting on a heap of rushes. And then, as he reached out and grasped Eutharic's strong arm, on which shone a pair of gilded bracelets, he felt

at ease again; the strained, rapt faces floating in the garish, smoky darkness blurred and were only reflections of his own face, his eagerness turned in on the central mystery, the mad, upleaping voice, the whirl of red gleams, the merciless rhythm.

And so, as the year dimmed and darkened and the cold winds swept over the steppes, he felt himself enclosed within the Hunnic world. The past faded beyond the frozen horizon. The frost stiffened and cracked the stems of the tall reeds. There was much slaughtering of stocks. The ice heaped in flawed lumps on the edges of pools and streams, spread out doggedly, broke off into little floating islands. The river was filled with drifting ice, grey blocks that sparkled in the thin gusts of sunlight. The drifts eddied into backwaters, were caught and frozen fast. More drifts came up and clashed. They huddled against the banks. The line of flowing water narrowed raggedly, narrowed, and one morning had gone. The songs round the fire took on a yearning note.

III

THE HUNS STRIKE SOUTH (A D. 452)

1. *The New Year Comes*

AFTER PAULINUS RETURNED from Uxellodunum, a period of pleasant idling and conversation settled down at the Villa. There were no visitors, no news from the outer world except the market tidings that the bailiff brought. Paulinus had lost his feeling of oppression; he showed a light touch in his discussions with Audax, a charming note almost frivolous in its self-deprecation. He gave a satirical account of his trip to Uxellodunum. "I don't know what I was after. I had an idea, I think, of unbosoming myself to Bishop Pudens. I might even have joined the Church if he had been sufficiently persuasive." He made the statement archly, as if of course it was only a joke. Both he and Audax were floating amiably on the surface of philosophic debate, they both felt extraordinarily wise and aloof from the world, superior to vulgar delusions, buoyed up their mutual support in a mild scepticism. There was a feeling that this sort of thing could go on indefinitely, as long as the right note of semi-mockery was sustained.

And yet, as the rain settled down, something of boredom crept into their conversation. They lounged in the library and drank watered wine and talked about God and a series of new interior decorations. The first trouble occurred over the central heating; the villa hadn't been inhabited during the winter for several years, and the slaves had let the system get out of order, various flues and passages under the floors had become blocked. It seemed that to get the confounded system into proper order the floors in the main living-rooms would have to be taken up, and how could that be done now, with the winter suddenly driving in on them? The bailiff suggested that they should use braziers; but Paulinus couldn't bear the smell. He was used to steam-heating. The bailiff found the smallest boy in the *familia* and made him crawl up the main heating-passages, but even the smallest boy couldn't get far enough up to rectify things, though he insisted that a monster with flaming eyes had attacked him. Probably there were rats nesting in the flues. Paulinus grew irritable. The abstract discussions about a way-of-life lost their attraction. He flew into a bad temper when he was served with cheese made from sheep-milk, which always upset him; and he was distressed afterwards, not because of his angry words in themselves, but because angry words revealed a failure of philosophic superiority. The bailiff got on his nerves, "You haven't even laid straw down under the apples in the apple-sheds. And the shutters are broken. The

apples will shrivel in this cold wind. You think I don't know anything about these matters."

The bailiff cringed, but his eyes kept a sullen resistance. "Yes, but three years ago I wrote to the head-steward at Lauriacum I told him about the apples. He said feed the hogs. He'd forgotten we'd had an epidemic of fever. It's not my fault. I sent in a report, with full list. I was promised a new herd. What's the use of keeping the apples so carefully? Besides, I'm short of labour. There's hardly any house-slaves left. It takes so long to get special services out of the *coloni*, I might as well do the jobs myself and manage to get a bit of sleep." There was a hint of insolence in his words. "I've never had any complaints from Lauriacum. I send in full reports." What underhand agreement did the fellow have with the head-steward of the manor? There was some cheating going on.

"I'll look into these matters," said Paulinus coldly. "Later on, in full detail."

"Nothing I'd like better. Any moment you please, sir. I've got all my accounts made up ready."

Obviously the fellow was cheating, with the complicity of the head-steward. But Paulinus lost interest and waved him away. The fumes of the braziers continued to disturb his stomach. He paced up and down the rooms of the house, but he didn't think of returning to Lauriacum. Anything was better than elbowing against his father and brother. The only member of his family that he could bear to think about was his sister Veria, he talked of her to Audax, even cast out suggestions that it would be nice if she and Audax married, though he knew quite well that his father would never permit such an alliance. The discussions between the two youths lost their equanimity, their concord, the opinions on either side began to diverge again, to clash.

He tried to read the rolls that he had brought along, the works of men who had passed through the crisis that obsessed him. How comforting it was to know that these others, with stronger and deeper souls than his, had passed along the same way! How painful it was to know that they had gone ahead into the fulfilment, while he still lingered helplessly in the briars and sloughs of the passage! He read aloud sections from the writings of Tertullian, Augustine, Cyprian, Jerome, Ambrose. Always the words came home to his needs and hopes, encouraging, agonising. In tones trembling with passion he leaned over the brazier, never feeling warm in these days of chilly winds and spiritual hesitations.

When I lay in darkness and blind night, wavering, tossed on the billows of this stormy world, uncertain of my wandering steps, ignorant of my way in life, and a stranger to the light of truth, I used to think it a very difficult matter that a man could possibly be born anew. The divine indulgence had made me the promise for my

salvation, but considering my character at the time, it seemed to be very doubtful if anyone could be quickened to new life by baptism in saving water, and putting off what he had been, should be himself changed in heart and soul, although retaining all his bodily structure.

"How," I would say, "is so great a change possible? How can we so suddenly divest ourselves of what was either born with us and has hardened by long use in our material nature or else was acquired by us and has become inveterate by lapse of time? These things go deep, and are now radically engrained within us. When does a man learn thrift who has grown accustomed to splendid banquets and magnificent feasts? When does a man descend to ordinary simple garb who has always been conspicuous in costly robes glittering with gold and purple?"

"He who has once felt the charm of power and office can never be a commoner again, inglorious and unknown. He who has lived attended by serried bands of clients and honoured by the close concourse of their officious train regards it as a punishment when he is alone. Things do not change, and it is inevitable that wine should always entice, pride inflate, passion inflame, greed disquiet, cruelty sting, ambition delight, and lust drive headlong to ruin, their allurements are eternal and will never let go their hold."

These were my constant thoughts . . .

He broke down, and could read no more. He sat crouched over the roll, striving to control his desire to weep. Why was he made different from the others, like his father or his brother, who never gave such matters a thought? or why was he made different from the others who had felt these miseries and yet had been able to press forward into the life of redemption?

Audax was moving restlessly about on his couch, eating an apple. "What kind of apple is this? And who was it you read? Jerome, did you say?"

"No, Cyprian," answered Paulinus, fighting back the tears. "That apple? They call them sweet-wines, I think. The bailiff says their name is honey-apples. They're apple grafted on quince. I remember from the time I was here with my mother."

"Go on reading," Audax took another bite.

Paulinus dropped the roll. "But don't you feel—doesn't it upset you? What's the point in life unless . . ."

"I wasn't listening very closely." He sat up, so suddenly struck with an idea that he sneezed. "But look here, Paulinus. That passage you've just read—in fact, almost all that you read—it refers to the problems that tormented these men before their conversion."

"Yes," said Paulinus doubtfully. "But I can't see . . ."

Audax rolled off the couch and began striding about the room, "Don't you see? It's most important. It gives me the key to a number of things that have been puzzling me. Don't you see?"

"No. What? Please do explain."

"Doesn't it strike you as odd that you find your state of mind expressed by men describing their growth out of heathenism into Christianity? You see, baptism put an end to all the doubts and worries of those men. Well, you're baptised. So am I. But have our doubts and worries ceased?"

Paulinus shivered. "Yes . . . but I don't see."

"It's most important. Don't you see? The same problem is going on now inside the Church as used to be going on outside it. How do you explain that? When did the change occur?" He waved his hand at Paulinus to bid him keep quiet. "I've got it. Don't you see that something went basically wrong when the Church became part of the State? Now the problem of living a Christian life has a discord at its heart . . ."

"There may be something in what you say . . . Put it like this. The problem is wider, more complex. It concerns, not more or less small fraternities compacted by resistance against the way of the world, but the whole of the world."

"That's exactly what I'm saying," protested Audax. "I don't know why I didn't see it before. The Church is trying both to be the Church and to preserve the way of the world."

"No, to transform the way of the world."

Audax laughed. "Now, think over what you told me about Uxellodunum. I instance that only as an outstanding episode. The same thing is going on everywhere, in small as in big matters. You know it is. What difference has the State shown since it became Christian?" He went over to the shelves and took down a copy of S. Luke's *Gospel*. Listen. *He hath put down the mighty from their seat and exalted those of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things and the rich he hath sent empty away.* Can't you see that that's what would have happened if the State had become Christian? And what has happened? The same men in the same positions of power. Only now they praise Christ instead of Jupiter for each new elevation of rank in their public thanksgivings." He felt feverish, and yet his mind seemed crystalline; he wanted to shout, to make everyone realise the truth he had unveiled.

But Paulinus protested. "There's something in what you say. But it's too crude. . . ."

A tense antagonism fell between them. "But I thought you'd be the first to agree with what I said," complained Audax, losing the grip on his exaltation, his certainty. "In fact, I was only trying to help you. . . ."

"I didn't say you were altogether wrong."

They both listened to the rain pelting against the shutters, and felt shut in, thwarted, resentful. Paulinus, dropping his eyes on to the roll

that lay twisted on the floor, read to himself some more lines of Cyrian's homily: *O, if on your high watchtower you could pierce men's secret retreats, if you could open their chambers' barred doors and reveal their hidden mysteries to the conscious eye, then would you see. . . .* To read farther, he would have to turn the roll. But he couldn't bring himself to move; he felt inert and didn't want to break the cessation of all movement and words that had fallen on himself and Audax. Besides, the unfinished sentence expressed all that he felt, the heart of the issue, the suffering truth that Audax could not grasp. What he wanted to solve was no question of the relation of Church and State, Alms and Wealth, and so on. The question was immediate, was the pang that grasped his heart in its constrictive fingers; now, now, the need to rise up and enter into the fullness of God; now, now, the need to throw off everything and come into that fullness, himself and God alone. A deep yearning for utter solitude took him; and then came the retort of fear. He sprang up. "Put on a cloak and we'll go and see if the olives were stored properly. That bailiff is up to some dirty work, besides being incompetent. Only half the crop was pressed. I'll wager those in store haven't been stirred as I told him; they'll start going soft . . ."

They were both equally pleased when a slave-boy ran into the porch and told them that strangers were riding up the drive. In another moment they saw the muffled rider splashing through the February shower, followed by two attendants. The rider pulled up before the door, flung back the flapping cloak from his face, and vaulted from the saddle.

"Welcome, Pastor," cried Paulinus; and Pastor squeezed his arm, scattering muddy water all over the mosaic of the ferocious watchdog and smiling his sweet smile.

"I hope I don't intrude. I made a mistake about the weather as usual. I was sure the clouds had gone. But once I started I swore I wouldn't turn back. I wasn't at all sure that I'd find you here, but I thought I'd take the risk, though it meant a good ten miles off my course. Look at the mess I'm making all over your floor. And here's Audax too."

He greeted Audax with perfect amiability, making it clear that ever since the night of the Festival of St. Regina he accepted him as "one of themselves". Audax, who always thought of him with disdain as a literary fop, was charmed with the pleasant smile, the ever-so-slight lisp, the well-fed air of self-satisfaction that was almost but not quite smug.

"Yes, I've been here all the winter with Paulinus."

"How remarkable! What a feat!" laughed Pastor. "How did you do it? No entertainments, I mean. I like moving about in the winter more than any other time, to tell you the truth. It's so jolly to come out of the rain into a warm house and drink some good wine and hear some new stories."

"I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place," said Paulinus glumly, recalling his primary source of misery. "The central heating has given out. The weather was so warm the first few days we were here, I didn't think of making enquiries, and then, when the rain began, it was too late to get the repairs made. I feel ashamed to ask you in. There wasn't even any dried wood that had been smeared with oil-lees. The smoke was dreadful till I sent for a cartload."

"Heavens, what a horror!" cried Pastor. "What heroes you chaps are! Still, I'd be pleased of any kind of warmth at the moment. The rain's been seeping down the back of my neck; there's a tear in the hood—I caught the cloth in an overhanging bough as I was putting the wretched thing on."

They ushered him into the library, the best-warmed room in the house; and he stood in front of the largest brazier and drank mulled wine and showed them his silver-scrolled sword-stick and told them all the latest scandals. "Yes, Evanthus had drawn the money for having the road repaired and put in good condition, and all he did was pass a small percentage on to the contractor to shut his mouth. And then he got the news that the Governor was going to drive that way. Most unexpected. And he knew that the Governor was looking for an excuse to trip him up. He lost his head. He had a huge gang sweeping up the fallen leaves, and none of the holes was even filled. He came up and saw the holes and went off his head, indeed he did. He was shouting in a panic for spades, and when the first came along he snatched at it himself and started filling the nearest hole with his own hands, picking up stones from a ditch. And after all the Governor took a different route. Evanthus is trying to find out who started the tale that made him sweat blood. . . ."

They had an enjoyable evening, and next day Paulinus wanted to get on with his journey to Gergovia. "I really must. . . . But surely you chaps aren't going to hang on here? Without central heating, too. I'm sure I'd go out of my head. Did you hear how Hesperius won a bet, racing against a horse? Another hero. It runs in the family, obviously." He lowered his voice. "Nothing came out about that night. . . . The Bagaudae were blamed. . . . I don't say I'm cut out for that kind of thing—not as a general run, anyway."

They were so earnest in their pleas for his company that he considered how far he would alter his programme. "I promised to be at Lugdunum for Firminus's Literary Afternoon. But that's several weeks yet. I can't get out of a hurried visit to Avitus; and I simply must be at Lauriacum for the inauguration of the new building. You'll be there, won't you?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"You haven't quarrelled with your father, have you?" asked Pastor in distress. "Of course, we all know what fathers are. I haven't much to say in their favour myself. Not that my old man is a nuisance, beyond a

grumble or two. The only time he's been really ridiculous was when there was that uproar about the wife of Aprunculus."

"What was that?" asked Audax

"Nothing at all, I give you my oath. It wasn't my fault that Aprunculus was so jealous. His house is rather queerly built. I was staying there for a hunting-drive, and I was looking for my room. I got lost in the corridors. I saw a slave at the end of one of them and went after him to ask the way, and before I knew where I was I'd wandered into the women's quarters. Of course that was atrocious manners. A man likes to keep his wife and daughters where nobody can see them, and Aprunculus is so jealous that he'd have fits if a male flea stung his wife. Well, there I blundered right into his wife's boudoir, while she was at her toilet. To be precise, she was only putting an earring on. But you'd think I'd assaulted her; she went all white and flopped against the table, and a girl screamed, and before I knew where I was, Aprunculus had run in and was attacking me like mad. Then about a dozen hulking slaves attacked me for attacking their beloved master, and I was considerably bruised."

"Served you right, I'm sure."

"No, I give you my oath. I've stated the facts. But my father believed the worst. He roared and roared. Adultery can't be winked at; it breaks the law, breaks family life, that most sacred of institutions, and it's liable to pecuniary mulcts, and so on. As if I didn't know. 'I've been mistaken in you,' he roared. 'I thought you were a decent and chaste young man, never touching a female except the slave-girls of your own home, and now I find you seduce the wives of neighbours. . . .'"

Paulinus flushed. "No, I haven't quarrelled with my father—not with anyone. I'm not the quarrelsome sort. Come on up to the roof and I'll show you the wood where there's good hunting. . . . We might have a party when the spring comes properly on. That's a nice self-heater we have for warming the wine, don't you think?"

Pastor departed after half-promising to return when he could, and extracting a half-promise from Paulinus and Audax to go on to Lugdunum with him for the recitation. After the last shout of farewell, the last thud of hooves in the still-sodden avenue, the two young men turned to one another with a mixture of relief and constraint.

"He's a good lad," said Audax.

Paulinus smiled in a strange indrawn way and lowered his head. "I feel near suicide," he said quietly.

The first sun-starts of spring were in the air, suddenly revealing a faint green rash on the trees—a touch of colour so very faint that it was gone at the next glance. The last rain-shower had left the sky-blue weak but gathering a new brilliance; a nest of last year hung pathetically broken from the trailing vines over the wooden arch. But the birds were hailing

the new year; a thrush headily repeated the same hail-call from the cedar; the sparrows gave ruffianly chirrups, digging with their beaks into their bosoms after bird-lice. An unfamiliar voice sounded from the side of the shed where the olive-press housed its rough stones. Paulinus paused, listening

"And so, my darlings, I have shown you that there is no reason to be ashamed of beauty. God is no botcher. Neither does He make unnecessary things. Consider the body. There are various aspects of it which are certainly fabricated for mere delight in symmetrical and decorative virtuosity, being created for beauty, not for use. The teats on a man's breast, for example, and the beard on his face. For the beard is devised as an ornament and not as a protection, since otherwise the bare faces of women would carry beards, women being the weaker sex and consequently more in need of protection than men are . . ."

Paulinus walked round the corner. A monk, wearing the cowed cloak which the monks had inherited from the wandering pagan philosophers, was leaning on his staff and addressing three abashed slave-girls. At the sight of Paulinus the girls giggled and ran off. The monk nodded to the newcomer.

"I was talking to those young creatures in words which I fear were above their heads; but the beauty of the world which God has given us has perhaps turned my wits a little"

"You are a Pelagian," said Paulinus, looking at the man's broad, good-humoured face.

"On such a morning, and in the countryside. But when I pass through cities I am Augustinely orthodox. I then believe in the unutterable burden of evil that weights on the soul, a burden that nothing but grace could remove. Ah, yes, a heavy burden. . ."

"I fear you are a trifler"

"No, brother, though at times I may talk too much and maybe a little foolishly." He rubbed his bald head. "You see that nature herself has given me the tonsure-crown . . ."

Paulinus could not help liking the talkative old fellow, who was one of the monks attached to no particular house and who was at the moment on a pilgrimage to the Isles of Lerins, "To gain a scantling more of wisdom before God pleases to take my old bones". Paulinus asked him to come into the house, but the monk shook his head. A loaf or two would be thankfully received, but he could accept nothing else. And after a slave had been whistled for and sent to the kitchen for some bread, the monk finished his conversation, put the loaves in his scrip, and set off on his journey again.

But the memory of his contented face and the sound of his voice remained, stirring Paulinus with a sense of something to be done, a dissatisfaction with everything around him. Whenever he looked out of a window or a door, or strolled down one of the paths, he found himself

staring for a glimpse of the monk, he kept imagining him on his journey southwards towards the sea-coast and the Isles. And Lerins loomed up out of a sapphire haze of desire, murmuring with the surges of the sea and with the voices of wisdom. He turned round and round his finger the ring engraved with a fish to signify Christ; and even that common symbol seemed now a private augury of the waters of rebirth.

At last he could stand it no more; the decision came to him. Why should he also not pay a visit to Lerins? The visit would tie him down to nothing; it would enable him to find out where he stood. Then would be the time to make decisions. He felt as if an immense weight had been taken from his life; he could not bear to delay a moment longer.

"But what about Pastor? We were so emphatic in begging him to look us up. And we more or less promised to go on to Lugdunum with him." Audax was troubled; he could feel that the invitation to accompany Paulinus southwards wasn't at all enthusiastic. "I'd like to go with you. But . . ."

"If you feel that way, by all means stay and carry on the programme with Pastor. I shan't be away long. I'll meet you at Lugdunum on my way back." He tried to hide his pleasure at this turn in the arrangements; and went off to the library to write a note for a courier to take to Lauriacum.

2. *At Lugdunum Again*

Pastor duly arrived, and Audax rode on with him to Lugdunum. They stayed on the way for a few days at the houses of magnates, where their welcome was assured by Pastor's presence, for Pastor's father had large estates near Nemossus. Audax was riding a fine chestnut mare which Paulinus had insisted on giving him. As they rode towards Lugdunum, he realised that his motive in staying to meet Pastor had not been a fear of hurting Pastor's feelings, it had not even been a wish to get away from Paulinus, mainly it had been a wish to see Zonaras again. And so, when Pastor asked him to put up with him at Lugdunum, he answered that he had already arranged to lodge with one of his father's old freedmen. "He's a remarkable fellow," he added, to excuse the decision. "A doctor, with a good knowledge of philosophy—on out-of-the-way lines . . ." But when Pastor said that it sounded interesting and he'd like to meet the prodigy and sample his lore, he felt dismayed. It would be appalling to have somebody like Pastor, however condescendingly well-intentioned, trying out the formal dialectics of the Schools against Zonaras's essentially direct and simple handling of problems. He ceased to talk about Zonaras, and let Pastor wander on in his own amiable way.

With a sense of returning home he sighted the meeting rivers, the slopes on which rose the noble buildings of Lugdunum, the slight veil of mist. As soon as he could shake Pastor off in the Forum, he took his horse to a

stable and then walked down to the familiar street in which stood Zonaras's house. The feeling of something missing flickered in his mind, and then he knew that he was pausing for the sound of Crescens's footsteps behind him; and the unsettled problem of Crescens's relations with the Bagaudae came into his mind. But he forgot Crescens again as he turned the corner and saw the doctor's doorway, a woman with a crying child in her arms halted before it.

The woman was still there when he came up. "Is this where the doctor lives?" she asked timidly.

He nodded and went in, but she lingered.

Old Miccio was fumbling about with some sprays of dried herbs in the dispensary. "Ah, I knew your step, master," he said, coming to the door and wiping his eyes. "My sight isn't getting any better but my ears are as quick as ever. That's one mercy, I suppose. I don't know what's happening to the world. The price of drugs from the East is dreadful."

"Where's Zonaras?" asked Audax. "And Phoebe? Is she all right?" He suddenly had a fear that something had happened to Phoebe.

"The master's out. But she's at the back, I think. Well, there's one thing. We got some lovely forceps out of Government stores. There was a whole case of instruments came up for the army, after the war was all over, sent from Rome; and we bought them cheap from a clerk at the Town Hall. But think of that!" He tittered, chewing with his almost toothless jaws. "They were all birth instruments. Fancy sending a case of obstetric forceps for use of army doctors on a campaign!" He tittered again. It was the kind of joke that Miccio could appreciate, it would last out what span of life remained for him. "Fancy that."

"There's a woman outside . . ." Audax wanted to get away. "I'll—"

"O, let her wait. She'll come in due time. No need to show people the way here. They know where they can get treatment free. I don't approve of it, and I've never hid my opinion—"

 He struck his shaky hand down and knocked a pessary off the stand.

"I mustn't keep you," Audax grasped the old fellow's arm and propelled him gently back into the dispensary. "We'll have a talk later." He turned and almost ran through the brown curtains with the frayed gold fringe. The garden looked bleak and small to him, surprisingly meagre, and even the one rosebush had been pulled up. "Phoebe!" he called. "Where are you?"

"Here, of course," she answered, and came round the scraggy myrtle out of the arbour. Had the wood on the arbour roof been so obviously decayed when he last stood there? how long ago? only a few months. "O, dear me!" She clapped her hands.

"Whom did you expect to see?" he asked, somehow annoyed, and then he saw her eyes of clear welcome. Her plain face became strangely

dear and significant; he wanted to keep on staring at it "Yes, here I am. Can I have the old room?"

"Of course you can " She came up and held out her hand. "I want to feel you, to make sure I'm not dreaming " He took her hand and they walked up and down the garden. "I was dozing when you called I was up late last night, helping father "

"You look exactly the same, only you're taller—ever so much taller," he declared with satisfaction. "That was what was worrying me. I couldn't make it out at first."

"And you, you're a little fatter "

"O no " He was hurt "I'm sure I'm not "

"Yes, you are. They've been feeding you better than we used to I didn't say you were too fat. You're not fat at all," she consoled him. "You're only fatter than you were."

"Why is the rosebush gone?"

"They were bringing a large case in from the back, and they dropped it on the bush and ruined it I was going to buy another, but I've been so busy "

They went on walking up and down the small garden-space. He felt an odd sensation in thus being intimate with a girl; it was only during early childhood that a male had any close contact with the females even of his own household—that is, a male of the upper classes Even sisters receded into the Women's Quarters as soon as childhood waned, and had no further relations with the brother Audax felt his contact with Phoebe to exist in a kind of neutral area, not properly inside life, ordinary social life; she was neither one of the females whose place was the enclosed part of the house given over to the Mother-of-the-Family, nor was she one of those who had fuller freedom of movement but were smudged out in the lower-class levels of ignorance and servility. The way that she had grown during the last year raised the issue, she was so obviously hovering on the edge between girlhood and womanhood. The fullness of her breasts made him feel the need to clarify his attitude; and the fact that she fitted into no category of familiar relationship made him warm towards her—for what had happened to his own life if not a falling out of all familiar relationships? He was bred upper class, but had no property basis to sustain his breeding; he was as poor as any artisan, but could not enter the artisan's world, its caste-guilds.

Then, though he heard no noise of doors or footsteps, Phoebe said joyfully, "He's come back," and they went into the house to meet Zonaras.

Zonaras showed no surprise at the new arrival. "I expected you some day or other. Your room's always ready for you."

"That's what I told him."

"Of course you did." He smiled gently, wearily. And they went into the living-room. Audax wanted to talk about his intellectual difficulties,

his conviction of maturing powers. But it was not till after the meal of eggs and salad and honey (which Phoebe proudly said had come from an unsmoked hive) that he began to find the angle of approach, talking about Paulinus "I too have come to the point where I reject all I've learnt at the Schools. It seems to me now a kind of systematised madness

It fills me almost with terror. You know, a dream-terror. A force grasping you, swallowing you up, and it expands logically, remorselessly till there's nothing but it in the world. And yet you feel that if you can only move, if you can only break the inexplicable paralysis, you can put your fist straight through it all and get outside into reality, truth, freedom."

Zonaras smiled "You're not far from the fact of it. At least, that's how I too feel. But, then, I've had a scientific training—even if my science is full of gaps and charlatantries, I've been able to grasp at something solid in it, by reading the works of the old physicians and mathematicians . . . Nothing opened my eyes so much to the fact that something disastrous had happened to the world as my effort to read the books of the Alexandrian mathematicians. . . I could only understand the simpler parts. And there was nobody I could go to for a better understanding. Nobody could read the works any better than I could. I began to understand why the Christians believed in a Fall. The foundations have cracked "

"But is there no hope? Can nothing be done about it?"

Audax was happy in the realisation that Zonaras was at last talking to him without reservations; he felt his own thoughts opening out and flourishing under the stimulus. The feeling of discoveries about to be made, which he had had at times with Paulinus, was strong and stirring. Phoebe sat over near the window, intently silent, with her hair simply braided. Zonaras took time to answer.

"Well, one couldn't live without hope. . . . For a while I retreated within myself, shedding the world . . . In the vein of Epictetus, let us say. He was a slave too, as I was at that time, you'll recall. You can style it a kind of despair. I'm not a Christian, as you've guessed. And yet, in a way, I must admit it was the knowledge of Christianity which gave me the fuller faith. I returned to the early Stoic Utopias, the Cities of the Sun, the Isles of Plenty . . . and to the Cynic revolt against false values, against money-values. . . But my return was conditioned, I realised afterwards, by what I had learned from Christianity. A new fullness, a body of life, an actualising centre."

"And yet, as you say, you're not a Christian."

"No. Apart from theoretic questions, there's also the fact which you have just raised—the way that the Church has become identified with the State, the State in a most decadent form at that, too. There's nothing new in this aspect. . . . But underneath there's still the ferment of a different hope, a different recoil. That passionate plan, the whole-

hearted desire to remodel life, which came from the commons, the slaves, the crucified masses. *Blessed are ye poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. . . . But woe unto you that are rich, for ye have received your consolation.*" He laughed his tender, ironic laugh. "Fine words for a State-Church to have written over its portals. As some day the State-Church will doubtless learn to its dismay . . ."

They were silent, digesting the thoughts that had been uttered, trying to get them into the final focus which would complete understanding.

At last Audax said, unwillingly, "But you still haven't answered me. What is one to do? What is the way of truth? I can't just be satisfied with thinking I see the flaws in other people's ideas and deeds, or with building up a cloud-world in which everything would be pretty and pleasant. I want beliefs that I can act on."

After a while Zonaras said, "Don't try to go too fast. . . . When you're sure that you understand your own words, then will be the time to seek for the next step. . . ."

"But I can't understand my words without action," protested Audax. However, he accepted Zonaras's intimation that they'd reached the profitable end of words for the moment; he stretched himself and felt delightfully tired, at peace with the world. How soundly he would sleep!

Phoebe, who had been watching him, got up and took a small dove-shaped terra-cotta lamp from the shelf, she went over to the candelabra and lighted the lamp's wick from its flame.

"He wants to go to bed," she said in mock-chiding to her father.

Audax had promised Pastor to go with him to the recitation. They had lunch together at the town-house of Pastor's family, in the company of Pastor's sleepy-lidded father and an uncle with a cold. Then they strolled to the Academy, the reading was to be given in the main hall. A bald-headed man with a purplish nose that powder sought vainly to disguise was getting out of a gilded litter, resting his pudgy hand on the shoulder of a yellow-haired page-boy. He waved languidly to Pastor, and said, "Don't wait for me, you dreadful athlete. Go on, bound in ahead of me." So they waited for him, and Audax was introduced to Marusius. "I've only come to hear the parrot," said Marusius. "What, didn't you hear that there was going to be a parrot? Of course you know that Firminus gets that clever secretary of his, an Egyptian, to write all his poems for him. It's not that he couldn't write them himself, I'll agree; low as I estimate his wit, I wouldn't deny that he could write such stuff if he really tried. But he's lazy. A lazy man with an appetite for glory. Whereas I'm a lazy man with an appetite for oyster-patties."

They were joined by Leontius, who wanted to talk about his horses; and so they sauntered inside. The hall had been draped with red and

gold, and a quantity of cushioned chairs and couches had been sent along by the reciter. A grumpy-faced man with hair sticking out of his ears was planted on a chair near the door, resting his chin on the top of a stick; and Priscus was already asleep on the most comfortable of the couches. Pastor insisted on his party going near the front. "I promised to clap all the best passages." A richly carved ivory chair stood on the dais, with a bronze stand for the manuscript.

A ginger-headed youth came up and asked Pastor, "Is there going to be any refreshments? It's barbarous to bring people out and not feed them."

Marusius produced from his sleeve, first a scented handkerchief, then a small box of comfits. "Have some of these. I couldn't sit out a recitation or anything else in the way of entertainment without their aid. Take as many as you like. I've more out in the litter. O look! there's Aprunculus coming in with his wife. He's become so jealous that he can't bear to go anywhere without her. Do go up and wink at her, and he'll do something indecorous." He leered at the short, fat woman with the black cape, whose eyes gleamed in hollows mauvely powdered.

Guests began to arrive more thickly. A man with a lapdog seated himself in front of Audax; then some portly and dignified men in consular robes took the other front chairs. A man behind was talking about his ailments. "No, a very ripe fig was applied, then it was dressed with cerate of rose-oil and a powder made from the bruised shells used at a forge for quenching hot iron." A more rustic voice was saying, "But you can tell if a cow has conceived male or female by the side that the bull comes down—left for a female." And then, in a lull, a shriller voice, "The new silks with such delightful floral embroideries. . . ." And from the tight-lipped man over on the left, "Naturally I'm foreclosing the mortgage." All the gentry were present.

A general stir and then a hush signalled the entry of the candidate for literary glory. A short man, whose curly hair glistened with unguents, stepped on to the dais, and received with composure the preliminary applause. His smile seemed to say: Of course I haven't done anything to deserve this attention as yet, but you just wait! His secretary, a frail brownish Levantine, stepped up behind him, with face totally impassive, and set the manuscript on the stand. Then he moved back against the water-clock which had been installed for the occasion. Firminus coughed modestly, glanced at the opening of the manuscript, beamed, and struck an attitude of surprise.

"What a galaxy of talent and worth, what a multiplicity of intellect and virtue, I see collected before me. Can a poet, accustomed to the lonely discourse of Apollo and the Daughters of Memory, bring himself to confront such a gathering?" He vociferated for some time in this vein, till a mild cough from the secretary at his rear advised him that he was going too fast. He sank his voice into a cooing softness and continued to

praise the audience. Then, after dropping back in the chair and having his brow mopped by the secretary with a gorgeous handkerchief, he recovered and announced the first item, *A Series of Quatrains on the Emperors*. "Each quatrain compresses the reign," he explained, "and thus, if memorised, does away with the need for reading lengthy histories." The same principle underlay the second item, which compressed all the philosophies—at least, all that Varro summarised in his treatise on *Philosophy*—into couplets. After that there only remained for the third item to compress an account of the months into a poem of twelve lines and an account of the days of the week into a poem of seven lines. Every break in the reading was punctuated with prolonged applause. Some of the audience clapped; the more energetic and excitable leaped up and stamped on the floor; the more indolent waved a portion of their togas. Those who had a special opinion of their own voices waited till the applause ceased, and then cried out, "Admirable! How truly poetic! How remarkably superior to Homer!"

After the third item Firminus dropped again into the chair and was tended by the secretary with restoratives hastily served by a page-boy with a gold salver. The audience seized the interval to exclaim on the mastery of style, the elegant pronunciation, the vast intellectual scope of the poet. But a rumour got round that the parrot was going to perform next, and a curious silence fell. Firminus rose to announce that a talented bird had been sent to him by an unknown admirer, which he proposed to exhibit to the company. And so another page-boy appeared out of the side door holding a gilded model of a leafy bough, with a green-and-scarlet parrot sitting on it. The boy ascended the dais and held the bough over the stand, while the other page-boy offered the parrot a handful of some parrot delicacy. The parrot cocked a wicked eye at the handful, but otherwise ignored the proceedings. "Apollo's bird . . . murmured Firminus, perhaps in the hope that flattery would move it to do its duty. The spectators waited breathlessly, and when the parrot shifted his position in the bough they all moved a little to the left in sympathy. But not even that concentrated attention affected the parrot, who merely made a slight cackling noise and glazed his eyes. At last Firminus, in despair, gave a gesture for the bird's removal; but as soon as the offered handful seemed about to be lost, the parrot cried hoarsely and rapidly, "Hail, Firminus, King of poets," and the page-boy lifted up his hand for it to eat. The parrot ate, and then, as the boy with the bough was carrying it off, it exploded in jeers of cacophonous laughter.

The reading continued. Some Epistles and then Panegyrics. Firminus praised his country-house in various metres, and in praising his friends gave himself back-handed compliments. The style was made obscure by complicated periphrases. "The little darky-girls of Cadmus dance their wish on Melo's sheet of white with marks of the swart cuttlefish," for instance, meant that Letters (invented by Cadmus) were written

on papyrus from the Nile (Melo) with ink from the cuttlefish. Sense was further eked out by out-of-the-way geographical epithets or a touch of astrology. Then, with a glance at the water-clock, Firminus declared that he would have no time for his prose Declamations and Letters.

At once impassioned orators rose among the audience to insist that he should continue the reading next day—everyone knew, of course, that he had taken the Hall for two days. Firminus demurred. The orators insisted. They pronounced Firminus among the great writers of the world and said that they must not be disappointed. "In georgics he strikes the perfect rustic note, though himself lacking in rusticity. In epigrams he shuns the diffuse and cultivates the neat. In elegiacs he handles the echoing or the recurrent line, and links end with beginning by ingenious repetitions. Horace is his model in lyrics, his iambics go with a swing, his choriambics with a fine gravity, his alcaics with a supple grace, and his sapphics are inspired. In short, he is a bird of glorious wing, following next after the Horatian and Pindaric swans."

This orator read out his clauses from a tablet composed the night before, and since he had concocted his praise before hearing the poems, it was not unnatural that he named a number of metres which Firminus had not used at all. But as the orator would not have recognised the metres if he heard them, and as he was merely copying the regulation phrases from some admired model of criticism, this detail was trivial.

To Audax's discomfort, Pastor hemmed, and, after consulting some notes that he had brought with him, rose and added his quota, in a rather high-pitched voice. "No living writer can so calculate the position of syllables or the juxtaposition of consonant and vowel. . . . All is fluent and ductile. It is as when the finger glides lightly over a surface of polished crystal or onyx, where there is not the slightest crack or fissure to stay its passage. I have said enough." He consulted his notes again. "But I must warn him that if he leaves our barrenness unenriched by the stream of his eloquence, we shall take our revenge by engaging the services of burglars, whose clever hands will soon despoil his roll-cases with our connivance and support. If he is imperturbable before a friendly request today, he will soon learn what perturbation means tomorrow, when the thieves have cleared his shelves."

He sat down with a thump, amid universal acclamation. Indeed, Firminus began to look dark, feeling that Pastor had made a bigger hit than himself. He hastily rose to say that he would accede to the pressure of his admiring friends, after all, and continue the recitation on the morrow. But as the company broke up, everyone was talking about the astonishing force and wit of Pastor's constructions. Pastor himself was flushed and overjoyed; he wanted to carry off all his friends to a drinking-party. But Marusius had an appointment with his hairdresser, a temperamental Syrian, who mustn't be kept waiting; and Leontius had promised

to dine with somebody. Pastor had to content himself with arranging a party for next week.

"I wonder how long Firminus took to train that parrot," said Marusius.

Audax strolled home, thinking what a profound change had occurred in his outlook. A year ago he would have taken more or less the same attitude as Pastor, his judgment would have been limited to operations within the framework of the formalism accepted as culturally significant. But now he had an entirely different perspective; the surfaces had cracked and flaked off, and there was depth and movement in his mind, a sense of rich involvements, which made the formalist approach seem infantile. It was a new human sense that had given him the new intellectual outlook; but, in the same way as he could not find an outlet in action for that new human sense, he could not see at all what ought to be put in the place of the moribund tradition that he had heard expressed at the recital. It was no use saying: Imitate Homer and the other great writers of the past who, he felt, had a human fullness. The lamentable tradition shown in the recital had come precisely from an atrophy of faculties induced by that kind of backward-looking imitation. Clearly, the new life must be found before the new literature could appear.

He was going on to consider how the Christian writers came into his scheme of critical values, when he stopped before a dirty doorway at which a dejected man was seated. A red tile was set up at the man's side, scrawled over by a charred stick: *BOY FOR SALE*. The man was offering his newborn child for sale as a slave. Such a sale was perfectly legal, the Church had merely had the proviso added to the law that the child could be bought back within ten days, and that if the parents failed to buy back within that period they were to have no future rights whatever in the child. There was no need to ask the man on the doorstep why he was selling his son, in every line of his grubby body was disclosed the fact of crushing poverty. One almost heard the hiss of the whips of despair under which he raggedly crouched.

Audax shrugged and walked on. The subject of literary style had lost its interest for him. He wanted to get back and discuss the meaning of life with Zonaras. Zonaras had at last met him frankly on many issues, but there was something that he still kept to himself. Audax had the feeling that he must at all costs wrest that something from Zonaras. In it, he was sure, lay the clue that he sought, the key to action.

3. *The Huns Again*

With spring came a deep restlessness in the Hunnic capital. Groups of the small, compact-bodied Huns, with their broad-cheeked faces and deep-sunken eyes, went scouring round on the steppes on their

small, wiry horses. Something of their fierce devotion to Attila, who, after murdering his brothers, had welded into a new unity the broken and expanding clans, had eaten into Prosper; but in him that emotion was part of his stubborn resolve to hold his own. A strange cold hardness had come over him, a sense that all men's hands were against him, an unceasing wariness, and yet this coldness, this deliberate hardness, was merged with a personal loyalty towards Ellak and Attila. He liked the Huns, the unruly clansmen, generous, quick to revenge an insult, independent and full of initiative. But with no one except the Ostrogoth Eutharic did he strike up a friendship, and the reason that that one friendship did not gall him was to be explained by its inarticulacy, its lack of any stated bond or expectations. It was simply there.

Conferences were going on in the Hall of the Prime Minister, Onagesius, a dry little man with a face like a wrinkled apple—the faded red patching his yellowish cheeks—and sparkling brown eyes. And more conferences in the Great Hall. Then the couriers were riding out east, west, south and north, to all the Germanic tribes who had sworn fealty to their conqueror Attila; and the smell of war was in the spring wind. The men rose from beechen-wood bowls of curdled mare's milk to stare southwards and smile evilly. Lying outside in sheepskin rugs, beside the piled stones of the kitchen fire, Prosper felt an uneasiness in his bones which was perhaps what birds felt before a seasonal migration, he smelt the burnt fat on the stones, the sweat of Kubai, on whose breast his head lay, he turned slightly and stared a long time at the stars, his hands felt swollen, full of a power all their own. Kubai woke and put her hot hand over his face, he turned again and savagely buried his face in her harsh hair, that smelt like a dog's wet fur, forest-damp, tallow.

The next day the command of war was issued. Attila gave a short fierce speech from horse-saddle before the Great Hall. Prosper remembered only the words, "Pull down the roofs upon the cowards of the cities . . . owls roosting on the lintels . . ." and the glint of sunlight on the ritual-scars of the King's face, a blue sheen of mail, and a short, hunning laugh. The ground was littered with weapons, the hammering of the smithies redoubled, men kept taking out their swords from the sheaths, rubbing away the grease with a handful of torn grass. Prosper went up to Ellak, who was watching a smith straighten out a dint in a breastplate.

"I need a sword."

Ellak bent his brows and stared hard at him. Prosper stood his ground and stared back. Ellak went over to a bundle of swords and picked one out. "That is a good sword. There is only a rivet in the hilt that needs mending." He said to the smith, "Give to him when you have mended it."

The smith wiped the sweat from his eyebrows and shot a glance at Prosper, then yelled at the boys who were working the bellows.

"I'll remember his ugly face."

Prosper stayed and nagged at the smith till the hilt was mended; then he went off with the sword buckled at his side. The weight of the sword multiplied his energy, he found it hard to speak. A new force seemed thrusting up through him. He went and stood where Kubai would be able to see him with the sword; he saw her throw back her black mane of hair that had escaped the lace. Then he went to drink with Eutharic, who smiled hugely and pressed his arm. There was a smell of blood from the beasts slaughtered for the feast.

There was no need to wait for an answer to Attila's demands. The Imperial authorities were not for a moment likely to surrender the Princess Honoria with her patrimonial treasures. But a war is all the better for a formal reason. The host marched a week behind the messenger who carried to Rome Attila's demand couched in the bluntest and most insulting terms possible. Through days of tender spring sunlight, gusty rainstorms, sweltering dust and chilly evenings, the Hunnic host made its way south. Its pace was conditioned by the marching powers of the Germanic auxiliaries; the cavalry swept on ahead in scouting work, extended east and west on foraging expeditions. Soon they were passing through areas at least nominally Roman, and the peasants hid away, buried their grain-stores, drove the cattle into ravines or woods. It was the work of the cavalry to intercept these moves, at the worst to catch a few villagers who could be made to talk and betray the lairs of grain and beasts. If they were obstinate, they were hung from a bough by their wrists and a fire was lighted under their bare feet, or their fingers were cut off, one after the other, with suitable intervals between each operation in order to give them time to think. Or if they were women, they were outraged in various ways. But peasants, in defence of grainstocks and cattle, could be astonishingly stubborn.

Steadily the host marched south. Through great gorges, along derelict roads, along shingly stream-beds, through vast misty silences where the earth dissolved into a distant trembling of sheep-bells, and again through dust and sweat, with jangling sword and shield, deep-throated curses and sudden marching chorus. Along the deep valley, trembling with undulations of wind, went ceaseless skeins of cloud-shadow. Some mountaineers in bear-pelts made a mad stand at a ravine head, shooting archaic stone-headed arrows. Dusty sweat prickled the brow; spray from the mountain cataract leaping silver between grey guardian rocks cooled it. The crests of eternal snow closed round, as if the host had got lost in another world, the bases dissolving in the evening immensity and only the deepening lucidities of space remaining real. And the broiled horseflesh, still half raw, was dragged from the cauldron, lumps spitted on dagger-points, to be torn by ravenous hands and teeth, swallowed in savage gulps while the last red glow burnished the pines.

And so the Hunnic host came down into Italy, with the Alps at last at its back, and paused for a moment, sniffing the scent of hunted creatures in the breeze, feeling the edges of weapons once more, lazily stretching and singing. "In the fir-forest, a black lake" They passed gold-workings, with the stream running through the deserted troughs, they looked down on fertile distances, spring crops that would never be harvested, elm-trees upholding vines that would make no wine of the grapes budding small and green. A big cask lay across the road, dropped by carters in a panic. The Hunnic host yawned, scratched itself, and prepared for the leap.

Amid the smoke of burning villages they moved on Aquileia. Prosper was in a squadron at the rear, guarding the waggons taken from the villages to hold the plundered grain, while over on the left the herds of cattle trampled the sown fields as they moved southwards with low thunder. The horsemen passed a hamlet where a girl was hanging by her plaits from the rafter of a ruined shed, with an arrow through her belly. A woman, crazed beyond fear, was searching in rubble; she looked up with fire-eyes shadowed by tousled hair and cursed at them. But nothing was done to her, for she was mad, and therefore sacred. One afternoon they hunted down some children in a meadow with dogs. A man—stabbed by some panic fear, since nobody had seen him in his hiding-place—sprang up from behind a bush and went in frantic, zig-zagging flight across a field in which the young cabbages spread their metallic blue-greens under the soft, sheeny morning. If he had gone walking off, perhaps nobody would have bothered to notice him; but his zigzag flight aroused the rivalry of the archers. A Hun shot, and missed, and then an older man, with a mutter of scorn, snatched the bow and aimed with seeming carelessness, his head thrown back and his eyelids half lowered. The shaft struck the fugitive between the shoulder-blades and he fell clawing the earth. A little farther down the road the party met half a dozen pigs scrambling and squealing over a mess of food; and when the pigs retreated unwillingly from the hooves, the mess was found to be a woman half trampled into the mud. And so at sunset they came to the environs of Aquileia.

The towers were washed with the reddish glow, the spears on the ram-parts gleamed. Advance detachments had already sacked and fired the suburbs outside the walls, but the city gates were all closed and volleys of spears and stones greeted any attempt to approach. Scouts reported that the walls seemed in good repair all round the city. As for the seaward side, they had not been able to view it; but in the absence of a navy no assault there could be expected to succeed. But the brags around the campfires that night were full of easy confidence. Meat was plentiful, the trail of burnt homesteads behind the army had left a conviction of irresistible movement. And the captives taken in the

suburbs, to excuse the lack of valuable booty in their own ramshackle homes, were ready enough to emphasise the great wealth that lay within the city walls, ready for the taking. Prosper munched some bread and mutton, and listened to the brags and songs "In the black lake, a little isle. . . ." Suddenly he thought: On the other side of the city is the sea. I have never seen the sea. And somehow the thought stirred an unhappiness, an incoherent desire of escape. "We shall go and see the sea in the morning," he said to Eutharic, who was drowsing at his side, with head nodding between his knees.

"Yes, the sea . . ."

Eutharic's sleepy voice seemed to understand, to echo the feeling of distances to be traversed, bonds to be thrown off; and Prosper felt easier. On the walls of the beleaguered city small glows outlined the dark rim of the ramparts, the towers that blocked out patches of the starry sky. He imagined the sentinels pacing the flagged walks, pausing beside the brazier-fires, leaning over the battlements to listen . . . The town-folk tossing in their uneasy beds, wondering what the crow of dawn would bring. And he laughed; he had no sympathy for their terrors, their closed-in lives. As if this Hunnic host was only a materialisation of the greeds and hatreds that festered hidden in the chaffering city life, as if the sudden beleaguering by fires of menace was only a materialisation of the closed-in ways, the darkened hearts, the self-centred obsessions, the in-turned ambitions that made each man and woman live in his or her little world of shuttered hopes and fears. Better the openly ravaging host, the murder before the eye of the sun, the laughing violence. The song in the night, stirring strange tears, a flower burning in the night of the blood. "On the little isle, a tall staff. On the staff, a terrible eagle. O, there my soul abides. Speak it not, whisper it not. My soul is hidden afar . . ." And then, with a bitter tang like the very taste of tears, he recollected that Kubai had been crying that last night; the sound of her grief, so long delayed, seemed to reach his consciousness for the first time, to merge with the unrest that the thought of the sea had caused.

The taking of Aquileia was not, after all, to be so easy as the emotions of the first night under its walls had suggested. The Hunnic host was no army with settled and co-ordinated discipline. The Huns were a terrific striking force; but even those of them who had served as mercenaries in the Imperial Army reverted in their own bands to the clan outlook. Under a leadership that gave them a new centre of personal loyalty they were capable of extraordinary feats; but the very nature of such a leadership necessitated continual aggression, expansive attack. As soldiers for a siege, they were the worst in the world. The brunt of the work thus fell on the auxiliaries. But they also for the most part were tribally led and organised; they were battle-warriors, not sappers and

trench-fighters capable of sharing in long-drawn and complicatedly interrelated tactics. What saved the situation, however, were the numerous Roman deserters.

Some had been with the army from the first, members of the cosmopolitan gathering at Attila's capital. Others slipped out of the environed city, coming mostly in wherries from the quays, though a few slid down the walls on ropes in the night. Others came in from the country around. Under the control of a Greek who was a member of Attila's Council, these deserters composed the core of an engineering division, with a number of Germanic detachments to follow their lead. The hardest work of all—digging and felling trees and the like—was done by gangs of captured peasants. At first slowly, and then with increasing efficiency, the investment of the city was carried out with all the rigour of the period's advanced military science. The Hunnic cavalry took no part in the engineering operations, limiting themselves to rounding up supplies or devastating villages within a day or two's ride, or else they sat in the camp and drank and watched the toil at the engines.

Connecting trenches were dug; two huge mounds of earth and timber rose before the main city gate, sheds of ox-skin, mounted on rollers, protected the men at work on the mounds. Square towers of logs were being raised ready for pushing forward up the outer slope as soon as the mounds had reached the requisite height. Wild-Asses had been constructed—machines for casting great rocks. And the largest available log was being fixed as a battering-ram, its head bound with iron and leather.

The routine of investment went steadily on. The artillerymen twisted the ropes that provided the motive-power for the Wild-Asses, then they pulled out the levers and ran for their lives. The arm swung up, flung its missile from the sling-pouch, and came down with a shattering smack on the big stuffed leather-bed; and the whole heavy framework leaped into the air so frantically that it was almost upset—that was why the men ran. Fast as they ran, the jump was sometimes too quick for one of them; and then there was an artilleryman the less. The soldiers on the city ramparts answered by slinging missiles or greek-fire out of similar though smaller contraptions with two arms.

But supplies were running short in the besieging army. The captured cattle had almost all been slaughtered and eaten. The devastations had left little food to confiscate in any near neighbourhood. So the cavalry had to make raids farther afield. Often Prosper wondered why the small detachment in which he was riding was not cornered and wiped out. Only the demoralisation of the Imperial system enabled the invading host to behave with such insolent lack of precautions.

In the camp the delays, with the food shortage, were weakening the fighting-force of the host. The clansmen fretted, grew broody and brawled, took to roaming about. There were many nights when an

effective and daringly executed sortie of the city defenders might easily have routed the besiegers. The men of the host relieved their fury by torturing citizens caught while trying to slip through the lines; impaled them on pointed stakes where the defenders on the wall could see them, crucified them amid mocking shouts, tore them to pieces by tying their limbs to half a dozen horses. For a while there was a return of enthusiasm when the great timber towers, set on log rollers, went lurching up the incline of the mounds. The artillery and archers of the city concentrated fire on the advancing erections and the skin sheds under cover of which men were dragging, pushing, and pulling them. Archers, staggering about and holding to stanchions in the lurching tower-tops, strove to drive the soldiers from the city walls. Then at last the towers reached the crest of the mounds. Greekfire set one of them ablaze. Buckets and pots of water were hastily passed along trenches and under skin sheds set end-on. Prosper saw a man lean over the tower-top to pour water down on the fire; an arrow struck him in the neck and he fell head-long.

And then the excitement passed. The towers were fixed in position, dominating a portion of the ramparts, but still the city was untaken. The filthy condition of the camp was having its effect; more and more of the hosts were daily down with fevers and dysentery. Even the ponderous battering-ram, completed with its turret superstructure, failed to stir enthusiasm. Only a small dispirited group stood round to watch an officer experimentally pull the rope that swung the great beaked log. The word had gone round that on the morrow the host would withdraw from the siege.

Then, next morning, as the first preparations for abandonment of the camp were being made, a wave of excitement swung through the host. Even men who had no knowledge of the facts were hurrying about, looking gleeful, clasping one another, or perhaps cutting a magical apotropaic sign on the turf with sword-point. The gods were coming over; a fish had leaped from the sea and spoken, a man had turned into a woman during the night. Something like that. Somebody had seen a sun rise in the south, out of the sea. And then the story of the omen became firm, coherent, established. Attila had taken a last ride about the city at dawn, to see if the gods would speak. And they had spoken. From one of the towers, on the eastern side towards the sea, a stork had flown up, and with her the fledglings; they had all left their nest.

The omen was obvious. Not the meanest intelligence in the host now doubted that Aquileia could be won. Attila had exclaimed in a loud voice, pointing to the storks, that birds so devoted to human society, so domestic in their habits, would never have been seen abandoning their nest unless they had known a doom was coming. Ruin was fated for Aquileia. The birds knew it.

E (Barriers are Down)

A fresh burst of energy came over the host. At once all the artillery were moved down to face the tower from which the stork had flown, and the slings began throwing heavy stones at the doomed spot. Falancas were hurled into the city, with iron heads three feet long, carrying flaming pitch and weighted near the top with round masses of lead. The battering-ram was wheeled along, and a gallery of skin-covered sheds was set up. For the first time almost the whole host was taking part in the siege-works.

Within four days the tower had been badly breached, and the battering-ram was thundering against its base, shaking stones and mortar from the walls at every crash. Archers from rapidly improvised wooden towers of a much lighter type than those near the gates picked off the defenders who tried to pour pitch, boiling oil, greekfire, on the ram and its turret. On the dawn of the fifth day the assault was launched.

Prosper did not take part in the assault. His detachment were among the reserves, and they were not called on until the stormers had clambered up the broken masses of masonry and timber and surged through the jagged breach into the town. A tremendous wail, long echoing, rose from the other side of the walls. Prosper watched a bird, a gull, soaring over the town and floating with outstretched wings on the slight breeze. What was it that the bird saw as it glanced down the abyss of air? A tangle of furious midges colliding, breaking, darting off, falling, dodging, cohering again into clots of movement, spurting afresh into meaningless criss-crossing lines . . . The wail was still there, not that great piercing shout, but now a ceaseless surge of mumbling terror and battle-lust. The gates swung open a movement which somehow was so unexpected, so spaciouly graceful, like the unfolding and pulsing of slow wings; so strangely stirring, like the dream of a new life, like a sudden thrill of music heard in some unlikely place, on a craggy mountain-top, so emblematic of victory, that he felt as if a great wind had blown between the flanking towers, to pour its stormy exultation against his straining body. And the next moment, as they galloped towards that opening space, the pressure was actual, he heard the trumpet-swing of the triumphal music, the pulse of mastery. He shouted with the others, galloping across the space littered with egg-shaped pellets of clay, stones, rubble, broken arrow-shafts, and bits of charred wood. The next moment they were inside.

The fighting had ended, except where an occasional man, lurking in frenzy on dark stairs or the rickety roof of a booth, leaped down to kill at least one of the murderers before his throat was slit. But few of the citizens or soldiers, once the defence on the walls was over, had courage enough to feel frenzy, they hid, anywhere, and were pulled out by the legs or arms or the hair of their heads, to be slaughtered at leisure. The host was systematically killing off everyone encountered—men, women,

or children. There was the rage of the prolonged siege to be expended, and, besides, it was necessary to scare the other cities so that no repetition of the resistance would be tried.

Tethering their horses, the detachment dismounted and joined in the work of killing and plundering. Prosper stood for a moment, dizzy, in a world smeared red, amid broken faces and purple hangings looped from a window, a woman falling from a three-storey roof, a whistle of endless terror hurting the eardrums, and a child with a wheelmark across its back in the gutter, blood dribbling over the stepping-stones that had once kept the feet of ladies dry in winter-walks, a face like a white flame at a window. A foot broke through a narrow pane of talc. A man, glimpsed down a lane, knelt praying with pointed hands together. A shower of mortar, a pot crashed at his feet. A woman was running round in circles, with her hands over her face, though no one hunted her as yet. A small girl, with a bloody hand printed on her dress of white silk, stood flattened against the stucco wall, her hands pressed flatly at her sides and her mouth open. A runaway horse came charging, knocked a Hun over, trod on his face. One, two, three, the corpses came thudding crash down from the window with the green shutters hanging on a single hinge. A woman with a cut across her cheek stood holding out her naked, milk-swollen breasts, as if the gesture might win her mercy. Three Germans were chasing a man whose head lolled back and who gave rattling pants; they were taking their time, but a Hun spoilt their amusement by spitting the man on a spear. The woman over whom Prosper stepped to enter the mansion had thin ribs and an old whitened scar on her thigh.

He went into the house to get out of the turmoil and because he thought it might have something gold in it. He had no intention of loading himself up with the cheap lumber that attracted the tribesmen. The fools snatched at the first gaudy things they saw. Gold, that was what Prosper wanted. The house must have belonged to one of the richest citizens. The living-rooms on the ground floor had all been repainted within the last year—a series of illustrations of agricultural and pastoral life, with charming landscapes, all connected by floral patterns—green and rose the predominant colour, a tender spring-green. A tablet containing household accounts lay on the couch inlaid with mother-of-pearl in the reception-room; somebody had put down a glass of wine, half-drained, at the side and had forgotten it. A framed triptych-painting was hung over the door by cords showing a bridal pair. On the cedar table stood a shallow gilt glass bowl with a decorative medallion at the bottom picturing a man and his wife and Christ offering them a garland, inscribed *LONG LIFE TO THE SWEET ONE*. Prosper put the bowl back carefully on the table, as if it were important not to break it, and went into the next room. There, too, the furniture was costly and new, but he saw no gold vessels. On the lovely almost lifesize bronze of the Gaditane dancer someone had hung a rose-wreath which was fading, shedding its

petals. He was about to retire when he saw a man hiding behind a cabinet full of terra-cottas and ivory carvings.

"Where is the gold?" he asked angrily.

"In the offices," quavered the man, sinking on his knees and lifting tremulous hands. "The inner room. It's locked. . . ." His eyes were dilated, blind-looking, there were big beads of sweat on his eyebrows.

Prosper hurried back into the atrium. There was a fountain there with goldfish waving their red-gold fins lazily in the greenish water of the basin; some crumbs of bread floated on the surface. In one of the rooms near someone was sobbing loudly. Prosper went towards the back of the hall; the *tablinum* were probably there. He found a solidly panelled door with a keyhole, and slid away the little bronze catch that protected the works of the lock from dust. He had a foolish idea of bending down to look through the keyhole. Instead he glanced round to find something strong enough to break down the door. A slave came running into the hall, howled, put his fingers in his mouth in terror, and then, seeing Prosper, dashed away down a side corridor.

"Come back!" Prosper shouted. He wondered where Eutharic had got to.

A girl aged about seven or eight years ran out of the side door, weakly sobbing. She ran straight for Prosper and flung her arms round him. He hastily freed his sword arm, which she had entangled with her thin, bare arms; and looking down he saw her rounded, tear-stained face, with enormous eyes of fear, pleading up at him. "All right, all right," he said irresolutely. "Let me go." But she clung faster. Sarus came through the side door and grinned, advancing with his hand out. Intoxicated with the smell of blood, the touch of the bodies yielding under the knife-edge, he grinned; his eyes in their slanted holes had quick little fires beading redly in them.

"Eutharic!" called Prosper.

Sarus was Ellak's chief huntsman, and he had never concealed a dislike of Prosper, who threatened to become his supplanter. He made a springy movement to the left. "Mine," he said, grinning broadly, for a moment he seemed to drowse, to succumb to the murder-drug, swaying on his feet, half closing his eyes and turning up his eyeballs. Then he made another springy movement, as if working round to the rear of Prosper.

"Leave the child," said Prosper, and with a careful effort, not liking to exert all his strength, he broke the girl's clasp and pushed her behind him. "Off you go, Sarus." The girl had prevented him from drawing his sword, and now there was no time; he dared not take his eyes from Sarus; he braced himself for the coming shock.

"Mine," said Sarus, in the same droning, polite voice.

He came closer, again with a slight skip, and then he leaped at Prosper. Prosper ducked and stepped aside, caught at the wrist of the knife-hand.

For a moment his grasp was clumsy, ill-timed ; he felt the wrist escaping, sliding away, his life with it. Then his fingers tightened, held ; he wrenched furiously, trying to break that sinewy wrist, to force the fingers to unclasp and drop the knife on to the mosaicked floor. He felt Sarus balancing for a tug that would spoil his hold, and he tried to exert a counter-pull. He slipped, he came down on one knee ; the point of the knife ripped his tunic at the shoulder, scored the flesh. Sarus threw all his weight down, striving to press Prosper farther back, and at the same time he kicked up with his left knee, jarring Prosper on the chest. Prosper felt his strength ebbing, in a moment he would get that knee under his chin, he would weaken and lean back and the knife would be in his heart.

Suddenly all the pressure went. He fell back, but without an enemy taking advantage of his fall, crushing him out of life, smudging him away like a gnat under a thumb. He rolled over, striking his head on the floor, and could not open his eyes, awaiting the jag of death, the crushing darkness. He relaxed, then without volition started back into tense life, scrambling up with arm guarding his head. And saw Sarus lying on the floor with his head split open, a puddle of blood and brains over the octopus and cuttlefish of the mosaic, and Eutharic sheathing his sword. The small girl was watching, half-hidden behind the curtain of Indian embroideries that hung beside the office door, the next moment she ran and threw her arms again round Prosper.

"It's about time he died, anyway," said Eutharic happily.

"We need something to break in that damned door," said Prosper hoarsely, pointing to the *tablinum*. "It's all right," he added irritably to the girl. "I won't let anybody hurt you."

4. *A Visit to Lerins*

From the moment he topped the hill and saw the two islands lying in the opalescent sea of the slightly misty day, he had a conviction of peace, of arrival. And the conviction was all the stronger in that he had been feeling tired, he hadn't been thinking of the purpose of his journey at all. If there had been any thoughts in his mind beyond recognition of a faint weariness, an uncertain frustration, a smell of acrid herbs, they had been thoughts of the bull-fight witnessed at the village on the by-road which he had taken to avoid Massilia. The arena constituted by a few stones and the circle of spectators, the tricks used by the cowboys in mastering the black bulls, the feints of nimble footwork and the lasso-throwing ; the lean, stubby horses that had no fear of the bulls ; the lad who had vaulted on bull-back. . . Those were the images that recurred, overlaying the closer memories of the porters in the docks of Forum Julii, the aqueduct rearing its graceful pattern above the lines of olive-trees rustling silver, then grey again. A journey that had grown more confused in purpose with each day, till it was only with an effort that he

could sort out the details, recall whether it was Nemausus or Arelate that had a theatre façade of three arcades one on top of the other, get into order the noble triumphal arches welcoming his afternoon progress day after day. And now, at last, when he had lost all sense of purposive movement and had expected to discover that his journey had been made in a circle, bringing him back to the large inscribed basalt rock on the eastern borders of his father's estate, he glanced at the milestone on the Via Aurelia and then found himself gazing down on a small, whitish township, Egytna, with red-sailed fishing-boats in its harbour, and, beyond, those islands that broke the seal on some deep spring within his spirit. And it was at once clear that he had not come in vain, the details of his journey ceased to be a haphazard medley and were knitted together like obscure symbols struck into significance and order by the light of concluding revelation. The noble arches, lavishly welcoming him at each stage of his progress, became in memory the only possible forms that could master his flooding sunset mood and mark the moment of transition from cosmic unions to the narrowing streets of actuality, the need to eat and sleep, to speak familiar words without being dinned into madness by the echoes repeating those words till all communicable meaning threatened to be lost.

He had only one attendant with him, a quick-witted lad named Iccus. When they had ridden down to Egytna, he sat in a sailor's tavern and drank some thick red wine while Iccus made arrangements about the transport, he himself felt incapable of doing anything. His emotion of arrival, merged with the after-effects of a strain that he only now dared to notice, had the effect of stranding him on a passive acceptance of events—as if he tested his emotion and proved that it was not one more illusion by taking no steps on his own account. He had almost been reluctant to issue orders to Iccus; he had merely said, "See if any of the boatmen are going to the islands." And it was only after he had finished his wine that he realised how late the day was. The islands were already fading into the dusk. He went to the doorway and looked round for Iccus, who was talking and gesticulating to two bearded sailors with felt caps. The last flushes of sunset were spreading in the west; and again he felt that peace, the lack of any need to exert himself. Iccus came over to him, protesting that he couldn't get any sense out of the natives, who had heads of figwood. "There will be time tomorrow," Paulinus answered, and they went inside to supper. The saffron steam of the soup wreathed round the heads of the innkeeper and his daughter and the taciturn fisherman who was staying at the inn, and Paulinus, as a better-class customer, was served his bits of brown scorpion-fish and white lobster on a plate made of cork-oak bark. He sat late that night in his bedroom, staring out of the window at the flotsam of starlight on the dark waves of the sea. It seemed that he was discovering for the first time the instability of things, the dangerous flux of darkness that sparkled with lights from

other-worlds: as if he were looking on the very substance and meaning of time, a dark acid of dissolving movement penetrated by eternal and unseizable patterns. And with no face reflected in it.

But next morning, woken at dawn by a clatter on the sea-front outside his window, he felt the other aspect of his arrival, an eager wish to get across to the islands and a simple curiosity to see the monastic centre from which so many evangelic missionaries had gone forth over Gaul. Here, if anywhere, he ought surely to touch the Christian reality. But it was not of ultimates that he was now thinking; it was only of the blue waters, the remoteness of the rocky, wind-swept isles that took on a spiritual quality of isolation as he stared across the racing foam-lines, the faces of the monks which he conjured up as infinitely old and kindly and wise, with strange sea-blue eyes. And the cloisters, the green shadows, the voices raised in rapture of praise in the night, at dawn, at noon, at dusk—at all the moments of fear and change in the circling patterns of human and elemental life. He wanted to rub his palm against the stones, to feel with his nail the spaces between, to lie with his face in the grass, to come close to that withdrawn earth, that little island which he had seen only from afar but which was already “home”.

He did not feel surprise, then, when Iccus came to him and said, “There are monks rowing across. In their own boat.” He nodded, and went out to walk on the sea-front, watching the boat come nearer, till he saw the white glint of the tonsured heads, the monk who turned to look landward, with the wind blowing his beard sideways; and seemed to hear the deep breathing, the grinding of the oars and the leathern thongs in the oar-holes, the scattered notes of the hymn which he was sure the monk in the bows was singing. Then suddenly the boat was coming much nearer, and he had to run back to be at the landing-stage in time to greet the monks climbing the steps; he got in the way of the fisherman who was mooring the rope to a ring in a stone block. Only two of the monks climbed up.

They paid no attention to him, going in silence at once straight down the street opposite the steps; and he was in despair, as if he had been rejected. He stood aside, trying to look as if he had not expected anything different, staring out to sea, unable to see the islands; only a dim, heaving race of whiteness and a deepening sky diffused with sharp, vanishing rainbow-splashes. But Iccus had no doubts. He clambered down and entered into discussion with the monk in the bows. After a while he reappeared. “Yes, they will take us.”

At first the words meant nothing; he could not trust their promise after so many disappointments. He stood watching some fishermen who had built a fire on rocks above highwater-level and were boiling a cauldron of tan for browning the sides of their boat, which had been

drawn up nearby. Then he said, "See about our horses," and went to look down at the four monks who had stayed in the boat.

"You are coming with us," said the monk in the bows, a young man with a heavy, square, browned face and grey-blue eyes that woke into unexpected warmth with his smile, as if what one had thought to be a shadowed flower had turned into a butterfly up-fluttering to catch the sun-gold. Hope flowed back into the veins of Paulinus, enriched, clapping his heart with a pain of overfull life.

"Yes. May I come down into the boat now and wait there?"

The monk smiled for answer and opened his hand; the other three monks, resting over their shipped oars, had not turned their heads, had not seemed to hear anything. Even the earth here glitters, he thought, recalling the way in which the sun had caught the micaceous fragments in the soil yesterday afternoon; and once again the details which he had noted at the time only with distracted attention became in retrospect instinct with meaning, woven into a great web of ensnaring purpose that was tightening about him. The flash of welcome on the face of the monk in the bows, the shrouded silence of the others over their oars—that, too, was exactly right. He went cautiously down the steps, afraid of the slippery slime.

The smaller island was soon reached and passed, but it was more than two hours before they glided into the little curving bay of the larger island beyond. The wind from the north-west had been blowing hard out of a steely sky. The monk in the bows girded up his skirts and sprang barefoot into the rocky shallows with the mooring-rope in his hand. Paulinus would have liked to follow his example, but Iccus settled the matter by getting over the side as soon as the boat grated and grounded. He braced his shoulders, and Paulinus lacked the courage to refuse. He got on to his servant's back and was carried ashore, feeling curiously ashamed before the unconcerned eyes of the monks; it was the first time in his life that he had ever had the slightest self-consciousness about accepting the services of a slave.

All the monks except the one that had been in the bows went promptly about their business, laying the oars inside a small boathouse and then striding off along one or other of the tracks that wandered about under the wind-twisted pine-trees. The remaining monk informed Paulinus that his name was Johannes, and offered to lead him to the central cloisters. They took one of the pinewood tracks, passing over beds of thickly strewn needles with an occasional blue thistle bristling out of the dry, stony soil. The ground rose and dipped, and they skirted a patch of yellow horned poppies and the blue-grey leaves of centaurea. The silence, full of the murmurs of the sea, had a tang of elemental purities, sea-salt and pine-breath; and then they met a lonely blackthorn flowering in a little hollow, and were near their destination.

A tall, lonely palm-tree stood by the church that was so roughly built, so expressive of an irresistible piety, it seemed to have come about out of a sheer impact of the stony landscape and the evangelic wills of its founders. The cells of the monks stood round, with small strips of greensward between, and over at one side the beds of cabbages and herbs. There was a well, from which a monk was drawing water in an iron-hooped bucket. Johannes inquired of him where the Father was, and the monk pointed to the church. Paulinus followed Johannes into the cool dimness of the church's undecorated, whitewashed interior. A man who was arranging a cloth near the altar spoke to him in a voice warm, clear, precise; and he answered the questions without discomfort. The world had wearied him, he wanted to taste the peace of God in the island where wells were dug and sweet waters flowed in the midst of the bitterness of the sea; at the end the Spirit would show him his way "I have much to learn . . . much to unlearn. My father has great wealth, but I have never been happy in it, I have always been more aware of the harsh rind than of the pleasant juices . . . Father, I have feared eternal death"

The voice said soothingly, impersonally, "You are free to share our hard fare."

As they emerged into the daylight, Paulinus was startled by the keen penetration of the man's eyes; he shrank for a moment, feeling himself a cheat, an intruder. Then he took a deep breath of blown, sunny air, the purities of sea and pine and stone shivered in his blood, the lofty arms of the palm-top swung round in a gust, and he heard the clatter of mattock on hard soil. He was not afraid of the test.

The Father seemed to understand his condition; he spoke to him as he was turning away with Johannes to go to the cell where he would sleep, "Do not strain yourself too much at the outset. And pray for Grace. I, too, shall pray for you."

At the end of a week he knew every yard of the small island, almost (it seemed) every contorted pine and every bright-green feathery fennel-leaf. He wandered along the southern shore, where the rise in the ground cut off his view of the snow-cragged Alps, the porphyry hills of the mainland, the endless recession of blue planes and intersecting ravines on the slopes between Alps and coast. The sea this day was dark purple, an intricate delicacy of transparent shadows and broad light-sweeps. But he was unhappy, lost. It was not that the life on the island had disillusioned him, but he could not enter its circle of reality. The spell of the first days, when he had merely been recuperating from tiredness and nervous strain, had fallen away as soon as he tried actively to relate himself to the monastic routine. And the consequent conviction of inner barrenness in himself had ended by preventing him from participating even as a spectator in the significances of the unending toil and praise

of the monks' lives. He still believed in those significances; but while this curse of inner barrenness was laid upon him, he could see the routine as scarcely different from the enforced activities of an *ergastula* of slaves. It was only intellectually that he could tell the difference. But the wholeness of the difference he could not grasp, could not enter into. Only at rare moments, a bell-chime, a vision of a monk's irradiated face or of the patient swing of a mattock in the vegetable garden, a waking in the night to hear the murmuring sea-silence and to know it tense with the vigil of men on whom lay the burden of the whole tainted world, he shuddered with participation and wept through his stiffened fingers at his inability to sustain the moment.

He decided to give up, to admit that he was hopeless, flawed with a weakness that no good intentions could overcome. And because his decision meant a definite course instead of the drifting and doubting that had been controlling him for so long, he felt happy, enkindled. The image of Lauriacum, of its comfortable solaces, rose up in his mind with overwhelming appeal; his body felt sore and enfeebled with futile privations, the unchanging cabbage-soup and the heather-bed on the hard ground. He wanted to get back to the house where he could stop thinking about such things as food and bed at all, where swarms of servants, docilely hovering in the background, arranged all external details and left him free to continue his interest in "higher things". His temporarily repressed scorn of physical toil, of the "body", awoke sharply within him. What was he doing with such a banal ideal as that of these monks in their penurious mode of life, their thwarting of all the refinements born of leisure? He would leave the island by the very next boat.

Some foam-froth whisked off the breaking crest of a wave and flew across his path. He paused and stared out over the sea, southwards. What, then, of all his dreams? Suddenly he remembered that the return to the old life meant a return to temptation, to lust. . . I shall get married, he thought, marriage is a sacrament of the Church . . . Even if it is a weakness, it is not a mortal sin. . . But the whirling words of Jerome in praise of virginity broke in on his thoughts. No matter, I am no longer a virgin such perfections are not for me. But the more he thought of it, the less did marriage seem a solution. It would either make no difference at all, or it would entangle him in a darker strife of wills, an explicit submission to the world's evil, an intimacy of squalid heat and intrusive cruelties. . . No, no.

He panted, winced beneath the goad. And the waters stirred and glowed under his travelling eyes, like the blood of a god, the endless stream of the life of God from which he was shut out. He panted with desire as for a woman; with hands of trembling haste he wrenched off his tunic and under-shift, he kicked off his sandals, and stood naked. He feared a lightning, a consummation, for his nakedness felt spiritual as

well as material; and in a fever of yearning he walked into the thin rush of a wave that had broken, the water frilling whitely round his ankles. Then the water was retreating, and the whole world seemed wavering, unstable, falling away in increasing speed under his feet. He swayed and almost collapsed. Then he strode to meet a wave curling to its end. He threw himself down into the smash and slither of the foam; he let the retiring suck of the pebbly waters carry him outward, lashing against his calves, then his back as he rolled over. He was in deeper water now, and began to swim, striking out blindly to the south, to the open sea, to the pure space of purple light and the endless flow of God. He could not see out of his drenched eyes, though he saw the purple and gold light-curves spinning into a kind of womb of forces; he felt so strong and buoyant that he was sure he could swim southward for ever, into the womb of light and water.

He awoke from his fascination to shake his head, treading water for a moment, to realise how far out he had swum and how merciless the buffeting waves. Panic mixed with his exaltation as he turned back and struck out for the shore, and panic drove out the exaltation altogether as he discovered how he was flung back, carried out of his course. His mind was cloven by two convictions—that he was going to be drowned, and that he was on the edge of the discovery of the secret of life, and therefore could not die. He was a good enough swimmer for small river distances, but he had never tackled such a problem as that which now faced him. His muscles began to ache, he went under a wave that caught him and tossed him like a mad goring bull, and he remembered the cowboys of the village in the salt-marshes. That memory somehow gave him new strength, a sense of companionship, the pulse thudding in his head was like the beat of the drum of dogskin hung on the festival musician's left arm, played by a knob of olive-wood. Two thoughts leaped in his cloven mind. I die without having achieved anything, and I die in a moment of perfect fullness, and so I shall not die. A skein of purple lights swung overhead, like a net cast by some angel for his soul. I am in the stream, I am in the endless stream of God at last, he thought, and yet still felt himself as one of the lads of the salt-marsh mocking at a maddened bull to the sound of a dogskin drum. And further strength came to him, a submerged rock struck his knee, and in another moment he was standing on a tongue of reef that ran out into the sea. A wave charged him and knocked him again out of his depth, but he laughed aloud now, and in a few strokes was back on the reef.

When he reached the shore, all his strength suddenly left him and he fell down on the rocks and pebbles, and the earth swayed under him as if it were as wild as the sea. But he lay still, unable to move, breathing very slowly, the ragged rim of a shell pressing painfully into his side; all his bones ached, and there was a hollowness in the palms of his hands and under the soles of his feet. The sky was a whispering shell held to

his ear. His closed eyes still saw the spiralling womb of water and light; he still felt himself drifting towards it.

How long he lay there, he did not know. But when he sat up, he startled a bird that had been poking about among some sea-wrack nearby. He thought: This is how Adam felt, a spirit strange in the sudden red clay. He felt infinitely tired and blessed. Where were his clothes? He thought that he saw them a long way off along the shore eastward, and set out walking in that direction. And as he walked, he felt himself walking back into life, into the world and his individual purpose, as if he were still only that newborn spirit in a sudden bed of red clay, until he reached the clothes and put them on and became once more a part of the world and distinct from the world.

The wind and sun had dried him by the time he reached his clothes. He turned to get back to the cells of the monks, and went up past a stunted pine over the slope splintered with stones and scanty asphodel-flames; and did not notice the time taken by his walking, come abruptly to the octagonal chapel with its single square window. Brother Johannes was still arguing gently with five other monks round him.

"And though there is no explicit commandment, yet it is agreed by the fathers of the faith that no person seeking to live the way of Christ can dare to eat the flesh of what was a living creature. Jerome, in his *Rule of Monks*, chapter eleven, says: 'The eating of flesh is the seed-plot of lust. And Augustine, in his *Manners of the Catholic Church*, chapter one, paragraph thirty-three, says the same. And does not our beloved poet Prudentius express this truth in melodious verses?" He paused and then recited softly:

. . . These are the riches with which we're supplied,
Christ the purveyor of all we require
Far may all lust of the belly abide,
slaughtering oxen in heaps to provide
courses of blood, an unholy desire
Leave to the savage and ravening brood
banquets on corpses of fourfooted beasts
Lettuce and bean are our natural food,
various salads, no blood may intrude
spoilng our innocent pastoral feasts
Buckets of milk! how they bubble and steam,
warm from the udders and snowily fresh.
Poured into thickening churns goes the stream,
foaming and whirling, while, parted, the cream
turns into cheese in the wickerwork-mesh
Clean with its sweetness, now honey I see,
shed from the comb as my nectarous fare
Thymes daintv essence and dew of the au . . .

He began to forget the lines. "Orchards are drooping with fruit overhead. . . . You all know the rest."

Paulinus had listened in delight to the poem, which he knew well ; but until this moment he had felt its lovely picture only as a dream, a fantasy of the golden age. Now, suddenly, it entered into his blood and became simple reality ; and to his astonishment he discovered that it had had this direct meaning all the while. Henceforth it would be a part of his active consciousness, his doing and his feeling blended.

The monks were arguing. Not about the question of diet, on which they all agreed, but about the interpretation of the commandment. A lantern-jawed fellow challenged Johannes, declared that he was Pelagian, a believer in the possibility of heaven-on-earth apart from the leavening influence of Grace working on a nature ruined by original sin. And a defender of Johannes, a young, curly-haired monk, retorted by accusing the lantern-jawed of being a Manichee, a slanderer of the body and the world, a believer in the absoluteness of evil. And Johannes smiled and tried to keep a balance between the two

Paulinus listened, and with something of surprise found that the altercation did not disturb in the slightest the deep sense of spiritual contact which the voice of Johannes had given him. I have patience at last, he thought, I can take things easily, even the knottiest of perplexities, the recrudescences of the dark principle in my own soul and in the soul of others. He thought. Tomorrow, on the pretext of a letter to my father, I shall send Iccus away and bid him to come back in three months.

And then suddenly the breath seemed to leave his body, his knees gave way under him. He threw himself on the ground at the feet of Johannes "I have sinned, I am utterly dark with sin, and God has shown me His mercy, His love. Pray for me, brothers. O, I feel a sword cleaving my soul. I am cut apart O dark, dark, dark . "

5. *Summer at Lugdunum*

At first the news of the Hunnic invasion of Italy stirred anxious interest ; but after a while, when it became clear that the war was not going to involve Gaul again, the citizens ceased to pay much attention to the matter. Even the news that Aquileia had fallen and had been burned to the ground, and that all the cities of North Italy were now at the mercy of Attila, did not provoke more than a day's discussion. Not that there were any local topics of particular import, there were only the same old troubles—the increase of taxes, the decay of trading, the pressure of Burgundians, Franks, and Visigoths all round the horizon, somebody's bankruptcy or adultery, a case of burglary Aetius, after the rout of the Huns, had made a rather hasty effort to reorganise the civil service more efficiently in the area of Gaul still officially under the direct sway of the Empire ; but though a number of lesser magistrates had become nuisances for a month or two by variously misdirected lunges of zeal,

the effect of the reorganisation had soon worn off. The system reverted to its normal basis of inertia and corruption. It was proof against the attack of even the most earnest of *agentes in rebus* who left Rome with the intention either of strenuously purifying the provincial controls or of making big money out of bribes—the sway of inertia and petty roguery would be sure to get him down. What remained of the complex system of spying and reporting by one official on another had only an effect of impeding what was already at a standstill, or of aiding extortion methods where scarcely anything of government but extortion survived.

Things were worse than before. Audax was sure of it—though perhaps his conviction arose from the fact that he now looked closer and with more perspicacity at the world. He felt himself infected by the general dullness. The mood of intellectual alertness, with which he had returned to Zonaras's house, faded away before his sense of the emptiness in society. His thoughts had stopped short in what seemed an open highway of discovery, and refused to move an inch more forward, like an obstinate mule. Perhaps the goad could be found which would set them going again, but he lost interest in trying to find it. He avoided serious conversation with Zonaras. Which was easy to do, since Zonaras never forced any kind of discussion and was clearly falling into bad health through overwork and lack of sleep.

But there were moments when he did try again to find that goad for his thoughts, a glimpse of the open country into which he had seemed to be forging ahead returned tantalisingly in unguarded moments. In vain. The oppression thickened on his brain. There were even days when he found it hard to rise in the morning; he felt listless and had fears that a real distractedness would settle upon him. He had extreme difficulty in listening to the talk of others; his mind developed a trick of going blank. It frightened him.

He had intended to ignore all invitations that might come his way from Pastor and his circle, he couldn't make any return of hospitality. But in his worried condition he found the refusals very hard to make; he was consumed with the feeling of missing something. And even though all the parties or excursions which he joined were boring to him, he could not lose his miserable conviction that all those at which he failed to be present through some accident or lack of invitation were somehow different, filled with momentous events, witticisms, enjoyments.

So he began to accept the invitations given by Pastor, who had taken quite a liking to him, associating him in some way with his literary success. Pastor always wanted his opinion on anything that he had composed, and to give a convincing effect to his laudations Audax had to get his mind back into something of the old focus, to think in the old terms. And though he started off with his tongue in his cheek, he found the old standards once more engrossing his mind; more than ever that highway to the glimpsed open country was being blocked up, filled with walls and

ditches as well as obstinate mules. But whereas in relation to Pastor he could keep a modicum of self-respect, he had to find in relation to the others of the group a rôle which would excuse or palliate his poverty. And there was no rôle at all adequate except one of semi-buffoonery, a continual drawing of attention to all that most pained and humiliated him. On such terms the others had no objection to his company; they were ready to invite him to parties, to extend to him a recognised patronage, as long as he went on being amusing and subtly deferential.

He felt more than ever a dislike of being alone with his thoughts; and he was well aware of the vicious circle of flight that he was creating for himself. But he felt impotent in the face of it, he could see no alternative that was not worse. What course was open to him? Perhaps, if he scraped together all the remnants of patronage possible out of the acquaintances collected by his father, he would be able to obtain some minor governmental position. But, apart from the fact that in the contracting system such positions were all the while growing harder to find and when found were no longer stable, his whole being revolted against the involved servitude. Anything was better, he felt. The only real choice for him was the Church. Doubtless, with a bit of trouble, he would be able to find a bishop who would grow interested in him and take him under his wing. But how did such a career differ from his present one of semi-toadysm? The present one seemed superior, since it allowed him, under cover of jests, to expose something of the baseness that he felt in himself and in those who laughed at him.

No, there was one other choice—the best one, in fact, for a man who hadn't much hope of becoming a bishop. That was to go to one of the barbarian courts—Visigothic, Burgundian, Frankish, Vandal—and there to enter the chancellery. With energy and skill one could rise to something like an exercise of power, for the barbarian courts were above all keen to make use of the Roman culture and organising system which they themselves could not directly master and apply. But this suggestion appealed to him scarcely more than that of entering the Church; he knew only too well that the scepticism which had got into his bones would lead him to disaster in such spheres. Best to take up buffoonery with all seriousness as a definite career.

The river-mist had been sucked aloft in scarf-whirls that seemed on the point of revealing the hidden nymph-dancer, the naked bacchante of elemental dance-gyres. A clear blue sky appeared. Audax paced up and down the little garden. A letter from Paulinus had just been forwarded to him, addressed care of Pastor; and his thoughts had returned to Paulinus, whom he had forgotten for some time. The note was brief and obviously evaded giving any account of what was really detaining Paulinus.

"I am sending a few lines to you and to my family by the hand of my

servant Iccus. I like the climate here and have decided to stay on for a while. In fact I can't say exactly when I'll return, as I promised to stay for a week or so with a friend at Arausio whom I put up with for the night on my way down. If you feel like going back to the Villa on your own, of course do so. I left word with the bailiff that he was to take orders from you as from myself. Show him this note if you wish. Farewell."

The care that Paulinus had taken to exclude any personal statement stirred Audax's curiosity and revived memories of their discussions; the winter days spent at the Villa were now invested with a charm of enforced intimacy, a sincerity of thought and feeling, which made the present somehow shameful and false. Had Paulinus been the one with the courage to face what those days had meant, while he, Audax, had degenerated into a will-less submission to all the forces which those days had most scorned and denied?

He read and re-read the letter, trying to find what lay under its dry wording. Did it imply that Paulinus had given up the search, had relapsed into trivialities, after all? Or that he was undergoing an experience so profound and regenerative that he had no words for it, no need to chatter about it? Did it reveal a sterile emptiness, or the "silence" of a man passing through the stages of a mystery? In any event, it had disquieted Audax, compelling him to stand aside critically from the life which he was living; and that was the last thing he wanted to do. He felt himself standing stripped in a chilly light, surrounded by hidden eyes. Let them laugh at me, he muttered, what does it matter, if I have the last laugh, the integrity of an entire bitterness?

But he could not still his restlessness. He wanted to go out, but he did not want to meet any of his acquaintances and he did not want to be alone. Suddenly he saw the face of Phoebe at one of the bedroom windows upstairs, she disappeared and then came forward again, hanging a small carpet out over the sill.

"Phoebe," he called, and she leaned out. "Come for a walk with me. I mean a long one. On the hills."

"Wait. I'll be down in a minute."

She came out into the garden, pulling her hair into something like order; and he repeated his request. She flushed with pleasure. "I'll tell father. I was only going to do housework, and that can wait."

"We'll take some food," he called after her, and she looked back brightly, nodding. The next moment she was beckoning to him from the kitchen, and he went in, to find her hurrying up Danne, the cook, who didn't like being hurried.

"All in good time. You'll get the place in such a mess that it'll take me the rest of the day to tidy it up again, and then everything'll be late,

and of course I'll be blamed. No, you can't take that cheese. I want it for something special."

"O yes, do let us have the cheese, please let us have the cheese," pleaded Phoebe. "I'll kiss you if you do."

"All very well, but human beings have got stomachs, and they can't live on kisses. A lot of thanks I'd get if I came in and kissed you all and said that would have to do for dinner. You with your pretty smiles, you'd worm anything out of a poor old woman and then say she was an old fool. All right. Take the cheese. And you might as well have some of that sausage too that's hanging in the larder, since I can see you mean to beggar me. . . . Not that I expect gratitude. It was in fashion only in the old days when God hadn't yet grown a beard. . . ."

They went out by the back door into the lane.

"Where shall we go?" asked Phoebe, as Audax was trying to find a comfortable way of settling the wallet in which the food had been stowed.

"Anywhere away from all this. . . ."

They passed down the streets where knots of talkers were languidly discussing the latest war-news: for the second time the Visigoths had answered an urgent courier from Aetius, refusing to send any troops into Italy to fight Attila there. Audax wanted to get out of the sight of men and the things that men had made; and for a while he was sorry that he hadn't set off on his own. At the Gates a farmer upset a cart-full of cabbages. The happy remarks that Phoebe made as they strolled along seemed to him silly, and he didn't want to make the effort to answer. They passed the old cemetery where the cheap harlots lurked, the straggling market-gardens. And then at last, as they did begin to get out into the open country, his carping mood left him, and there was nothing that he wanted so much as to abandon himself to that kind of silliness, a childish submergence in the moment, in the shapes and colours and sounds of the differing day. Phoebe, however, had grown a little depressed by his lack of response, and now he had to woo her back to light-heartedness.

"One day I was walking out this way and an old shepherd showed me how to get a cigale walking up a stick by whistling to it."

She laughed once more. "O, do find a stick and whistle."

"Have you ever seen one? Such delicate wings and such bull-eyes."

"O, do find a stick and whistle, please!"

But he pleaded that he'd forgotten the tune. However, happiness was restored.

They stopped at the top of the first rise and looked down over some cornfields of dry, rustling gold. 'How good the earth is!'. . . Why are we all so out of key with it? . . . Has there always been all this hate and greed and murder? was there ever a Saturnian Age of peace and brotherhood? And if there was, why did evil break it up?"

She became serious. "Father says. . . ." She found it hard to formulate

what her father had said, though she could feel inside her the meaning of his words as clearly as she could see the wind stirring the gold . . . the cornfields shivering the way a dog's coat shivers when one scratches his spine. "Yes . . . and no Not the way the poets write about it. But he says things have been different . . . One of the Stoics, I forget which one, says that . . ."

He looked at her face, which was frowning with the effort of thought "No, no," he said, catching her hand "It's my fault. We mustn't fret our brains today. We must be happy I insist on it " He bade her with mock authority, "Take that frown off your face at once "

"Was I frowning?" She smiled and passed her hand over her forehead. "You know, I'm such a disappointment to father He wanted a son. I forget things so easily "

"And people too. You'd forgotten all about me You didn't know me when I came back in the spring "

"O, what lies! No, I don't forget people . . ." She turned and pulled at her hand, which he was still holding "Don't let's talk about me. It's so dull. Let's walk and walk till we're really hungry. I want so much to eat some of the food we've brought, and I'm not hungry at all yet. It's so nice eating out in the country "

They stood back among some meadowsweet to let a creaking ox-cart go by, and then wandered from the road along a track that led them past some beeches into a little firwood, and then up a rough slope of coarse grasses where three goats were browsing They sat down for a while on a grey slab of rock beside a strip of narrow-leaved lungwort and looked down a patchwork of small valleys and cornfields and dots of trees and dark clumps of woodland, and it seemed that they had suddenly come right up out of the world that they knew, so that there was no need to go any farther.

"I didn't know we'd climbed so high . . ."

"The road was sloping up . . ."

They felt drowsy and contented, in a hush that hummed like a large furry bee winging from honey-flower to honey-flower of blue. The man hoeing at the edge of the nearest field below was cut off by a limpid breadth of silence. The hawk that hovered high overhead increased the sense of depth, of a swaying bell of space. A dragon-fly passed near, with blue water-flames for wings, and then flew straight out into the emptiness, making them feel dizzy as their eyes clung to it. And now it was time to eat.

He opened the wallet and spread the food out on the rock. "A clean table all ready . . . how pampered we are!"

"I do feel greedy." She clapped her hands "I could eat the whole lot."

But so far from eating the whole lot, she spent much of the time while he was eating, in trying to lure some small greyish birds to come for crumbs.

"They'll come as soon as we've gone," he consoled her. "Leave the crumbs on the stone."

"The ants will take them. Look, they're swarming already."

"Then the birds will probably eat the ants too and have a splendid feed. I've seen some bird or other eating ants . . . starlings, I think. There isn't much that starlings won't eat."

"You do find a way of making the best of everything . . ."

He wasn't sure if her words weren't sarcastic, a criticism of his mode of life, she was such a mixture of childishness and maturity. He didn't answer, but lay back, the aromatic smell of some herb spicing the sunlight. What had he come out for? to find the reason for living or to loaf pleasantly through a difficult day. "You're an odd creature, aren't you?" he said at length, challengingly.

"Am I? But does it matter what I am?"

There was pain in her voice, but he deliberately ignored it. "What does anything matter? Nothing matters, eh? We might as well have stayed at home."

"Some things matter a lot," she said in a calmer voice.

He turned his head sideways and saw that she was tossing pebbles up and catching them in her palm.

"It's only persons who want to hide their high opinion of themselves that say they don't matter and all the rest of the humble remarks." He grew aware of an urge to hurt her—at least to press her into a corner and make her admit something or other. The worthlessness of life?

She did not answer, and he rolled over till he could put his head in her lap. "There," he said. "I'm at your mercy. Punch me in the eye for the bad-mannered lout I am. Quick, now's your chance."

"I don't want to punch you, or anyone else," she answered, failing to react playfully. "I only wanted to forget myself for an hour or two, and you won't let me."

"Poor thing," he mocked her. "Carrying the world's dark burden of destiny on your young shoulders, eh? And you pretend you're humble. . . ."

His head was lying in her lap, he felt the muscles of her long, lean thigh as she straightened out her legs. She leaned back, resting on the palms of her hands. He moved his head a little, to fit it more exactly into the hollow of her lap, he felt the movement of her stomach through her thin tunic, as she breathed. He expected her to say something angry, in her own defence, but she said sadly:

"I wish I could help you. . . . You see, I am useless."

His hostility faded away, or perhaps it merged into the desire that began tingling all over him; and yet he too felt sad, needing comfort. He didn't know whether it was an impulse of desire or of sadness that drove him to lift his arms above his head and try to catch her round the waist. From his position he couldn't catch hold of her as he had meant.

He rolled over and sat up, putting his arm round her waist. The position was still unpropitious for an embrace; her left arm got in the way and he held her clumsily, but he tried to kiss her on the cheek, the throat, the corner of her mouth, whichever bit of her face he could get at. He kissed her awkwardly under the ear. Without aiding him, she did not seem to resist, and he tried to draw her round more to face him, at the same time lifting himself to press round over her.

"No, no," she said faintly. "You don't really want me. Perhaps if you did . . ."

"I do want you, I do," he muttered hoarsely. "Go on. Perhaps what?"

"No, no," she answered in stronger tones. "Not even if you did. But that doesn't come into it. You're merely bored, miserable. . . I'm sorry for you. I wish so much I could help you."

He kissed her on the throat, more skilfully this time, and felt a reluctant response of her body. "Yes, yes, sweet thing," he murmured, caressing her. She let him caress her for a moment, and he felt her body yielding; but as he thought that she was about to give in, she was filled with strength and pushed him away. His first reaction was to hold her tighter, to exert his strength against hers, to kiss her on the struggling mouth and force her back. But as she was sinking back, he heard her pleading whisper, and was ashamed. He let her go and sat up. She lay there still, with her arm over her eyes, careless of the dishevelled state of her dress.

"Please, dear, do understand," she said softly, with her arm over her eyes. "I know you don't really want me. . . But it isn't that. You've been mocking at me, but I don't feel I'm important. I'd let you do what you like if there was only me to consider. . . But there's father. It would hurt him so much if I was to have a child. . ."

He felt sorry for her, and yet the baffled desire in his blood prevented him from succumbing to that pity; he wanted at least to hurt her. But what he said was only, "Who's talking about having children? I only want to kiss you, to forget the world a moment," and it was himself that he felt the pity for. He leaned over her and began kissing her mouth, at first gently and then with increased warmth, at the same time pressing down over her. She lay inert for a while, and then began shuddering. He plucked cautiously at her dress, she clung to him and her mouth opened passionately. Suddenly there was nothing between him and the attainment of his desire; and yet at that very moment he felt a barrier arise. The thinness of her shaken body somehow filled him with sorrow; he caressed her tenderly.

"I don't care . . . I don't care . . ." she whispered. "My life's of no value. . . I want to help you so much."

But he gave her a last affectionate kiss and sat up, he had an airy feeling of magnanimous triumph. It seemed now that it had been the

submission of her will, not her body, that he had wanted all the while, and that all his actions had been cunningly directed to that end. He was able even to contemplate the pale, lean body that she made no effort to cover, with an equanimity of mingled pity and triumph. At last she too opened her eyes, sat up, and smoothed her dress down; and he expected her to utter some reproach. But what she said, after staring into his eyes keenly for a while, was quite different from his expectations. "Are you all right? you're not upset? I don't understand about men. . . . I thought you'd be upset. . . ." And her candid eyes, so full of a searching affection, made him flush. He looked away and thought: She'd have told her father as soon as we got back, thank God I didn't do anything. But at the same time he began to feel a little resentful.

"Come on now, time we were going home." He ran off down the hill-track, and she followed, running recklessly, after having shaken out the crumbs from the wallet for the birds. He waited for her at the bottom of the slope, and opened his arms to catch her in her headlong descent. "Now, now, you might have broken a leg. . . ." A fear came over him that she was altogether innocent; that she might imagine things had really been consummated, and might tell her father they had. "Nothing happened, you know," he said haltingly. "There's nothing to tell your father."

"I know," she answered, looking at him breathless and wide-eyed, her body pulsing against him, and he was so relieved that he gave her a long, gentle kiss, while her body hung softly and heavily in his arms.

The more he thought the matter over, the more pleased he was that nothing serious had happened; and yet the fact that she had once lain in his arms ready to let him possess her made it impossible for him to watch her henceforth without a certain desirous regret, which, almost against his will, kept him day-dreaming plans for a future episode when her readiness would not be in vain. And she, too, though in general she treated him with even more open and frank cordiality than before, had moments when he saw a faint flush creeping under her skin, up her throat towards her cheeks and eyes. More than ever he tried to avoid Zonaras. Once, when he knew that both Zonaras and Miccio were out, his restlessness sent him into her room. He closed the door quietly, and she turned a flushed face to him from the stool on which she was sitting. Neither spoke. With guilty tread he went over, lifted her up and lay with her on the bed, caressing her tenderly and roughly, and kissing her; but that was all. Only kisses and caresses. This time it was simply fear of Zonaras that restrained him. Not a word was spoken, and with a shy, trembling complicity she let him undress her. Then at last he went out with guilty tread, almost stifled as he shut the door behind him.

Next day she came to him when he was sitting in the arbour. "Dear, we must stop it," she blurted out desperately, with red patches

on her cheeks. "You know what is sure to happen if it goes on. I don't blame you . . . or even myself. But it mustn't go on. It was all wrong what I said up in the hills. It seems as if I said it to tempt you. Dear, I can't tell you how grateful I am that you did . . . that you didn't. . . . Please don't spoil it now. I realise that I would have killed myself. I couldn't bear to face my father and know that I'd hurt him to the heart." She had been speaking rapidly, jerkily, as if she were repeating a lot of set phrases that she'd painfully learned and was afraid to lose the thread if she paused. But now her voice broke. "He loves me. He loved my mother too. Now I'm all he's got. He couldn't bear it if he felt I'd spoiled my life. Yes, he respects me, he's tried to teach me everything he knows. . . . I'm a coward. I want . . . I want . . ." Her voice quavered. "It doesn't matter. I've seen what I must do. I feel as if I went mad for a while, now I'm sane again. It must all stop." And her voice weakened so sorrowfully that she failed to convey any determination, and Audax understood her words as a plea to his mastery of her. Besides, when he remembered the way that his embraces had quelled her, how could he not but think that they would do so again? she was begging him not to exert his mastery of her again?

"Of course, I see. . . ." He reached out to take her hand.

She shrank away. "No, there must be nothing."

"Not even a handclasp?" he asked reproachfully, as if he were pitying her inability to control her senses, he the master.

"No, not even that." She pressed her hands over her left breast. "Can't you see that I . . . I . . ." And she turned and fled, with tears in her eyes. And the airy emotion of magnanimity came over him again, he felt perfectly at ease, but when he tried to go on reading, a hidden excitement made him incapable of concentrating attention on the script.

The next afternoon he went to a gathering at the house of Marusius. To carry off his semi-buffoon rôle it was necessary to drink a fair amount at the outset, and this time, when once he had gulped down three or four goblets of unmixed wine at the murena-table—a very valuable table of citrus-wood with a black stripe in it like the stripe on the fish's back—he felt that he was acting his part with especial wit and vigour. Marusius loaded him with ironic praises, calling him the soul of the party. "Put some more balsum on his hair," he insisted, under the pretence that he was honouring him. He made the slave-boy pour the stuff on Audax's head till it ran all down his neck and over his face. "Charming," said Marusius, with a fat smirk. Audax wiped as much of the stuff off as he could with a napkin when no one was looking. Frankincense smoked up to the fretted ceiling, and the lamps, needed in the afternoon for the large room with only a few small windows, burned with scented oil. Three agile girls, professionals, were doing a high-kicking dance, while another, taking the hem of her tunic in her teeth, bent back till her

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face appeared between her legs. "Charming," said Marusius with a yawn. Dice-playing began. Audax hated the gambling, because he lacked the funds to take part in it. He drank more than he had meant to drink, for a lacuna in his memory of the afternoon occurred. He hovered on the edge of a group arguing about the threefold headings of pathos in Art. according to the subject, the method, or the cause. "Consider the pathos of the death of Galesus in the *Aeneid*. While standing out to mediate for peace." Then examples of Pathos *a simili*, *a maiore* and *a minori*. Then he remembered another group sniggering over the misfortunes of the heiress Papianilla, the girl with the maimed face. He tried to listen attentively to that, because in his more wretched and debased moments he had even contemplated the possibility of retrieving his fortunes by taking up the marriage project of Prosper. A young man, a Reader, who had come with forged testimonials to the Bishop, had managed to use his ecclesiastical position to gain the aunt's confidence, had had an interview with the girl and won her over, then the two women carried the father by storm and he accepted the suitor without proper inquiries, satisfied that the Bishop's high esteem of the Reader guaranteed the statement about his paternal estate. The marriage was hurried on, the Reader got his fingers on to a number of valuables and estate-deeds and thereupon dodged off. Now a complicated lawsuit was going to be waged.

Marusius was rather bored, he saw that Audax was getting drunk, and encouraged him to drink more. The next that Audax remembered was finding himself in the midst of a dance to the music of two flutes, a burlesque wooing dance, and as partner he had a beastly, slobbery-mouthed wretch who had been doing tumbling tricks. Certainly the whole thing had been fixed by Marusius to degrade Audax. But for the moment Audax was so carried on by the applause that he danced the idiotic dance, which somehow turned into a parody of ritual—but nobody noticed that, for the ritual which he parodied, which he ended by passionately enacting, was a Mystery which he devised himself on the spot, but which seemed to him at the time a ritual established from the first throb of time to utter the deepest secrets of life. Only Marusius perhaps had some inkling, for when Audax, suddenly horrified, broke away and passed by him, he hissed, "Blasphemer."

The horror that drove Audax from the room had nothing to do with a realisation of the degraded fool that he had made of himself; it was a sudden fear that he would become the thing he was enacting, the victim-god. That he would be caught for ever in the vortex of the forces which he was invoking, transfixed on a pattern of life-death. It was only when he stood in the anteroom, shaken by his fear and listening to the burst of laughter which had followed him, that he began to think of the others. He plunged his face in the bowl of water which the slave brought him, and the shock sobered him to the extent of making him feel ashamed. A

murderous hatred of the whole jeering roomful welled up in him, then died away into the enduring shame.

He went out into the gathering dusk, and paced for some time along the streets in a condition of such self-divided misery that he could not recall afterwards what he had thought or felt. He came to himself down by the river-side, and attained something of peace, or at least of relaxation, by watching the turbulent, dimly-glimmering flow. Then he turned and went home.

He meant to sneak up to his room, but the shame that held him was making him dread his own company. Some impulse of his misery even wanted to lead him back to the house of Marusius and force him to behave there yet more imbecilely. Hatred and self-abasement fought in his mind. What was there to hide? When one had sunk to the depths, one had at least given up pretences; to that extent one could maintain a sense of superiority. Though he knew that he was not in a fit state to argue intelligently, he wanted to find Zonaras and have a long, penetrating argument with him, put him in the wrong and show him that life was essentially cloven, balanced hopelessly on irreconcilables. He had an idea that he could prove the most irrational mode of living to be closest to the essence of life and therefore the most rational mode. An exquisite joke, an Olympian unquenchable laughter.

He saw the light through the curtain and went into the living-room. But there was only Phoebe there. He remembered standing in a pose which he thought to be a most humorous satire on oratorical gestures, and he started a speech of some kind.

"... Do go to bed. . . ."

He discovered that she was trying to get rid of him; and then he laughed, recalling the way in which she had pleaded with him to leave her alone. He advanced and caught hold of her. It was all a joke. He was merely going to reduce her to submission, make her confess her desire for him, and then let her go. None of this pretence that it was she who had put him off, set the terms of their relation¹. But to his surprise and indignation she struggled furiously.

"Let me go. . . . I told you it was ended. . . ."

She was stronger than he had thought, now that she was coldly and seriously fighting him. Besides, he was weak and confused with wine. But he grappled and fought; and the wrestle became a real contest. Each lost any qualms about hurting the other. He tried to force her chin back, and she kicked at him with her knee.

"I told you," she muttered.

They slipped and fell to the floor sideways, but still went on fiercely wrestling.

Suddenly someone was leaning over them, pulling at their hands, angrily shouting. Audax let go, and as he got up on his knees, he saw Zonaras. "It's all right," he mumbled. "Teaching a lesson . . ."

"How dare you?" cried Zonaras, and hit him across the face. "Out of my house at once. You filthy parasite. . . . I hoped for better things of you . . . But I've watched you for months now sinking into the mud. This is the end. There is no hope for you." His eyes were burning with a cold, venomous fury. "You cankered parasite. . . ."

Audax wanted to explain, to weep, to forgive, to be admired. What had he done? But he quailed before the cold, furious eyes. Then the words pierced into his fuddled mind, and horror returned. And yet he hated Zonaras too; he could never forget the insults. He tried to fold his arms with dignity, but his hands got in the way of one another; and giving up the attempt, he turned and stumbled from the room, with a vague idea that he was repudiating Zonaras. Out in the dark street he halted, swayed, clenched his fists. "You're an old man . . ." he shouted, and when no answer came from the night he strode off up the street. He even felt a weight off his mind as he thought of Marusius, to whom he was going, the party would be over, no doubt, except perhaps for a lingering group of gamblers, but he knew that Marusius would put him up.

6. *The Huns Again*

The stench of burnt bodies was everywhere, Aquileia was a pile of fire-split stones and blackened wood. The Hunnic host stayed for a couple of days in camp, counting over its booty; and then moved on. Within a wide radius of its movement the folk of the countryside fled—into the marshes, anywhere. Concordia yielded up its fat sheep and luxury villas, Altinum and Patavium were entered without resistance, but the desire to smash and kill had been so whetted by Aquileia, that these cities also were burned to the ground. The Hun nomads and the Germanic tribesmen yelled with delight to see a detested and despised city crashed out of existence.

The Emperor had fled from Ravenna to Rome; and Aetius was said to be levying troops. But as yet the Hunnic host had met no resistance in the field. The warriors were talking of a march on Rome.

Prosper now had too much to think about in his own affairs to care where the host marched. The young girl, whose name was Theodora, was still on his hands. With Aquileia reduced to ashes and the villages around all depopulated, there was nowhere to leave her; and despite the fact that he cursed her as a nuisance, he did not consider going back on his promise to her. And in this attitude he had the tacit aid of Eutharic. Eutharic took for granted that some gesture or word of the girl had amounted to a claim on Prosper's protection, and though he himself hadn't seen what the word or gesture was, that merely meant he didn't understand the customs of hospitality among the folk from whom Prosper came. He thus gave Prosper his moral support. In desperation Prosper cut off Theodora's pale gold hair with his sword and dressed her

in a tunic stripped from a dead boy in the street. "Now you're a boy, you're my page, do you understand?" And though she didn't understand, she nodded her round little face with its large round blue eyes, and seemed pleased. Indeed, when she found that during the marches she was going to ride on the same horse as Prosper, behind him, she entered into her part with alacrity. In a few days she was beginning to grasp her duties as a page, and Prosper found that it was not unpleasant to have somebody to run his messages, get his food, bring him water to wash his hands, and take off his boots for him when he was going to bed.

Besides, he now had a pouch well filled with gold plate and trinkets, which he had hidden in his saddle; and further bits of gold were secreted about his person and accoutrement. The possession of the gold, which he kept on adding to, had somehow changed his whole attitude to things, though in what exact way he wasn't sure. He felt less carefree; he lost his pleasure in the hard-riding expeditions on the flanks of the host; he began to observe events with a closer scrutiny, though not at all sure what he was looking for. The gold was a responsibility, he felt dimly, and so was the girl, and it seemed that sooner or later these responsibilities were going to make demands on him that he couldn't estimate at the moment but had better get himself ready to meet.

Theodore was re-christened Theodorus and given a cup of unmixed wine in proof of it, and she choked and got red in the face and laughed a long time. After a few days she lost one of her shoes, and so Prosper advised her to throw the other one away. And that was a good joke too, though she kept hurting her feet for a while. But he paid no attention to her complaints, and her soles got harder and she ceased to limp when she trod on stones or hard ruts in the road, and soon her feet were as red-brown-dusty as the feet of the various boys who, as recognised pages or as mere vermin, accompanied the host, mainly hanging about the wag-gons. Not for some weeks did Theodorus manage to come to terms with these youngsters, who began by persecuting her. At last, when a lad had tripped her up one day, she flew at him and scratched his face badly; and after that she hit another tormentor on the head with a well-aimed stone. The discovery that she was quite a good shot with stones restored her courage, and she even became an aggressor, recounting her successes with considerable pride to Prosper while he ate beside the camp-fire. Her legs were now browned by sun and dust and bruises; and her nose had sun-blisters on it. And she had a lot to say for herself and seemed very pleased with life in general.

The mansion in which she had been found, the clothes that she had worn, demonstrated that she had been the child of a noble. But the only subject on which her volubility ceased was that of her former life. When first Prosper asked her a few questions, she ran to him and clasped him and buried her face against him, as on the day when she had run to his aid from the bloodthirsty Sarus. Her mother had presumably been the

elegant woman whom Sarus had ravished and strangled in the corridor—found by Prosper as he took a last look round the ground floors of the house before the flames swept up the street. But the girl herself could not give him any information. A kind of terror, expressed by a blankness, a dim, smiling paralysis of the faculties, seemed to come over her at any attempt to make her return mentally to the day of the city-sacking. When Prosper kept on broaching the subject she gave up running to clasp him, she merely stared at him with that dumb, unseeing smile which ended by frightening him, as if she were going out of her wits. But she didn't go out of her wits. On the contrary, she showed daily an increased adaptability to the rôle of camp urchin; it was hard to believe that she had lived any other kind of life than one of scrambling, throwing stones and exchanging insults, wrestling in the dust, thinking out tricks to get her patron something extra for dinner or some oats for his horse. But at times in the night Prosper woke to hear her gabbling in the strange language of dream-terror as she lay coiled up in her horse-blanket on the other side of the saddle on which he was resting his head.

Village after village went crackling up in flame. The Hunnic host was moving westward along the rich river valley, making for Mediolanum. The cities on the line of advance sent embassy after embassy to offer their homage and to beg that Attila would be so divinely merciful as to leave them unburnt. Every day more groups of shivering burghers rode up and surrendered to the vedettes, asking to be allowed to carry yet another motion of this or that city-senate declaring Attila to be the obvious vice-regent of God on earth. Scouts reported that an Imperial Force had been mobilised and was moving cautiously about, barring the roads to Rome.

The towns and cities were now no longer burnt down, but their richer quarters were sacked. The carts full of plunder accompanying the army on its march swelled in number and began to block the roads, confusing the military programme. Besides, the tribal warriors kept leaving their contingents to go off and make sure their plunder wasn't being lost. Broken waggons and dead or dying beasts littered the roadways and caused further traffic problems. Groups of warriors, who had lost their plunder or considered that their share was insufficient, were liable to attack the waggon-lines, brawling and bloody disputes increased. The commissariat and sanitary problems were beyond control of the army staff, despite the efforts of various Greek and Roman deserters among the officers to impose a rudimentary system of control.

Verona fell, Mantua, Brixia, Cremona. In two main columns the host converged on Mediolanum. Once more excitement began to swell, to draw the impulsive host of tribal contingents and Hunnic horsemen into unified action, temporarily taking the place of discipline. Stimulated by fantastic tales of the city's wealth, many of the men threw away their plunder, peasants, timidly venturing on to the trail of the advancing

host, found costly plate and rich hangings in the ditches, and for a while did not dare to touch them, afraid that there was some trick involved in such gawdy bait.

Prosper had lost any sense of the loyalty, the clan cohesion, which he had felt in obscure but powerful ways at the outset of the campaign. The success, with its consequent plethora of booty, had split the host into gangs of individuals concerned only to hang on to loads of valuables—indeed, in many cases loads of mere rubbish, gimcrack oddments that had caught some unsophisticated tribal warrior's eye and that had been lugged about ever since. Far more valuables had been destroyed than carried off. Prosper still had no notion of what he was going to do; but his conviction that he would soon have to make some kind of new choice kept sharpening every day.

The gates of Mediolanum were drawn more widely open than they had ever been drawn before, the citizens didn't want to produce an effect of grudging space to the entering host. The main streets were hung with stuffs and greenery, though in a half-hearted way. Shopkeepers had clearly spent the last few days in trying to make their houses look as if they had never held stocks of lootable goods, but various malcontent citizens quickly collected round the invading detachments and offered to point out all the houses where gold, silver, or other valuables might reasonably be expected. All they asked was a slight share in the proceeds, though some made the offer on disinterested grounds of hatred. "They heard the words of Christ: Sell all thou hast and give it to the poor," shouted one gaunt man. "They had their chance and they closed their ears to the word. Now they're going to lose all. It's the will of God."

That seemed the opinion of a considerable portion of the citizens who had nothing in particular themselves to sell. The city poor, after the first shock, found that there were going to be no massacres, and they thoroughly approved of the policy of looting the rich houses. They lost their fears and began looting on their own account. Finally the invaders had to take police measures to quell the activities imitating their own; but, even so, the lower classes had enough share in the looting to make them continue enthusiastically in favour of the Hunnic regime. Prosper, as he moodily strolled about looking for any little gold ornament to add to his stock, heard many wild prophecies uttered in the streets. The poor inclined to think that a total upheaval of social values, a reversal of rôles, was being inaugurated and that the rule of Attila by some mysterious process would shade off into the millennium so anxiously desired.

But these emotions, born of the fraternising of the clansmen and the city poor, merely had the effect on Prosper of accentuating his conviction of the instability of the victory. The more that he saw the others lost in a glow of second-adventist hopes, the more he retired gloomily inside himself and felt sure a calamity was on the horizon. He knew that the imperial forces were mustering with increased strength somewhere along

the Via Aemilia; and he knew also that the organisation of the host was in an extreme stage of demoralisation. The ranks were being thinned by sickness, quarrels, desertions. For the first time peasant bands, laired in swamp or forest, were gaining the nerve to swoop out on straggling detachments of the host and slaughter them. While riding out to gather in some corn, he and his squad had come on the familiar sight of a half-wrecked village with the streets corpse-strewn. But this time the mutilated corpses proved to be those of Germanic auxiliaries, who had been trapped and massacred by the peasants. Some of the bodies had been hacked almost into fragments, and one had been half consumed in a fire before the peasants had been scared by some alarm.

Theodorus had been riding behind Prosper on that expedition, which he had expected to be quite peaceful; but she didn't turn a hair as the horses stepped delicately over the corpses. "Who killed them?" she merely asked. But the episode made Prosper consider afresh her position. She was certainly getting into a wild state; only two days before she and some of the camp-boys had nosed out a money-lender who had escaped being plundered, and had broken into his place.

Next day he went to the nearest church he could find, and made inquiries about the clergy. By dint of bribery and threats he found a priest, who was lurking in the house of a monumental mason—since the Huns and most of the Germans were heathen, with a liking for doing unpleasant things to any Christian clergy they encountered, the city priests kept out of their way as much as possible. Prosper managed to thaw some of the priest's fears, and explained that he wanted to find a decent family with whom to leave a young girl. And after much mumbling the priest had the brilliant idea of suggesting the very family with whom he had taken refuge. "A pious family, a thoroughly trustworthy family. . . ." And he cocked his small eye at Prosper, wondering if he had said too much, for though the questioner spoke excellent Latin, he was clearly a member of the host and was clad in Hunnic fashion.

"It's all right, I'm a Christian," growled Prosper.

The priest grew more confident and gave Prosper his blessing. "These are sad days. . . . Of course, not for all of us. . . . However, I can recommend this family. They are poor and honest." He called in the woman and explained what Prosper wanted. At first she shook her head in scared objection, but she suddenly changed her mind and wept.

"I had a young daughter, and the Lord took her from me. Eight years ago it was. . . ."

"The very age of this young girl," Prosper had no idea of the girl's exact age, but he snatched at the chance of warming the woman's heart.

"How strange! It's like the finger of God," she appealed to the priest, who assented emphatically, seeming to feel that in the person of Prosper he placated the whole Hunnic host.

Prosper produced a couple of gold vases and handed them to the woman, and gave a smaller one to the priest.

"Those are for yourself," he said to the woman. "And some day I'll send something more to make up a dowry for her, do you understand?" He swore to himself that he wouldn't forget; the moment that he had established his fortunes—as he had not the least doubt he would succeed in doing some way or other—he'd send a good sum to start the girl off in a not-so-bad marriage.

He returned to the church (once a temple of Diana) near the western gates where his detachment was stabled, one of his responsibilities was settled, and he had the feeling of a good work effectively done. But when he called the girl from the lane where she was playing hopscotch with the boys, he found difficulty in explaining about the good work. He had a suspicion that she wouldn't take the change kindly, but he did not think for a moment that his statement of it would produce such a tempest. "I won't go, I won't!" she screamed, and clung about his neck; and then, when he persisted, she attacked him with her fists and nails. And then she clung again. And then she ran off, and he had to send the boys in pursuit of her. She was brought back, considerably mauled and still noisy, with her arms pinioned, to be shut in a small room at the back, where she lay on the ground and refused to eat anything. When Prosper took in some soup, she threw it at him and retreated into a corner. "I'm not going to be a girl again."

He had to promise her that it was only for a short while. He would come back again and she could be a boy again and everything would be all right again, only she must behave herself for the moment. She clearly treated these promises with the suspicion they deserved; but against her will she began to hope that there might be some truth in them. So she weakened, and at last burst into tears. And then she was cajoled into eating the second plate of soup that Prosper brought her, and sat silent on his knees, every now and then eyeing him with an extreme suspicion, while he tried to be jovial. And thus he was wholly taken up by the worrying job of calming her down; and it wasn't till he had deposited her with the good mason's wife that he had time to realise a pang of his own at the parting. A very dejected Theodora—her name once more changed—waved good-bye from the doorstep, after extracting yet another promise about the speedy return; and Prosper rode off hastily, thinking. Thank God that's over. And at once he missed the youngster; if it hadn't been for the drag of the other responsibility, the gold, he might have ridden back and whistled to her to jump up behind him.

The March on Rome, which had been confidently predicted, did not come off. Instead, the host withdrew eastward, towards Lake Benacus. The rapidly increasing number of deaths by dysentery and fever was the main reason for the withdrawal. The dubious Imperial Forces under

Aetius, after giving the host time to get well on the way, came following discreetly at the rear.

There was a prolonged halt near Verona. Prosper's detachment was camped beside the Lake; and as he walked by the reedy shore on the evening after the arrival there, he felt a strong dissatisfaction with the way that things were going. For some weeks he hadn't even seen Ellak, who was ill. And now he gazed out on the hills and gently rising ground, the orchards of apples and figs, the villas nestling amid cypresses. A sky of primrose hues, with lucid washes of green and rose, filled the spacious west; and shouts came peaceably over the waters. A breathing hush filled the scene; a fisherman in a small, yellow-sailed boat was getting trout aboard. Northward a mountain suddenly became clearly outlined in delicate air. He felt a wish to move into the farthest distances, to be alone, to break through bonds that were holding him, and at the same time a wish to embrace and enjoy the fullness of the earth, the comfortable ways expressed in the tree-ensconced villas. How long was it since he had slept in a civilised bed?

Suddenly Eutharic was close behind him. For a while he walked on in silence. Then he said, "The Old Man is coming. . . . He that they call the Bishop of Rome. He has great power over the spirits of the dead, he can cause tempests by calling up the dead. . . ."

Prosper had heard a vague rumour that the Bishop of Rome, Leo, was coming to treat with Attila, but he hadn't paid much attention to it. Now it interested him. "Is that sure?"

"They say so." Eutharic shrugged his shoulders. "If I were the King, I should put a drug in his wine and carry him off. A man with such power over the dead would be very valuable. Yes, he is coming."

It was true. He came. Attila, who wanted an excuse for withdrawing with dignity, had encouraged the hint of an embassy; and the Bishop of Rome, not any officials of the craven Emperor, had been appointed. . . . Prosper felt dimly that there was a token in this appointment of some profound change in the basis of the Roman world, at least a premonition. But such general questions could not hold his mind for long. He was seized with a wish to see the Bishop and his retinue; a deep nostalgic hunger held him. Some foraging work prevented him from being present at the Bishop's arrival at the section of the camp, by the banks of the sluggishly winding Mincius, where Attila had his tent. But a few days later, when the embassy, its mission performed, was leaving the camp he got his chance.

He stood amid a group of warriors, who were boasting about the way that Attila had had his will. He had made Bishop Leo agree to the payment by the Empire of a large indemnity, the amount that would have gone with the Princess as her dowry. "That was a good one he thought out," chuckled one of the men, "when he was in the Imperial Palace at Mediolanum. There was a picture showing the Caesars seated

on their throne and the princes of Scythia bowing at their feet. So he got a painter to change the figures. Now the picture shows the Caesars bowing. . . ." Prosper heard the stir and tramp of the coming procession. The carriages were waiting on the other side of the palisade, and the Bishop and his retinue would be passing on foot.

Some soldiers with well-polished armour trying to look stolid, then some boys in uniforms full of gold braid, then a worried-looking man in an old toga who had presumably got into the wrong place, then a knot of tonsured priests, then some more boys with even more gold braid, then a fat, sagging fellow who somehow smelt like a eunuch, then some more priests, and then, under a gilt canopy held by four boys, an oldish man with drooping jowls and an eagle-nose and eyes burning avidly under heavy brows. Without moving his head, that oldish man moved his eyes from left to right in a jerky way, and Prosper had an unpleasant sensation that one of those half-glances had picked him out, asked what he was doing there, threatened him, issued orders, taken his life to pieces and put it together again. . . . It was only when the inquisitorial eyes were past that he noticed the gorgeous vestments, the slow, steady pace, the atmosphere of dignity and assurance. A sense of awe stole over him. So that was the Bishop of Rome, the inheritor of the See of Peter, the Father invested with all the spiritual aura issuing from the manifold graves of the martyrs at Rome—the administrator who came to beard the Hun King while the Emperor slunk away in some corner.

That night, after having made sure of slipping safely through the laxly arranged pickets, Prosper rode south in the trail of the Bishop and his retinue. He had his gold stowed carefully about himself and the saddle; and when he was a few miles beyond the picket radius he began to sing. After a while he thought that he heard the sound of a single horse some way in his rear, and he stopped singing and rode faster. Not that he was particularly frightened of a challenger, but it was simpler to avoid the man, whoever he was. Near dawn he came to a village where he saw a smithy, and he dismounted; for one of his bridle-rings had broken. While he was raising the smith from sleep, a horseman came clattering up. Prosper went out with his hand on his hilt, and saw Eutharic.

Eutharic lifted his hand in welcome, he seemed to think that Prosper's slipping off alone had been merely a friendly test of his wide-awakeness. "So we ride south," he said

IV. BREAKS (A.D. 453)

1. *Events at Lauriacum*

SOLLIVS WAS INTERESTED in the reports submitted by the bailiff of the Velusine Villa. In the first place, he hadn't at all expected his brother to accept the contemptuous offer of the position of sub-bailiff. (He had made the offer partly as a sardonic joke, partly to soothe his conscience, partly to have something to talk about in final denigration of his shiftless brother "Not many men would have done it, after the way he went on. . . ") And, in the second place, he couldn't make out the way his brother was behaving at the Villa. After first learning that the offer had been taken up, he had given orders that his brother was to be supplied with all the wine he wanted, and expected to hear that he was in a continual state of intoxication. That would be the easiest way to finish him off quickly. But though it was true that Basilus was drinking hard at the Villa, he was also working hard, he was actively superintending the work of the fields and plantations, and was checking accounts. From the aggrieved tone of the bailiff, Sollivsus suspected that the checking had got in the way of various minor peculations that the bailiff had meant to carry out; and though he had no objections to that, he was astonished at such a show of energy on the part of Basilus—energy that had the effect of increasing the profit of his greatest foe, Sollivsus.

More, Basilus had become extremely sullen, silent, and suspicious. But he made one exception, a half-wit aged about twenty-five, who had a split palate and who was reputed to be the son of Basilus himself by some slave-woman. In the evenings Basilus sat alone in his room with this half-wit, whose name was Orion, and held long conversations with him. But what these conversations were about, not even the most persistent efforts at eavesdropping had been able to discover. Basilus had chosen an upstairs room at the end of a corridor, a very creaky corridor down which he looked unexpectedly at short intervals, so that the most careful attempts to sneak up to his door had failed. The bailiff, to prove his devotion to his master, reported that he had once got a ladder under the room's window and had crept up it with the utmost caution, only to be met with the face of Basilus poking out of the window as he reached the top. An attempt to explain his presence by a desire to clip the vines by moonlight had no success, Basilus calmly seized the top of the ladder and threw it off, with the result that the bailiff landed in a myrtle-bush and sustained several concussions. Basilus made no further reference to the incident.

Sollius was so disturbed by an inability to explain this behaviour of his brother that he determined to make a surprise visit on the Villa; and promptly arrived in the midst of preparations for cleaning out the pigeon-house, a wooden erection with a vaulted roof and trellised windows, and with smooth walls of marble-cement niched from floor to roof with nesting-holes. Basilus was standing with folded arms, raucously shouting at a lad who was cleaning out some fouled pipes which led to the troughs inside. "Kidney-beans, I tell you!" When Sollius, who had refused to let his arrival be announced, strode up, Basilus stared at him for a moment out of his sunken and dark-rimmed eyes and shouted again, "Kidney-beans!" Then he turned, stared at Sollius again, and shouted, "Kidney-beans!" Then he walked off, still with his arms folded, his fibre-sandals slip-slopping.

For some reason Sollius, a man not easily daunted, was sorry that he had come. He thought: He's going mad, he's mad. But that thought did not make him any the more keen to continue the one-sided conversation. Especially as Basilus, after disappearing in stately fashion round the corner of the barn, suddenly put his head back and shouted with fierce vehemence, "Kidney-beans! I tell you."

Sollius felt that the interview could not be prolonged with any profit; and only a fear that the bailiff would laugh behind his back made him stay any longer at the Villa. He saved his face by going over some accounts in the office and finding mistakes about the last harvest. He rated the bailiff soundly and reduced him to tears and hair-clutching, but even that pleasure was spoiled by the abrupt appearance of Basilus at the door with twitching eyebrows. Basilus gave a loud raucous laugh and withdrew. "He's mad, he's mad," said Sollius when he felt sure that the words wouldn't be overheard. "Keep an eye on him," he said lordly to the bailiff, and departed. By then he was more than sorry that he had ever made the offer to Basilus or that, having made it, he had come on this visit. For the first time since they were small boys and Basilus had pushed him into a muddy ditch, he felt at a loss and decidedly quelled.

He would probably have felt even less pleased with his visit if he had heard Basilus describe it to Orion that night over a flagon of red wine in the chamber that defied eavesdroppers. "I frightened him, friend I frightened him. It's the first step. I made him see I was master here. I insist on the kidney-beans." He flung the door open and peered down the passage. "Ha, I can smell them." He shut the door and poured out more wine. "When the time comes . . . when we've built up the necessary forces, you and I . . ." He winked, and Orion made a stupendous but vain effort to wink back. "I was too careless before. I threw things away. But not a second time. I learned my lesson. Trust nobody. Only you and me, the only friend I've got in the world. . . ah, you're a deep one; don't try and pretend you haven't fathomed it all." Again he

winked, and again Orion wrinkled up his face and rounded his eye and goggled and made stupendous efforts to control his refractory eyelid. "I've got it all clear. . . . Of course it's true he took me by surprise today; I wasn't ready, or it might have fitted in very well, eh? Ha, you deep one. You see the point No, first we must build up our forces." He leaned forward. "I tell you, every grain counts, every grain, every drop of pigeon-dung. . . . Ah, ha, you deep one, you see it all. . . ."

Sollus had recovered from his upset by the time he returned home. After all, there was no disgrace in being put out of countenance by a loon. One couldn't argue or impress or do any of the customary over-awing things with such an adversary. "He's breaking up," he said to his wife, a woman much younger than himself, his third wife. "If he wasn't such a scoundrel, I'd have been sorry to see it." And he sat down to write a long letter to his fifth cousin, the Bishop of Gergovia, explaining how he'd acted in such an exemplary Christian way with regard to his worthless brother and how God was now sending that brother mad as a warning to all thankless relatives; and then handed the letter to his secretary to put in the necessary antithetical balances and periphrastic contortions. Then he went out to deal with a scandal which had occurred during his absence. The slave-women segregated in the weaving manufactory had somehow been visited by a male; for two of them had been found with child.

Sollus was annoyed. He had taken much trouble to make the manufactory difficult of penetration, surrounding it with a high wall and keeping all the windows narrow slits, and seeing that there were only two doors, easily guarded by the crones in charge. Yet here all his paternal care about the women was being brought to naught. What was the use of getting the women well trained at the looms if pregnancies were to disrupt their work? The rule was that once a girl was admitted she was to be kept at the weaving throughout the hours of daylight until she was too old or broken to go on working. He found the guardian crones in despair. They couldn't make out how the pregnancies had occurred, and they couldn't get the two women to confess, no matter what methods of persuasion were used. Sollus thundered at them, and felt better; he returned to the house feeling quite in harmony with the universe once more.

But it seemed that the perverse race of womenfolk were determined to bother him; for that very afternoon he became aware of various obscure and subterranean stirrings in the household, which threatened to break the settled frame of things, the domestic routine which was part of his conception of the will of God. It was difficult to get to the roots of it. There was a matter of dreams, and a matter of entrail omens, and a matter of premonitions and the texts that had turned up both in the *Aeneid* and the Bible when the lot-seeker had closed eyes and put a finger down. The dreamers had been his aged aunt Liceria and one of the tire-

maids, who had both miraculously had the same dream on the same night—a Sunday night, too, and the entrails with the peculiar markings turned up in a fowl that had had its neck wrung on the following Sunday; and his wife was in the nefarious business, on account of a vow made with regard to some complaint of hers, about which he now heard for the first time—and as for the vow, it could obviously be taken in two senses, and why should she be so sure that the Virgin, especially the Virgin as located in a black-stone image over a hundred miles away, could be relied on to put the most irritating interpretation upon it? For, however complex and shadowy were the origins of the affair, the trend of it was beyond doubt a kind of collective inspiration on the part of the female section of the household that all kinds of calamities were going to occur unless there was a pilgrimage undertaken.

Sollius had no objection to other families undertaking pilgrimages, but he disliked the advent of such unsettling affairs in his own domestic sphere. Still under the pressure of the entire female section he felt himself giving in; even the strict Liceria had stood out against him, although she was the one who never tired of talking about the decay in the true womanly spirit of obedience and humility. As a last resort he tried to use the priest whom he had installed in the estate church, and the fellow did his flunkey best, but the urge perturbing the females of Lauriacum was beyond even his damping. Sollius gloomily set about making the arrangements for the journey. There would be his wife; his daughter Veria, Liceria, the orphan niece with the buck teeth, the second-cousin twins with the unfortunate noses, and Pomponia, the other aunt, a greedy woman who never ate a meal, but lived on snacks from dawn to eve; and with them the numerous maids without whom they could not manage to dress, undress, eat, drink, wash, or gossip. The whole affair was totally opposed to Sollius's principles, he believed that women should be kept in their private quarters, except for the walk to church or on such occasions as a marriage, when they overflowed to a certain extent into the rest of the house, the part set aside for male habitation. But it was no use objecting. As in the case of the demented Basilus, Sollius felt himself in the presence of a force that transcended all the rational categories.

At the fastest rate of progress possible for such a collection of females, the pilgrimage would take at least three weeks, if not a month, and Sollius grudged the time. But how could he let his females go wandering about without his personal supervision? He was busy. Political circumstances were suddenly coinciding favourably with long-laid plans. The latest shock of insecurity, with its following debilitation of the already contracting imperial system, had been the last straw in breaking the back of smaller landowners. Unless they were within a municipal area, such landowners had no choice about submitting themselves to the patronage of a magnate, a senatorial; and once such patronage began, with the State's control ebbing daily, the land soon came, for all practical pur-

poses, under the dominion of the magnate. Every week now Sollius saw his estate extending little by little; and he had completed the fortifications of Lauriacum, his centre of control. After each new plea for his patronage he went out to walk round the solid walls that closed in all the south and west of the house and to inspect from a distance the towers and battlements that rose on the front

While he was still meditating about the pilgrimage nuisance, both his sons arrived home. Hesperius had been staying with a friend over to the east, in mountainous country south of the Burgundian area, where the hunting was good; and Paulinus had abruptly sent a courier to announce his return from Lerins. Sollius was glad to see Hesperius, who arrived bursting with health; as for Paulinus, he had ceased to think much about him since he saw the melancholiac streak appear in him. Let the fool go his own way; he was only the second son, and could develop eccentricities to his heart's content. But this time Sollius, after thinking the matter over, was pleased to hear from him. Paulinus was serious and morose; he would make a suitable guardian of the womenfolk on their confounded pilgrimage, and Hesperius could go with him as reinforcement.

In the women's quarter an extraordinary vivacity was reigning; the faces were unusually bright; and the voices were elated, though often pitched in a whisper, as if some unseen force might cast an evil-eye spell on the happiness if it were made too manifest. Aeonias, the wife of Sollius, a woman of about twenty, was the centre of the new activities; and though the austere Liceria set her thin lips and seemed munching some cud of disapproval, she did not go too far, for the spell of the pilgrimage had descended even on her. Young Veria was so excited that she kept knocking things over, to the combined dismay of buck-toothed Aemilia and the big-nosed twin-cousins.

"You'll spoil everything," complained Aemilia. "You'll do something dreadful and then we won't be let go."

"Yes, we will. Yes, we will," cried Veria, clapping her hands fearlessly, the spoilt one of the family, and she purposely pushed Aemilia down the stairs one afternoon when no one was looking.

The more grown-up females were absorbed in the question of clothes; they were tumbling more and more clothes out of chests and cupboards, and finding reasons why they wouldn't serve. Since they would be driving in closed carriages and would be unlikely to have a chance to show themselves to strangers on the way, they must have been animated, it would seem, by a wish to appear resplendent in the eyes of the black-stone Virgin on whom they were to call. Even Liceria insisted on having a new dress made, with special embroideries round the edge, and she plagued the two maids who were making it with changes of mind about the trimming. Aeonias was taking more than enough clothes for a double change each day. And then there was a whole carriage-full of

cosmetics being prepared, and almost as big a heap of medicines, for Liceria refused to budge without a full stock of her standbys, and in this matter she was backed up by Pomponia, who often suffered from indigestion and always came to Liceria for treatment. The twin-cousins were so terrified that something would happen to postpone or destroy the proposed outing that they sat most of the time in a corner, clasping one another with thin, bony arms and giggling convulsively every now and then. Vast were the preparations in the kitchen, where the food for the journey was being got ready: smoked fish and huge sausages were produced from store cupboards and from rafters on which they hung; conserves were accumulated in great wicker baskets, sacks of flour; hams, jars of fruit-juice, millet for the servants, and so on, were heaped in a special store-room. And then all the carriages and gigs in the stables had to be inspected, tested, cleaned, repaired; and the horses for them had to be mustered. "Only quiet horses," insisted Liceria, "I've never forgotten my poor friend Megentira; she was pulled over a precipice without even the time to say her prayers. . . ." And then the twins had dreadful dreams of being torn to pieces by ferocious horses, and everyone was in dismay, uncertain whether there wasn't some omen in the dreams, until one of the tire-maids saved the situation by asserting that horses in dreams signified a marriage or crop-blight; she remembered how her own mother had dreamed about horses, and the only result was a failure of the crops. And then of course Aemilia had to go and get a bad attack of toothache.

Finally, the question of tents, bedding, and washing apparatus was dealt with by the indefatigable Aeonina (normally a placid enough person) and it was possible to advance to the fixing of the date of departure—a matter that was hastened by some more bad dreams on the part of the twins, who were suffering from excitement colic. Everyone was afraid that those untimely dreams of the twins would turn up an omen which would stump even the resourceful tire-maid. Paulinus had arrived back from his long stay in the south looking leaner and browner, and he and Hesperius had been put in charge of the party. The preparations had taken so long and had raised so many problems that nobody could believe the time for starting off had really come. It was with the feeling of some momentous change, some adventure into a new sphere, that they all at last climbed into the carriages and began discovering how many important things had been forgotten. Aemilia had toothache, and Aeonina strong-mindedly dosed her with some syrupy wine that put her tipsily to sleep; and then the twins had another attack of colic. And Pomponia, bilious with all the cakes she had eaten, fainted. And then, as the order to start was being given, Liceria declared that a special ex-voto tablet had been left behind. But it couldn't be found on the shelf where she said it was; and a large package, full of breakables, had to be undone before the tablet turned up, at the very bottom—exactly where

it ought to have been. And then one of the twins dropped her small rocking-horse out of the carriage-window, and a slave trod on it and broke one of its legs, so the expedition started off with the bad-omen of wails, which all the women tried to ignore, talking brightly about the weather.

The first night was an easy matter; for it overtook them while they were still within the domain of Sollius. One of the villas was all ready to receive them. But thereafter they would have to fall back on the expedition's own resources, except for two nights when they would be able to put up at the houses of friends on the road. Their route did not lie on one of the imperial roads dotted with elaborate post-stations. Inns were out of the question. They were either small shops kept on the highway by the magnate whose estate bordered on that part, for the purpose of selling his wines to travellers, or village taverns dirty and lacking in all accommodation. And the progress was slow—so many hours were taken up in starting in the morning and in settling down in the evening, and the carriages had to set their pace to that of the lumbering baggage-vehicles. Most of the nights had to be spent in tents; and not one of them passed without some disaster which seemed heavy enough to throw the whole expedition into irremediable confusion and necessitate an abandonment of the goal. Only the astonishing energy and determination which Aeonina displayed weathered these setbacks, the sicknesses, the frantic quarrels, the accidents. Whereas the baggage always revealed a huge supply of things that would obviously not be wanted on the journey, the most elementary needs had somehow been forgotten, or the required articles had been mislaid by some mistake in one of the numerous re-packings. Much time was taken up at each stage by the construction of baths. Pits were dug—if possible near to a spring or stream—and into them were thrown heaps of red-hot stones, the pits were then covered with arched roofs of wattled hazel, and over the roofs were laid coverings of Cilician goathair to keep the steam in. The ladies had vapour-baths in these contraptions, often enjoying them so much that they chatted away for hours inside them, though of course the twins had an accident, falling through on to some of the hot stones and getting blisters on their bottoms. The meals too, prepared at hastily-made stone fireplaces in the open, were matters that could not be hurried; and after lunch the ladies liked a siesta, in their carriages, or under trees with an awning fixed to the boughs. Altogether it looked as if the trip would take about two months. The ladies were all in a chronic state of excitement, they seemed to hope the journey would go on for ever.

Paulinus and Hesperius, however, were worse than bored. They could not refuse the task of guarding the party, which had been laid on them as a command by their father; and at first they did their best to speed up the movement, but with such small success, generally giving orders which

had to be countermanded after screams and tears from the flustered female section, that they ended by taking as little notice as possible of what was going on. They rode ahead, bathing in streams instead of using the vapour-baths, and keeping aloof from the excitement. Paulinus was more quiet than ever, but Hesperius was not a person given to interest in the moods of others. He had long past accepted the fact that his brother was touchy and pensive; but even he could not help noticing that there seemed an extra-intensity about the pensiveness this time and that for some reason Paulinus refused to eat meat. He tried to draw him out about his trip to the south, but learned nothing.

When they were about thirty miles from the shrine, a weather change showed itself. The morning was hot and serene, but little dark clouds peeped over the southern hills and grumbled with thunder and jerked faint spikes of lightning. The ladies were in high consternation, but as the clouds merely kept up their distant threat and the sky overhead stayed hot and serene, the fears passed. Reaching a pleasant glade with brightly rustling stream, Aeonina decided to halt there, and, scornful of the thunder-grumble that sounded as far off as ever, gave orders for bath-pits to be dug. Then, as the ladies were being steamed clean and dinner was cooking, the dark clouds were discovered to be coming up at incredible speed. A wind swept souging down the glade, tossing the trees; and Hesperius, who had made a protest against the proceedings and then retired to doze on his back in a hillside nook, ran down to the camping-place. The setting up of the tents had been postponed till after the urgent matters of baths and food. The slaves had got only two tents half-pitched, and in panic at the sudden storm-advent they left the work and most of them dashed for shelter under some oaks.

Hesperius ran into the larger of the tents and started collecting a number of rich wraps that had been taken out of a chest; the wind was already turning them over and threatening to blow them away. As he stuffed them back inside the chest, somebody blundered into the tent. "Here, tie those ropes down!" he shouted, and dived for a piece of flapping tent. He collided with the person at his side, who threw bare warm arms round him and murmured his name. "Aeonina," he said, annoyed, recognising his stepmother. "Get off to one of the carriages." The light dressing-gown of blue silk, hastily drawn about her, slipped from her shoulders, which looked very plump and rosy; she exhaled a sweet warmth of the bath, which suddenly invaded his senses and made him unable to think. And she too was dazed, scared by the thunderclaps that were now bursting overhead and the exhausting effect of the bath-heat. Rain was slashing at the canvas, which waved and flapped noisily.

He recovered himself. "Go to one of the carriages!" But she still did not seem to hear him. She was shivering. He pulled the light wrap up over her rosy shining shoulders. Then he forced her to let go and pressed her down on to the chest. He had a view of her flushed face with soft

dishevelled hair flying about it and with large eyes of fear, dark blue and strangely intent, then he turned to wrestle with the ropes, yelling to the runaway slaves. One of them, who had been cowering near under a crate, came up and began helping him; and in a few moments, the thunder pausing and the rain falling more quietly, half a dozen others came running up. "I told you so," he said angrily to Aeonina, who was now seated disconsolately on the chest, with her feet drawn up under her bath-robe. But as soon as he was outside the tent, in the gentle rain, he was sorry that he had spoken angrily; he couldn't remember at all why he had been angry, and a slow smile crept over his face, till he pressed it away with his fingers, as if it had no right to be there.

At the hill-shrine there was an ancient spring, which had the reputation of curing female complaints and ensuring fertility, it was also used for the ducking of epileptics. The chapel which had received the votive offerings of sick pagans now received the votive offerings of sick Christians; every inch of the walls was hung with miniature models of legs, arms, breasts, wombs, genitals, noses, etc. But the stone which previously had represented a local manifestation of the Mother Virgin now represented a local manifestation of the Virgin Mother. The party from Lauriacum found several other pilgrims assembled on the spot, but coming merely from one or other of the near townships, and they consequently took on themselves a much greater virtue of piety. They expressed their sense of difference by exclamations of extreme humility and an exclusive refusal to notice the lesser pilgrims at all.

Hesperius could not forget the episode of the rain-storm. Aeonina, his stepmother, with whom he had previously exchanged scarcely any words except on a few formal occasions, had become a suddenly vivid person with a soft, warm body indelibly printed on his memory, he had seen very little of her during the five years of her marriage to his father. He was sure that she was now aware of him in a new way. He did his best to keep insinuating himself into her notice, rode near her carriage, lingered with the ladies at the meals served on a low, portable table. Once, finding that there was no one else near enough to hear his words, he said, "I'm sorry I spoke angrily. . ."

"When?" Her plump, heavily-rouged face showed surprise; the dark line lengthening her eyes was so ill-suited to her charmingly simple face that it gave her words an effect of childish duplicity.

"In the tent. . . ." He flushed. "In the storm."

"Were you angry?" This time it was she that flushed. "I thought . . ."

But then Licinia came hobbling up, and nothing further could be said. More than ever he felt curious, intrigued, stirred to seek for closer contacts. And he became cautious. One slip and Licinia would pounce. The evening of the arrival at the shrine left him feeling shaken and anxious to speak alone with Aeonina. The journey had reached its goal; and though

there was all the way back yet, he felt the pressure of time. But he found no chance of even a single word. The expedition had arrived at its end none too soon. Pomponia's biliousness was getting alarming, the twins had developed throat trouble; Aemilia had become naughty—in exactly what way Hesperius did not know, as the ladies talked about it behind their shocked hands. Veria, too, had been ill; she had boils. Only Aeonia was unaffected, she looked healthier than ever. The servants had been upset by the general disorder; there had been love-making and brawling, also some of them had fallen ill . . . Altogether, apart from the wish to be near Aeonia, Hesperius had reason enough to be glad they had no farther to go, to feel ill at ease and ridiculously cornered.

Paulinus had become increasingly morose, and Hesperius dropped all ideas of confiding in him. He knew, in any case, that his old ascendancy over Paulinus had been broken by the episode of the rape at the Festival of St Regina; and he felt only an uncurious scorn for his brother's moody vagaries. From a distance, a little up the hillside, he watched the women taking offerings into the chapel, a priest was hovering about them, lifting his hands and giving instructions. Nearby straggled broom and ragged bits of knapweed, with the pines beginning darkly about a hundred yards farther up. The air was hushed; the earth was yielding up aromatic scents after the hot day, veil after veil faded in the clear sky, till the watcher had the sensation of opening spiritual vistas and forgot to distinguish sky from mind. He bent down and tore up a handful of quaking-grass. He thought: I don't care.

The camp-fires were already alight, as he came down the track he heard the jabber of the slaves, and felt hungry. He passed Paulinus lying outstretched among the broom, and gave a wry smile. When he neared the chapel, the priest came out and bowed low, and after many expostulations of respect said that he felt it his duty to mention the report of brigand activity in the neighbourhood. Hesperius nodded and passed on. Every night he set men to watch against a possible attack by the *Bagaudae*; and he decided now to take extra precautions. When he had been climbing up towards the pines he thought he had noticed a man lurking in some bushes on the slopes opposite. A shadow, a goatherd, a *Bagauda*? Best not to take risks. But he was annoyed to find that the talkative priest had chatted to the womenfolk about his fears, and they were all quavering at the meal, terrified of the coming night. "But surely on a pilgrimage we can rely on divine aid," moaned Pomponia, who, despite her pains, had eaten a large supper of hard-boiled eggs, ham, and rather squashed honey-cakes; now with a spoon she was digging into another egg and already looking greenish. Aemilia had eaten honey-cakes too, and developed toothache, and so Aeonia dosed her with cloudy white wine made by boiling ordinary wine down till only a heady residuum remained. "You'll turn her into a drunkard," protested Liceria, who suspected that Aemilia had developed a taste for the stuff

and feigned toothache to get some more of it. "Look at her now." And certainly Aemilia's drowsily blissful face didn't suggest toothache. But the twins fell off their wobbly seat and provided another theme for conversation. Liceria remembered that they hadn't done their evening gargle. And then one of them couldn't find her favourite doll; and lamentations arose.

Hesperius stood at his tent door, expanding his chest and deciding to go inside in another moment. He was looking towards the tent where Aconia was sleeping—with Liceria. He could see only a dim whitish blur in the starlight. Suddenly there was an owl-hoot and then a series of loud crashes, as if the hills had started to slide down on the camp. His first thought was to run over to the picket he had set near the shrine, but then he remembered Aconia. His desire to speak with her, to touch her, was stronger than his sense of danger. Doubtless the Bagaudae had surrounded the camp and were rolling boulders down the slopes to cause panic before they attacked.

Snatching up his sword, which he had put ready inside the tent door, he ran over to the tents of the women, shouting, "Into the chapel!" He had already told them all to hurry inside the chapel at the first sign of trouble; there were forces enough to defend the chapel, even if the baggage had to be abandoned to looters. Already there was stir in the tents, someone loomed up before him and screamed. "Into the chapel!" he shouted. A shrouded lantern flashed its light on, and he saw two slaves. "Carry Julia Liceria to the chapel!" he bade them, pointing to the tent. Another series of booming crashes sounded: coming down from near the pinewood, he thought. He hustled the nearer slave towards the tent. They dived in, and a few moments later emerged with Liceria in their arms. "All into the chapel!" he shouted, amid a scurry of half-clad women and wailing small girls and demoralised slaves. If those Bagaudae attack at once, we're done for. The thought calmed him, made him concentrate even more sharply on his purpose.

He passed into the tent. It was surprisingly warm, scented; he could see nothing. And then he heard the soft movement, and at once had his arms round Aconia. "Don't fear," he said in a low clear voice. "I'll find a horse and we'll ride off. . . ." She murmured something, and he kissed her on the throat, then her hands were behind his head and she was drawing herself up, warm-breasted, into his embrace. He laughed, a short high laugh, and caught her up in his arms and carried her out. Outside, in the starlight, he stood unmoving for a moment, trying to hear what was happening on the other side of the hubbub of scurrying slaves. The woman was quiescent in his arms, her face nestled up against his throat.

The crashes had ceased; he strained for the sound of slithering feet. The noise in the camp was dying down; most of the slaves had now withdrawn into the chapel or run off into the undergrowth. Would he

ride off as he had at first intended? or would he join the others in the chapel? He decided, after all, to take the second course. "You're mine, do you hear me?" She pressed her face closer into his throat, and he knew that she had heard and had accepted his claim. His tension relaxed. Carefully but swiftly he strode towards the chapel. As he neared the steps he gently lowered Aeonie to her feet. "Can you stand?" How still everything had become, there was only the neighing and stamping of frightened horses down by the willow-clump and a shout from one of the guards along the road. He made out the figure of a slave on the chapel steps. "Here, take your mistress in."

He turned and whistled. An answering whistle came from about two hundred yards down the road. The outer picket was coming in. He walked quietly down to meet them. "Seen or heard any movements besides the rocks?" No, they had seen or heard nothing. He led them up to the chapel and gathered in something like martial order those of the slaves who had arms. Paulinus came up to him out of the shadow. "You . . . I shan't fight! Do you hear? I shan't fight . . . no matter what happens." Hesperius shrugged his shoulders and made no reply. Paulinus went back to the shadow.

The women had a bad night, weeping on the cold chapel floor and praying to the black stone to be forgiven for their sins, but nothing else happened. Hesperius stayed awake with no difficulty, savouring a keen rapture which he could not focus except in the words. "You're mine, do you hear me?" He had no plans, only a memory of the pressure of her face against his throat, that, and a cool resolve to be careful, sure, undiscovered—his resolve was like an oath to the woman. In the morning they found the boulders lying along the roadway and by the stream, and three of the horses missing. Either the Bagaudeae had lost their nerve at the last moment, or they had been small in numbers and had meant only to give the pilgrims a scare, or they had made a diversion to cover the horse-stealing.

2. Progress of Audax

He could have gone to stay at the Villa, as Paulinus had suggested; or he could have gone to stay, at least for a while, with Pastor till he thought things out. But it was precisely not to think things out that he most wanted. He went to Marusius, because he felt that there were no pretences in his relationship with him. With Pastor he would have the feeling that at any moment he would be upbraided as a cheat, an intruder, a passer of false spiritual coin; with Marusius that could not happen. If Marusius ultimately turned him out, he would not feel disgraced; it would merely be the end of a compact in which no lies had been told. And so, to escape from shame, he threw himself into the depths of shame; the only way in which he could preserve self-respect was by stripping himself of self-respect. To say: Now there is no lie, now

I shame the world. That alone seemed the way of keeping intact his conscience for the truth.

"I am penniless, and I'd like to sponge on you "

Marusius considered the proposition, turning round and round the wine-glass in his hand. "I shall engage you as my tutor in philosophy. . . You shall prove to me the immortality of the soul."

"Of course. I believe because it is impossible. You know the tag. Augustine remarks that he could not credit the Gospel without the authority of the Church compelling him to believe We comprehend only by opposites Our experience of evil is our desire for good . . . The Acts of the Apostles record the Christian life as one of the community of goods. Tertullian, Justin Martyr, the Clementines and the Shepherd of Hermas, to quote no further authorities, utter the same lesson and command. . . . But we, latter-day Christians, are wiser We have elevated greed to the supreme pinnacle, so that we may yearn all the more finely and austere for unity How much more subtle, philosophic, and so on." Marusius yawned. "I shall have to make a bishop of you, I can see." He glanced at the water-clock, which had its indicator pointing at the line graved on the cylinder *five o'clock* "Otherwise you'll be dangerous. . . Shall we have some music? No, go and tell Glaucias to buy the roses from the florist's shop unless the courier comes before the hour's end with the fresh supply from the villa "

Audax acted as a kind of secretary, running about on errands and arranging things, and at entertainments he was expected to amuse the company. Marusius would sometimes threaten him, "I don't think you were *very* funny today, do you? You've got such good taste that I always ask your opinion. . ." Audax lived amid minor squabbles with the other members of the household who sought the master's favour—the secretary proper, a curly-headed page-boy, the beastly tumbler, a reader, and the like. There was also a pompous organist who had recently been hired, to play the hydraulic organ that Marusius was installing

In his spare time Audax wandered about the city, keeping away, however, from the area in which stood Zonaras's house It was in these wanderings that he gained the only real sense of companionship left to him; a vague sense fluttering at moments into a kind of uncertain ecstasy, then drifting out into depression. It was not so much the individuals; rather it was the city as a whole, a collective organism of men and women working and loving, contriving and hating, sending forth into the future the dim tentacles of their hopes and fears—a shadowy form of union and disunion, a form which seemed to have a purpose transcending any of the schemes or intentions of the individuals composing it. And this form was reflected in his mind as something pathetic and ceaselessly endangered, thwarting the individuals and yet giving them all that was most precious in their lives, weak and terrible as the cry of a newly-born child and yet swelling into a tumultuous music. Human life. And then this shadowy

reflection, his final effort to create an abstraction of purpose, went out in a deathly mustiness, a void. The end of all things.

Then he hastened back to the house, longing for the hour of bed; for then the slave-girl Namia, with her dark glossy head and dim eyes, would come to him. And he would pour out his misery, knowing that his words had no meaning for her "A moment of imbecile joy, and then the chill, the ache. Humanity is trapped in a vicious circle. Effort swings in a pendulum, backwards and forwards, nothing gained. Except the deepening consciousness of death. The world is evil; all efforts to change the world merely change the innocent heart, the foundations are rotten. Only the consciousness of death is sure, is clear, is clean. . . ." And she would listen, no longer afraid of him, for she knew that he would not beat her; but she was afraid of his pouring words, which she could not understand—afraid that they would cast a spell over her, afraid that they were the expression of a spell that someone had cast over him with a leaden tablet inscribed with the dread names and thrust into a tomb. And then he would weep and embrace her, and she would forget to fear even those dark words.

The water-organ was being constructed in the country-house, not far up the left bank of the Rhone. It had twenty-six pipes of bronze and reed; keys adapted with levers and with perforated sliders to open and shut the mouths of the pipes, and a continuity of wind guaranteed by the water-pressure. Audax knew every detail of it, for he was expected to expatiate about it before visitors while Marusius pretended to make fun of it.

He was thoroughly sick of the organ by the time that the party was given to celebrate its completion. Eratosthenes, the pompous musician, was the centre of laudation; everyone declared that they had never seen fingers moving so quickly and that his imitation of a storm was terrifyingly realistic. Audax disliked the fellow, but had to pretend to admire, it was his job to set the flattery-pace in order to give Marusius the chance of posing as a belittler of glories about which he was in fact extremely proud and jealous. "Give us the battle-piece," he begged, while Eratosthenes sat lumpishly basking in the general admiration. "Even on the portable organ where there's only a pedal to blow the bellows, you know you positively scared us out of our wits with that." Marusius tittered, but Audax knew that he was watching carefully to see that his pace-setter conveyed a proper sense of the organ's virtues. "Come on, now. I happen to have been in a real battle, but I assure you it was child's play compared to the effect you produce." But Eratosthenes, with the wilfulness of genius, insisted on rendering a spring-day before he would think about his battle-piece.

Then Audax, at the suggestion of Marusius, undertook the guidance of some of the guests over the baths. "You see how handy it is to have that

wooded slope hanging right over the spot. It's a fact, when the timber's cut, the piles of logs slide down almost of their own weight and end up against the very mouth of the bath-furnace." He glanced at Marusius out of the corner of his eye and saw that his showmanship was being approved. "See, here's the hot bath, same in size as the adjoining *unguentarium*, except that it has an apse with a semi-circular basin. Listen to the sob that the hot water makes in the lead pipes. You'd think it was a widows' holiday. And look at the lighting. Why, it's more than daylight. It's a fact, some of the more modest persons who've bathed here have blushed because they seemed more than naked. And now we come to the *frigidarium*; you'll admit it can challenge comparison with those in most public baths. Notice how the spaces between the converging ridges of the pyramidal roof are covered with imbricated tiles. The architect had a good idea when he inserted those two opposite windows about the junction of walls and dome, so that when you look up, you can see the fine coffering displayed as well as it deserves. The marble of that pillar is from Proconnesos. Notice, by the way, the landscape in that fresco, the one with Ethiopic crags—the purple precipices are stained with real murex. The annex on the eastern side of the hall has a capacity of twenty thousand *modi*. . . . And now look at the supports of the three arches leading into the hot room, they're not piers, but columns, which your experienced architect justly calls the glory of buildings. Don't rush into the *piscina*. The stream is lured down from the hill by channels round the outside of the swimming-basin, and it issues through six pipes ending in lion-heads—if you enter in a hurry, they're so realistic you think you've wandered into a real lion's den. . . ."

It was dry work. After he finished with the baths, he dodged off to gulp some wine with the butler, a cheery Syrian, with whom he was on good terms. They jocularly discussed possibilities of drowning Eratos-thenes in his own water-pressure, and Audax felt less oppressed. He drank more wine, and felt capable of meeting the company again. Dusk was coming on, and some of the dicers were playing under lamps in the garden. One of them, a rich and rowdy youth named Filagrius, had a pouchful of gold coins. Audax watched him sprawling on some cushions. About a week ago, after dicing had gone on in that spot, he had found three gold pieces beneath one of the cushions; and the thought of those coins, now secreted in the underframe of his bed, stirred him with a mixture of apprehension and covetousness. Perhaps Filagrius, who was rapidly getting very drunk, would spill some of his gold unnoticed, Audax longed to add to his store.

Somebody called from the room over on the left, and the dicers re-plied. Three of them rose up, stretching, and went off into the brightly-lighted room.

Filagrius rose too, but blundered off into the darker part of the garden. "I'll be with you . . . moment . . ." he called thickly.

Audax waited awhile and then strolled over in the same direction. Filagrius had been overcome with the wine-fumes, he lay breathing stertorously on the grass. Audax stared at him till he could distinguish the details in the dim light. There lay the pouch, about a foot away from Filagrius's open hand; its mouth was temptingly open; Audax even thought he could see the gleam of the gold. He bent down and put his hand into the pouch, but did not dare at first to catch hold of the coins. The drunken man gave no signs of awareness. Audax closed his hand about a number of coins and drew them out; he stuffed them one by one into his shoes. Then he bent again.

But this time, as his hand was closing about another lot of coins in the pouch, the drunken man suddenly revived, reached out and grasped his wrist. "What's this?" He growled and spat. "I thought I heard something. . . . I was watching you. . . . Stealing, eh?"

Audax tried to pull his hand away, but Filagrius hung on and almost dragged Audax down over on top of him.

"Thief, eh? Can't have that. Hey!"

A couple of slaves answered his shout, one of them with a lamp. Audax got his hand free, and dodged off into the bushes.

"Dirty thief!" Filagrius yelled. "I saw your face, dirty thief! Where's the host?" He rose up, supported by the slaves, and stumbled towards the house, cursing loudly.

Audax, leant with quaking stomach against the bough of a cypress, heard the noise of voices. What was he to do? He couldn't go back and face the disgrace; besides, he'd be turned out now. There was nothing to do except get away as quickly as possible. He pulled himself together and slipped down a gravel-path to a side entrance, he wasn't going to leave without those three gold pieces hidden in his bedstead. He knew the house well, and had no difficulty in getting unnoted up the small stairway at the end of the wing, where only a weak one-wick pottery-lamp was alight, set in a niche. Two slaves who were fetching some clothes out of the big screwpress took no notice of him. In his room he soon had the three gold pieces out. What else was there to take? He found a leathern bag which had been used for carrying book-rolls, and put into it the spare clothes which he had accumulated as gifts from Marusius; then he put the three gold pieces inside an old roll-case and added the other gold pieces which he had stuffed into his shoes, and which were hurting his feet. The roll-case he stowed away at the bottom of the bag. For a moment he thought of running off with a fine bronze statuette of a dancer that he had had put in the room, but it belonged to Marusius, and he feared Marusius's malice; he didn't want to give him any legal basis for revenge. He knocked over a small box of tooth-powder, and in trying to retrieve it he sent a double inkstand of gilt bronze banging to the floor. His nerve failed him and he almost wept; but nobody came.

He tiptoed down the passage. He would have to walk to Lugdunum,

about twenty miles ; but the night was warm and serene, and, once he had left the estate, his route would be along the highway. As he emerged into the night air, he felt a wrench of relief, almost as if he had staged the whole episode in order to belong once more to himself.

3. *Prosper Finds a New Master*

At about noon on the day after his flight Prosper and Eutharic sighted the scouts of the imperial army. The scouts discreetly withdrew, in case the two warriors might be the van of the Hunnic host. But a few hours later, behind a clump of poplars, there emerged a village where a couple of cohorts were stationed. To the officer in charge Prosper briefly explained that he had been captured on the Mauriac Plains and had taken the chance to escape. After being passed on by various officers and officials, he managed to get himself and Eutharic enlisted in the army. In fact they took part in some of the final reconnoitres on the rear of Attila's retiring host. Then, by using a small portion of his gold, he managed to get himself and Eutharic released from active service and sent with minor despatches to Rome.

The despatches referred to some matters of supply and reserves, and would bring him into contact only with a few lesser officials of the bureaucracy, but he had his own ideas about profitable outlay of gold, and meant to use the contacts as stepping-stones to higher things. He arrived in Rome about the time of the New Year, when various ceremonies of thanksgiving for the retirement of the Huns were being carried out. For a few days he gaped almost as much as Eutharic at the endless magnificence of great buildings and monuments, and at the splendid clothes of the higher clergy and officials at the ceremonies ; but then he resolutely recovered his sense of the prior importance of his own affairs. If he was thenceforth conscious of the grandeurs about him, he recognised those grandeurs as the proper background for the making of the fortunes of a worthy and determined, but at present obscurely situated, young provincial. His sense of that vast and noble background merely spurred him on in his need to do something about himself. Here was the world which he had to conquer, he was thankful to Fate for the ways, however devious, which had brought him from lesser milieus to the one which was alone worth the full exertion of his faculties.

He used up some more of his gold on fitting himself out as well as was consonant with his rôle of soldier-of-fortune, discarding all his old accoutrements and clothes, after first carefully scrutinising the fashions of the metropolis. Meanwhile he stretched out his business in the departments that dealt with imperial factories and arsenals, and became well known (and well liked as a generous fellow) among the officials of the relevant section under the *Magister Officiorum*. He managed to hobnob also with the officials of other departments, such as those who controlled,

in the offices of the *Quaestor Sacri Palatii*, the Lesser Register of civil and military dignitaries, and even went on to become acquainted with others attached to the great Imperial Council, who dealt with the Larger Register. He managed to pick up much general information about the inner workings of the bureaucracy; also many details about the methods and habits of the Dux, Aetius.

It was therefore not altogether by chance that, one afternoon as Aetius was coming down the stairs from a meeting of the Council, a handsome and extremely well-accounted young soldier should have found his business lead him at that moment to the foot of the same stairs. The young soldier sank on to one knee in a very graceful way; and Aetius, who prided himself on his memory for faces, thought there was something familiar about the handsome face which regarded him with such becoming reverence. The young soldier rose and approached the Dux, begged forgiveness for the liberty that he was taking, and prayed to be allowed to say a few words. Aetius happened to be in a specially good mood—the young petitioner had made sure of that before he stood at the foot of the stairs; he knew exactly what stage had been reached by Aetius's plans for marrying his son to one of the Emperor's daughters. Aetius nodded, and signed to the young man to follow him into his apartments.

The young man introduced himself, mentioned that he had been presented to Aetius at Lugdunum at the outset of the campaign in Gaul against the Huns. He took the risk, and cited as his introducers the most important of the magnates whom he recalled as having been present that day in the salon of Avitus. Aetius was pleased that his memory for faces hadn't been at fault. After the petitioner had given an account, more or less true, but somewhat edited, of his capture by the Huns, Aetius felt even more friendly. He recalled his own long years of residence when a youth as a hostage among the Huns—especially as the petitioner happened to drop in his account a number of casual references to the high esteem with which Aetius was remembered by the older Hun warriors and nobles. Finally the petitioner explained how his one thought had been to escape and offer his services to the great general Aetius, and how he had been enabled at last to slip away. Aetius looked at the excellent clothes and accoutrements of the young man, and rubbed his chin. And so Prosper became a member of the select corps who constituted the bodyguard of Aetius.

4 *More Events at Lauriacum*

The pilgrimage thoroughly upset the plans of Paulinus. He had found himself becoming part of the monastic life at Lerins, and yet not wholly absorbed. For long it had been sufficient to feel his spiritual life maturing; but a time had come when he had had to ask. And now what use do I make of this new self? Action of some kind had become necessary.

Was he going to return into the secular world and use his "regeneration" for the best purposes there? Or was he to enter the Church, either as a priest or a monk? He had been unable to solve the problem; and had decided, after some discussion with the Father of the community and with Brother Johannes, to return home for a visit and then to come to a conclusion. The impact of the old life would settle things, would make him see once for all what course he was to take, would draw him in again or definitely propel him out into the Church.

But that was not what had happened; the choice was still as perplexed as ever. He had not come back to confront the old routine, as he had expected. Instead he had been pushed off into the pilgrimage, which, with its silly difficulties and the endless chatter of the womenfolk, had seemed to him a parody of pious impulse. He had been unable to get himself and his problem into perspective against the old environment at all. And then a new misery had appeared. Against his will he had felt himself forced to recognise the existence of something guilty and secret between his brother and Aeonina, his stepmother. He knew Hesperius so well; he had several times seen him looking at Aeonina in a way which he could scarcely have misinterpreted. And then, once having had his suspicions aroused, he had been sure that Aeonina was not only aware of Hesperius's emotion, but was encouraging and returning it. He became frightened that the watchful Liceria would notice something; he found himself, to his horror, acting as a kind of shield of the two creatures for whom he felt not the least sympathy, doing his best to take up Liceria's attention when Hesperius was about. Once, when he heard Aeonina speak with especial tenderness in some casual remark to Hesperius, he groaned aloud without intending it, and thus distracted Liceria, who at once seized the opportunity of doctoring him for the heart-pains which he had to allege. Again and again he tried to bring himself to challenge Hesperius, to have the matter out with him; but strangely, as soon as he neared the moment of speaking, he found all his conviction gone; he could not believe that he had correctly judged Hesperius's emotions. The charge seemed too monstrous, and he recoiled into horror of himself, accusing his mind of having fabricated the whole business out of its own foulness. Till again he intercepted that look in Hesperius's eyes which he knew so well, and which he felt as a reflection of his own evil lusts, and when at once he was sure again, he began trying to force himself to speak and to bring Hesperius to a sense of his behaviour.

This problem had become so engrossing that it was only in fits and starts, without any real urgency, he recalled the reason for his return to Lauriacum. After the pilgrimage was ended, he no longer had such direct means of assessing the guilty emotion linking Hesperius and Aeonina. For now the womenfolk once more disappeared into their quarters and only rarely was Aeonina brought into contact with her stepsons. But Paulinus still saw the crafty indrawn smile curling about the lips of his

brother, and felt sure that the matter had not ended with the pilgrimage. He knew that smile, and he knew how uncontrollable Hesperius was when he had set his heart on some woman. A feeling of imminent doom haunted him. At any moment the revelation of inexpiable sin was going to brand the family. In his broodings the problem became more and more acute, driving him into an impotent agony as he tried to devise means of arousing Hesperius to a sense of his actions and of averting the evil from the house.

He was also unhappy, though in an altogether lesser way, about the marriage which his father had now announced as fixed for the near future between Veria and a neighbouring magnate who had been widowed a few months. The magnate was a man aged about fifty, reputed to have treated his dead wife with extreme harshness, but Paulinus knew that it would be no use to appeal to his father. Sollius was concerned only by the fact that the man had a large estate bordering his own on the north-east. A most eligible husband for the girl, in his eyes, since there were no direct heirs—the two sons by the first marriage having both died a few years ago. Veria would have the chance of producing the heir and linking the estate closely with that of her father's family.

Paulinus had a strong affection for Veria, though he had seen little of her for some years, he recalled her as a quick-witted young girl with a love for climbing trees, who had hidden cakes for him on days when he had been in disgrace, and who had always run to hide with him in the games of childhood. He felt that he must say something to her about the marriage, and after watching for some days, managed to find her alone in the shrubbery that lay on the right of the women's garden-close.

"Veria," he said, and took her hand. "I want to speak seriously to you. . . . I've been thinking about the news of your betrothal."

She nodded and pressed his hand and gave a little jump as a butterfly sprang up from some flowering weeds nearby

"O, look at its lovely colours!"

"Veria, it's serious. Have you thought the matter out?" He tried to draw her round so that she would look at him, but she resisted, pressing his hand again. "Have you assented? I mean, assented with the whole of you? Do you realise what it means? That old man . . . he was cruel to his wife and his sons . . ."

"Don't, please." She pulled her hand away and said primly, "Father wouldn't like to hear what you're saying. He'd be angry."

"But do you really want to marry him?"

"Father says I'm to marry him."

He saw her amazed blue eyes, she couldn't understand. And now he, too, didn't understand. What choice did the girl have? "Don't do it," he begged. "Take the veil and become a bride of Christ." He hadn't had any idea of making such a suggestion, he had merely thought of a tender and intimate conversation. . . . But now that the suggestion

had been made, he felt an intense desire that it should be carried out. It seemed that if Veria made such a break from the family, his own choice would be settled simultaneously, happily. "You will be glad if you do. . . . You can't know how foul the world is. . . . O, if I could only tell you, you'd bless me, you wouldn't hesitate for a moment. . . ."

He had caught her hand again and was pressing it hard. She tugged in vain. "Let me go. You're hurting me." Her face seemed fatter, less pure and sweet, than he had remembered; even since the pilgrimage she had become unpleasantly mature; the bustle about the marriage had given her a touch of wilfulness, of self-importance. He studied her face as if for his own lost innocence; and could find no words to utter the fullness of his heart. "Let me go. . . . I'll tell father. . . ." She got away from him and ran as fast as she could down the pathway.

The marriage was celebrated at Lauriacum, with the old pagan shouts of Talassio and the blessings of a bevy of sleek Christian priests. Paulinus kept in the background, feeling a lassitude which was broken only by twinges when he saw that crafty smile playing about the lips of Hesperius. He tried to argue himself out of his obsession. After all, he had no proof. Perhaps it was an exhalation from the mud of evil in his own soul, a temptation sent by Satan or one of the lesser devils to draw him aside from the purpose on which he had returned to Lauriacum. But such arguments had no power to break the spell. Some way or other he must learn the truth, and he now knew that he would not be able to learn it by speaking to Hesperius. It was impossible to speak of such things.

Sollius was more than ever wrapped up in the problems of his expanding estate and patronage. In these stormy days to consolidate control of the land it was necessary to wield effective power, the magnate who could not protect the cultivators who were falling under his rule would soon lose them to someone with more forces at his disposal. Outside the *municipia* the State was practically powerless, and had to rely on the goodwill of the magnates to get in taxes. Sollius was putting pressure on the Governor for a number of minor remissions and privileges, and had just shown his hand by ordering the peasants to the north-west of his borders, who were drifting under his patronage, to beat up three tax-collectors. And now important news had come through. A palace conspiracy at Tolosa. King Thorismud had been murdered by his brothers. Did that foreshadow an irruption of the Visigoths into Auvergne? Sollius, who with several other magnates kept in close touch with the Court at Tolosa, was trying to turn the Visigothic attention south to Spain or north across the Loire against the Franks. The new King, Theodoric, had declared the most pacific intentions towards the Roman Government; but that might mean anything.

Aeonia had her bedroom on the upper storey, near the end of the wing given up to the women; her bedroom window overlooked the hedge

between the women's garden and the shrubbery. Paulinus knew that Hesperius would have no chance of getting alone with her during the daytime; if there were clandestine visits they must be taking place in the night—and via the window. No other way could avoid raising an alarm. Standing in the shrubbery, he inspected the window, and then examined the ground underneath. On the shrubbery side, exactly where a ladder would be placed if it were to reach up to one end of the sill, he found two depressions in the earth. And there was a light ladder, he recalled, in the shed in the apple-orchard on the other side of the shrubbery.

There was no moon that night. He lay tossing in his bed, and then got up, he would have to settle this matter which was tormenting him. Telling Iccus that he had a headache and wanted to be left alone, he strolled along the garden path and then slipped into the shrubbery. He found a wooden seat and sank down on to it. A faint drizzle of starlight fell on his upturned face, and he forgot the reason why he had come out. A sense of angelic communion stirred in him, like lilies opening in the night, a spray of stars reflected in its heart of trembling dew; each pulse was the footprint of God on the earth of darkness; an immaculate conception, I believe, he thought. There was meaning suddenly in the words of Ignatius: Our God Jesus Christ was born and baptised that by His passion he might purify the Water. He had thought the words understood—expounded in a homily by Brother Campanianus—but he had understood nothing; now a dogma had flowered as realisation. To purify the Water. A thin white stream was pouring down between the enormous uplifted hands, drenching his face. Bind me that I may be free; fetter me that I may throw off my bondage.

He was disturbed by a number of slight sounds coming from the left in quick succession—a scraping and a swishing and (it finally seemed) a heavy breathing. It sounded as if a large and clumsy dog was doing his best to bury a bone without attracting attention to his hoard. Then he realised what it was. But his mind was still absorbed by the imagery of its meditation. Which of the Fathers had said it? Unless one is begotten of Water and Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God. He rose and moved towards the spot where he knew the ladder was set. This Stream, this Flow dizzily dropping over the cliffs of immensity upon his accepted face: it was Spirit, it was Union. He walked easily, without stumbling into any of the bushes, as if he could see his way. The pure power of the spirit in him seemed so strong that he felt he had only to utter one word in order to persuade his brother, to convert him into abhorrence of evil. Even to touch him would be enough; a laying-on of hands into which the inner power of things had been canalised. And he was so relieved to have found at last certainty, to be released from his suspicions by finding his suspicions come true, that he did not feel at that moment any horror of the deed which he was about to interrupt. He felt only the release, and the belief that as soon as he spoke, or touched, he

would save his brother from the spell of evil, and there would be rejoicing between them, the pure flow.

He reached the foot of the ladder. He touched the wood, his hand on one of the rungs, and he was astonished that it was not the flesh of his quested brother. It seemed as if the brother had faded away into the night, had escaped; and then he felt the ladder slightly shake as Hesperius moved cautiously up. "Brother," he whispered and began to climb, driven by that urgency to come close, to have physical contact; only in closeness could he feel faith in the transforming potency of the word, the word become touch and union. It was the need of closeness, not any fear of rousing others, that made him begin to go up after his brother. He had forgotten the others, and his quietness was only part of the night-mood, the frail lilies of starlight opening in the blood, the murmuring silence.

But Hesperius had heard him; he stopped. Paulinus came suddenly up against him "Brother." He heard a quick expulsion of breath, the ladder shook. "What are you doing here? Get to hell . . ." The heels of Hesperius were pressing against his breast. Hesperius tried to turn so that he could reach down. "You can't do it. . . . Come away. . . ." He had no words, after all; he clasped the ladder's sides tighter; he would not let Hesperius go up. One of the feet kicked him in the face, and he relaxed his grip. Hesperius went on and up. Paulinus paused, then climbed after; he hurt his knuckles on the sill. Suddenly somebody shoved violently, the ladder's top swung up and out, the ladder had been steeply set and it was easy to overbalance. A woman screamed and screamed as the ladder swung out into the gulf of blackness.

His mind was still dazed. But not from the jolt of the fall, though that had stunned him for a moment; not from the flame of the lantern which one of the slaves had thrust almost into his face, stinging his left cheek; not from the screaming of the women that seemed to go on for ever, not from all the confused noise and trampling. The conviction of a lost chance, of a world gone awry, had seized his mind. He blamed himself. Why could I not speak the right word? why did my hands lack the sanctifying gesture? Was it all a dream, the world behind the world, where the water fountained luminously into Spirit? There was nothing he could say to his father. He stood inert, numbed; he was the victim harried before the place of judgment. If only they would crucify him: then all would be well, all would be rightly ordered. But, instead, the world's mad face, the unceasing question without relevance, the blind fear that brought about the thing it sought to evade.

"What were you doing on that ladder?" The swollen face gaped at him; he saw the painful thought, the effort to be judicial and calm, not to rush to conclusions. He could not answer; he listened to the irrelevant questions. If he closed his eyes, he saw a storm-scurry of terrified forms hurrying over the cliff-edge which they ran to avoid. "Why did you

scare your mother in the dead of night?" It was best that Sollius should have got the whole situation wrong—that he should think it was his wife who had pushed the ladder away and that she had screamed for help. Had she acted in far-seeing craft, or had she merely wept and acquiesced in interpretations which made her out as innocent? And what had happened to Hesperius—had he hidden under the bed? or had he jumped down after pushing the ladder out, and then slipped away before the slaves came out? It didn't matter. All that mattered was the fact of Paulinus's guilt, his inability to save his brother from the death of sin, his arraignment before the tribunal of paternal justice. He wanted to fall down and confess his sin, his guilt; but what words could he use? He stood, staring at his father, as he had stared in dumb terror as a child when accused of some wrongdoing—unable to explain, to beg forgiveness, to plead innocence. No matter what the facts, he had always felt guilty, if he had not done the particular act of which he was accused, he had done other things, imagined other things. Even if he had done nothing, his life itself affronted the fury of unlimited power and had no excuse to offer, no reason to advance for mercy and the gift of life.

His father was losing his self-control. "You have always been a difficult child . . . not sane and obedient like Hesperius. . . . Beware lest I be forced to curse you . . . There is still power in the curse of a father . . . Answer me. . . ." He took Paulinus by the throat and shook him. "Are you mad, deaf and dumb? Answer me." He glared balefully, and snarled, with thin lips curling from his teeth "There is still justice in the world. By the blood of Christ I'll kill you . . ." And still Paulinus could say nothing. Every moment made the world less real; it was slipping through his fingers like wet mud. He had not been afraid when his father grasped his throat; he felt relieved. The pain was nothing; it was a proof that he was beyond attack, safe at last. He pitied his father with a gushing agony of pity, like blood spurting from a wound in his side. Now that his father's power had been reduced to those harsh fingers pressing madly against his throat, he felt secure; his father dwindled in his thought, became a mere old man pushed into a corner of terror. The act of violence had been like the manumitting blow that turned a slave to a freeman.

"No, I will not answer," he said at last, as his father let go with a sudden gesture of disgust and uncertainty. He spoke in precise, calm tones, rendered slightly hoarse by the pain in his throat, and those tones rather than the words were what severed him from the past, from his father's power. Now it was his father who stood mute.

He walked out of the room. He heard his father, restored to fury, shout after him; but the meaning of the shout did not enter his consciousness. He was exalted by the discovery that he was not afraid; that he had rent the rotten rags of the world. He could not wait; there was nothing that he wanted to take away with him. Iccus was waiting at the

end of the passage, scared and solicitous. "Saddle my horse. . . . It is the last office I shall ever ask of you."

"Master, I will go with you. . . . Let me."

He felt strangely calm. "I am no man's master. And I am going into hardships which you cannot guess. And even if you were ready to face them, it would be for love of me, not love of Christ. Stay and learn that love, and perhaps we shall meet again, as brothers." He raised Iccus up and kissed him on the cheek; his voice had a calm assured note which it had never had before

5. *Audax and a Way Out*

Lawn was breaking as he reached Lugdunum. As he walked through the night, he had made up his mind to go straight to Zonaras and beg his forgiveness. Only Zonaras's kindness and understanding had been recalled. But when the light came with its first veils, slowly penetrating the gloom and dissipating it, he stood outside the gate and waited for the wardens to open; and now what he recalled was the bitter fury of Zonaras's eyes and words at their last meeting. He still held to his resolve to get somehow into touch with Zonaras and to plead for pardon, but no longer did the carrying out of the resolve seem so easy. He must think out the right method; he must prove himself that he had something decent and purposeful to bring. He could not go while he was still hot with the shame, the dirt, of his base complicity with the parasitic world; he must find something of peace and goodness in his own heart, a settled mood, before he could possibly knock on Zonaras's door and meet his eyes again.

And yet he didn't want to go away. Omitting his country home, which was lost to him, Lugdunum was the only place where he felt at ease; he didn't want to strike out among strangers. As soon as the yawning warden had let him in and given him a good stare—the peasant-woman with the egg-basket was a natural early bird, but who was the dusty young fellow with an upper-class tunic?—he made his way to the quarters which were farthest apart from the street of Zonaras's house. At a tavern he got some warm wine, and the grimy sensation of weariness began to ebb. He stood in dulled relaxation for a time at a street corner, while porters and dockmen slouched past. Then he went into a baker's shop and bought two small round loaves, each marked into eight segments, and broke off segment after segment, surprised to find how hungry he was. The baker's wife encouraged him to take a seat and breakfast in the shop. "I don't know your face, do I? What have you got in that bag, may I ask? You're not a pedlar, eh? I'm not at all curious, I believe in letting folk go their own way, it's no use believing otherwise, but I don't mind anyone asking me a civil question, and so I don't mind putting one to anyone else. Is your mother dead? You look as if you've

been travelling?" She had a dark, hard face, with a large, hairy mole on her chin; and he asked her if there were any tenement-rooms round about that she could recommend. "Recommend? That's a serious business. I'll have you coming back and complaining about the bugs to me, or the way the woman in the next room keeps setting fire to the party-wall. . . ." In the end it turned out that she had an attic of her own which she'd be ready to let cheap to a young man if she was quite sure he was respectable. "I can't have you bringing women in. I know a young man has his needs, but there's proper houses controlled by the authorities where he can find what he wants without upsetting private houses with screeches and boozy songs and sickness on the stairs and things missing . . ." She led him upstairs; and he rather liked her cold bossy voice with its intonation of self-mockery, as if there wasn't much left for her to be disillusioned about—not even in herself. The stairs bent under their tread, creaking and grumbling, and then the leather hinges of the attic door added another creak and groan to the protesting noises. And though one of the boards made an alarming dip under her weight and a flight of moths came out of some old curtains heaped in a corner, and the straps on the bedstead had decayed, he agreed to rent the room. His landlady promised to mend the steps and have the room swept, if he'd only give her a couple of hours to arrange things, and then she became suspicious again and made obscure remarks about the misfortunes of landladies, until he paid her a month's rent in advance, and then she became amiable again and wanted to know a lot more about his prospects in life. "Don't you worry. If somebody's cheated you, just you cheat them back again. I can see you've had a come-down of some kind, and I'm not a bit curious about it, only you'll feel much better when you've told me all about it . . ." Audax began to wonder if he'd been rash in paying a month's rent down.

But when he came back at noon, the room was quite clean, and a small table had been added—"And not that it was in the contract, neither," said the landlady, "but that's the kind of person I am. If I like, I like; and if I don't, it's best to say good-bye quickly."

The baker was a mild man effaced behind a large apron; and there was a son and a daughter—the son surly, with dough clotting his hair, and the daughter pretty in a rounded, melting-eyed way.

"Now we're all acquainted," said the baker's wife, "and don't believe Quintus when he tells you he's bad-treated; that only means he's lazy."

The room was close under the roof, and the ceiling was low, but by keeping both door and window open it could be made habitable. And it was cheap. By living on bread and cheese and olives, with some light watered wine, he'd manage to make his stolen gold pieces last out many months. It was therefore with a feeling of security, of roads open to the future, that he sank into slumber that afternoon. He woke shortly after dusk with a sickening leap of his heart, unable to remember at first where

he was or to get any notion of how much time had passed. A stupefying panic held him stricken for a while, until he heard someone moving about on the stairs below. He heaved himself out of bed, feeling chilled and aching in all his bones, and went over to the door. "What's the time? . . . Who's there? . . ."

He heard the girl calling, "Mother!" and then her mother answered, "What's that? I thought there must be robbers on the roof. . . . The time? . . ." And again the sense of escape came sickly over him, he clung to the door-post, while the friendly voices argued about the time below. I mustn't fall back, I must use my brains. And yet the thought of the idle world of drinking and self-indulgence from which he had fled afflicted him with a pang of loss, a chime of flowers and golden lights and subtle laughers, a woman's love-sob and opening blossom body. But he knew the fact wasn't anything like that at all. Yet he still longed to give up the struggle back to loneliness, to submit himself to any humiliation. Why had he fled? Why hadn't he made a joke about the boozy accusations of Filagrius? A moment's thought, a scornful brazening of face and voice, and he could have carried it off. But instead he was standing dizzy and sick in this poverty-stricken garret, with a small stock of money that he had no chance of increasing.

"Thanks," he called and went slowly, swaying, back to bed, to the fever of sleep.

Next morning he made out his regimen with extreme care, reducing it to the barest minimums and swearing not to exceed it by the least fraction. The money must last out until he had grappled fully with the ghosts of his mind and had found a place in life. A place in life? At once the problem began revolving its insoluble circles. What was *life*? What could it be but the world as it was? He had then to find a place in that world. All the old argument for and against a small Government job or an entry into the priesthood sprang up again. The Government jobs he ruled out. Even in the last year in such an important administrative centre as Lugdunum the imperial bureaucracy had moved into a new phase of disintegration; for generations, despite all reconstructions, it had been becoming more futile, but now it was actually breaking up. The only institution which showed signs of weathering the storm, indeed of gathering strength from the stress, was the Church. More and more the Bishops were becoming the only effective administrators of the *municipia*; their arbitration courts were supplanting the imperial courts of law; they took over the rights of intercession once exercised by the rich patron or hired rhetorician. The Schools were at their last gasp; Audax paid a visit to the academy-rooms, and found that classes were no longer being held there, now only small groups under tuition in the private houses of the rhetors would be educated.

To enter the Church meant to enter the only body that was carrying

on at all actively the old imperial tradition. What energy still remained in the *municipia* had almost entirely collected round the Bishop. (In the country all control was passing into the hands of the magnates, and the peasantry were scarcely affected by Christianity at all, at the most getting a superficial veneer of phrases from the priest of the magnate's church. But Audax had put aside the world of the magnates, which he could enter only in parasitic guise.) To become a priest, then, would be to come to terms with the world, to do one's bit to salvage a fragment of the old imperial forms. . . . And there came the snag. He could not convince himself that he wanted to help in that kind of salvaging.

There remained the monks, who tried to find ways of living the apostolic or Christian life. But Audax, while yielding them a certain general sympathy, felt only repulsion when he came up against their practice; every element of the humanism that he had learned from Zonaras rejected the monastic views.

And so the argument circled on, finding no point of rest, no stable relation between self and world, no aim that could be felt as wholly worthy. One day Audax almost blundered on to Zonaras in the street; but Zonaras was walking in his usual indrawn way, and Audax felt sure that he had not seen him. For the most part he kept out of the city, walking straight down from the bakery to the southern gate and then out into the fields, where he roamed about, carrying on his endless argument. At times he thought he had come to the point of accepting the Episcopate and its aims, but when he came to acting on his acceptance, he found his energy flag away.

Summer was passing, and still he had reached no conclusions. He wandered at times afield, to watch the last activities of harvest: the almost naked reapers at work, the grape-gatherers with their baskets, the gleaners, the oxen grinding out corn on the threshing-floors. His mind was dazed with the heat and the ceaseless round-and-round of the patiently plodding oxen, his thoughts went round-and-round. The oxen plodded over the pale-gold wheat-stalks, their hides dull with the grain-dust, round-and-round with gentle up-and-down nodding movements of heavy heads, and girls hurried up with their arms full of sheaves and then stood back to scratch the hair in their armpits. At one place, an old peasant, with apple-shrivelled face, went on complaining that no one had followed the orders given last winter to pour *amurca*—the water from the olive-press—over the floor, and so the floor was covered with weeds. "Nobody listens nowadays. . . ." He seized on Audax as an audience for his complaints. "They're all lazy, but they make themselves more work." Women and children picked out the dirt from the trodden grain; and farther on Audax saw a low harrow stuck with flints being used. Corn was being winnowed, cast up on shovels into the light breeze. Family groups were gossiping, suckling squally babies, searching for

vermin in one another's hair, under bough-huts, awnings of leaves. He loitered and watched the work going on by torchlight. Then the light yellow chaff, which in the day glittered like gold dust sprayed around the brown bodies, took on strange shimmering lustres and enclosed the bodies in broad haloes. The scene grew fantastic, to drowsing eyes, with wild figures fading out into vaporous shadows, phantomed on the ragged edge of light, suddenly crimsoned by the leap of flame. He loitered outside the circle of work and laughter, and ended by going to sleep in one of the stubble-fields, with a hope that somehow one of the brown-armed girls would come bending over him, to merge with a dream of moonrise; but he lay alone, awaking a couple of hours before dawn, cold and cramped and itchy with dust and bits of stubble.

Sometimes he helped in the bakery, when there was a rush of work at night; the baker was afraid of trouble at letting anyone not a member of the baker-caste be seen in the workrooms. In the large room at the rear, where stood four mills of grey volcanic stone thick with crystals, there was also a movement of round-and-round, though usually now one mill, turned by a blinded donkey, was sufficient. Audax drew water from the aperture at the back, where a pipe led to the cistern, and watched, while the vessels filled, the peeling fresco of the goddess Fornax and the two undulating snakes with birds over them; while the women were at the kneading-troughs in the room on the left, and the baker and his son dealt with the double-oven, got the furnace to right heat, cleared the ashpit, or shovelled the loaves in. But Audax wasn't encouraged to watch the flour being mixed; he had an idea that some odd things went into it as well as the alleged ingredients. And then on afternoons when the others were out except the daughter serving in the shop, the baker's wife would tell him all the family history on both sides for generations, and sigh, and remark how easily she could have done better—the baker in the next block but one, who was so well off, had wanted her, but she was a fool. Then she gave Audax free one of the cheaper loaves which had vetch in them.

One afternoon he awoke to the fact that he seemed to be becoming a regular rubbish-bin for other people's complaints and meanderings. At the wine-bar where he had gone for a cheap glass of watered wine, the old theatre attendant, who had promised to get him a good seat at various shows but always had excuses, was blabbering in his usual way about the nuisance that actresses were. "It was all right in the old days. There were six door-attendants looking after the store-rooms and dressing rooms, and big fellows too. Now there's only me, and the lads know it. How can I throw them all out? They simply brush past me and go into the actresses' rooms. Not that the women like it, for they don't get any extra pay. Last time the show was held up because the chief woman-tumbler couldn't get away from three of the lads. I've been to the aedile's office, and they say to me: Get out, you know that such women haven't

any civic rights, anyone can do as he likes with them, it's your business to keep order behind the stage. And so I've been to the priest, and he says: You must be mad, you know that Mother Church deniessuch women can be saved, there's a devil in their viscera, and so you can't blame the men that the incubus lures in. And so I get blamed for all the delays and noise. . . ." And then, when Audax returned to the bakery, the woman had a new misery. She had just discovered that when her daughter was sent down to the cellar with a flagon to draw wine from the hogshead she'd acquired the habit of putting her mouth to the bung. Starting with a modest sip, the girl had been emboldened by practice and impunity, until she's made herself, this afternoon, blind drunk. "That's why she's been smiling to herself so slyly," said her mother. "That's why she's been as stupid as a bedpost. I don't mind admitting that I thought she must be up to tricks with a boy, to look so sly, and God forgive me, but I had my suspicions about you, as I couldn't see who else had any chance of getting at her. I don't mind saying so, since now I know you're as innocent as I am myself, and such a well-behaved young fellow I never did see, I don't mind telling anyone. All I can say is that it serves me right for being so trustful I've had my lesson. I'll stop the credit I was giving to that Arete, the wife of the greengrocer." And she laughed her small, gruff laugh, and he couldn't tell whether she was being serious or not; and suddenly he felt how little he knew about her or anyone else. He could never tell whether she was joking or not; she had an odd dry manner, and sometimes in the midst of their talks she would give her half-laugh and look at him quizzingly.

"You can't stop people," he said. "What they want to do, I mean . . . We all interfere too much. . . ."

She wasn't so bad-looking when one got to know her; there were clear lines in the hardness of her face and she was solidly built, without fat. He'd seen her strong haunches swaying at the kneading-tubs, moving rhythmically in the frenzied rush of work, but he hadn't been able to think of her personally. Was there anything in her life but a compulsion of toil, a dull acceptance of wifedom? "I didn't think you'd touched the girl," she said, more softly than usual. "It wasn't included in the contract, that? And if it had been, I'm the landlady . . ." She gave her laugh, more like a gasp this time; her joke ran away with her, and she couldn't finish it. Her unusual lack of self-possession startled him, and he stared at her; then realised that she was flushing under her dark skin. And he knew that she would let him take her, though perhaps she hadn't known it herself until she found her wits floundering over that joke. Tenderness warmed him, but he still felt utterly aloof, outside the world, grateful. His emotion of contact reached out only towards that rhythmic movement of the haunches which he recalled. And what he wanted was personal contact, a submergence of his fears in human fullness; not only the body gripped by a rhythmic compulsion. And yet he knew, as his

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hands stirred, that he dreaded to make the trial, to seek the unmasking of the hidden face, and to find the face a thing of horror—or worse, to find that there was only mask, only a hole underneath, a smell of death. But he wanted to know why the woman was attracted by him. Simply as a protest against her deadly life, as a blind lechery, or as a wish to loosen funds of tenderness that so far had stayed untapped in her breasts? How fearful, the coupling of the driven human beasts in the vast night of the death-horror, beside the little fires of pitiful self-delusion. Amid the lumber of things which were treasured as if they could save; the little oddments of property over which men and women snarled and murdered in their obsessions. And now it was only the powerful swing of female haunches, significant in labour-act, which he desired; and the reason why he failed to lift his hand was the fear that he would break through into the deadly personal world, the lie. But he still felt grateful, wanting to show that he appreciated the woman's liking for him.

She lowered her face under his stare, still flushing. He wondered how long he had looked at her, and was afraid of the distractedness which had been growing on him of late, he had found himself staring at people in the street, in the same kind of dreamy remoteness. "Where are you going?" he asked stupidly.

"My son will be back in a moment." Her voice was subdued, uncertain.

He went up to her, with a vague idea of holding the door open—the kind of courtesy that he had never previously shown her. She looked up as if scared, and raised her hand, palm outwards. "It's all right," he said, but she was standing in his way. He felt helpless, as if he could not control his movements and would knock her over. But she moved away, out of the door, muttering something about her son. He stood dazed near the door, and then ran out; she was already going down the stairs. He felt baffled, and the mixture of an excessive desire to act and a bitter need to withdraw left him suspended in stupefaction. She half turned her head, and then noises from below drew her on. He watched her go on down the stairs, feeling desire again, a wish to embrace her, not at this moment, but as she would be when she stood at the kneading-trough—as if he could then embrace her without her being aware of anything more than the rhythmic contractions of her toil suddenly dissolved on a blissful ease. Yet the knowledge that she would not resist his advances sent a tingling exhalation in flood through his veins: a sense of pitiful brokenness (though her body was so strong), and a fear of being ensnared (in what, he did not know), and a shame as if caught in a lie, and a defiance, a feeling of renewed forces, a hope that mocked at all his fears and regrets. Suddenly there was pure happiness. He blessed the lovely largeness of chance, the infinite resources of life in colour, in the graces of movement. O, sudden cry of summer flutes. He went back into his room and paced about. He had forgotten that the world held women;

he had been afraid of wasting his hoarded money. Something had got to happen, he felt. I'm at the end of my tether; I must let go; what are all the qualms about? Laugh, join in, give life a chance. He argued down a dissident voice; but felt newly braced all the same. Women. . . . Accept, submit, forget. Why had he neglected his chance? He wanted to get alone with the woman again. Something must happen. His palms itched. A growing recklessness gripped him; he wanted to shout out of the window, to roar with laughter, to spend all his money. Enough of caution. I'll break down all my bridges; I'm getting nowhere in this giggling way. Then he heard the son creaking up the stairs, to come complaining once more about the miseries of belonging to a baker's family.

The lad came in with his discontented slouch. Yes, the law was specially hard in restrictions attached to his trade-guild; bakers' sons not only had to follow in their father's footsteps—that was usual for all crafts and jobs—but they were also forbidden to marry anyone except a baker's daughter. "Here we've got a girl in the family, but there isn't another baker's daughter marriageable in the city except Fircellia, and she's got a harelip." Audax had heard the whole mumble before; he felt a hatred for the lad's pale, staring eyes and cracked voice. He got up to go out, feeling his impatience increase, and the other followed him down the stairs. "And I had such a good idea. I can't marry my own sister, so I went to Segulus—he's the baker in the next block, and he's got a good-looking wife. So I said to him. You marry my sister after divorcing your wife, and I'll marry your wife, and then everything will be fair. But he wouldn't have it, the mean hound."

His mother called, and he hurried on past Audax, who paused on the bottom landing. The little room on the left with the curtained door was the daughter's; he thought he heard a snuffling noise there. He went over and lifted the curtain, and saw the girl lying flat on the bed with her mouth wide open, snoring faintly. Again recklessness came over him, and he was about to step into the room, but he heard someone creaking up the stairs, and let the curtain drop.

Outside in the street he walked towards the pudding-shop that sold hot pease—the one dissipation he had so far allowed himself. He was struggling with a sense of shame and an impulse to act rashly, it seemed that there were no bars left—not even moral bars—and that this absence of constraint left a fathomless horror. To be jailed in stone walls was bad, but not deathly, one could believe in a life on the other side. But to be jailed in paper walls, in mere figments of restraint, was sheer horror; for there was nothing on the other side but the same emptiness, the perpetual breaking-through into another degradation. Personality seemed now to be dragged and thin that paper wall into which he was about to walk. His own spirit was unresonant, crude, dull; he had never imagined such a wretchedness. And leaping through it was the mad

bull-note, a confidence for the first time that he could do as he liked with women; the world was nothing but a maggoty mess of petty cruelties and perversions, not even satanic. He wanted to get people down, to wreak on them this feeling of disillusion, to make them admit their own little dirty intricacies. He stared at the few women whom he passed, he felt relieved from his misery of worthlessness while he stared at them and released that bull-pressure straight into his brain, sneering, ramping, confident. And if he were to speak to one of them, his voice would be infinitely suave and soft and caressing.

He entered the food-shop. A midwife was trying to buy some hogslard for use in birth-throes that had already begun in the tenement opposite. The man serving was in a bad temper because something had gone wrong with a tap-cock, which he was fiddling about, while a boy was straining something hot through a colander and sucking a scalded finger. The loungers at the counter were talking more loudly even than usual; but Audax paid no attention till he thought he heard Zonaras's name " . . . raided . . . conspiring with the Bagaudae . . . the town-slaves too." He asked the nearest man what the sensation was. They all spoke at once. Nothing so astonishing had happened since—well, since the cock prophesied the locust plague. The doctor had been the centre of a conspiracy, going on for years, linking the Bagaudae with the malcontents of the town. The wharf-lumpers' guild was under suspicion. The doctor's house had been raided, the authorities were at this moment tearing up the floor-boards and tearing down the plaster of the walls to find weapons or documents or whatever it was that conspirators hid away. Audax took his pot of pease-pudding and started off for home. His first reaction to the news was incredulity, haziness, inability to grasp the situation concretely; but half-way home he felt nervous tremors running over his body, he felt as if there was something jibbing and pulling in his mind. What was he to do? And then he was gripped by sheer sense of loss, he would never be able to talk with Zonaras again, to retrieve his errors, to win forgiveness. He realised that at the back of all his efforts to find a place in the world there had been the need to achieve a basis on which to regain the esteem of Zonaras. If Zonaras died, he was utterly alone.

He scooped out some of the pease-pudding with his hand and began eating as he turned back. For a while his thoughts were taken up by the problem of consuming the pudding in time; the lower part of the pot was still very hot. He turned the mess over with his forefinger and burned himself, he sucked his finger and had another try, more carefully. As he neared Zonaras's quarter he finished the pudding, tucked the pot under his arm, and walked faster. What was he to do? His agitation grew; he would have to do something. Now had come the testing hour, now had arrived the moment to find whether he had a place in the world. All his cogitations of the last weeks had been only a passing-of-the-time

to bring him up to this true crisis; life had its own ways of shoving aside generalised debates and posing a concrete issue, and it was the way in which one faced that issue that decided one's virtue, one's manhood, one's whole future, one's place. If I fail this call, he thought, I have no place in life; if I do not fail, I shall not have to ask questions about such things.

That at least was clear. But it was still a generalisation. Only, it was a generalisation moving towards action, towards wholeness. His agitation grew, tightening fiercely across his brain. Act, act; and redeem your manhood. A mortal fear and a readiness to die struggled, became one in his spirit; his fear of death became courage. I can't fail if I am true to this. And then all words failed, under the memory of Zonaras's level gaze, his deep goodness, his love. What else was there? Only the need not to fail those eyes which had once trusted him—not to fail a second time. This debt pays all. The fear rose up, surged, became courage again; the need to act, to escape the taunt, to escape loneliness. The crowd was thickening. He became aware of the world as if something had snapped in his head.

There was a number of soldiers at the head of the street, pressing back the crowd with spears used as barriers. He walked up, and one of the soldiers pressed him back, pushed him in the chest. He retreated some paces and looked anxiously round, trying to guess the emotions that stirred the people. They seemed sullen and heavy-faced, weary, as if the veil had suddenly been stripped from their toilsome lives, angry, but listless. He turned to a man whom he thought had muttered a curse against the soldiers when he was pushed back—a broad-shouldered man with matted hair. "What is it?" he asked weakly, and then, ashamed of his weakness, he went on, "Have they taken him away? Is he still down there?" The man shook his head doubtfully, shrugged, and turned away. Disappointed, Audax retreated against a booth on the opposite side of the street. *How little he knew of the lives, the minds, of men. If only he knew the right word, the word which put him at once in enkindling relation with all these men about him. There must be such a word, a word that would strike through the husk of their wretchedness, their submission to the world's evil, and would stir alive their buried humanity. If he could find that word, he could save Zonaras, save himself, restore meaning to life.* . . .

"Brothers," he said, but his voice was toneless, ineffective, nobody even heard him. The total lack of resonance in his voice made him feel like a ghost vainly striving to speak through an impenetrable veil to the men of the living world who moved about him. And then, as he was about to run away, to confess failure—thinking: Yes, I shall go to the Bishop tomorrow—he felt the agitation return, deepened, more fiery still, bursting in his brain; and again the wave of terror, which ebbed to leave him reckless, cold, determined to act. A woman near by broke into ululation. "He brought back my child from death! He saved the life of

my child! and now they are killing him!" A rising murmur from the crowd answered her.

That rising murmur met the rising resolve in Audax; it gave back resonance to his voice. He climbed up on the booth and shouted, "You all know him. Is there another man in all the city who has given his life up so wholly to the people? Did he ever grudge his sleep to help the poorest in their need? Who could claim the name of Defender of the Citizens if he were denied it?" The murmur increased. "Yes, you all knew him. And now they are going to kill him, torture him. And why? Only because he loved you all. Because he wanted to find the way of life for the people." The woman who had ululated began screaming and went up to the nearest soldier. She beat at him with her feeble fists and he knocked her away with the butt-end of his spear in her stomach. A threatening note swelled in the crowd's murmur. "Who are the evil-doers—Zonaras or those that are killing him?" shouted Audax. "Don't let them do it!"

A babel broke out. The broad-shouldered man swung himself up beside Audax. "Fellow-citizens!" he cried in powerful tones. "You all know me. It's true what has been said. Zonaras gave us life, and that's why they're killing him. Zonaras lived only for the people's good. You all know it. Remember, God is above Lugdunum. God is listening. What is the word of God? *Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you.* Can you dare to go into the presence of the living God unless you have kept His commandments? God's word is against the rich. God's word is the bread of the poor. Between us and you, O rich and mighty of the world, is a great gulf fixed. Those are the words that Christ spoke, as Luke tells us, speaking of the poor and the rich. Speaking of himself, the bread of the poor, the bread of toil, and of the rich, the weevils and the locusts. Between us and you, O rich and mighty of the world, is a great gulf fixed. The gulf of hell. The gulf into which Dives was plunged. I proclaim that the rich crucify Christ afresh every day, every hour of the day and night. They are killing our friend, the healer who brought life into the households of death!"

The military had moved from their position at the head of the street and were advancing towards the booth to arrest Audax and the broad-shouldered man. "Come on now, now's the chance," said the latter aside to Audax, and they jumped down. A shower of stones and broken pots struck the soldiers, hurled by a group of dockers over on the left; Audax, finding that he still had his pease-pot, flung it at the centurion and hit him on the side of his face. "Come on, save Zonaras!" yelled the broad-shouldered man, who had caught hold of a handcart standing against the wall. He lifted the cart with an effort of his powerful arms and crashed into the soldiers, laying out two of them and scattering the others. The crowd burst into the street beyond and raced whooping down towards Zonaras's house.

Audax ran with them, in a whirl of exhilaration, as if there were no more problems, no more barriers remaining, and as if the rescue of Zonaras were now assured. But the soldiers in control of the house had been warned by the tumult to take measures. The doors were closed, and missiles began to rain down from the small upper windows. The crowd was checked, drew back on itself, falling into confusion as those behind kept pressing on. Audax leant against a doorway; the feeling of leadership, which had for a moment come over him, was lost. He had no power to dominate the seething mass, to respond to its submerged impulse and to call that impulse forth, but he was still in contact, he hadn't been thrown back into his former isolation. Now he was merely one of the units, but in that was sufficient happiness. The broad-shouldered man, whom someone had called Leo, was in charge of the unleashed forces. The tumult opened for a flash to show him shouting and gesticulating "On to the roof through the ironmonger's shop! . . . Who's going round to the back?" A spear came hurtling down, it missed Leo, but hit a young woman in the chest.

And then, just as Leo seemed about to bring order into the attack, the cry rang out, "More soldiers are coming!" At once the crowd began to melt away—down the side-lanes, into the doorways, jostling and yelling. The noise thinned, the trumpet-call and the tramping feet of the reinforcements could be heard. *There was no one in the street but the woman seated in the gutter who was trying feebly to staunch the wound in her chest, and a small boy lying flat on his face, and an old man running round and wringing his hands, and Audax leaning hopeless in a doorway.* Somebody darted out from round the lane, a lanky man with deep-sunken eyes and a fortnight's beard, who ran up to Audax and grasped his arm. "Come on, you fool." He gave a jerk, and Audax ran with him into the lane. Leo was waiting there, still panting. "Come on." They ran off down the lane.

Where were they going? That did not seem so important as the awareness which beat into his brain. *I can't go back again.* There was no longer any choice, he was henceforth a marked man for whom only torture and death awaited if the law caught him. And so he seemed to make at last a supreme act of choice. The terror of death and a huge thankfulness struggled in his blood, and again the terror seemed a necessary part of his courage, his will. They slackened pace as soon as the immediate environs of the riot had been left behind, but walked with a kind of slouching speed. Audax imitated the gait of the other two. They turned down a specially narrow and muddy lane, near the city-walls, on the river-side; passed under a low, crumbling archway and through the back door of a house.

The curtain dropped; by the light of a weak spluttering lamp he saw an old man mending a saffron-shoe. The old man looked up with pale,

bulging eyes, and then bent his head again over the shoe; a shawled woman appeared at the inner door.

"What's it now?" she asked in a coarse, dull voice. "Go to Ascla's."

"Shut up," said the lanky man. "It's serious. We're leaving . . . quick."

"The milk's turned." She tried to scratch herself between the shoulder-blades. "Well, I can't stop you, can I?"

A baby began howling. The woman withdrew, and Audax saw Leo beckoning to him. They went into a side-room, and the lanky man pulled up a rush mat, revealing a trapdoor. Leo got his finger in a hole in the trapdoor and tugged.

"Come and put the mat back after us," called the lanky man, and the old man groaned. Audax heard him shuffling about "Always trouble . . . what's it now?"

The trapdoor opened, and Leo signed to Audax to go down the stone steps.

"It's all right. I know the way. No need for lights. It's straight ahead."

Audax went unsteadily down the damp steps, and the others followed. The old man had reached the trapdoor. "Will I shut it now? Always trouble. Not like things used to be. . . . Well, God knows His own mind best, still . . ." He dropped the trapdoor back with a bang.

Audax let Leo go ahead and then pressed after him, catching the end of his tunic; behind him sounded the hoarse breathing of the lanky man. After an interminable movement through reeking darkness (probably some two hundred yards of it), with water dripping on the head and down the neck, and a spell of crawling before they turned into a rounded passage at the end of which daylight dimly showed, they emerged from the mouth of a disused drain amid rubbish-heaps and bushes; and sat on a mound of pottery-shards, waiting for the day to brush out the sunset colours which were looping the west. In whispers the two men gave Audax some notion of what was happening. With darkness they would take the wherry of a friend and slip across to one of the river islands where there was a hiding-hole, and then, when the excitement had died down, they would get away into the hills.

"I'd given up hope," said Leo. "But when you jumped up and started your cockerel-crow I thought I'd make the best of the chance. It's not our fault it failed. But that's the end of Lugdunum for us."

"Do you know what happened to Phoebe, his daughter? . . ."

Gavius, the lanky man, had an idea that she was safe, she'd been out with a message to the docks at the time the raid was made, and he thought she'd got off on a barge that was leaving downstream for Arelate. Audax forbore to ask more questions; he felt intensely tired and rummative, yet happy underneath. "But they got Zonarias and old Miccio, and the cook too—they'll torture her old bones to see if she knows anything."

The first stars were flickering in a gloom from which the green was fading; a cat made a spitting noise and darted away under a bush; children's voices came from the river-bank. Leo stood up and stretched his big body. Bats were flitting overhead, so swiftly silent that it was hard to believe one wasn't imagining them, twitches of tired sight in the changing light.

6 *Prosper at Rome*

Once he was settled in the bodyguard of Aetius, he had no trouble in getting Eutharic also into its ranks, it pleased him to have the stalwart German as a kind of bodyguard of his own within the corps; it helped his status. For he was already aspiring to get within the inner circle—the group whom Aetius specially trusted and who merged with that of the high officers advanced by his favour, men like the Suevian Ricimer or the Roman Marcellinus. Prosper felt that he had his foot on the first rung of imperial success, and he wasn't going to make any error. He studied Aetius carefully, not only because he wanted to anticipate his needs and wishes, but also because he wanted to learn the secret of his rise to power; perhaps the next Dux would be a Gallo-Roman who had taken hard knocks and discovered how to hold his own . . . a Gallo-Roman named Prosper. Stranger things had happened, in this shaken world what was under one day could be uppermost the next—and in no sphere so much as in that of the military were rapid rises possible. Rapid falls too. Prosper was watching his steps carefully. The Dux was the man with the real power; the Emperor was only a figurehead; and any officer, bold and shrewd enough, might hope to grasp the army-control if he watched the political moves and was in the right place at the right time.

But these thoughts were in the back of his mind. He had no one to talk to about them, he dared not think them at all clearly, even in his self-communings. It was not that he doubted his capacity to rise, to seize any opportunity, but he had an instinctive feeling against the waste of energy in day-dreaming. Enough that the ultimate goal remained as a sort of touchstone of all immediate activities, unstated, but continually present as a criterion. He listened to the conversations of the aristocratic youths in the corps, and modelled his clothes and behaviour on theirs; he also did his best to recommend himself, without gross flattery, to the high officers surrounding Aetius. Ricimer attracted him as a man who seemed to conserve a dark, repressed force, but provided no chances for an ambitious young guardsman to gain his intimacy; Marcellinus, however, was more open and jovial, and seemed to take a fancy to Prosper, liking his youthful ardour, his eagerness to hear stories or counsels from the more experienced. And, though Prosper was unaware of it, it was the moments when he forgot his schemes altogether and became simply an ardent and eager youth that did the most in forwarding his schemes.

He consulted both his own inclinations and his wish to be fashionable

when he found a mistress, a freedwoman who ran a florist's shop with an inscription over the door, "I sell only flowers to lovers". A warm-white girl with the best of tempers, who had been the mistress of an official who died of liver trouble. A leading member of the High Treasurer's department had almost slipped into the dead man's place when Prosper, with dashing tactics, cut him out. The door was finally slammed in the Treasury official's face, while Serena, the freedwoman, poured a whole basketful of faded rose-petals over his head from an upper window. And the story did much, together with several suits of excellent clothes, to gain Prosper entry into the more select circle of the corps.

Altogether there had been no wasted time. Prosper could congratulate himself that he was on the second rung of the ladder, and that the rise had occurred in record time. He felt justly pleased with himself, and yet, as he roamed about the city and saw the squares with their towering monuments and entered the vast, resplendent Baths, which were still in operation, and when he returned to the palace area and saw the offices of the complex bureaucracy which still kept intact the mechanism for ordering a whole world, he felt only his smallness, his impotence. The rungs of the ladder yet to be climbed went up and up to the clouds, and he was only beginning the ascent, he was gripped with impatience, with the conviction of time going faster and faster, till there was only a whirl in which his unimportant life dissolved. The great swarming city—and himself only one of the masses filling its streets. If he stopped a passer-by and asked who was Prosper of Lugdunum, the man would shake his head and hurry on. He longed to impress himself on the city, to have his name in the mouths of the careless citizens—in the mouth of the world.

There was one consolation, the news that Attila was dead—dead of a burst blood-vessel during the nuptials of yet another young bride. The news pleased Prosper, because it made him even surer that his feeling for the movement of history about him was sound, he had felt in his bones that the Hunnic power was going to split. Now, with Attila gone, it would disintegrate in furious rivalries and dynastic feuds, the momentary point of concentration which Attila had given to the disturbed clan loyalties could not hope to survive his death. I must trust my judgment, thought Prosper; but I mustn't force it in impatience. I must be in the right place at the right time. And he bought an emerald-studded bracelet for Serena; he liked pleasing her, and, besides, she would talk about the gift and show it off when he took some of his friends among the corps, the aristocratic lads, to visit the apartment over the florist-shop.

NEW STARTS (A.D. 454)

1. *Hermit*

WHEN PAULINUS RODE south, he had no settled plan. He had no need for plans, he had made the break with the old life, and his heart was filled with an abiding content. He rode straight south, not taking a main road eastward on to the highway down the Rhone; but making for the hills, the wilderness. He left the cornland and came to the barley-fields on the slopes, and then, beyond a beechwood, the land where shepherds kept their flocks amid the broom. He slept the first night in one of the little huts used by shepherds, and awoke to the sound of the treble bells round the necks of the bleating black-and-white sheep, the horn of the man leading them afield from a small, ragged village, and he went into the village and got bread by giving away his embroidered belt to a suspicious woman, who took him for a thief. Then, with lark-song, he rode on, higher into the hills, up white roads winding through shallow valleys with spiring poplars and fir-trees, and near dusk he met a low-slung bullock-cart with solid wheels groaning along the way, and offered his horse for a meal and a night's rest. And so the man whose face he could scarcely see in the tousled hair of head and beard took him for a robber or a murderer fleeing from justice, a desperate madman of some kind, and refused to have anything to do with him, but when they came to the cottage, the woman listened for a few moments and then said: "You can have food and bedstraw, but we don't want your horse," and scolded the man "There's a holy light on his face." And Paulinus was moved, as if the woman were speaking with priestly accents and sanctifying his choice, his necessity, so that he kneeled on the floor and kissed the hem of her ragged dress and felt himself lifted like a babe on the broad palm of the charity of God.

He left the horse next morning. "It is no longer of use to me," he said, and the woman accepted his words. But her husband started examining the horse, looking for some peculiar fault, and when he could find no fault, was sure again that the horse had been stolen and would bring him to the gallows. But Paulinus walked on, with a scrip that the woman had given him full of bread, and climbed higher into the hills, among steep red rocks overhanging a stream and oak-clumps, red bluffs tufted with heather. And now he began to breathe more easily, and the pressure like a hand against his shoulder-blades driving him on and on began to slacken, and he lay for a while under jagged boulders of black basalt, looking at the sky through fir-boughs and trying to remember something, but without urgency, as if he had eternity in which to find the lost thing.

God died in the west. Darkness passed like the waving of a mysterious banner unfurled at the moment when a bell rings and the heart breaks. The rising sun triumphed. The mist-wraiths whirled and the light splintered on the broken rocks. He walked on through a valley of fantastic shadows cast by the rock-shapes, and a zigzag path led him up a slope to the spot where bubbles oozing from a stony bed told of the source of a river; and he went on over mossy turf glowing with violets, into another ragged mass of rocks, black and red against the dark green of pines and the dark blue of the sky. Then from a ridge of stunted grass he looked down on one side of a small lake rimmed with reflected hazels and firs, and on the other side he looked down on an endless vista of mauve distances, a vastitude of tangled valleys and outspread plains and ultimate hills melting into light. He swayed, as if he stood on the edge of this vastitude, which was also his past life rendered beautiful by the height of vision, all the little swarming forms of evil lost in the immensity of scale, the wholeness of revealed pattern.

He had no farther to go, and knelt gratefully on the ground. He did not speak, but a hymn of praise welled from his spirit, and it seemed to him that a whole skyful of larks were singing. He bowed and kissed the earth. Then he went down to the little lake and stripped his clothes and swam in the cold waters. He lay on a rock in the sun to dry, and then went in search of a place in which to make his home. Above the firs, under the ridge, he found a slight cave, which could be enlarged, since it was backed by clay and smallish stones. He rested in it awhile, and then scraped out some of the clay with a hard stone; then he looked round for suitably shaped stones to build a wall and cover up some of the wide entrance. Time passed so quickly that the sun was setting before he had done more than begin to plan his arrangements. He took a little of the bread that he still had, and ate it after he had uttered his happiness in a prayer for the blessing of his bread and of his new home; and then he lay and listened to the gathering night and the stir of the leaves and the leap of water-life.

He deepened his cave about three more feet, and he finished a wall of stones which blocked three-quarters of the entry; and then he felt at ease. His finely-tissued clothes had been torn and worn by the hard exercise, and he contented himself with tearing the tunic and wearing half of it as a kind of loin-cloth, his skin grew tanned and firm. He was known now to the peasants of the region, who sometimes passed through the small basin in which the lake lay, or came to the lake with nets for the fish. Sometimes they brought him bread or cheese or a pot of herb-soup. He knew that they were not Christians in any sense that made the term serious; but they revered him as mad and holy. And though he scarcely exchanged a word with them, he felt wholly in harmony with their lives, their outlooks, their spirits. Their religion had been touched

by the official creeds of the pagan Empire little more than it had been touched later by Christianity; its roots were in the ancient Celtic cults, or in cults that lay even earlier in the dark of time. Their ideas were strangely in the key of those that burned in Paulinus. They thought of a victim-god periodically dying to save the world, to ensure fertility; of sacramental meals of bread and wine that were the flesh and blood of god, of the virgin bride, mother and daughter, who suckled the divine babe. And yet, he knew, these ideas of theus had somehow to be lifted on to a new level, a new centre of aspiration and union, before they became the love of Christ that was his. But he did not make any effort to convert or to explain; a different commandment was laid on him. And while he was maturing in the solitude, he found the faith of the peasants closer to him than could have been that of any orthodox member of an episcopal flock.

He had severed himself from the old life, but a death was not necessarily over in a moment. The world in him had to die slowly, utterly; only then would he be perfectly reborn. And the sphere into which he was being reborn was obscurely connected with the struggle of perpetual toil in which the peasants lived. The pattern of renewal which was deepening, clarifying, strengthening within his spirit was like a reflection from that life. Through it he gained his point of contact both with the common life of earth and with the new world into which he had to enter and with which he would in due course wrestle for the fuller glory of God. He loved these men and women and children, who scarcely knew the name of Christ, because in them was the material of all the good and the evil that constituted the new level of struggle for which he was preparing himself. And, lying awake in the night and listening to the night-noises, he understood how he could feel and know two contradictory truths at once: that he blessed the world, which was entangled everywhere with evil, and so accepted evil, and therefore in a sense blessed evil, and that he yet, by that very act of acceptance and blessing, was taking the vow to defeat evil, to struggle against evil unceasingly and at a thousand points, wrestling till his grasp took in the whole of life and the evil in that wholeness became part of the very body of God pulsing upon him and within him, as Jacob wrestled of old with the angel by the riverside and found renewal and a new name. And now the vision broadened and took in the whole of the world, not only the peasants who were the first necessary point of contact; and the pattern of the passion enclosed and revealed and merged with the life of toil all over the world, and suddenly, at the climax of the mass, that life became a single thing, a single man, the unity of men, and became the body of Christ broken and renewed in glory and transfiguration, and there was no division.

And then he understood why the voice that spoke to Antony the swine-herd had said, *Go, sell all thou hast, and give to the poor . . . and follow me.* And why Augustine had been tormented and compelled by the realisa-

tion that poor men everywhere had found the strength to live the life of Christ, which remained so terrible and impossible for him in his learning and his cherished lust. And he listened to the noises of the night, and happiness overbrimmed in star-spilth, in the least rustle of living thing in the thicket of darkness: lifting his arms and feeling the body of his desired union suddenly pressed against him, a touch of the bridegroom, till sometimes he ran out and stumbled over the stones in the night and cut his flesh on their sharpness, and even plunged into the dark, engulfing waters, into the very heart of his terror, to cool that burning, for which his flesh was not yet enough purified.

Yes, there were moments when his body was like a strangling vestment, and he had to use all his self-control to stop his hands from tearing at it, to get free at last. Moments when the fever danced on his bones in the shapes of devils, terrible in beauty or gibbering, pointing fingers, skipping before him to the cliff-edge of madness, soul-death, despair. Moments when he fell down in a faint of hunger and lay in the hollow of God's hand with stars and sun and moon, strange dissolutions of wheeling movement, gyres of the flame of silence. Then he rose up, walking with raised shoulders and trailing arms like Adam on the First Day, and fell to the earth again, and after a while found a root or a handful of berries, or a peasant came with a crust of sweaty bread. The winter-chills gnawed like worms in his bones, the harsh spring-winds flung him to the ground, and yet he did not die.

Then the happiness returned. He shared his berries and his bread with the birds that came to the hollow for water; they lost their fear of him. A bird sang on the bough above his head, or stalked into the cave to find if he had crumbs to spare. His prayers at morn and eve merged with the bird-cries. He found more happiness in the trust of the birds than he had ever found in anything during his past life; it bound him to the earth, the delivered earth. And so in the web of dawn-dew, in the shifting skein of leaf-shadows, in the moment between midnight and dawn when he woke and knew that all wild things had also woken, in the cloud-images floating on the water, in the breaking of a berry on his palate, he watched and tasted the changing life of God and waited for the flash of sweetness, the bell-note, when he would be absorbed fully into that life, and the changes would be merged in the unending light, the single swell of song.

2. *Among the Bagaudae*

While they were laired in the island, Audax gained from Leo and Gavius a full account of the work which Zonaras had done on behalf of the Bagaudae. He found it hard for some time to get his old concept of Zonaras into focus with that which emerged from the disclosures; but gradually he managed to bring the two halves together and make up what he felt at last must be something like the whole man. He knew so

well the intense hatred of the doctor for all oppressions, his dreaming of the perfect expression of the "law of nature" on a new level of world unity; and he came to understand how these attitudes had led him into his relations with the Bagaudae. The contact first came through a wounded Bagauda whom he had tended and who confessed the true reason for his wound. Zonaras had hidden the man and helped him to escape. The word had got round among the Bagaudae; they knew that he could be trusted, one way and then another he was drawn into giving further aid, medicine or information or refuge. Finally he had thrown himself heart and soul into partisanship, and had used his position in the town, his wide clientele among the poorer folk, to extend the body of sympathisers and to organise support. He had felt strongly that the Bagaudae, consisting of peasants and serfs in revolt, would never be able to achieve anything stable unless they could find means of rousing and uniting the slaves and free caste-labourers of the towns. Leo and Gavius, members of the dockers union or guild, had been the leaders of the conspiratorial group in Lugdunum.

"Other towns have a fair lot of sympathisers, of course," said Leo, "but it was only at Lugdunum we were really organised . . . and now that's all broken up."

"I'm sorry I acted rashly," said Audax, "since I didn't help Zonaras, and it meant you had to run off . . ."

"Don't be sorry. You did the right thing. And we should have had to run anyway within a few days. Things would have got too hot for us after the police-spies had followed up the bits of evidence that led them to Zonaras. It's just as well you started us off when you did. Otherwise we might have lingered too long—and then . . ."

But how strong was the movement in the countryside? Gavius gave a picture of it, of the way it had surged up a score of years ago, but had been broken by Aetius acting in conjunction with the Visigoths. Now there were only scattered bands in the wilder parts still under arms; but there was a very large number of serf-farmers, agricultural slaves, and the like, who would rise the moment there was any chance of a mass revolt sweeping to success.

"We hoped that Attila would break things up more than he did. We were in touch with him. . . . Though if we had been able to use him the way we hoped, we should have had to fight him ourselves in the end. . . . But things didn't work out that way."

Leo added, "And now our hope lies in Spain. All over the west and centre there the peasants are coming out, and we've had messages that that's only the beginning."

Zonaras was dead, they learned. He had escaped torture in the jail by swallowing some poison that he had kept ready hidden about him.

They stayed on the island a week, food being brought over in a skiff

by a friend under cover of darkness; and then they took the wherry they had hauled up under some bushes and made their way downstream for some miles. Then they broke up the wherry and started across country for a place in the hills where they would be able to get into touch with the nearest fighting group. After wandering for four days—one of which was taken up by following a false trail—they found the mountain hamlet which they sought, and through the headman they obtained a guide to the rebel camp near by in a small valley. About thirty men were gathered in a large shed once used for cattle, to which a fresh thatched roof had been added.

They were welcomed in friendly fashion, but without any special enthusiasm. Audax was disappointed; he had expected a band of partisans living perpetually in a patriot abandon and looking only for a chance to sally forth in a last forlorn hope of defiance. But these men seemed most concerned about where the next meal was to come from. Instead of broad discussions about a national rising, they talked of the successful raids they had made on country-houses or highway travellers. They were all of peasant stock, except for one unpleasant fellow with a torn nostril, who described himself as a sailor from Massilia, but seemed merely a rogue from nowhere in particular. The high hopes, the sense of taking part in a significant political movement, which had filled Audax excitingly during his first days with Leo and Gavius, began to fall away, he felt that he had merely become a member of a brigand band. And though that was perhaps better than the paralysed condition into which he had been falling since he ran off from Marusius, yet it was a sad declension from the emotions he had felt when he stood on the booth to raise the people against the authorities. A blind blow of resistance, a lawless greed substituted for a greed backed by the State.

And yet, as he came to know the men better, in the give-and-take of the small daily tasks and activities, his feeling of loss subsided. On the whole there was warmth of brotherly union about the band; a few of the elder men might be inclined to grumble and impede, and a few of the younger to gather round the rascally sailor with the torn nostril, but the bond that held the group together had strength and virtue. It was with a shock that Audax attended the first meeting called to discuss various measures about food. The elected council of three presided, but every member had full rights of discussion, and the decision lay in the majority vote, if the leaders couldn't carry the meeting with them they had to submit to its directions. Democratic representative forms had so long ceased to have reality in the political milieu to which Audax had been bred that this simple little arrangement staggered him. But he could see that it came naturally to the peasants in the ordering of their own affairs—a tradition from clan days which had straggled on in various minor aspects of village life—aspects with which the imposed State control hadn't bothered to interfere. And now the State control had fallen

away, and the native tradition rose up again to fill out the empty spaces. But what confused Audax was the fact that the tradition, as he saw it expressed in the meeting of the rebel group, was in fact much closer than anything in the familiar State world to many elements of theory which he had absorbed in his education—theory about the Roman Freeman and his relation to power, the Delegation of Authority, and so on. And talking the matter over with Leo, in rather incoherent formulation, he began to realise that Leo felt no difficulty; for in the guilds and fraternities, despite the heavy State supervision, something of a true representative system lingered on, ready to reassert itself if only the State power was removed.

And again, as he came to know the peasants better, he found that they were far from being so limited in their interests as he had supposed. His feeling of the anarchic element in them was disturbed by the discovery that they had their dreams of unity, of a changed world, as much as he had—in fact their dreams were far more firmly rooted and purposive than his. The difficulty had merely been to learn their idiom, their angle of approach, their method of summation. He seemed to track out two different trails in their minds, allied trends impacting from different levels of social experience on the one hand the Christian idiom of revolution such as Leo had uttered in his appeal to the crowd at Lugdunum, and on the other hand an obscure but powerful fraternity bond coming from organisational forms of immemorial age, which had survived in the villages despite the pressure of both Roman State and Christian Church. These latter forms were built round rituals of sowing and harvest, and were imbedded deep in the productive life of the country; and they included the election of mimic kings and queens, dance-leaders, fertility heroes, guisers of bear and wolf.

Leo was the only one with whom Audax could discuss in any fullness his thoughts, his difficulties and sudden hopes. For Leo had been the man most in the confidence of Zonaras, and he had a townsman's mental agility, together with sympathy for the peasant ways, he could follow the direction of Audax's efforts to grasp the underlying realities of their movement, and often made a remark which clarified what had been only a confused suggestion. The winter passed in a continual discussion, a slow but steady broadening of views and aspirations. "The problem for us," said Audax, "is to find a definite plan . . . an understandable programme . . . an appeal, a war cry, which will catch up all this mass of revolting emotion in town and country and give it constructive purpose. That's why they beat us, the oppressors, because they have a system and we have only an emotion. . . . The world has got to hang together somehow, and men will accept the most evil system as long as it holds things together . . . unless we show them another way . . . and not only show it in words—for words remain only emotion. We have to start building it up, offering an alternative. Words play their part, of course. We need the

words, but we must have words that lead straight to action, to a way of life, a form of life. A form, an organisation."

Stirred by Audax's earnestness, Leo began to feel the pressure of the need. "Yes, yes, and we can't waste time. Perhaps this coming year is the last chance we'll have. Everything depends, I feel sure, on what our comrades in Spain do. If they succeed, the people will rise all over Gaul, the whole of the West will revolt."

"But how can we succeed unless we can offer the alternative? . . . Otherwise, even if we did succeed, we'd only start the same thing all over again. A blind circle."

Leo stamped about. "Yes, yes. . ."

In his struggles to get at grips with his new world of action, Audax had ceased to make further enquiry after Phoebe. Leo and Gavius consoled him by pointing out that she must be safe, for if she'd been captured, the news of it would have got about. But where exactly she was at the moment, was a difficult question—communication between the small guerilla groups was very imperfect, especially now that the centre at Lugdunum was destroyed.

"The lads on that barge can be relied on to have done their best," said Gavius. "They were our chief means of getting messages and supplies up and down the river. They'll have put her ashore somewhere where she'd be most safe. We'll hear sooner or later. That's all we can say."

A girl had come over from the village to say that the Bishop of Valentia was on the way to Lugdunum; a report had been sent up from a smith at a village lower down, who had it from a shepherd, who had it from a stableman at an imperial post-station, who had it from a courier. A meeting was held, and the band decided to make a raid. There was also the matter of a village priest near the highway to settle, he had been lending money at twenty per cent to the farmers and foreclosing on their land—and even the Church didn't approve of its priests taking more than twelve per cent. The meeting decided to deal with both priest and bishop on the one expedition. Half a dozen men were detached to raid the priest's house, strip him and beat him, burn all the mortgage-bonds, and carry off any of his goods that caught their eye. The main body, among whom Audax found himself, were to waylay the bishop and his train.

The ambush was easily carried out. Things had been quiet in the neighbourhood for many months, and the bishop had taken no special precautions. A tree had been cut down and laid across the road on the farther side of a sharp corner; and when the three guards cantering ahead were held up by this barrier, the train fell into confusion, the ambushers rushed out, and, after a brief fight in which one of the guards was shot down with an arrow, the train surrendered. The bishop ap-

peared at the door of his carriage, red in the face and full of expostulation, till one of the Bagaudea slapped him soundly with a sheathed sword. The booty was rapidly packed on the back of horses and asses, the bishop's retainers were disarmed, and the bishop, trying once more to expostulate, was pushed into the ditch, from which his attendant priests rescued him in a slimy condition.

The raiders were about to depart when Audax glanced at the retainers. Some of them were cowering, others standing nonchalant or blank-faced. He whispered to Leo, who said, "Of course, go on." And after a false start, in which his voice failed him, he managed to call out, "Hey, you fellows there! do any of you want to join us?" For a moment there was no answer, the retainers did not seem even to have heard his call. Then one or two heads were turned his way. "Come on. Stand up for yourselves!" He thought he saw one man wavering, and stepped closer. "We're not thieves; you know that. We're fighting for the people's rights." One of the men, not the one at whom Audax had been looking, came out, jostling those in front of him.

"All right." The speaker was one of the slaves.

Audax said a few more words of appeal, but there seemed no further response, the men shifted uneasily and refused to look at him. He turned and took the arm of the slave; and as he moved away another man darted out, bending down a little, as if he expected a blow, and ran up to him on the other side. The raiders, who had been watching these events, stirred and began their retreat. Looking back, Audax saw the bishop, supported by two of the priests, raising his hand in malediction after the raiders and saying something. A Bagauda, who had also looked back, remarked reassuringly, "Ha, he's cursing and excommunicating us. But there's no need to worry. We don't belong to his diocese; his curses can't find us out."

That night, as they lay round the camp-fire, the idea came to him. He rose and went out of the range of the firelight, and paced up and down for a while. Thoughts stirred and sang in his head, the night was soft with premonitions of the moon; and life was a simple space of vast sweeping forms, craggy against stars. He went back and sat down by Leo. "I've got it."

Leo turned over and belched, and asked what he'd got.

"Our war-cry, our basis. Abolish slavery and serfdom! And with that naturally goes: The land to the peasants! I don't mean that those words solve everything. But they give us the right start. That's the important thing—what we've been trying to see. The right start. . . ."

Leo sat up. He scratched himself idly. "You've got the idea, but I can't catch this damned flea. . . ." He yawned. "Yes, it sounds good. . . . Yes, it gives a new start. Something's come out of it. . . . Yes, it's in the line of all that Zonaras said. Damn it all, yes, you're right." He

looked round for some wine. "That bishop had a good taste in wine all right. We'll talk it over, lad. I feel you're right."

A couple of days later, with the help of Leo and Gavius, Audax put his views before a general meeting, and despite some cavilling by the old men, his proposal was adopted by a large majority.

"We can't ever achieve anything solid unless we know what we're after," said Leo. "That's why the peasants have been rising for the last hundred years or so, and every time they've begun well, and they've smashed a lot of dirty dogs up, and then they've got it in the neck themselves. That's what happened when Aetius broke the big rising a few years ago. And it'll happen again in Spain, where our people are rising now. Audax has got the right idea. We must find a plan and stick to it, or we've got no hope; and it's got to be a plan that will bring in all the underdogs against the State and the landlords and the bishops. Otherwise they split our ranks. Try to use your brains, brothers, you lot of rattle-pated bumpkins. I know it hurts, but it's worth while, and it gets easier in time."

The men voted to have the matter thrashed out at further meetings on the following days and then to send messengers round to explain the decisions to the other groups of Central Gaul. But the problem of Spain was more pressing. It was finally agreed that Audax and Leo should go off and try to get into touch with the leaders of the peasant revolt on the other side of the Pyrenees and persuade them to unite their forces under the single programme of Abolition of slavery and serfdom, and the Land for the working peasants. Such a programme merely put in slightly sharpened form the emotions struggling incoherently behind the revolts; but by giving explicit definition and aim it would have the power of transforming the whole situation. At least that was what Audax felt.

3. Embassies at Tolosa

But there were others also keeping a keen eye on the risings in Spain. Sollius and various other magnates had been foregathering at Lugdunum and Ugernum, assessing the position and canvassing measures to meet it. And since there was no point in appealing to the paralytic imperial Government, these informal councils of the men who held the land, the key to power, had resulted in couriers and embassies to Tolosa, the capital of the Visigothic kingdom in Gaul. Much as the magnates might fear the Visigoths, they feared a mass revolt of peasants and slaves far more, and who but the Visigoths were in a position to act effectively? They had played a leading part in the last general campaign in Gaul against the Bagaudae, they had a strong warrior force mobilisable at a moment's notice; they were kinsmen of the Visigoths who were now the dominant power in Spain.

"Theodoric aims at expanding his rule," said Sollius. "Let us turn his

eyes to Spain. Let him seek to bring the Visigothic power there under his control. We shall then gain two ends—we shall break the peasant-rising in Spain, which threatens to spread, and we shall divert Theodoric from expanding into Central Gaul. . . .”

As he was driven home, he pondered the situation further, and decided that in such a crucial matter he could not trust only to the moves decided on at Ugernum; he must send his own personal ambassador to Tolosa to size up the position there. And in such a delicate business who could he send but his son Hesperius, who was turning out as admirably as that waster Paulinus had turned out badly?

Hesperius was at Lauriacum. The episode of the ladder had scared him, he had made up his mind to break his affair with Aeonia. The breaking was all the easier in that he had been up the ladder, without any scandal, on seven nights before Paulinus made such a fool of himself, and he no longer felt such an ardour for Aeonia's bed. He was afraid that she would do something imbecile, she had become so infatuated. Not that he blamed her for the infatuation, but it in its way constituted a further reason for making the break, she had been becoming tediously jealous and possessive. By taking a risk, she managed to corner him in the orchard on the other side of the shrubbery, and made a tearful scene; but the good sense of her maid, Arethusa, who got her away before anyone else came on them, prevented an exposure. Hesperius rewarded the maid by taking her to bed for several nights—for more reasons than one. She was pretty in a swarthy way; he wanted to get her on his side, to help in controlling her mistress, his relations with her, which various attendants could attest, were a kind of alibi, in case any suspicions about himself and Aeonia came out, and finally he wanted to insure against any rashness on his own part, and Arethusa's embraces sufficiently took his mind off Aeonia and any impulse to resuscitate the liaison. And so he weathered that nasty moment. After a slight attack of brain fever—put down by the house-doctor to shock resulting from Paulinus's brutish attempt—Aeonia weakened and acquiesced in the loss of her lover. One glimpse that Hesperius got of her in the hall showed that she had lost most of her good looks, had a dimmed and washed-out appearance; and that pleased him, since it made his abandonment of her all the more sensible and easy. (She was with child, as he learned later when she bore a girl, to her husband's surprise.) Meanwhile Hesperius went to stay with a friend and did some boar-hunting and then bought a young German slave-girl at Lugdunum.

He was tiring of this girl, whose stupidity had ceased to be charming, when his father arrived back from Ugernum. The proposal of the trip to Tolosa suited him very well. He went over the political situation with Sollius in detail, and remarked that he could look up Montius, who was such an authority on fish-sauces, and decided he'd have a chance to learn a few things about Visigothic women.

"Yes, father, it's specially important to us, our estates lying on the border. Exactly. Trust me."

Sollius ran his slightly protruding eye over his stalwart son, and smiled, and thought that he could trust him, definitely.

"I'd go myself if I wasn't sure you could handle it. It's a big thing. It'll be the making of you, my son. When you come back, we'll see about starting you off on your political career. I'll arrange to have you made tribune of the praetorium. Gaudentius was putting out his chest because of that son of his, a nincompoop, only a year older than you, has been attached to the Vicariate. I tell you what I'll do. I'll toss Avitus a wink and he'll put you in the Prefect's Council, and then you'll have privileges and status above Gaudentius and his Council of the Diocese. . ."

And so, three weeks later, Hesperius found himself lying in a heap of purple cushions stuffed with goose-down, under a canopy with gold fringe, in the river-barge of Montius, with an oak grating under his feet to make sure he didn't tread in the bilge, and Montius was drawing away. "No, my dear boy, don't go by appearances. The secretary to keep your eye on is Polemius. He's the sly dog that pulls the strings. Don't be misled by the fact that he looks like a mangy rat and shuffles his feet all the while. He's the one to slip the gold to, not that fat Perdix, who talks with chin stuck out at you. Well, you came to the right man when you came to me."

"Tell me, Lucius," said Hesperius jestingly. "How do you do so well if you had to give up two-thirds of your estate to the savages? You can't tell me that you manage your fish-sauces out of a measly third."

"Ah, ha, ha," laughed Montius. "Now you're asking something. Do have some more of that golden wine. And look how delightful the reflections are in the water, those willows there, you brute. . . Why isn't life always an afternoon? It's such a nice time . . . especially after a good meal."

"I'm seeing the King tomorrow."

"Praise his archery, my dear boy, and if he's so kind as to play a board-game with you, take care you lose. Cheat if necessary with the dice to get low throws. And say you're bored with choirs of young boys or girls. Don't forget he's a pious Arian heretic. Say you love a good bawled-out hymn. And if you get a chance, comment on the comely smoothness of his knees."

He presented himself early at the Court. The King had already been with a small suite to Mass, and was now in the royal seat, with armed nobles standing about him. Hesperius, sponsored by the secretary Polemius, passed the outer barrier and the chatting guards in their skin-coats at the door; a page-boy lifted one end of the green curtain. He entered the hall, where the Vandal ambassador was already being received, promising a consignment of panthers, a man whose face seemed

made up of a number of bulges. Theodoric, large and heavily-built, with a touch of athletic condition about his ruddy face and quick movements, was dressed in a skin-coat, to keep up the tradition of clan equality; but the way in which the tradition was now almost entirely pretence appeared in the trimmings of gold braid, the costly baldric, the decorated shoes and leg-wraps. His large face, rendered hairless by tweezers, beamed at Hesperius, and then he tossed back the long hair that came down over his ears; and he certainly seemed proud of his bare knees—not to mention his long eyelashes. Hesperius recalled the titter of Montius: "True, he has the hairs in his nostrils cut every day." With an effort he gathered his wits and bowed and spoke of his father's limitless esteem of the mighty monarch. Theodoric beamed and said that yesterday he'd inspected the stable and the previous day the Treasury, and so today he'd hunt, and he regally suggested that Hesperius should go with him.

The hunt started at once. With shouts from the guards and a great stamping and galloping of horses, the cavalcade proceeded to a thicket only a short distance from the royal villa. A page-boy carried the King's bow, and Theodoric confided to Hesperius that he considered it derogatory of royal dignity for a king to carry his own bow. Hesperius agreed, and Theodoric beamed on him. The beaters sent forward a small herd of deer, which had been apparently kept ready in a cage, and yelled, "Deer for the King!" Theodoric at once snatched the bow from the page; it was purposely handed to him with the string all hanging loose. He held it in both hands and bent the extremities together with a powerful turn of the wrists. The courtiers applauded. He shot and killed two of the deer, and then the herd had got past into the further recesses of the woodland. He handed the bow back to the page, who at once unstrung it. "It's effeminate to have a strung bow kept ready," Theodoric confided to Hesperius, who agreed. "Pick out something for me to shoot at!" the King went on. Hesperius picked out a white mark on a tree not far off. The King took the bow and this time strung it by setting the knot-end down against his lifted heel and running his finger up the slack string. The courtiers applauded. He shot and missed the mark. "It is the vision of Marcus Hesperius that is at fault," said one of the courtiers tactfully, "not the archer's skill." Everyone applauded, including Hesperius, and the King beamed.

After a few more such episodes the company got once again on horseback and set off as if going on a day's ride, to wheel a few moments after into the gates of the royal villa. Hesperius was invited to dine.

"The board does not groan beneath a mass of dull and unpolished silver set on by panting servitors," said the secretary Perdix, "the weight lies rather in the conversation than in the plate."

The dining-room was hung with purple silk, except by the King's couch, where some linen curtains had been set in order that Theodoric

might remark on his taste for simplicity—the abundance of purple silk in the rest of the room proving that his taste didn't come from lack of rich materials. "We have few toasts," he remarked to Hesperius, and in fact there were not more than about a score, and only three of the nobles fell off their couches through drunkenness. Theodoric was getting ruddier and more amiable, and Hesperius felt that the moment had come to make an appreciative remark about his athletic but smooth knees and to signify a preference for simple hymn-tunes.

Theodoric announced that in order to honour Hesperius he would intermit the siesta and play a board-game at once with him. The board, the pieces, and the dice-boxes were brought. Every time that Theodoric rattled his box, he made lengthy humorous apostrophies to the dice. "Ah, one sees the strategist in every move," said Hesperius as the King was moving some of his pieces; and when he lost the game in a dexterous fashion that enabled the King to show his best skill, his reputation as a courtier had been established at Tolosa. At the ninth hour, when the audiences began again and Theodoric resumed his place on the royal seat, Hesperius withdrew.

Things could hardly have been going better. In a side-room of the chancellery, pigeon-holed for important State documents, he had a conversation in a subdued voice with Polemius. The Visigothic Government, said Polemius, was well aware of the issues at stake in the little matter of the insurgent peasants of Spain, not only did they sympathise with their Visigothic brethren in Spain, whose control would end if the peasants weren't put down, but they also fully realised the danger of the Gallic peasantry being stimulated to come out in mass again. "In a matter like this all petty differences sink. Gothic or Roman land-owners stand shoulder to shoulder against the common foe, the populace." Indeed, everything was going so well that Hesperius kept looking for the catch; he wanted to make sure that Theodoric would turn his eyes definitely south and give up any hopes of expanding into Auvergne. But that was too touchy a matter to be mentioned outright, he would have to find a way of getting at it in some veiled form. He left Polemius, feeling intensely elated and suspicious, and reminded himself not to forget the Arian metropolitan bishop. The lesser Arian clergy, Montius had said, might scowl at a Catholic, but the metropolitan had a sound notion of his responsibility and of the intricacy of Visigothic national policy, especially if he got a tasteful but costly present. Politics, decided Hesperius, weren't as dull as he had thought; they had their excitement, almost as much as boar-hunting or woman-catching.

Yes, he had been so taken up with his mission that he had quite forgotten his intention to investigate the qualities of Visigothic ladies and sluts. He recalled that intention again the next afternoon, when he was dining at the house of Athanarich, a Visigothic noble, whose wines were

excellent. The dinner was in the usual Roman fashion—the Visigoths did their best, whether in legal enactments or table manners, to ape the culture which they had conquered. But there was one detail which was more Visigothic than Roman and which proved Hesperius's undoing. Some high-breasted women came into a recess at one end of the room and stood talking vivaciously there, and Hesperius surmised that they must be some kind of Visigothic harlots, mimes or tumblers, though they were richly dressed. They frankly stared at the guests, and then, after speaking to the man on the nearest couch, they went out by a side door. At the time Athanarich happened to be out of the room, seeing to some hitch or other in the *pièce-de-résistance* of the meal.

Hesperius, in a recoil from the careful watch he had had to keep over himself all the previous day, had been drinking rather heavily. Otherwise he would hardly have been so rash as to slip off the end of his couch and follow the woman-trail. His intentions were not at all clear, but he thought that at the worst he might arrange for one of the women to visit him. He came abruptly on two of them returning down the passage, and put his arms round the one in the red-and-blue dress, who had yellow hair. The clout she gave him was surprising, but that only made him set his teeth and take a closer grip. Women couldn't do that kind of thing to Hesperius. They lurched against a curtained door and he tried to drag her inside. At that moment he died, almost painlessly, and sagged in the woman's arms so that she let him drop and stood back panting. Wulfila, a trusty retainer, had driven a dagger under his left shoulder-blade as a warning of what happened to young men who tried to rape his master's wife.

4 Further Events in Aquitaine

Audax had a Canonical Letter, which had been taken from a clerk waylaid by one of the Bagauda bands. Such a letter was an attestation given by a bishop to priests or clerks of his diocese when they travelled abroad; it would serve as a passport for Audax and give him the best chance of escaping molestation. He was now, in consequence, Faustus, clerk of the Bishop of Avenio, travelling on business connected with some distant lands left to the Bishop's church in a legacy, and Leo was Leo his servant.

They rode westward, through valleys where the crops were maturing, and over the brown river between hay-banks, across bits of moorland where lizards whisked from every heated stone, then down to the river again, over a bed of pebble and sand, the waters turning from olive-green to emerald, and up a winding road again, to rest amid green shade lighted by campions and lilac campanulas, and past the stunted oaks to a broad view, the deep basin of the mountains flooded with green and the gilded sun-foam, and the faint line of the far uplands in a blue swoon, and down in the shaggy valley the vein of the river glittering turquoise

to crystal, while chanting men cut barley for forage. They slept on a warm curve of sand that sloped into the stream; and boatmen poled by as they breakfasted, and hailed them and went on before them with a song; and they rode past patches of rye, and heard the river booming to its rapids, and in the dusk met a goose-girl with her home geese and goat-bitches with stiffly jerking udders. The moon came over the hilltops, with distant lightning-flickers and thunder-taps, and the toads sang. Past silver beeches they came among the heather, and then were down by the river again, in a narrowing gorge, the land southward raised in gloomy bluffs; and the freshening breeze tossed up the cumulus clouds. The road climbed, and once more they looked into unimagined distances, tree-masses waving below in broad, magnificent undulations, and the sweeping plain behind, with silvering river-thread, and roll on roll of faint ranges slit with shadow-passes, soft sheens fading into the ultimate frail light-blooms, and Leo found some wild strawberries. The wind from the north pushed up cloud-masses, they passed blunt knolls and entered a forest-shade and rode through a broad tableland, parallel ranges at right angles to the river and scamed with valleys. The rush of a grunting swineherd across the track almost unhorsed them. They rattled over the pebbly track by the stream, over strips of grass wedged between the stream and the closing walls steepest on the right, precipitous scree of loose granite with convolvulus heaped pinkly at the foot, and on the left the bells of goats on the slanted cliff, with blue butterflies fluttering from the purple bugloss. The woodland thickened, with glimpses of bald summits lofty on the right, and then between stunted oaks they rode along winding tracks of chipped granite, looking down on the rushing waters in the gorge, until dusk came again with sweet air and the tolling of oxen.

And so they made their way westward, and at last crossed the Garonne, after Leo had pitched rocks in to make sure that he had got the shepherd's directions about the ford correct. "You can tell the different sound when the water's deep." Then, near Sontuates, they heard rumours that the Visigothic host was already on the move from Tolosa; and they rode faster, debating in the dusk the chances of getting across the Pyrenees in time and the best ways of putting their message before the leaders of the Spanish peasants.

At Aquae Tarbellicae they got in touch with the guild of ironworkers, they had been given the names of sympathisers among its members. They lodged for two days in the house of an old ironworker and were provided with elaborate instructions about the route to take. Details about the leaders of the nearest bands of revolting peasants were also given, and three letters, in which their mission was set forth succinctly and an appeal for its immediate consideration was made. The letters simplified things greatly, but were highly dangerous baggage. After

much discussion, Audax and Leo decided to take the risk in view of the value that the letters would have for expediting their whole business; and Leo split open some leatherwork of his saddle, inserted the papers, and then sewed the leather up again. They set off from the town with raised hopes, feeling their mission suddenly brought close to earth, no longer a mere cloudy aspiration.

But a day's ride south of the town they lost their way in a confusion of fading valleys at day's end, and next day went even more astray, distracted by interlacing streams and a dividing valley, there was only a slight ridge between two streams, and the stream that they chose brought them to a cul-de-sac of limestone cliffs; they had to return and climb up a shelving slope of rough, loose stones, and camp under the overhanging ledges on the top, hoping that no storm would come up out of the lowering weather. Their bread was running short, and next day they crossed an open grass-saddle littered with boulders, unable to get their bearings in the driving mist and changing contours, and picked their way over a fallen mass of scree, following an uncertain sheep-track.

They came suddenly down out of the mist on to the lost road and a small village, and were so exhausted that they would have kept on riding into the village even if they had noticed the glint of arms sooner than they did. The Visigoths came lounging out to watch them pull up before the largest house. "We are travellers, we lost our way and have eaten nothing for twelve hours," said Audax, but the Visigoths showed no interest in his remarks. Neither did the few villagers who had come into the road. "We want food, we are starving, we'll pay for it," shouted Audax in anger, and still nobody took any notice. Then the man in charge of the Visigothic detachment, with a priest behind him, appeared at the door of the house on which Leo had beaten. "We need food," Audax cried, holding out some coins.

The officer signed to them to dismount, and Audax produced his Canonical Letter. But before he could hand it to the officer and begin any explanations, the priest snatched it from him.

"Ah, heretics; I thought so," he said in a guttural voice.

"But men of peace," replied Audax.

The officer looked bored and went inside, but the Arian priest was obviously not going to lose the chance for theological discussion, especially as the appeal-to-persuasion-by-force (if necessary) was so strongly weighted on his side. "Here you behold one of the vile heretics who mislead the blinded people with foul fabrications concerning a supposed Trinity, which have no warrant in the Gospel and the words of our Saviour." He jeered, and gesticulated to the warriors, who looked at Audax and Leo with hostility, but not with much interest. "Ha, you have no words to defend your indefensible position," the Arian priest went on. "Your Church relies only on the authority of the Imperial State to carry its points and enforce the decisions of its packed Councils.

Are you aware that the Council of Nicaea, which banished the great Arius and condemned his views, represented only a snatch-vote, some three hundred bishops out of near two thousand? How can you defend the ridiculous propositions that make the Son one with, yet born of the Father?" His furious eyes glared at Audax, who was at a loss to uphold his rôle of Catholic clerk without embroiling himself

"Is this the time and place for such matters?" he asked as mildly as he could.

"The matters of salvation can never be out of time or place," sneered the Arian priest, who was folding and refolding the Canonical Letter as if he would like to tear it up.

"I appeal to the officer in charge here," said Audax. "He will bear me out that though the Visigothic church is Arian, yet the King graciously permits the Catholics in his domain to hold peaceably by their creed. How much more, then, may a mere traveller, passing through his domain, assert the claim to tolerance."

"Ha, but what tolerance for Arians is there in the lands ruled by Catholics?" shouted the priest, who, however, seemed to be weakening. The soldiers were listening with the same dull hostility. "And why are you travelling?" the priest went on, seeking for further reasons to be unpleasant. "It is not the time for men of peace to be travelling in these regions." He sniffed, as if hoping to catch some suspicious odours.

"I tell you we are starving," protested Audax. He waved the coins again. "Who will sell us food?"

One of the villagers stirred and shuffled. "The soldiers have had all the food we've got to spare. We are a poor folk. Now we shall have to go short. The last harvest was bad. God is angry with the world."

However, Leo managed to find a woman who was ready to provide some rye-bread and a little goat-milk. While they were eating in her hut, the priest came in and asked for details about their journey. "So you're going to Pampaelo? That's a long way to go. About some property left to your bishop's church? It's a long way off." He was itching to find something suspicious, but couldn't find it, and his nose twitched. "You Catholics poisoned Arius, I suppose you know that? I'd be pleased to hear how you define the Holy Ghost—if you're able to define it at all." He sneered and went out.

Audax and Leo felt relaxed and weary; they didn't want to get up and go on with the journey. They sat on a bench while the woman complained about the crops and her husband and her goats.

"Go and see what he's doing," said Audax, getting uneasy.

Leo strolled out and reported that the priest was standing in the middle of the road looking as if he'd like to bite someone. An ox-cart rattled and groaned past; and then the Visigothic detachment began mustering, with a clatter of spears and hoarse voices. Audax decided to let them get on ahead; he had heard something about a rendez-vous of forces in the

pass about ten miles to the south-west. Then, while striving to throw off his sleepiness, he saw Leo beckoning at the door. He got up and went over. "He's fooling about with my saddle-bags," said Leo.

Perhaps it was on account of Audax's refusal to start off a theological debate; the priest was determined to find something to quarrel about. Some of the threads of Leo's sewing had come undone in the hard riding of the last few days, and the priest was poking a knife-blade into the spaces between the layers

"Come on," muttered Leo

He and Audax went swiftly over to the horses. As yet no alarm had been given. The priest was poking away with increased energy; he had evidently felt the papers, but so far no one else had noticed anything wrong. The Visigoths were standing in careless files in the roadway, waiting for the officer whose raised voice could be heard in the large cottage. The nearest file was about three yards off. Leo shouldered the priest away.

"Mind your own business "

Audax untied his horse's bridle and prepared to leap into the saddle.

The priest caught hold of Leo's arm. "What have you got hidden in your saddle? Documents aimed at cheating our Church, eh? I suspected something of the sort. What right has your heretic bishop to send his creatures after land that ought to belong to the true Church? You've been tolerated too long, and I can tell you that it isn't going to last for ever. Wait till we put out our hands and gather in the rest of Gaul. How long do you think that's going to be? Only a few years. Your power is tottering, and you know it. Now I mean to see those papers and find what it is exactly your bishop thinks he's going to grab. Ha, I'm not a fool. I knew you'd have papers if you were going to put in claims for what doesn't rightly belong to you. . . " He clung on to Leo's arm, and Leo didn't like to exert all his strength, but, the dispute was attracting attention.

"Let go or I'll knock you down," said Leo in a low, menacing voice

"Ha, so I guessed correctly?" cried the priest in triumph. He dragged at Leo and shouted to the soldiers. "Here now, arrest these rogues till I have a look at the papers they're hiding."

The soldiers hesitated, and Leo wrenched his arm free.

"Off, lad," he shouted.

Audax leaped into his saddle and galloped down the road; he had a confused glimpse of the priest on the ground, rolling over and stabbing at Leo's legs with the knife which he had been holding. Leo's horse was plunging and rearing, preventing Leo from mounting it, and the soldiers, at last deciding that something was really amiss, were breaking ranks and running forwards round Leo and the priest. Audax galloped on to the turn of the road by a clump of stript cork-trees with black boles, and then reined up. Leo hadn't managed to get into the saddle. The

horse had broken away and was dashing riderless down the road. A furious mellay in the village revealed that Leo was trapped and putting up a fight; he was out of sight, but the yells and heaving of forms showed that he was still holding off the Visigoths. With heavy heart Audax kicked at his horse's ribs and galloped away. It was hard to abandon Leo, but there was no choice.

He was riding savagely, in a careless rage, and as he was taking a corner, the horse slipped on some loose stones and rubble. He fell clear, on some nettles, but when he got the struggling horse up he found that it had sprained its left fore-leg. He led it limping on for a short way, because there seemed nothing else to do and he couldn't get his mind to grapple with the situation. Seeing a small farmhouse not far off the road, he led the horse up a lane towards it, wondering if he might be able to leave his injured horse in part exchange for another, he still had a good supply of gold in his purse. But the old woman said that the farm had no horse, only a couple of oxen, and though Audax made no effort to bargain for an ox, she told him angrily and at length that the oxen weren't for sale, and seemed sorry that she'd mentioned them. Then her man arrived from the fields, rubbing his gnarled hands on his smock and knitting his brows while he heard from the woman how the stranger was trying to get away with the oxen; and it took about half an hour before Audax explained things. Then he and the man examined the horse and decided that it wouldn't be rideable for weeks, and so there was nothing left for him but to ask the man to look after it. He gave the man a gold piece. "If I don't claim the horse within a couple of months, you can keep it." And the man bit the gold and weighed it in his hand and said stolidly, "What's to stop me hiding the horse away and saying it died?" And Audax said, "Nothing," and after that they began to get friendly.

He had a good meal, and stayed that night at the farm. Then he set out on foot. At the township about ten miles off he might be able to buy a horse, he had been told. But after he had gone about four miles he heard the thunder-roll of many horses coming down the highway, and went aside, climbing up a pine-clad slope to get a view of the countryside, and saw a large body of Visigothic cavalry, over two thousand strong, moving in his direction. He lay under some bushes, and waited till the riders had gone past, and the dust of their passage was like the crumbling and crushing of his hopes. He was already well behind the Visigothic advance, there was no doubt of it, and he no longer had any confidence in his capacity to get into Spain and do the necessary work of swaying and inspiring the peasant leaders there. Only now did he realise how much he had been leaning on Leo, on his rough energy, his ready wit and tongue, his ability to find the right approach to the peasants with whom they would have had to deal. And Leo had given his life in order to enable Audax to get on with the mission, and the only result was that

Audax felt perfectly useless and derelict. Lying there on the hard clay among the bushes, he covered his face with his hands, tasting the bitterness of defeat and torn with an agony of loss. He wept for Leo, feeling now belatedly the pity and grief of Leo's death, and seemed to be weeping for all the broken bodies, all the deaths of past, present, and future, which had been poured out in vain attempts to bring something noble and comradely to birth on the earth. Gone, gone, all gone, all forgotten. Breaking out like the lovely songs of the spring's birds, amid hunger and terror and madness of blind appetites, a vain and meaningless surge of loveliness and gratitude; and then an end of high dreams in the bloody puddles of death. And nothing gained, nothing made certain. What had he known of Leo? Now his relations with the man seemed crude, oblique, heartless, unresponsive; he remembered only momentary impacts, brief smiles and half-caught tones, the communion of silences and casual touch, which came to him from the hopeless past, infused with a delicate tenderness, a wasted potentiality, an individual richness. Gone, all gone, unwanted, unrealised. He wept, and the tears ran between his fingers on to the hard, gritty clay, and he smelt wild lavender, and a bird went flying off with scattering alarm-cry, and he lay wretched.

At last he sat up with bleared eyes and looked at the afternoon, and began mechanically eating some of the bread which he had taken from the farm. The bread refused to be masticated or swallowed, and tears came again. And then he rose up. No, I shall go on, after all, I shall go on and do my best, and that's all I can do. Zonaras, Leo. He was bound to the dead; he dare not fail the dead. He started off down the slope, slipped, and rolled to the edge of the roadway. Bruised and scratched, he sat up and smiled as he felt his ribs. He thought I needed waking up. But when he tried to stand, his ankle gave way. First the horse and now myself—it's too much of a good thing. He was ashamed and made an effort to walk on, but his ankle twisted under him with a stabbing pain and he collapsed. Now I've done it, he thought. And the thought was intolerable, it forced him to face what he was striving not to face. His desire to have an incontrovertible excuse for not going on any farther. It seemed that both the accidents had been willed, deliberate. He swore. I'll get to that township and buy a fresh horse and carry on. And he stood up and limped on another few yards. Then he collapsed again, with a howl of pain. It was no use. Whatever lay behind the accident, the accident itself had happened.

After resting awhile, he ate some bread and looked round for a convenient stick. Then he began the hobbling journey of return to the farm. Dusk came on him when he was only half-way, and he had to dive into some bushes while a small body of Visigothic horse cantered by. His whole left leg was numb with pain. He crawled under a large bush and decided to stay there for the night. He ate some more bread and fought to keep down the satisfaction that one part of him felt at the

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accident; and then suddenly out of the depths there swirled the agonising pity, a passion of regret and rage, and he beat at the ground, at his leg, wanting above all things in the world to rise and carry on, to step into the gap left by Zonaras and Leo, to die with the approving eyes of the dead upon him. And then the sneering smugness returned. How easy to feel that luxury of self-dedication when he couldn't do anything about it! He tried to persuade himself that his whole idea about the need and the possibility to give the peasant revolt a conscious and clarified programme had been futile, an expression of intellectual vanity, a mere memory of Iambulos' *City of the Sun*. But Leo had believed in it. Again the agony clenched his fists. An owl hooted terrifyingly near and unexpected, and he lay back, aware of the twisted mask of grief fixed on his face, the heat of drying tears, and felt childish, theatrical, desolate. Outside him the inexorable struggle of blind appetite was going unceasingly on, and all his sorrows and hopes did not seem even pitiful.

5. *Politics at Rome*

Prosper was well aware that big developments in his patron's career were close at hand. Aetius was consolidating his position in many ways, he was enlarging his personal corps, getting more and more of his followers into central bureaucratic offices, and he was putting the Emperor in a final corner about the project of marrying his son to the Princess Eudoxia. All these developments promised well for Prosper; the faithful dependents of Aetius were going to have every chance to rise in the world. Prosper himself was slowly but steadily working himself into a favourable position to make the most of the coming chances; he had already been sent once on a confidential mission to Ravenna. Marcellinus had told him that he was being watched. "Don't get dizzy, my dear fellow, if you soon find yourself moving upwards a little." He gave Prosper a shrewd, friendly look. "I think you can keep your head. That's the way to scale the heights. . . ." And he smiled, seeing the glint of eagerness which Prosper could not wholly repress.

Of course there were counter-forces. The eunuch minister Heraclius, who had taken the place of the dowager-Empress in dominance of the Emperor, was known to be a rooted foe of Aetius. And the Emperor himself had exploded in a few feeble mutters of menace, which were retailed extensively in the whispers of Court gossip; he had muttered quite a lot when Aetius had made him swear an oath of reconciliation after an outburst against the proposed marriage of Eudoxia. A mere subject to bind his superb and divine master the Emperor by an oath. . . . Let him beware. Even a worm will turn, even a divine Emperor will turn on his irreplaceable servant if he's jumped on too obviously. The mutters were much laughed at in the drinking-hours of the Dux's corps.

Yes, Prosper felt satisfied on the whole, even if at moments his extreme caution was suddenly thrown aside by that pressure of insatiable impatience which astonished even himself with the demands it was ready to make on life. But it was the caution that ruled in his daily life, in his duties as a guardsman, in his good-fellowship as a drinker, in his affair with the buxom Serena. That affair went on smoothly; it was almost as constant and quiet as a marriage. Serena had a husband—she needed him as a legal background—but he was a very unassuming person; he was always “on business in the south”, though that formula, Prosper knew for a fact, sometimes covered a melancholy retirement into the kitchen until guests were gone. For the rest, Serena was kind and sufficiently amorous, and she told Prosper whenever any of his friends tried to get at her behind his back.

Prosper and a young Roman noble named Idatius were in command of the dozen members of the bodyguard on duty. A page-boy came up with the message that they were to accompany Aetius on a visit to the Palace, and they drew up in files of four before the steps, to march in front of Aetius and his attendants. At the Palace they turned off into a room at the side of the main hall, where one of the officers of the palace guards awaited them. Wine was served by a couple of slaves; and Prosper, Idatius and the other officer discussed the next race meeting, while the men sprawled about on benches. Prosper felt depressed, he had lost heavily the previous night at dicing and he was weighed down by the sense of the distance to be traversed before he was really on the heights. What did he want? he asked himself with unusual introspective keenness. Did he truly want to climb up to a high military position? Wouldn't he be happier if he had a small farm and went on quietly out of the main rush of the world, feeding well, married to some loving and not too intelligent wife who would bear him half a dozen children, and joining the other small proprietors of the neighbourhood in hunts on regular beating-occasions? He failed to catch at any impulse in his mind that he could label Ambition; and yet there he was in actuality straining every nerve ambitiously and making himself miserable. He couldn't help trying to make the most out of whatever sphere he found himself in. His thoughts turned back to Auvergne. He had managed to pick up through various channels some idea of what had gone on there since his departure; he had even learned of his father's lawsuit failure and his charity post in the villa that he had lost. The latter part of the news puzzled him, but he gave up pondering about it; the main thing was the fact that he no longer had any patrimony. He had to make his own career or go under. And at that thought his jaw set again.

“They caught a scoundrel of an astrologer,” said Idatius. “He was putting spells on the horses. No wonder the favourite lost.”

The other officer, who had a lean, swarthy face, wanted, for some reason,

to impress Prosper. "I've got some better wine in my apartments. Shall we go there? I'll see that word's sent up as soon as the Lord Commander leaves the Sacred Presence. There's a painting I received only this morning too I commissioned it. It's of a lady-friend." He smiled fatuously and tried to recover himself and look dignified. "It's the work itself, of course. . . . And the wine comes from my father's vineyard near Ravenna. You've only just come back from that city, eh?"

Prosper nodded, wondering if the fellow was going to try to pump him about the letters he had had to deliver. But Idatius seized the chance to rattle off some antitheses. "O, Ravenna, what a place! a veritable compendium of the unnatural. The waters stand and the walls fall, the towers float and the ships stick fast, the baths are chilly and the houses blazing, the sick walk and the physician groans abed, the dead swim and the quick are parched, the police are asleep and the thieves wakeful, the clergy live by usury and the Syrians chant the psalms, business-men turn soldiers and soldiers business-men, old fellows play ball and young fellows hazard, eunuchs take to arms and barbarians to literature. In short, it is the epitome of our age and world, the mirror of our souls and——" His supply of phrases gave out, and he coughed. "Ravenna What a place!"

Prosper strained his ears, he had heard a clash, a crash, somewhere, muffled by doors and curtains. He couldn't estimate how near. But he didn't mention the noise. Instead he put his hand on his hilt and leaned closer to the palace officer. "Yes," he said distinctly and slowly, "we'll taste your wine." His sense of danger was increasing. "But I don't think we ought to leave the guardroom. Do be so good as to send a boy for it." He pacified Idatius by clapping him on the back. "What a rhetorician! It's a pity you haven't a sphinx to encounter. . . ." He heard another clash, slightly louder, and was sure that the officer also had heard it. "By the way, what's your name, friend?" He had the sensation of being suspended in time and space, as in a skiey rush of cloud and wind. "A sphinx," he went on to Idatius, "whom you with your well-chosen . . ." A door banged. "Exactly." The officer had flushed darkly. "Your well-chosen and riddling periphrases. . . ."

"What is it, Prosper?" asked Idatius, catching a sense of something-in-the-air from the intensity sharpening Prosper's face before he drew any conclusions from the short wail, ended as suddenly as begun, that sounded somewhere near in the palace. He half-drew his sword. Prosper put his palm over the top of the hilt and rammed the sword back again. Then he smiled at the palace officer.

"But your name . . ."

"Patience," the man answered in a dry voice, backing a little.

Prosper nodded and went towards the door that led out into the hall. He saw an attendant running across the foot of the main staircase. He stared, trying to understand. Probably his life, not to mention lesser

matters such as his career, depended on the next few minutes. He turned and saw that Patiens had come up close behind him. He grasped his arm and bent to his ear. "Is he dead?"

Patiens trembled and drew back, then swayed towards Prosper as if obeying a pull stronger than his own will. "Yes," he hissed.

A slave appeared at the head of the stairs, hesitated, lost his balance and fell with a yell. Prosper smiled grimly, watching the fellow roll noisily down. Behind him in the guardroom the soldiers had risen and drawn their swords; but Prosper could see armed men standing in the guardroom opposite. And lines of guards had quietly moved across the outer door of the palace. He felt sure that the great purple curtains in the gallery above had armed men behind them. "Bear witness to my acts," he said in a low voice to Patiens, who nodded. "Sheath your swords!" he shouted harshly, turning to his men. "What, naked steel in the Sacred Palace! Sheath, you fools!" Patiens drew back against the wall, biting his underlip. The soldiers stood bewildered for a moment. "Sheath!" cried Prosper in a fierce voice, and they reluctantly obeyed.

Idatius came up to Prosper, his hand on his hilt and his head lowered. "What are you doing, Prosper? Are you mad? What is happening?"

"I know what I'm doing," said Prosper coldly, though the words came with an effort. What if he were making a mistake? "Obey me."

A palace officer, an elderly man with grey squarish face, entered and gave a curious look round; then he stepped up to Patiens and whispered to him. Patiens whispered something back, and the other went out, after a raking glance at Prosper. The hardest moment of self-control came for Prosper after that, he forced himself to stand there impassively, listening to the clamour that broke out and died, and the clang that followed, and then the hush. The soldiers of Aetius's bodyguard had become uneasy again. One of them, a tall Dane, drew his sword and shouted, "Treachery!" Eutharic stepped up close behind him and looked at Prosper for his command. Prosper nodded sharply, with compressed lips, and Eutharic struck the Dane on the temple with his sword-hilt. The Dane staggered and fell. "Keep your places!" shouted Prosper. Then he went at last over to Patiens.

"Yes," said Patiens in dry, hissing tones. "It's done . . . They're waiting for Boethius now. . . ."

"You'll report my services . . . my prevention of unnecessary bloodshed."

Patiens lurched slightly and smiled. Idatius was leaning against the table, pallid, his lips moving. Prosper went to the door again. He saw a senator, one of Aetius's chief supporters, coming up the outer steps with an attendant. Half-way through the hall the senator noticed something that frightened him; he paused and seemed about to withdraw, giving a low order to the attendant; then he looked round. Soldiers were coming up behind him from the outer steps, and five men advanced

from the guardroom opposite to where Prosper stood. The senator screamed and ran towards the great stairway, with two of the soldiers after him. They cut him down as he reached the stairs. How much more of it? Prosper asked himself, he could feel a nerve twitching in his left cheek. Could he keep his men leashed till the end of it? Then his sense of mastery returned, strengthened. He turned to Patiens, "What about that wine in your room you promised to send for?"

It was over an hour before the killings were done; then Prosper led his men out of the palace by a back door and told them to look after themselves, for they no longer had a master. Idatius wanted to hang on to him, to talk and get his bearings; but Prosper had no wish for aimless chatter of nerve-strain. "There was nothing we could do," he said brusquely, and went off with Eutharic to Serena's rooms. The details of the murders were now flying all over the city. The Emperor Valentinian had asserted himself for the first time in his thirty-five years by assassinating, with the aid of his eunuch Minister, the general to whom his reign owed what stability it had been able to preserve; then the praetorian prefect Boethius had been called in and killed and then various prominent supporters of Aetius. Valentinian didn't mind being a mere puppet as far as any real control of the administrative and military mechanisms were concerned, but he wasn't going to be bullied into marrying an imperial Princess to his dux's son Ricimer and Marcellinus, the two most capable of Aetius's lieutenants, had escaped.

A couple of days later Prosper received a note from Marcellinus, delivered by a hooded man in the dusk. "If you're as good a lad as I take you to be, you'll be meeting me in the near future at Salonae." So Marcellinus had dodged off to Dalmatia, to try to raise an insurrection. Prosper thoughtfully tore the note up and then burned the bits.

"What was it?" asked Serena. "A love-note?" She wasn't really curious, but she believed in acting her part conscientiously. She yawned and lay back on the couch of ebony-wood.

"A tryst, but not a love-tryst. And in any event I'm not keeping it."

"Sometimes I think you've got your head screwed on a little too well," said Serena in kindly tones. "However, I've got rather the same failing myself, don't you think? Sometimes I try to be just a trifle unhappy—to be like other people, you know, and to get a sense of contrast . . . and, well, just to be on the safe side in propitiating Saint Felicitas, who, you know, is the saint I worship—it's such a nice name, and I like the walk out to the Via Salaria. . . . But as I was saying, I find it so hard to be unhappy—though of course I don't like ear-ache, which I do get sometimes, now I think of it." She yawned again. "Take my slippers off, will you? I want to lie here and curl my toes, and the slippers are too light for really pleasurable toe-wagging. . . . What shall we have for dinner?"

Prosper stayed in her rooms till things had quieted down; then, after
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making some enquiries to ensure that he perpetrated no *faux pas*, he got in touch with various officials and within the month was enlisted in the palace guards. Patiens had become quite friendly with him, and assured him that his behaviour on the day of Aetius's death had been well received—in fact the Emperor himself had commented favourably on it. Valentinian was in the highest spirits since the success of his coup; he was making a great show of reorganisation—which actually amounted to the seizure of all the more profitable positions in the civil and military services by his partisans. Prosper, who a few weeks past had been galled by the slowness of his rise under Aetius, now had his comparatively insignificant status to thank for the ease with which he could shift into the conquering camp. One day the Emperor stopped before him as he stood on guard with some men on one of the balconies.

"And so this is the young man . . ." The flaccid-faced Emperor was at a loss; he began his sentences with a rush and then was jerked up by an inability to finish them. "Very creditable, I'm sure. . . Well, we shan't forget you. That is, if, having begun with such promise. . ." He laid his clammy hand on Prosper's shoulder and wafted a heavy musk-scent into his face. Then he went to lean on the balustrade and make suggestions about remodelling the garden below. There were some Court ladies, members of the Princess Eudoxia's suite, among the attendants who clustered about him; and one of them, who had long, slanted, greenish eyes flecked with gold, stared rather frankly at the handsome young guards officer. But Prosper pretended not to notice her, he had no wish for an affair with one of the lecherous Court ladies. To keep his head and scent out what was going on behind the scenes was a difficult enough business without further complications, and he had no intention of trying to build his career on the unreliable basis of love-favours and intrigues.

"Delightful," the Emperor was saying, "of course that's the only possible wine to drink in an arbour of roses . . ." He straightened himself up, holding on to the arm of a golden-haired page-boy, and scowled round, blinking his narrow-set eyes. For a moment his glance rested opaquely on Prosper, filmed with a kind of dull blindness, and then he recognised him again, and smiled and waved his hand.

6. *Completed Vigil*

With the fullness of summer came ease for him as for the birds, he relaxed after the agonies and exaltations of winter and spring. The sunny warmth, the cool purity of the water when he bathed in it, the rustling breeze, the gentle nights, all were a benediction, a renewal, a token of acceptance; and yet he was waiting for the definite sign, the break, which would dismiss him from his present mode of existence and send him off on new urgencies. The past was gone, the hardships of the winter had scraped it away, opened a new self. And yet the kernel of

that new self could not yet be perfectly ripe. For the sign had not yet come. He waited, content in the moment; he had only to put out his cupped hand and it seemed that it was filled overbrimmingly with God. He felt the Holy Spirit like a perpetual gust circling and penetrating the mountain hollow, out of which he had not moved since the day he recognised in it his place of refuge and cleansing. Sometimes, when he had not eaten for days, the actual forms melted away, and he was aware only of the swirl and intricate patterning of the Spirit, and then of the mighty conflict forever being waged, so that each moment was simultaneously a resolved harmony and a fall into discord, with the swirl of God triumphant. Angelic forms draped the beams slanting through the trees of afternoon, demoniac faces writhed in the shadows at the edge of vision. The perpetual change, gathered up into a crystal point of nothingness, pervaded his body, and was his body, and his body was the universe. He drifted down enormous sunset caverns like a storm frozen into lurid and toppling cliffs of immensity; he saw endless processions of beings pass across a desert of bronze light.

He was not the only hermit of the district. The peasants mentioned other holy men, including a group of six who lived in a cave about five miles off, but he had no wish to encounter any of them. Once a tall hairy man, dressed only in a loin-cloth, appeared at the mouth of Paulinus's cave and made the sign of the cross with his forefinger in the air, and he and Paulinus stared at one another silently for a while, and then the man went away. But now one of the many recluses who had fled into the hills had settled down only a short distance off, and came to the lake daily for water. At first Paulinus was displeased, as if he alone had the right to make hermit use of the vicinity, and then he felt this attitude a sin, a remnant of the possessiveness which he had come into the wilds to discard. If he found his solitude spoiled, then he could go farther on. But the stranger came at a regular time in the morning, and Paulinus was therefore easily able to avoid him by staying inside his cave at that hour.

One day a heavy restlessness came on him, an overwhelming sense of the conflict underlying the swirl of essences and forms, the intimate wrestling of God and Satan, he seemed almost to hear the deep troubled breathing of cosmic combatants, to feel the pressure of omnipresent grappling bodies. He had been sitting on a patch of bare brown earth that morning and had woken out of his timeless meditation to see a host of ants on a ledge directly below, red and black ants. They were fighting. The reds were small ants, and the blacks in a clumsy swarming charge overbore them and drove them away and for a while were rushing about the ledge, over one another, round and about in a fury of success; and then the reds began surging back, more and more of them. Now the reds outnumbered the larger-bodied blacks. They had a concerted

method of attack. Two of them gripped one of the blacks by the forelegs or the antennae, while a third sawed his head off. Soon the ledge was strewn with headless blacks, and the survivors withdrew. Then it was the turn of the reds to swarm exultantly about. Paulinus had leaned watching the battle for two or three hours, absorbed as if the ants were enacting a conflict relevant to his own thoughts, and afterwards the patterns of the swarming death-struggle remained imprinted on his mind in darkness veined with twisting fire. He had only to close his eyes and the stormy enlacement of forms burned before him, within him.

He felt desperately the need for release, he feared that his brain would crack. He tried to pray, but his union with the resolving harmony was lost, and the fall into discord was perpetually going on, deepening, threatening to engulf him. He cried aloud, "Wherein have I failed? Which of the rotten rags of righteousness have I tried to keep? Purge me into utter nakedness, O jealous God. Encompass me with your jealousy to the last moment when my old harlot-self clings to its vanities. Strike me and break me and deliver me from the horror of the world. . . ." But the momentary relief passed, and the pressure began, hotly seething, again. He lay down by the water-side, seeking to lose his polluted self in a world of green light and water-murmurs.

He heard the gurgle of water flowing into a narrow pitcher-mouth, and raised his head. The hermit from the other side of the ridge was kneeling at the edge of the lake, filling a pitcher, only about ten yards off. Paulinus saw the long, pale face, the crooked head, the bare, thin arms, through a haze of semi-delirium. The other hermit was wearing a sleeveless robe of coarse dark stuff. Leaning forward, he trod on a piece of bank that the water had eaten away beneath, and almost slipped into the water. Perhaps it was the peculiar high shrillness of his cry that disturbed Paulinus. In another moment the hermit had recovered his balance and gone off with the pitcher. But the perturbation still remained in Paulinus's blood.

It was not till dusk that he understood why. Then he suddenly realised that this neighbouring hermit was a woman. Many women adopted a monkish robe, cropped their hair, and took to an ascetic life in the wilds, there was nothing unusual about the hermit's sex. But in Paulinus's inflamed condition the fact became part of the final test which he felt himself undergoing. The realisation that the hermit was not a man, as he had thought, came on him like a clap of thunderous terror, a sudden stripping of the mask from the face of nature, a monstrous menace. And as if the forces of evil had been waiting for this moment, they summoned up every element within his blood and mind that still held the savour of his past indulgences; the past which he had thought extirpated from his being rushed upon him with a tempest-shock, an intolerable blood-flare. His brain heaved and split with the lightning-jag of madness; his body was a monolithic force of ravening fury. He was tormented

with the image of a lamb torn to bloody shreds and greedily swallowed, he rubbed and wrenched at his body to cleanse it of the blood-smears of murder-guilt that indelibly defiled it.

He rose and staggered down the track, in the direction in which he knew that the woman-hermit went on her return to whatever lair she had. Reaching the top of the ridge, he stood swaying for a while on the abyss-edge of night. The moon had risen, a full moon, and he could see the bushes and boulders in the soft chalky light. A world of broken and massed forms, on the other side of actuality; primeval and filled with an undertow of silence. He uttered a low, moaning animal cry.

He prowled for long in the moonlight before he found the small chamber of stones piled against a rift in the face of the ridge. He uttered his low, moaning cry and entered. At first there was nothing. Only the darkness of the hole, the lair of a beast; but the beast was gone, leaving only an animal-smell that stifled him. And then he touched the beast with his finger-tips stubbed on the limestone. She lay stark and rigid with fear, unresisting as a dead woman, but not dead; no, animal-hot. Nothing was said, but he heard his own heavy breathing, like the presence of evil. And then suddenly under his unresisted hand the world changed. The burning pressure lifted from his brain. He kneeled in thankfulness, sluiced with cool joy. There was no longer a woman there, a lairing beast. The flame—driving him to possess or to murder: two ideas which had become identical for him—was extinguished, and life was again the steady flow, through his body, of complex forces pulsing into resolved harmonies. There was no longer a woman there, there was no longer a man. There were two lives united in Christ, annihilating sex, and tenderness flowing back from the heavenly bridal.

"Fellow in Christ . . . sharer in the Good Tidings . . . rejoice
For you too this is a moment of redemption "

And he heard the sound of weeping, a verification of his words. He kneeled for a timeless moment, and then withdrew into the moonlight that was now the caress of mating deity; his lips parted in a long sigh. And again he ran on through the night, but this time assured, released, upborne by a guiding hand.

For a week he lived in quiet perfecting of the knowledge which had come upon him. Then, his period of lonely vigil ended, he passed over the ridge and took the road down towards the levels where men lived and toiled. A new command, a new mission, had been laid on his spirit. A brooding and fallow world of autumn, bare hills patched with dark firs, and the clouds spilling purplish shadows that made the distant hills recede, and the birches stained with yellow. And as he came closer to the nearest field, he saw the dust smoking wispily from the clods that the man with the harrow was breaking. An immense pity, luminous as the dome of sky, arched over his mind; clouds, storm-skurry, rain, whatever veiled the

sky for a moment could only in the end accentuate that perpetual arc of mercy. Each pulse of his heart was a renewed breaking of the ancient husk of hatred and cruelty, a defeat of Satan. Pity for the world of men and women torn and bleeding in their snares of hatred and cruelty, caught in the snares of accusation and lust. Pity for the toiling masses trampled in the vintage-presses of the wrath of God, from which came the wine of redemption. Pity for outraged childhood and perverted manhood and crushed age, the cycle of death and terror that enclosed all those who had not died to the world. Break, break, O stony heart.

7. *Lovers' Meeting*

By the time that Audax got back to the cottage where he had left his horse, his ankle was badly swollen and he was racked with pain. To his relief, he was welcomed as almost an old friend, and the man and his wife of their own accord protested that he would not be able to move for weeks. By the time that both he and his horse were sufficiently recovered to start off, the old couple were so friendly that they refused to let him pay them anything. "There are some debts that must be left for God to pay," said the man, "and if He takes His time about it, it's not for such as us to jog His memory." And he smiled a smile of multitudinous tiny wrinkles.

So Audax rode back to Aquae Tarbellicae, and there he heard the news of Spain. Theodoric had attacked the main concentration of Bagaudae near Osca and shattered it, the Visigoths already settled in Spain were expected to quell without much trouble the various local uprisings. At this news Audax banished his last qualms about turning homewards. There seemed now no hope whatever of a concerted and properly organised revolt of the peasants of the West. (In North Africa too, he'd gathered from Leo, there had been sporadic revolts for over a century, but the Vandals had crushed the last hopes of the peasantry when they came pouring over from Spain.) What, then, remained? Was there any point in nursing the sparks of revolt in the semi-brigand bands of dispossessed peasants lurking in the hills and wilds? What, in particular, could he himself hope to do? What life was left for him?

The heavy, low-slung waggons and the scent and song from the fields told him that he was riding through a land of haymaking, from a hill-crest he looked down on a mosaic of white and golden crops, with the cruder green of vineyards, and strips of grass between the squares of heavy-eared oats and wheat. And that night he saw the Midsummer Fires lighted. The village headman had found him a barn for stabling and sleeping in; and he went out into the evening to stand by a dry-stone hedge and watch the ceremony. The folk from the whole neighbourhood were already gathered; there was a low bee-hum of voices: babies, woken from their first sleep, crying in their mothers' bosoms, and in a grass-field not far off, all the while, a herd of cows lowing in a dis-

turbed way. Near, behind where Audax stood, there rose a recurrent clank, which worried him, till he found that it came from a hobbled horse; a dog ran up at him barking, but suddenly changed its mind and ran off with tail between legs. The bee-hum went on, rising a little with the salutations of a new-comer. On a slab of bare rock, outlined against the starry sky, stood a tall monolith. Each person, on arrival, went first and laid a bundle of wood on the pile which had been growing up below the sacred stone. Close, under the wall, a woman began singing softly to her ailing babe, "Soon the flame . . . and my little beloved will see it shoot up to heaven, he will grow up too, he will shoot up tall and comely, my beloved . . ." The men, in red woollen shifts or sheepskin cloaks, had collected together over on the right.

A man called out something, repeated it in a wild rising cadence, and then a woman answered, the same words, the same rhythm. Audax moved a little closer and strained his eyes through the starlight, he saw a young girl going up to the heap with a flower garland, which she hung to the pole surmounting the wood. Then an old man, limping on a stick, went up after the girl. There was a deep silence, broken only by the lowing of the cows and afar the faint cry of a night-bird. Then came the first spark, the first crackling and twisting of flame; and a deep echoing cry went up from the whole crowd. Audax saw the old man and the girl lighted sharply by the fire which ran in a scatter up a bough with dead leaves. There was a strange peace and delight on their faces, both faces had exactly the same intent expression. The white of the wool on the distaff, which had the flowers wreathed round it, flashed out; the flowers gleamed with jewel-flares, and then that first flame-spurt died away. But the flames in the base of the heap went on gathering strength. Somebody placed in the old man's hand a long thin pine-candle, his cadaverous face, in the dancing light, took on grotesque shapes under his greasy skin-cap, with his scattered grey hair hanging down to his shoulders. A breath of wind passed over the scene, fanning the flames, the smoke went belching up into the dark sky or smudged round over the participants, who were now moving about. There was no set pattern as yet in their movements, which seemed seeking for a key of union, a signal of release. Then the whole wood-heap crashed into flame, with towering crest of red, and the surrounding mountains sank back into heavy dark, and the sky was revealed overhead dappled with cloud-streaks, like the roof of an enormous cavern of rippled limestone. And the folk had taken hands, were moving round and round, their voices knitted in song, and at each great flap of flame they screamed their hail. A drum was beating in the dark.

Now the rite began to move faster, and Audax lost his clear sense of what was going on. He had seen similar rites on his father's estate at midsummer; but here there was a more primitive abandon, a richer warmth of relation to the lives of the participants. The circling dancers

with their cries, "Behold the Night of Fires is here," became in his half-dreaming mind mythological figures of Dionysian revel, the everlasting dance of the elemental forces, spiralling tree-nymphs. Solo voices sang of the Ox of Plenty or of the Mother's Tree. "The Mother's Tree is tall, and it has many branches, it has even leaned over the Great Sea. . . ." The young couples were "sung together" in ceremonial formulas, and blessings were called down on the land. As the flames sank lower, the couples jumped over the charring boughs; the dancers took hands and sped through the redness; a man led his sick cow across the ashes. Masked figures were dancing in the dimming gleam. The children fled from the Bear-Brother; the Wolf-Brother ran and stood in the midst of the glow, uttering strange calls. The girls over on the left were singing, "The cracking cherries are ripening, the luck has turned to the girls. . . ." In the waning light, the masked figures mimed a death. The girls scattered and ran. One of them was carried wailing across the dying fire by the Bear; a long sob of all the women's voices came out of the gloom, and then the girl was dancing on the other side of the Stone "Rejoice, but more slowly, my dear young ones. . . ." The drum-beats threaded the hush

The serious folk, the farmers, were gathering up the ashes in the folds of their cloaks, to strew them on the heads of their beasts and the furrows of their fields and the breast-clefts of their wives. The girls were laughing. "We must not desert the poor wretches." The masked men of the Fraternity were dancing a follow-my-leader dance down the stony hillside. Food was being brought out; and Audax heard close under the wall the young mother's voice, "So, my beloved, you have seen the flames shoot up to heaven. . . ." He wanted to join in the rite before the last flame died, but didn't know how. He didn't want the ceremony ever to end. The ending made his sadness stronger; he felt an ache in his bowels. And when he almost stumbled on a pair of lovers under the shadow of the wall, his heart thudded a wild gong of despair, loss, fear. Here seemed something irreducible, a power, a form, which had persisted from the early darkness of human time and defied all the powers and forms which were imposed from above. It frightened him, a darkness; it made him ache with yearning, a warmth. And somehow these rites, their enduring vitality and their core of ungrasped meaning, seemed relevant to the problems of hope and despair which had been troubling him, his own destiny and the future of mankind

Next afternoon a storm came on him. Over converging hill-tops the sky darkened to livid blue; two long dark wings of storm-menace rose up behind the hills to north and south, with the river-road lying between. There seemed no bounding line between the sky and cloud, both deepening and darkening turbulently above the profound valley hush. Then the two wings of menace met, and he saw the far hill-crests in the remote

distance gleam with the sun, and the whole sky crashed and broke, the tree-tops whistled and staggered. Then the wind suddenly dropped, and the leaves lolled back, and then came the rush of rain amid thunderbursts; and he rode past fields of rye swishing in beaten swathes. He forgot his doubts and miseries; he felt uplifted into action the moment that the rain came sweeping down, like a blade of coolness cutting away his stifling fears. He wanted only to get back to the band of Bagaudae

When he arrived, he had a talk with Gavius first, and then told the story of his misadventures to the meeting of the whole band. The discussion that followed, though it settled nothing, heartened him; he no longer felt the need to ask if there was any use in continuing the struggle. The struggle was there, it was continuing without asking questions. Nothing could stop it. He had made his choice, and he was among the only men to whom he could speak without fear, without checking his tongue and asking if he would be understood.

Gavius took him aside after the meeting (which had voted that Audax had done the best possible under the circumstances). "I found out about that girl," he said, and for a moment Audax couldn't think who it was that he meant. "She's not far off," said Gavius. "Only, the hills between are very rough going, and so there's little communication . . ."

Audax rode off the next day, with one of the band as his guide. Part of the way they had to lead their horses, moving slowly over the ground littered with boulders and ragged outcrops; and then they came down on the other side of the ridge, taking a line of stones set up to warn shepherds of cliffs when the snow fell. And late in the afternoon they reached the hamlet. Now that Phoebe was suddenly so near, Audax felt uncertain, shy. How would she receive him? After all, their last encounter hadn't been very pleasant. His heart almost failed him, and only his fear of being laughed at by his companion made him stop from proposing a return. He let the other go ahead a little, to make inquiries. A woman directed them on to a cottage at the farther end of the hamlet, and when they arrived there, Audax had no choice but to descend. He pretended that there was something wrong with his saddle-girth and fumbled about while the other knocked at the door.

"She's here," the man said, turning back from the woman who had answered his knock.

"All right, I'll be there in a moment," said Audax, and straightened himself up, and then he noticed that Phoebe was standing at the corner of the house, wiping her hands on her apron. She'd heard the horses and had come round from the back. "Phoebe!" he called involuntarily, and saw her stand suddenly still, with paling face, and sway back as if she meant to run. "Phoebe!" He ran up to her, and took both her hands. "You're not angry with me still?" He was still afraid that she was hurt and hostile, but his faintness had gone; he was confident of winning her over.

"Angry . . ." she said weakly. "Why should I be? . . ." Then she flushed and lowered her head. "No, no. How can you say such a thing?" She looked up. "How did you get here? Where have you come from?"

He began stammering out his story, and she listened in a kind of stupor. " . . . It was only yesterday I learned where you were . . . Say you're pleased. You are, aren't you?" He pressed her hands together. "I can't tell you how pleased I am." He wanted to say that he loved her; but he couldn't say the words. She was still partly a stranger; she had her hair thrown carelessly back and cut off at the shoulders, and her face was not quite the face that he had known. It was stronger and sadder, more tanned and thinner. But there was still something in it that was Phoebe, that he loved, that he wanted to become part of his life more than anything else in the world.

"Of course I'm pleased." And then she burst into tears. But before he could draw her into his arms and console her, she had pulled away and brushed the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. "Don't take any notice of me. Yes, yes, I can't believe it, that's all. . . ." And this time it was she who grasped his hands and pressed them with a steady strength. She let his hands go and said, "There's so much to tell."

They went inside the house, where the woman, a widow, asked Audax and his companion to share the soup she had on the fire. There was a shed at the back in which they could sleep on beds of straw. And over the meal Audax and Phoebe told one another more and more of their stories. Phoebe had been put ashore by the bargemen some miles farther down, and one of the men had guided her to a group of Bagaudae laired in a large mountain cave, where she had stayed until about six weeks ago. "When I heard on the docks at Lugdunum what had happened, I wanted to run back to father, but they wouldn't let me. They said that I'd only make his death less easy for him if he knew that I'd been caught too. . . ." She seemed to want Audax's approval for having run off; he saw her lower lip quivering as she looked at him.

Next morning they went off for a stroll in the fields and she led him to a small copse with a singing stream. She sat on a stone and clasped her hands over her knees, and her face seemed to go bleak and drawn. That bleakness disconcerted him and spoiled his impulse to take her in his arms. "Phoebe . . ." He wanted her to look up, but she bent her head still lower. "Why do you turn away from me? I want you to marry me . . . share my life whatever it's going to be. I feel there's nothing else that could make life worth living. . . . Surely you feel the same."

She did not answer; she unclasped her hands and took up a twig and started tracing circles and lines on the ground. He sat looking unhappily at her and then made an effort to take her in his arms. "No," she said in a trembling voice, and he drew back, hurt and puzzled.

"Don't you . . . care for me at all?"

"I love you," she answered, speaking rapidly, as if she had only a brief moment in which to speak. "But I must tell you . . . Perhaps I'm not what you think . . . No, no, let me tell you. . . . I lived in that cave for months. There were about twenty men, and only one other woman. One other beside myself. Don't you see? What else could I do?"

"So you . . . they . . ."

"Yes. But don't think they forced me. No, no, they couldn't have treated me better. But I wanted it. I saw how they went with the other one . . . and I wanted to help them. It was all my doing . . ."

"Twenty men . . ."

"Twenty-two," she corrected him humbly, wanting to extenuate nothing.

Her pedantic precision made him want to laugh, it intensified the bitterness that had taken him by the throat. "Twenty-two, then . . . and you fought me off . . . and I all this while . . ." He had the feeling that he'd been faithful to her memory; he genuinely forgot the slave girl with whom he had slept at Marusius's house, the emotions stirred in him that last day by the baker's wife . . . "Well . . ."

"Does it matter, Audax?" she asked timidly.

"O no, not at all, of course not. I can't think why you mentioned such a trifle." The desire to hurt her was growing, he drew away.

She spoke coldly. "And I'm with child . . . three months."

He stood up, a slightly hysterical hilarity struggling with his bitterness and jealousy. "Well, that's not altogether impossible. I'll take your word for it."

She too stood up, she seemed to have thrown off a burden. "There, now you know it all. I feel better now . . . there's no false pretences. Yes, it's better now, even though you hate me. I can bear anything but a lie. . . . Do you think I ought to have lied? No, I'm glad I've thrown everything away rather than that. I never thought I'd see you again. I was nearly mad with misery. O, I didn't mean to say that. It sounds as if I was pleading, and I'm not." She stood up straight and looked him proudly in the face. "Don't think I'm ashamed of what I did. No. And I wanted it," she added defiantly. "Yes, I'm glad I did it. Come on, let's go back now."

But the proud and easy carriage of her body had stirred Audax's jealousy into desire; he still felt as bitter and withdrawn, but at the same time a heat was stiffening, asking why he shouldn't be the twenty-third. At least he'd complete those baffled embraces in which he had so foolishly restrained himself from taking this girl. "There's no great hurry, is there?" He reached out and caught hold of her. She struck at his arm.

"So that is what you think of me?"

"But you wanted all those others. . . ."

"They didn't hate me."

"I don't hate you," he muttered, still trying to catch hold of her.

She broke away and strode on up the track, and he stood watching her, confounded with an intensity of conflicting emotions. But before she had gone more than a half-dozen paces, she stopped, and came back with lowered eyes. She stood before him. Desire and bitterness thrust up again in him, and he reached out and took her in his arms. She made no resistance.

. . . His rigid anger broke, surged out of him, left him suddenly calm and relieved. What did it matter, what did anything matter but their union? He could bear anything but to lose her. What she had told him had left a wound, it still rankled, but it would heal; whereas to lose her would be to lose everything, to be poisoned at the core. O, he knew that it wasn't so easy to throw jealousy out. He could feel it coming back as he told himself that he had conquered it; it would hurt him yet and make him hurt her again, but he would conquer it still. He would wear it down, he could bear its hurt now. But she was unaware of the change in him. She lay inert and lax, possessed but unresponsive, with her eyes closed.

"Now you've had your way, let me go," she said at last, while he was still seeking words to utter rightly his joy. No, he would never let her go. She opened her eyes and stared at him. His smiling face she thought only an expression of his crude triumph over her. "I thought of how kind and good you were that day we went picnicking. . . . I felt I owed this to you. Now let me go. The debt is paid." She tried to struggle up, with her elbows on the pebbly soil. She lay back again. She seemed probing into her motives, as if only by a full statement of the truth about herself could she make him release her. "And perhaps. . . . I wanted it too. . . . Now let me go." She stared into his reddened face. "The debt is paid. Now we can cleanly part. I don't want hatred between us. Anything but that." There was a lustrous gleam of unshed tears in her eyes.

"Yes, anything but that."

She thought he was still mocking her, and began to struggle, and then the words burst out of him.

"Darling, darling, I love you. I can never let you go."

But she couldn't believe that his words meant the same to him as to her, she was still listening for mockery.

"Don't be cruel. . . ." she murmured.

"I want you. . . . just the same. Can't you understand?"

And then at last she wept, hiding her face against his throat. "Don't break my heart by saying things you don't mean. . . ."

"But I mean it, every word of it." He fought down the leap of jealousy, and gulped. "I'll father the child, you silly creature. That's what I mean. And then we'll have a try at getting one for ourselves, eh? Lots of tries, eh?"

She began laughing and sobbing at once, and he held her shaken body fast, fighting down the bitterness; then once more there was no bitterness, only the simple words he had said, and the simple truth they enclosed.

VI

ROADS TO THE FUTURE (A. D. 455)

1. *Events at Lauriacum*

THE NEWS OF Hesperius's death was a sore blow to Sollius. He sat in a darkened room for three days; then he emerged in a fury of energy and fault-finding. The servants who had been whispering among themselves, with mingled fear, sympathy and gloating, that the old man was breaking up under his grief found something else to whisper about. The fellow who specialised in the floggings had to call on a couple of the ploughmen to help him; his arms, though practised, couldn't meet the demands. It seemed that Sollius had been listening at the door-cracks to the ill-advised sighings of the household and was resolved to see others in the the breaking-up rôle prematurely attributed to himself. What had happened to Hesperius was uncertain. The official note sent by the chancellery from Tolosa declared that he had had an accident while hunting, but Antiolus, who had been in Tolosa at the time, called in passing at Lauriacum and told Sollius the common report was that Hesperius had been stabbed in a dicing quarrel with some Visigoths. Sollius had written demanding that the body be sent to Lauriacum for burial, and had received a polite note assenting to his demand. But so far the body had not been sent. And Sollius was in a quandary. He couldn't let the matter rest, and at the same time the last thing he wanted was a quarrel with the Visigothic Government.

He had the impression that nothing would please the Tolosan chancellery more than a quarrel with him; and he began to suspect that secretary Polemius, whom he knew to be the man with the strings of power in his rheumatic fingers, had had Hesperius murdered for the precise reason of driving him, Sollius, to some rash act. Consider what was happening on the western borders of Sollius's estate, where his lands met the Visigothic kingdom. In the township just over the border and in the villages round about a number of questionable events had started off, more or less contemporaneous with Hesperius's mysterious end. The Arians and the Catholics, after living in mutual peaceful abhorrence for decades, had begun to riot and attack one another's houses. Each group had an elaborate story proving that they had been oppressed and had taken to force only as a last resort. Polemius had written Sollius an informal note, suggesting that as the nearest Catholic of senatorial status he must be interested in these occurrences and that he should use his influence to quieten things down. That was exactly what Sollius was trying to do. He had no interest in sectarian brawls, but he had much interest in keeping the peace on the borderlands.

So far from feeling a Catholic champion, indeed, he had at this moment on his hands a dispute with the Bishop of Uxellodunum. For the Bishop was trying to get administrative control over the parish chapels built by Sollius on his domain; and Sollius had no intention whatever of letting the Bishop get the least fraction of such control. He didn't mind the episcopal authority extending over his priests to the extent of forbidding them to preach sermons, he thought the rule allowing sermons to be preached only by bishops or the priests directly under their municipal eye to be excellently sensible, it prevented hot-heads from using the pulpit. But that was as far as he was ready to let the Bishop intrude.

The Bishop then used his strongest argument. He had been aghast, he wrote, to find in his diocese a recrudescence of the horrible heresy of Vigilantius, who, in the words of St. Jerome, "opened his fetid lips to pour forth a filthy venom on the relics of the holy martyrs, and called us who cherished them ashmongers and idolaters." Such a heresy meant a heavy falling-off of offerings at the shrines and must be stamped out at once. The Bishop's conscience was clear, he was stamping out the heresy with all speed and violence. But he had irrefutable evidence that it flourished in parts of Sollius's domain, and how was he to carry out his episcopal duty and crush the enemy of mankind, the dragon of sin, unless his authority extended over the parishes within that domain? The Bishop, indeed, grew so wrathfully excited that parts of his letters seemed to denounce Sollius as a fomentor of heresy and to confuse him with the diabolic Vigilantius himself, who had sought to prevent the worship of the relics of the martyrs.

And have you the audacity to speak of "the mysterious something or other which you carry about in a little vessel and worship"? I want you to know what it is you call "something or other." Tell me more clearly what you mean by the phrase "a bit of powder wrapt up in a costly cloth in a tiny vessel". It is nothing less than the relics of the martyrs which you are vexed to see covered with a costly veil and not bound up with rags and haircloth. Are you aware of the honours that the emperors themselves have not shrunk from paying to this something or other, you madman? Are the bishops not only sacrilegious but silly as well because they carry that most worthless thing, dust and ashes, wrapt in silk in a golden vessel? Are the people of all the churches fools, because they go to meet the sacred relics? Does the Bishop of Rome do wrong when he offers sacrifices to the Lord over the venerable bodies of the dead men Peter and Paul and judges their tombs worthy to be Christ's altars?

Sollius was troubled. He did not know whether the Bishop had been carried away by zeal of rhetorical apostrophes, or whether the letter represented an effort to entangle him with charges of heresy. He at once

wrote a reply lengthily protesting his orthodoxy, declaring his readiness to evict, torture, maim, or kill any of his *coloni* who should be named by the Bishop as heretics, and expressing his devotion for the Bishop's person. "Revered Pope . . ." he began his letter, in terms of filial reverence and ended, "Deign, I beseech you, to bear me in your holy remembrance, my Lord Bishop." He read it over several times, and decided it was entirely orthodox, with nothing that could be twisted in it

The following day he received another disturbing letter—this time from his son Paulinus. After the death of Hesperius, he had brought himself, despite extreme repugnance, to make inquiries as to the whereabouts of his surviving son, and at last had located him. Paulinus was instituting a monastery somewhere in the Cevennes, as far as Sollius could make out, the account was confused, and Sollius merely took it to mean that Paulinus was up to some kind of eccentric nonsense. After a struggle, he wrote a brief note, explaining that Hesperius was dead and that Paulinus would be forgiven if he returned home and showed himself in the future a dutiful son. And now the reply had come. It was briefer even than the bald note which Sollius had sent. It ran, "Seek the forgiveness of Christ while there is yet time. Obey your Saviour. Sell all your property and give it to the poor." Sollius was astounded; he had a feeling that the world was rapidly getting demented.

He decided to shut Paulinus out of his mind. If only Aconia would bear a son. He had a sensation of time and his enemies closing in on him, threatening to baffle all his long-laid and careful plans. But he couldn't pause in the carrying out of those plans. Now every month extended his power, his *dominium*. It was not even necessary to bribe the imperial officers when he arranged evictions of small free-proprietors and asserted a personal ownership of areas that had been communal pasturage. The ease with which his domain widened out intoxicated him, but left a haunting evil-eye fear. And the peculiar letter from Paulinus, who apparently rejected the proposal to become heir to the huge estate, and the fuss being made by the Bishop and the Visigoths, became increasingly perturbing, like a small black cloud that persisted in frowning over the hill-tops on an otherwise flawless summer day.

He decided to make a call on the Bishop in person, to get a feeling of what lay behind that letter of confused rhetorical questions, and set off in a carriage with a dozen outriders—more than he had been used to take; but the highways, besides falling into disrepair, were becoming infested with robbers and beggars. The best and broadest road carried him for part of the way through the borderland between Visigothic and Imperial territories—the exact demarcation was by no means closely fixed, and there were some unfortunate villages which the tax-collectors of both systems visited and squeezed. As he was passing by the township with which his family had been mainly associated a couple of generations

ago, before they had moved into the front line of the magnates of Auverge, he noticed something going on in the half-derelict cemetery. His grandfather was buried there, and he idly remembered that the tomb-monument was still not erected.

Muttering a vow to see about that belated tombstone as soon as he could spare the time, he shouted to the driver to stop the carriage. Perhaps, he thought, his dim feeling of something darkly looming in the background of his affairs had its origin in the slowness of his father and himself in having done anything about that grave. A dead and affronted grandfather. Yes, that was a dangerous thing to have on one's hands. He decided to present something to St. Justus, his favourite saint, as soon as he reached the city; perhaps he would consult the Bishop on the subject—it would create a good impression and prove his Catholic piety.

He climbed out of the carriage, feeling stiff and a little livery; and stamped over to the crumbling wall of the cemetery, which had long past been overcrowded with burials of shrouded corpses and urns with the ashes of the burned dead; interment there, he understood, had ceased. Rain and snow had caused the mounds to settle, the part of the ground where no stone monuments had been set was quite flat and grassy. Where was it that his grandfather had been buried? He turned his eyes towards the corner, and saw to his horror that a gang of undertaker's men were digging with spades in the very spot.

"Arrest those criminals!" he shouted, and his retainers, leaping from their saddles, vaulted over the low walls and delightedly grasped hold of the startled diggers. Assisted by two slave-boys, Sollius got over the wall and strode up. The diggers howled and tried to get down on their knees.

"Do you know what terrible crime you were committing?" cried Sollius.

One of the diggers found enough self-possession to say that they were only obeying orders, they hadn't the least notion they were doing wrong, please pardon them, he himself had five children and a cancerous wife.

Sollius had him hit over the mouth, and then bade his men find sticks or whips for flogging the criminals. "The Code pronounces torture as the penalty for desecrating the tombs of the dead. But as we have no racks, and as this is a case where punishment cannot be delayed, I'm going to inflict only the pains that the imperfect means at our disposal permit."

The undertaker's men, however, did not appreciate this mild decision. They howled and squirmed and begged for forgiveness.

Sollius stood back while his retainers got hastily to work. The diggers had their tunics torn from their backs; then they were flung on the ground and trampled on, beaten with their own spades and spearstaves. "Make their blood flow," said Sollius calmly. He felt that this condign chastisement, executed on the very spot of the grave, would act as an emollient on his annoyed grandfather. His own slackness about the tombstone would be forgotten in view of the greater crime which was being tumult-

tuously expiated; and his dead grandfather, with whom he somehow merged St. Justus, would merely recognise that amends for dishonour were being made. But it was necessary to have the blood flowing into the earth, soaking down to the bones and dust which would solidify once more into living flesh as his grandfather on Judgment Day.

Blood duly flowed. Several arms and legs were broken. The battered undertaker's assistants lay moaning or unconscious on the bloody soil, and then Sollius called his grinning retainers off. The journey was resumed. But now Sollius felt happy and relieved; he had his grandfather and St. Justus for certain on his side. He rocked in a kind of doze, awaking to compose lines for the tombstone which he would lose no time in having set up—something plain but big, with about twenty verses of laudation. "Skilled in the law and helpful to all men beyond the common rate . . . He laboured for the province, native-town and State, unselfishly. . . . But this stands as first title to his deathless fame, that first of all his family he purified his brow with the Holy Cross's sign, his limbs with the baptismal stream . . ." It was a long time since Sollius had composed verse; he'd better ask the Bishop to mention someone whom he could commission to provide the inscription.

His interview with the Bishop was quite affable. As he had felt, his account of the terrible crime which he had so justly punished won him the Bishop's sympathy.

"I know that strictly speaking I should have reserved the case for your judgment," he admitted, "but I considered that it were best for the general advantage that I should act on the spot."

The Bishop nodded at the admission that the case was really one for his cognisance, and congratulated Sollius on his sound views.

"Certainly so audacious a deed deserved the death which our forefathers would have inflicted. If the dead are not respected, there is an end of all religion and sanctity. Now what's this little bone of contention between us, my good friend?"

The talk was conciliatory on both sides. Sollius made some concessions about the Bishop's supervision of the creeds of his *coloni*, but was adamant on keeping the financial control of his chapels in his own hands. But perhaps the Bishop thought he had got the thin end of the wedge into operation, he seemed satisfied, and reassured Sollius about the rhetorical questions in the letter, which had been aimed at the shade of Vigilantius. An excellent dinner confirmed their friendliness.

But the episode was to have less pleasant reverberations. It turned out that the beaten diggers were Arian converts under the protection of the Visigothic Government, and elaborate reports were sent by the Chancellery of Tolosa to the Roman Prefect and the Military Commander, complaining that a state of terror existed in the borderlands, and that Sollius would have to bear the responsibility if, despite the earnest efforts of the Visigothic authorities, there were disagreeable consequences. The note

further, with discreet ambiguity, made some obscure comments on the lack of precision in the boundary line. The document, when laid before the Prefect with some marginal comments by a secretary, was signed by him under the apprehension that it was a tax-account, he had been enjoying himself with some fellow-drinkers on the previous evening. But secretary Bigerrus, a hard-working and shrewd observer, who had long given up the futile practice of submitting his more brilliant proposals or analyses to his superiors, remarked to his colleague Paconius, "We can expect Theodoric in the near future to nip off that corner of Auverge. It's the perfect point for launching an attack eastward . . ." And Paconius grunted, "Paper-supplies are getting short again Write a stinging letter to the office at Massilia. You know who's swallowing the money. . ."

The result foreseen by Bigerrus was not long in coming along One morning a rider dashed up to Lauriacum on a horse whose flanks were zigzagged with sweat, and announced that Visigothic cavalry had occupied a large portion of Sollius's western domain The consequent note to the Prefect mentioned that a few minor rectifications of the frontier in connection with the estate of Sollius had been undertaken, merely for the defence of the Arian population of the neighbourhood, no aggression was intended against the imperial authorities, arbitration if necessary would be acceptable, and so on And the Prefect, a week later, was able to buy some expensive jewellery for his chief mistress as well as a large collection of furniture made of citrus and ebony, for which he had no immediate accommodation, but which had been "too good to miss". Avitus, the Military Commander, had his attention taken up by a new threatening move of the Franks, who (his spies reported) were concerting measures with the Burgundians on the north-east Besides, Avitus was leader of the clique that hoped to bring about an alliance—or rather a definite merging—of Visigothic and Imperial organisations, in the hope of thus re-founding the Western Empire in its pristine strength He was not a man to be bribed, but he was a man ready to make the most amiable interpretation of Visigothic policy; a flattering letter from Polemius convinced him that there was nothing to worry about in the frontier-rectification—that it was in fact a step towards carrying out his own projects. Everyone was satisfied except Sollius

The news that Sollius had lost a large part of his domain arrived at the Velusine Villa at the right moment to bring to maturity various plans and resolves that had been long buzzing in the head of Basilius. When the bailiff blurted out the news, Basilius was sitting astride an overturned amphora and with one eye studying the habits of beetles. His supervision of the Villa's economies had slackened, and the bailiff no longer considered him with much suspicion.

"So it's begun," said Basilius, closing his right eye, as if he kept it

solely for the purpose of regarding beetles, and opening his left eye as the one allotted to the regarding of bailiffs. "Ha, it's begun." He stood up unsteadily, and whistled.

"What's begun?" asked the bailiff, frightened he might have said too much. "I was only saying what I've been told."

"Ha, it's begun," repeated Basilus, an enraptured gleam coming into his left eye. "Sooner or later . . . sooner or later. . ." He whistled again.

Orion, the half-wit, came loping round the stackyard. Another whistle agitated him so much that he fell over a half-sawn log and began running in the wrong direction, till yet another whistle recalled him to his senses. He came panting up with his tongue hanging out.

"It's begun, Orion," said Basilus, and winked.

Orion stopped, shrank away, and then, with his mouth still gaping, made frenzied but hopeless attempts to wink back.

"What's begun?" asked the worried bailiff, trying to recall exactly what he had said, but Basilus gave him such a strange look out of his one open eye that he walked hastily off, muttering a spell and fingering under his shift the amulet which he had worn ever since his mother had it blessed with holy water and hung round his neck on a twisted cord.

The news also roused interest among the Bagaudae, who for some time had been paying increased attention to Sollus. He outstood as the exemplar of a ruthless determination to extend *dominium*; many of the latest recruits in the rebel bands had been evicted from their homesteads by his orders. And his efforts to grab at any communal pasturage-lands lying on the outskirts of his estate had brought his agents uncomfortably close on the foothills and upland wastes. A large band of Bagaudae, whose quarters were in the hills directly south of Sollus's domains, came to the decision to launch a large-scale raid on Lauriacum itself, and sent round to the neighbouring bands for their co-operation.

The band of which Audax was a member voted to take part in the raid. And though Audax was preparing to leave the band and to live in a village deeper in the Cevennes, he felt that in honour he must postpone his departure till after accounts had been settled with Sollus. Phoebe was already at the village, with the baby girl whom she had borne; and he sent her a message that he would be coming in a week. Then he gave himself up to the work of helping to arrange the raid. As he had stayed at Lauriacum while the fortifications were being built, he was able to give advice as to the best forms of attack; and with Gavius he rode over to the main concentration of Bagaudae in the hills south of the house.

Success depended on the element of surprise in the attack. Since Sollus would be sure to have his thoughts turned towards a possible further advance by the Visigoths from the west, the Bagaudae decided to attack from the south-east—especially as the lay of the ground would

enable them to come comparatively close along a valley slanting in that direction. The horses were left in this valley, and the Bagaudae at dusk advanced on foot towards Lauriacum. In the event of failure they were to scatter and make their way in the dark back to the horses.

A couple of years ago he had been lounging with Paulinus in the orchards where soon he would be skulking with the intent of taking part in an attack by fire and sword on the house. So Audax mused, trying to decide whether he was violating any true obligation of hospitality; and then fiercely mocking at himself for the qualm. Sollius had no qualms in battenning on the serfdom of the peasantry. Everything else but that fact was an evasion. And this stealthy movement through the gloom was the only possible retort, the only way of affirming the resistance of human dignity to such vileness. The moral qualms about force begetting force in blind cycle could not survive one tone of the comradely voices, one pressure of the hands, one throb of indignation in the free heart. It was not a blind cycle. That at least he knew. But what it was, what fullness of human purpose was fed by the arc of action in which he was implicated—that he could not solve. He had ceased to pester himself about it, without abdicating his need to gain as much intellectual clarity as he could hammer out between the hurry of circumstance and the generality of vision. His happiness, certain amid the weltering fears and doubts, was balanced on a dual bond; his union with the men moving stealthily through the gloom on a mission of fire and sword, and his union with Phoebe. And that latter union was also a union with the men in their labour of production, of raising food and making things with their hands. And over the unions was that wholeness of integrity, which linked his small life with the great sweeping curve of human purpose in all its fullness. And at this moment, while he moved stealthily forward—as also at certain other moments, touching the milk-swollen breast of Phoebe or looking down the completed furrow in the field—he could hold the realisation simple and entire as a ripe fruit, but at other moments the realisation was shattered, was an ache or a blur, and seemed lost for ever. And yet it would return; and underneath the ebb and flow it was never lost.

The softness before moonrise, which he knew and loved so well, was subtly evoking the world of arching trees and broad fieldswell, an effluence of peace and goodwill, which he did not feel in the least discordant with the purpose of violence on which they moved stealthily forward. A nightbird cried like a sentinel of the doomed house of greed.

Basilius, with his faithful Orion, arrived in the cypress avenue as dusk was settling down. "We shan't go and announce ourselves," said Basilius, as they turned aside and sat down behind the western line of trees. "We are not expected, Orion." He chuckled, and Orion, trying to wink in the dark, made small grunting noises. "Not by him, Orion. Like a thief in

the night, that's how judgment comes." Basilus drew from under his tunic the long carving-knife which he had kept hidden under the floor-boards of his room ever since he accepted his brother's charity "Now, Orion, what you're wondering about is how he's going to be delivered up to me. You're an intelligent lad, Orion. That's why I took you under my protection. I had a look over everyone at the villa. There wasn't one of them I could trust or respect but you, Orion. You keep your own counsel and you're not scared of the devil himself. And why should you be? He's got nothing on you. Nor on me neither. It's true I let myself be ruined by cheats and liars who deceived me. It's true I was insulted and brought before the judgment seat and given up for dead. But I didn't die, Orion. I fooled them all in the end. And I've got one more little surprise here ready for them. That's for that brother of mine. He always hated me. I can remember how he hated me when I was only a baby at my mother's breasts. He used to come and watch me while I was suckling there; he grudged me my mother's milk. It used to drive him mad with rage to see me sucking away. If my mother was still alive, she'd tell you the same. She used to say 'Don't you mind that beast, you suck all you want to, it's all for you.' Ah, she was a good mother, Orion. If she'd had her way, she'd never have weaned me at all. That's the way she loved me."

Orion, unable to see his patron's face in the dark, decided for some reason that winking-time had come once more. He grunted weakly and despairingly.

Basilus began to unpack the wallet of food he had been carrying. "Here's some bread. You can't have any of the olives. You know you always swallow the stones, and you make such a noise when I have to hit you on the back. We're here like thieves in the night, Orion, don't you forget that, whatever you do. When you hear a trumpet, get ready to support me."

The one scaling-ladder which had been prepared and brought along was successfully hooked on to the parapet near the small tower at the south-eastern corner of the wall. Half a dozen men swarmed up it, Audax among them. "The gate we want to open is over there," he said, pointing to the left. A glow faintly illuminated the main colonnade, behind which lay the dining-room with frescoes from the *Iliad*. And from the kitchen quarter another glow was diffused, mixed with a chatter of voices. There seemed no guards on the wall at all, though scouts of the *Bagaudae* had reported the gates as shut and bolted.

Another half-dozen men came silently up out of the darkness and clambered over the parapet.

"The steps are that way," said Audax, and then lost his conviction. "I think so. . . . Yes."

And then round the tower came a man with a girl on his arm. The

girl's low laughter sounded strangely sweet and alluring, innocently remote and yet merged with all the death-snares of the night. The pair came abruptly into view, as if the moonlight slid a soft veil away from between two diametrically opposed realities, and for a moment those two worlds could not realise what had happened. The pair advanced, still with that gentle, treacherous laughter of the girl bending her face over her lifted bosom, the dozen men did not even grasp more tightly the hilts of their weapons. And then the two worlds met, recognised one another, and the girl screamed.

Some more men were coming up over the parapet. The man with the girl was shut out from Audax's view as others grappled with him; the girl's screams were suddenly quenched. Then in the tussle one of the men fell over the inner side of the wall-top; but before the thud of his impact on the ground could be heard, Audax and the men nearest him were running for the steps. "Here," he called, and stopped in dismay; a trick of moonlight had fooled his uncertain memory, and he had mistaken a loose block of stone for the stair-head. But there must be steps somewhere near. Noise was beginning, shouts and flurry in the house, and the men on the wall-top no longer taking care to muffle their movements. Audax ran on, looking for the steps.

He overshot his mark. Back near the tower some house-guards had appeared, fighting was going on. Noise was thickening, rising. Another man yelled as he slipped off the wall-top. Audax halted and looked back, and saw that someone was shouting to him. Bagaudae were already pressing down the stone steps. He turned back and joined them. They slithered and pushed down the steps, cursing and shouting their cry-of-the-night, "Death to the tyrant!" With a relief, like an escape from danger, he felt the earth under his feet; but it was then that danger began, a rush of the defenders. He trod in a small jar and saved his life by falling over, under the flash of swords, and sat frantically tugging at the jar into which his foot had become wedged; and got his foot free at last and sprang up, drawing his sword and rushing into the side of the skirmish. He struck a big man in the back of the neck, not with all his force, it was so hard to strike at first with the reckless will to slay, and then the fury came over him and he struck at the next man without regret, without reluctance of his muscles. And suddenly there was no one between them and the gate except the inert body of one of the men who had fallen from the wall and a man crawling along with down-dropt head.

Basilus heard the uproar. He was not surprised. He gripped Orion's arm and said gleefully, "It's beginning, eh? I told you so. Never say again that I don't know the secret will of God. Now's the time for you and I to get to work, lad. We're the executioners of the Judgment. That's what I've been preserved for all these long years. You see, it's all happening exactly as I foretold it to you night after night in my room

with the devils slithering round us to eavesdrop on the counsels of the Lord." He brandished his carving-knife. "Come along, lad They'll be waiting for us by now."

He walked with careful dignity, settling his clothes and passing his hand over his scanty hair "Now, pull yourself together, Orion, and don't disgrace me in this great hour of my justification Remember that everybody will be looking at us, especially when I stick this blade of justice in the evil heart for which it was forged Ah, it's sharp, Orion. Sharp as those cunning wits of yours, lad, you deep one "

They passed on up the avenue towards the house, in which the tumult was at its height Something was on fire already, a rosy glow was showing over the tower-tops. But Basilus walked slowly, with assured dignity, as if all the eyes were already upon him and it was necessary to sustain the importance of his part in every detail Once a number of panicked figures rushed up out of the darkness, sobbing and howling, and he stood aside, holding Orion by the arm, till they were past "Did you hear that they were crying on my name?" he asked

As they neared the house, more figures came looming up suddenly out of the shadows, dashing past or squealing back into some refuge. "Ah, it's well for them to be afraid of me," observed Basilus. "This is no common night, Orion." The rosy glow, blown up on the storm-bursts of clamour, had now grown brighter, the dancing tips of red-and-gold flame appeared over the black lines of masonry; and skirls and gyres of smoke, yellow banners of smoke and flame bellying out broadly, and sudden furious plumes of black. "They can't finish without me," said Basilus, but nevertheless he quickened his pace Orion was slobbering with excitement

The shutters of a window gave way, a rush of flame and smoke twisted and leaped out, licking up the stonework, catching a creeper and tossing off into the night a scatter of whirling sparks. Basilus moved round to the rear, where the worst of the noise was. The main gate was standing open, with four or five corpses heaped at one side, and beyond it the flames lighted the courtyard. Basilus blinked; for a moment he thought that he had strayed into hell, into a fire-gulf where the devils were dancing and tormenting the souls of the damned Men were dragging furniture, chests, all kinds of oddments valuable or useless out of the burning building, others, wounded, were moaning or trying to bandage their wounds; a few had found a large winejar and were reeling drunkenly about. Dead bodies lay trampled all over the courtyard. And then there came a tremendous roar, louder even than the cracking and roaring of the flames. Two men appeared at a doorway with a miserable creature slumped to the ground between them; they hauled him up. Again the crowd roared, and Basilus recognised his brother Sollius He took out his carving-knife and tenderly felt the well-ground edge. The executants of the will of a just god were bringing out his enemy to have his throat

slit. Basilus shouted, "I'm here, lads!" But nobody paid him any attention, his shout was unnoted in the uproar, and this disregard staggered Basilus. He frowned, stared around him, and looked hard at his knife. Again he shouted, and again nobody noticed him. His face was working anxiously, puckering, blinking, grinning and scowling. The world had suddenly become unintelligible; its disregard struck at the heart of his convictions, his rôle; he began to feel hostility towards the mad crowd jumping and racing and roaring about him. His concept of justice was undergoing a radical change. What were all these frenetic creatures doing to his brother? He remembered the day, long ago, when Sollius had tried to climb a fir-tree and fallen down and broken his forearm, and he, Basilus, had picked him up in his arms and run with him all the way to the house, while Sollius had clung to him, with his unbroken arm round his neck, weeping, and the broken arm had hung in such a pathetic way, looking so hopelessly damaged.

"Let him go!" he yelled, and raced over towards the spot where Sollius was pinioned by his captors. He brandished his carving-knife and shouted curses, while Orion followed close behind. He got half-way across before the men about him realised what was happening. "Let him go!" he yelled, and saw the pallid eyes of Sollius turned upon him with an astonishment that was a kind of terror, and then the others closed in round him. He struck at the nearest and heard cloth rip, and then something heavy smote him in the side of the face, and something else heavy in the back, and a tremendous weight was bearing him down before the pain caught him, not a pain in any particular place, but a flame leaping up off the ground and consuming him and then passing into utter blackness.

The episode of Basilus attracted no particular attention. It was over in a few moments, and nobody interfered with the gibbering Orion who knelt over the dead man, plucking at him and then recoiling. But Sollius had recognised his brother; he continued to stare at the spot where he had seen him struck down, and scarcely heeded the insults and orders which were being flung at him. His two captors went on holding him by the arm, but he ceased to shiver and pull; a stupefied immobility had come over him. Two of the raiders were standing out in front of him, accusing him of various deeds of oppression and violence. They called on the bystanders to testify, and shout after shout burst from the mob, accusing Sollius of some specific act of cruelty, an eviction or a flogging-to-death or a ruthless tightening of the knots of serfdom. But Sollius had given up trying to understand what was happening, somehow or other he had failed to pacify the potent spirit of his grandfather. How could he have been so rash as to leave that grave without a monument for so long a time? The Bishop, the Visigoths, St. Justus, the officials at Lugdunum and Ugernum over whom he had walked roughshod, the fellow-magnates who had been jealous at his rapid expansions . . . all his enemies

floated in confused forms before him, merged with the mad figures staring at him with flaming eyes. If only he could find the right word to say. He felt that if he only clapped his hands in anger, everyone would scurry off in terror. That was how things had always been; he had God on his side, and yet he couldn't clap his hands, he was at the mercy of a world suddenly risen up with mad eyes of flame. And what had Basilius had to do with all this? What had happened to him, that he rose up one moment a kind of terrible accuser, an unimaginable rescuer, and then was trodden down into the black earth? Sollius felt that he must have imagined the advent of his brother, and that frightened him more than all the threatening eyes, the madmen in the hell-scene of tempestuous flares. As his captors gripped harder and started to drag him off, he shouted, "Brother!" and then louder, "Brother!" And now he was sure that there had been no Basilius and that it was himself who was going mad. He struggled feebly, with slaving jaws; he wanted to throw something down to appease his assailants. I'll give it up, he thought; only let me live. But he couldn't think what it was that he had to give up in order to be saved, and then the face of his son Paulinus rose up before him, and he kicked and screamed. "I won't! I won't!" The knot seemed to be tied somewhere in the region of his navel, and he dared not unloose it; his life would go if he did. And he was filled with a passionate regret that he hadn't killed his son while he had the chance; that had been his real error. And now it was too late. No, no, he screamed, and tore at the hands. It was never too late. God would pardon him, for he truly repented. He would get another chance, and then he would kill that devil of a son, and all would be well, and his grandfather would smile on him. He felt the rope tightening round his throat, and wrenched at it. The hands had now let him go, and he felt for a moment that God had come to his rescue, God with a carving-knife, out of clover-fields where the colts had been rolling and God had His hand on his arm, and then the glitter burst again into the mad eye-slits. The rope tightened and up he went, kicking and squawking, and the roaring grew drowsy.

He was already dead when one of the men came up with a piece of board on which had been scrawled in black. SO DIE ALL TYRANTS

2. *Monastery*

When Paulinus left his hermit hollow, he had no plan, only the knowledge that he was sent forth and must enter into a new phase of the Way, the Life of Redemption. He walked on for over a week, fed by peasants, before he discovered what the new phase was. Then, one day, he halted, weary and footsore, and rested on a drystone fence. Before him about a dozen peasants, men and women, were at work hoeing in a field; a slight breeze seemed to shake the pale-gold tissues of sunlight. And so the spirit came on him, he called to the hoers and they came up. They stood

round him while he spoke to them of the great love pouring through the world and rejoicing in itself, unspeakably lonely and yet in its essence the rejoicing of fellowship, a bird crying in a green solitude of waters and the force that made them one with the growing corn through their sweat and the movements of their hands. The words flowed from his tongue after the many months of silence, at first turbidly and darkly, then growing clearer and warmer. "I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Thus says the apostle. Everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. At what then do you rejoice, O man of Christ? Whereon do you feed, O man renewed in the knowledge of God, after the image of him that created you, you living soul, of so much continency, you tongue like flying fowls, speaking mysteries." And he spoke of the Coming, the Day of the Regenerate Earth. "Yet heaven and earth shall pass away, but His words shall not pass away. Because the scroll shall be rolled together, and the grass over which it was spread shall with the goodness of it pass away, but the word remains for ever, which now appears to us under the dark image of clouds and through the glass of the heavens, not as it is. Because we also, though the well-beloved of the Son, have not yet reached the moment of our transforming. He looks through the lattice of our flesh, and He spoke us tenderly, and kindled us, and we ran after His odours. But when He shall appear, then shall we be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. As He is, Lord, will our sight be. And as our sight, our whole being." And he ended with the words of Paul: "*As unknown and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich, as having nothing, yet possessing all things.*"

And he looked on the faces of the men and women, faces darkened and hardened with toil and misery, and he saw that they could not have repeated or explained the least of the phrases which he had uttered, and yet they were perfectly in union with him, they understood his utterance in its wholeness. And he blessed them, and they returned to their work; and when their backs were turned, he lay on the roadway and wept silently in his intense happiness. For now his solitude was over, now he was not only one with the Spirit in itself, he was one also with the Spirit in men and women. He was outside the world and yet one with it, actively drawn into the struggle of God with the Darkness which became the suffering body of Christ; and all his vigils had been a preparation for this fuller participation in agony and joy.

He wandered on for another week, moving back towards the wilds. But now he was seeking for solitude with a new intention, and at last he found the site which spoke to his heart; a valley in the hills where three good springs fed the stream, and where there was a stretch of thicket that had good soil under the roots. On one side was a broad ledge, which could

be widened and which would provide an excellent position for building on. He walked over and over the ground, and planned out each detail, and slept in a nook on the hillside with peaceful dreams. He stayed five days in the valley, till the bread, which he had been carrying and eating in small portions each day, was used up. Then he turned his steps back to the district into which he had first retreated.

On the way he met another ascetic, a tall man with a hollow voice and burning grey eyes, with whom he talked; and this man declared himself moved to join with him. His name was Aper. Two days later they found the place near Paulinus's lake where a group of ascetics were living. Both Paulinus and Aper, now an enthusiastic supporter, spoke at length, and after some discussion among themselves the group agreed to take part in the founding of a monastery. Paulinus had passionately set forth his conviction that though the hermit life might be necessary for individuals at a certain stage in their shedding of the world and their union with the Three-in-One, yet the fullness of union could only come about in a corporate life bound together by labour for the common good.

There were seven ascetics in the group, who had already in a rather unco-ordinated way begun to form a cœnobitic settlement. But the ideal which Paulinus had formulated insisted on a careful co-ordination, and consequently required an allocation of offices and tasks. The new group, nine strong, decided that Paulinus's proposition of the need for a Rule was sound. Paulinus was elected Father, and the distribution of further offices and the construction of a Rule was postponed till later, when the actual grappling with the problems of a monastic institution would have clarified the issues and the respective qualities of the monks. This initial discussion took three days. Then the nine men set off to find the valley which Paulinus had selected as the site.

The first work was to build a small chapel. The weather was still warm enough for them to lie among the boulders on the hillside in the nights. Then, when the chapel had been roughly built up without mortar and roofed with boughs and clay, they began on the cells. And at every spare moment they argued, sometimes with hot disagreements, over the Rule and the productive works to be undertaken and the lay-out of the buildings to be erected. One ascetic grew discontented and went off, but the others were only more closely bound by this defection. Visits were paid to the hamlets in the neighbourhood and the purpose of the settlement was explained, and the peasants brought gifts of food, small bags of seed-corn, even a couple of calves and lambs. An intense keenness had now awoken among the ascetics, a determination to make a success of the settlement. Discussion was still incessant and impassioned, and out of it a vital expansion and rooting of Paulinus's ideas emerged. He himself at times found it hard to relate his first exalted but skeletal concept with the living thing, complex but organically fused, which was being born out of the mating energies.

The winter was difficult. But there were no more defections. Each day of hardship made the settlement more beloved among the group. There were moments of rapture when the sharpness of the trials borne by the monks had the effect of creating a kind of athletic spurring-on to new difficulties—when they rose up in the midst of a frosty night to chant lauds in the chapel or to drag stones from the hillside down to the places where the building was going on. All agreed now that the Rule must contain a clause forbidding the departure of a monk who had taken the full vows; there was to be none of the restless coming and going that were typical of other monastic settlements. Paulinus's ideal of a highly co-ordinated community, living in ascetic simplicity but achieving a productive control impossible for the self-divided world, had become infused into the whole group. "In the world," he said, "the advance of skill and management means an increase in discord and greed, and a total perversion of the uses of things. But we, who are sworn to a common ownership of goods, cannot but find in the love of Christ a principle which will turn to good what the world turns to evil, which will prove that the abundance of things and powers with which the earth is blessed can be used for the glory of God instead of the glory of the perverted creature of the world. . . ."

With spring came a new access of energy; and the peasants, having grown accustomed to the settlement and having watched its struggling but unsubdued activities, came oftener with gifts. A few tools began to accumulate. The son of a shepherd came to join the community. A large part of the thicket was cleared, and ploughing and sowing started. Peasants came to give advice and to help. And Paulinus, in his careful managing of the growth of this child of his salvation, found in himself a new depth of certainty. Qualities which he had not suspected himself to possess came naturally to his aid and expanded under the stress. Above all, he found that he had an intuitive power of organisation, he lived so fully within the growing community that he had no time to feel doubts about his own capacity or to anticipate with dread the various mishaps that did occur. Each emergency stirred in him a deepened energy, a more comprehensive leadership. And he was aware that his growth was no barren thing, no egoistic exploitation; it was centred in the love of Christ and actualised in the common life of the settlement, in which the out-flow of each man's energy was also a laud of such love, a welling from new springs of human unity. And because what he loved in each of these men was not the personality, but the welling spring of a new unity, he loved them in person also; and the personalities of them all, himself included, were enriched and fulfilled and transfigured because it was that welling spring of new unity, and nothing else, to which the ultimate allegiance was rendered.

Not that there was a lack of passing discords, checks, obstacles that threatened to hurl back the whole effort into confusion. But all such

discords, however engrossing for the moment of their pressure, had only the effect of strengthening the ultimate unity, the harmonising sweep. And so the great patterns of the life of God which he had realised in the hollow by the Lake were given body and passed forever through the renewing fiat; and God's life was being lived in the valley monastery with an intensity and wealth which had been impossible in the hermit hollow, though without that period of hermitage this new depth of incarnation could never have come about.

And one day the inner continuity of his experience was warmly brought home to him. He was standing on the bouldered hillside at the back of the level space which had once been the thicket and which would sway with the golden corn before the summer's end. He surveyed the chapel, the cells, the byre and the sheds which were already built. The work was crude, but it would suffice for a year or two, till the problem of cultivation had been solved. The valley was in waste land to which no one laid claim and which the contracting imperial State had forgotten; but the completed monastery, which Paulinus could see in his mind's eye, would transform the whole district. It would teach new ways to the peasants, educate them, raise their whole standard of living—but it would do this on a system totally opposed to anything yet adopted in the world. It would spread its ideal of community living and burn out with its love all the cruel old ideals based on Family and State. He felt a tremendous power throbbing in him, as if he and his followers were already containing in themselves the whole of that new life which would in time be spread abroad and shared among the others, and the effort to contain this terrific force, this lightning of God's contact with the earth, was extreme and wearing and threatened at any moment to consume the container in a flash of glory. And yet what joy, what humility of love, to be chosen as the container and transmitter of this terrific transforming force . . .

At that moment a hen chaffinch flew down on his shoulder, fluttering round his face with little caressing chirps and gentle pecks. He smiled and walked slowly down the hill, with the bird still fluttering about his shoulder and face; and this strange affection of the bird drew his mind back to the days in the hollow when the birds had so friendly companioned his lonely days and shared his food. His heart gushed with love for all life, for the bountiful earth; and it seemed that a new consecration had fallen upon the monastery.

Brother Aper met him half-way down the hill. "A man has brought in a spade. That's good. We lack spades."

"Next year we shall have our own smithy," said Paulinus. "Over there I have thought it all out."

3. *Audax Settles Down*

The village to which Phoebe had withdrawn ahead of Audax was deep

in the Cevennes. More than a generation ago the tax-gatherers had given up visiting it; only continual punitive expeditions could have kept the district within the flagging imperial control. And what governor was going to bother in such days to send expeditions for so poor a return? The villagers had tales about the thrashing that the last tax-collector had got; and there the matter remained. A scanty crop of wheat and rye was harvested from the fields, enough under ordinary conditions to provide bread for the year and seed for the next sowing. For the rest the peasants looked after their sheep-flocks. The district was self-contained; it supplied its own wants in food, clothing, building, and smithying, it had held no commercial relations with the outer world since the day when the last tax-collector retreated hastily over the horizon. A hardy breed, the folk, whose sole contact with the other world was through their natural alliance with any of the Bagaudae groups that came near.

Audax had found his jealousy not so easily controlled; there had been moments, recalled with shame, when he quarrelled with Phoebe and cast up her past at her. And instead of submitting and consoling him by a show of gratitude for his agreeing to overlook that past, she had her pride roused by his jealousy, and asserted, probably much more emphatically than was true, that she was not in the least regretful of what she had done. She had done it freely, gladly, and under the same circumstances she would do it again. "You mean any time I happened to be out of the way for a day or two," said Audax, knowing quite well that she had meant nothing of the sort. And he tormented her by asking questions, he wanted to know each detail. He assured her that if only he knew it all he would be relieved, he would forget the whole thing, and at first she believed him, as indeed he believed himself. But she soon found that anything she told him of those days only made him much worse, and she knew that even if she told every little detail he would even less than ever be able to control his desire to know more. For what he wanted to know was not something that words could tell, though words could exacerbate the wish. And so she refused to tell him anything more, and then he accused her of having secrets too shameful for words, and the wrangling went on. And then he awoke from that obsession of his, ashamed and tender, and the whole of the past seemed truly obliterated. He was sure that the dark mood would never return. But it returned. He had a fear of meeting one of the men who had been in the band that had possessed her, a fear that he would be laughed at. And then again he was astonished that he should torment himself and Phoebe about something that didn't matter in the least; and he was glad of her pride, her refusal to be ashamed or to plead with him. It seemed to him that her self-respect, while making things harder at moments, was enabling them both to cleanse themselves of an evil inheritance.

And then when the child was born and turned out to be a girl, he had a profound upheaval of the spirit. His pity for Phoebe in her throes, his

pity for the baby—a pity half repulsion and confused shame—and, strangely, an immense relief that the baby was a girl and not a boy, conspired to give him a conviction of tremulous happiness and purification from the darkness which had been oppressing him. “Darling, I know now I don’t care about anything but you. . . . It’s all wiped out, all that nonsense,” he whispered, kneeling by the bed and shyly touching her brow, her sweat-plastered tresses, her cheek. And she smiled at him out of an enormous distance of pain and thankfulness, not hearing the words, but aware of his panged and exultant presence.

And yet, though his jealousy hadn’t been all wiped out, it had been basically modified, he felt sure that it could never master him again. He felt now that it had been the last bond holding him to the evil world to which he had bidden farewell, that tormenting pressure to wring from Phoebe the “truth” of it all had been exactly like the tormenting pressure he used to feel in his desire not to miss the satisfying events which were always going on somewhere else. And when he arrived in the village and began to settle down in an empty and partly broken-down cottage with Phoebe, he found that his need to get at grips with the new situation effectively exorcised the ghost of bitterness and jealousy. It seemed, indeed, that it had not been of Phoebe at all that he had been thinking when the dark mood swept over him; he had been struggling with the whole inheritance of evil, the greed and cruelty of the world based on private property. The village, shut off from the State and from landlords, had reverted fully to self-government by assembly; the whole of the pasturage was communally owned and organised, and much of the crop-growing; all decisions affecting the life of the group were thrashed out by free discussion in the meeting by the Stone which represented the community centre. And his entry into this mode of existence, so strange to him at first, though prepared for by his experience of organisation among the Bagaudae, had the effect of movement into a new world—a world, which, however imperfect and limited, yet had in it the seeds of all future freedoms and expansions, so that what from the angle of the external observer would no doubt have seemed a limitation became for him, an active participant, the sources of flowing happiness, of security for development.

With the help of other villagers he repaired the cottage, and he and Phoebe began to feel more comfortable. She quickly recovered her strength after bearing the child, and had become quite acclimatised by the time he came to rejoin her. He had gained his chance of settling in the village through one of the Bagaudae who lived there and who was returning after a spell of fighting, and he was thus from the outset accepted without reservations by the others. His eagerness to make himself of use and to fit harmoniously into the structure of the established group-life made the villagers overlook his ignorance, his mistakes; and he was himself surprised at the speed with which he did adapt his ways to those

of the village. Details of the management on his father's estate came back to him, and he began to hold his own, to have suggestions to make.

"What a long tangled way we had to take to get here," he said one evening as he sat on a bench outside the cottage. "And yet how simple it seems now that we are here"

She had the sleeping baby in her lap.

"And yet, no matter how simple such a matter seems afterwards, there's no short cut. Imagine a year or two ago. If anyone had said to us: Go off to a village in the wilds and there you'll find the solution of all that troubles you, it would have seemed lunacy."

He stared out at the changing hues, trying to unwind the tangle which had led him to the present moment—to put his finger on the moment when the basic change had occurred. He couldn't find that moment, no change seemed to have occurred, and yet he knew that he was totally changed. His world was changed, the world of his loyalties and needs. And he was aware that the old pressure, the feeling of loss and of missing something, had quite gone; he had driven roots into the earth. He was no longer afraid.

4 *Events at Rome*

Prosper had weathered the storm caused by the murder of Aetius, but his self-satisfaction ceased to grow. Perhaps the reason lay in his inability to regain a sense of security. He had had no affection for Aetius, far less than he had had for his Hun lord, but he had worked out a scheme of advancement with Aetius at its centre. And the violent removal of Aetius from that place had left him with the feeling of a void. At moments he felt stifled, the rich hangings and perfumes of the palace made him feel the desire to get on horseback and ride out to the open country.

He began drinking more heavily; and though he could hold his drink well, he was left with an increased sense of that void. His affair with Serena was no longer so pleasant; they had started quarrelling. He knew that the fault was mainly his; he had become irritable. But that didn't make him feel any more kindly disposed towards Serena. And then, in the palace, he became more than ever aware of the eyes of the lady Elaphia upon him. One day she brushed close against him, he felt her thigh and breast, and a wave of hostility and of desire went through him. It was only a question of time, he knew at that moment, before they came closer still. And that very evening, as he was lounging about after the meal, a page-boy with heavy-lidded, insolent eyes sidled up to him and said that a lady wanted to see him in private for a word or two.

She was seated on a couch in a room of richly encrusted hangings, lighted by a single satyr-lamp burning perfumed oil; her hair was unbraided in long ringlets about her shoulders, and she wore a blue silk

wrap. Despite her calculated pose and the softly rounding light, he could see through the wrap and fine chemise that her body with the breast-band and belly-bands left off was not at all attractive, it was meagre and yet slack. And he knew already that her love-making would be insatiable, but without laughter or passion, and he regretted Serena, with whom he would now have to break. She said, "Pour out some of the wine in that glass flagon, and tell me about yourself." He poured out the wine and told her how gracious and comely she was. There was no surprise in it all, only a sensation of drudgery, which would become harder to hide with each meeting; but since the affair had happened, he was resolved to make the most of it, to use Elaphia's Court position to ensure his rise. He knew that she had no more belief in the sincerity of his protestations and love-making than she had in that of her own; all she required was the carrying out of the set forms and an obedient drudgery of embraces.

One day he gathered from some remarks made by a couple of pages that a group of pilgrims from Gaul were about to leave the palace, after having presented a testimonial of thanksgiving to the Emperor from their local senate, and, as he was off duty, he hurried to see if he could intercept them. He felt hungry for news of the districts he had known as a child and youth—a mood that had grown stronger during the last couple of weeks. He caught up with the tail of the group on the palace steps and stopped a young man with a smiling freckled face, whom he found to be a deacon from Lugdunum named Amrosius. The deacon was only too pleased to slip away from the rest of the deputation and accompany the young officer of the palace-corps.

"I am staying at the hospice of St Lawrence's church," he said, "though I could have gone to the house of the Bishop of Collatia, to whom I have letters. How fortunate you are, to live amid the holy odours of the tombs of the martyrs! One could scarcely fear death in such a neighbourhood, which is a sure passport to heaven. Are you busy? I was thinking of going to the precincts of St Peter's. There are excellent stalls there with objects of piety for sale. Yes, I agree. It's rather a crush. All the vulgar mob of pilgrims washing their feet in the troughs. I confess I hardly know my way about yet. Of course I have reverently visited the churches where rest the inestimably sacred bodies of St. Peter and St. Paul, and I have ventured into the crypts and underground sepulchres, where all is so dark that the words of the prophet are verily fulfilled, *They descend alive into hell*. Psalms, fifty-four, sixteen. Or perhaps you are one of those who find the Old Testament too harsh in its diction, too uncouth and difficult. Certainly it is a stumbling-block that worthless pagans such as Cicero should be so blessed with perfections of style, whereas . . ."

He was very anxious to show himself broad-minded, unprovincial;
1 (Barriers are Down)

and was quite distressed to learn that the officer derived, like himself, from Gaul and knew Lugdunum very well.

He had been sent by his Bishop to pick up any relics buyable at reasonable prices, but also to beg the particular gifts of a cloth that had been laid on the tomb of Peter and a phial of oil that had burned in some martyr's shrine. The Bishop needed the cloth and phial for the glorification of a new church that he was building, and had written letters of voluminous rhetoric to everyone he knew in Rome, begging to be granted such tremendous and incomparable articles—articles so charged with the potency of the dead as to be able to cure sickness, detect burglars, cause prophetic fits in virgins, and avert the lightning, as well as ensuring a steady supply of offerings and legacies for the church so fortunate as to possess them.

"The cloth is practically promised," said the deacon, with bated breath. "And I have the highest hopes for the oil. Of course I know it's rather presumptuous to ask so much. It's not as if the church was to be built by a king, or something like that. But I must say I'm finding everyone most amiable. I was intending to make a round of the shrines today, starting from the Via Flaminia and going on in a circle, following the sun. . . . How wonderful it was on the steps of the Lateran Palace this morning. Hundreds of us hailing the sun as it rose, with hymns and gestures of adoration."

Prosper felt so much at a loose end that he offered to visit some of the shrines with the deacon. They set out for the Via Flaminia in the north, and entered the basilica of St. Valentine, after passing through the usual ring of scabby beggars and fugitives living within the circle of church-sanctuary. Pilgrims were gathered round the tombshrine, clasping it and kissing it with noisy fervour. Those behind tore the others away, calling out that they had been kissing long enough, and then fastened their own greedy lips to the stone. Others had bottles and flagons of all kinds, from which they poured libations over the tomb or the heads that got in the way, and then they retired to a corner and drank the rest of the wine with pious ejaculations and songs. "It's a sweet savour in the saint's nostrils!" cried one of the drinkers, waving a jug. Half-tipsy women were smiling leeryly and rubbing themselves against the men. A pilgrim, trying to hide his hand with his cloak, was cutting his initials on a side of the tomb; others were looking for spaces on the walls to fill with their names and prayers. The deacon confided to Prosper that he had managed yesterday to scratch his name and an invocation on a tomb-wall in the catacombs, he felt assured about his after-life after such an act. He beamed round.

"Delightful. Rome is indeed a city of incalculable piety. At home of course we see this kind of thing every now and then, but here it goes on all the while. All the while," he repeated with cherubic glee. "And all over the place. Hundreds of shrines, crypts, basilicas, hospices, ceme-

teries. And all of them filled with pilgrims and the faithful of the city, glorifying the Lord and absorbing the unspeakable odours of the holy dead."

But Prosper felt no wish to be edified; he gazed gloomily round at the votive offerings, the fresco of the Seasons, the mosaic of the Crowing Rooster, the pedlars at the door with trays of amulets, depilating ointments, contraceptives. The deacon tried to show his learning by an oration connected with another fresco, that of the Nativity "We see here how the Ox and the Ass proved the divinity of our Lord, thereby fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah, one, three, and Habbakuk, three, two. And the adoration by the Ass, representing the Gentiles, in turn proved the inspiration of the prophets."

A number of pilgrims who had drawn gaping round applauded, but Prosper made his way out of the church, followed by the crestfallen deacon, who had wanted to deliver a speech on the triumph of religion in making the mighty of the earth humble themselves before a Fisherman's Tomb That was always a popular theme.

"There's so much dust," said Prosper "Let's find a quiet tavern and have a drink "

And the deacon instantly discovered a need for a drink in a quiet tavern. They had a drink in a noisy tavern, the only one that they could find in the neighbourhood; and Prosper guided the talk to the doings in Gaul The deacon at first struggled to converse of Rome's magnificence and such intellectual matters as the relevance of the symbolism of Jonah and the Whale's Belly to the contemporary world, but after he had begun on the gossip of Lugdunum he found himself carried away by his themes and enjoyed himself He told all about the riot because a parish priest's wife bore a child at the age of fifty, though she and her husband were of course supposed to be living in chastity ever since his ordination, the people had been roused to a sense of the impending End of the World by a wandering monk, and about the same time an epidemic of fevers had broken out, and so a rush was made to burn down the priest's house over his head, the priest had claimed that the child was spirit-begotten, and in proof of his words the child, though only a few weeks old, had cried in a loud voice, "Glory to the Lord." And then there had been the affair of the deacon Leontius, who had absconded with funds and precious relics, and the death of the very pious priest Secundus, who had been buried privately for fear that the people would tear his body to pieces as relics, and the murder of one of the revenue-controllers by a bankrupt fuller, and the murder of the magnate Pannychius by his slaves in the bath, and a case of astrology prosecuted by the bishop.

"Of course I reject astrology," said the deacon confidentially, "as an heretical prying into the will of God and as showing false ideas about Freewill, but it was certainly odd that Pannychius, so I have heard say, was born in a year when all the planets which rose favourably in the

zodiac sank with blood-red fires, whether it was that Mercury made them baleful," he added, opening his hands to show his breadth of mind, "asyndetic upon the diameter, you know, or Saturn retrograde upon the tetragon, which is of course possible, or Mars returning to his old position upon the centre, which seems to me the most rational explanation. You see, Pannychius had his face pushed in the bath-furnace till he choked."

After which gossip Prosper managed to turn the flow of chat upon Sollius.

"What, didn't you hear? He was hanged by some rebels. The Bishop of Uxellodunum is claiming the estate. It appears that the only direct male heir is a son that's become a monk. As he's making no claim, the Bishop insists that the estate belongs to Mother Church. The wife and her baby daughter escaped the assassins, but were drowned in a fishpond when running off."

Trying to hide his interest, Prosper remarked, "I believe Sollius had a brother . . . Basilus . . . He lost all his money, I think."

The deacon frowned. "O yes, I heard something about him. Yes, he was killed too, at the same time. I believe he was staying with his brother."

The news upset Prosper far more than he could understand; it rocked all his remaining sense of security. Sollius dead—hanged by rebels—the estate all being swallowed by the Church. Damn it all, he thought, I'm the nearest male relative; I'm his nephew. But weariness came over him. What chance would he have of asserting any rights against the Bishop? If only he had been on the spot. By this time the Bishop would have got his fingers tightly on the land, taken possession, gathered together all the support for his claim that his acquaintanceship among church dignitaries, nobles, and imperial officials would enable him to do. Whatever legal rights Prosper had would never avail against such a serried mass of patronage. It was true that Prosper, as an officer of the palace corps, would be legally ranked among the *honestiores*, and so would be given preference in any case he fought against one of the *humiliores*, the lower classes; but his status would be of little help against a bishop in such a matter as that of Sollius's estate. Perhaps if Aetius hadn't died, and if Prosper had managed to climb a little faster up the ladder of preferment, something could have been done; but Prosper had scant feeling of any solid favour behind him at the moment. Under a plea of having to return to duty, he left the affable deacon, who was slightly overcome by the wine and who was admiring the heavily painted girl behind the bar.

He felt more and more impatient. He tried to get some hold on the lady Elaphia, some reality of intimacy which would enable him to use her for his advancement; but for all her glib utterance of amorous formulas and all her ever-ready but characterless sensuality, she easily evaded his efforts to get closer, to look underneath the cosmeticked mask. And as he had no deeper emotion towards her than she had towards him, his

efforts were not at all adroit or pressing. He knew now that he was not the only lover she had in the palace; but he crushed down the resentments which sought to rise into angry utterance. Sometimes she blandly insulted him and laughed in his face, and he had to pretend that he had misunderstood her and that he was a boor incapable of grasping her finer ironies. And yet, the more he felt himself resenting her and shrinking from the drudgery of her embrace, the more he felt impelled to cling to her as to the sole clue promising any safety, any way-out from his inferiority. Wild schemes for claiming the estate of his dead uncle flourished in his mind, only to be discarded after he had desperately decided to carry them out. What could he do without strong and powerful patronage?

Eutharic said, "There is something going on . . ."

"What?" he answered irritably. "Speak clearly."

"Something," said Eutharic with a grin. "I don't know what I smell it."

Prosper shook his head and returned to his thoughts.

About a week later the full palace corps were in attendance on the Emperor at the military sports and manoeuvres in the Campus Martius. They had marched past the Capitol, and up the road lined with porticoes and theatres, to the only part of the Campus which still remained for military displays. The rest of the Field was taken up with the huge buildings and monuments which the emperors had erected. The Emperor's booth was set up at one side of the long Stadium, behind which towered in confused masses of grandeur the Neronian Baths, the Pantheon, and the Baths of Agrippa. On the eastern side of the Field, along the banks of the Tiber, the populace were collected behind a line of spearmen.

The games and manoeuvres, which a short while ago would have interested Prosper very much, were flatly boring; even the intricate movements of the horsemen roused only a weak response. From time to time he covertly watched the Emperor on his chair of ivory and gold, and debated how best he could catch the favour of that flabby-faced and indolent creature, who had now for some time relapsed from his show of activity. Behind the imperial chair stood the eunuch Heraclius, bending to whisper something into his smirking master's ear. Prosper fretted with annoyance, feeling still more resentful against the lady Elaphia and day-dreaming how pleasant it would be if someone made an attempt on the Emperor's life so that the smart young officer named Prosper might rush to the rescue. The day was not very hot; but the prolonged standing in the sun and dust was beginning to make him feel languid and thirsty. He had an agitated desire for something to happen, like a kind of itch which he couldn't locate.

The spectators were cheering something; he jerked his head up and

blinked his eyes. But he had missed the feat, whatever it was; he saw only the dull lines of horsemen meeting and separating out. I've been too humble with that bitch, he told himself; I should have taken a higher hand at the outset, and now it's hard to assert myself. But it wasn't easy to assert himself when the least angry word would probably mean the door slammed in his face; he was pretty sure that that woman even took some of the slaves to bed; she was infamous. About the heavy-lidded page-boy he was quite sure.

And then, abruptly, something went wrong with the world; he was stricken motionless. There seemed a widening silence, but that was only because his ears ceased to register anything. Everything seemed to happen with extreme slowness, deliberacy, though he knew afterwards that it had all been furiously quick, entangled, maddened. Two Huns, whom he knew fairly well—they had been members of Aetius's body-guard before they were taken into the palace corps—were standing in the same line as himself, about four or five files down. He saw them leap from their place, with a flash of swords; then they were on the dais, and the Emperor was looking at them, with a kind of dazed intentness, only his dropped jaw revealed his panic. And then he was down, with his head smashed in, on the bloody dais, and his minister Heraclius was darting at the purple curtains at the rear, as if he didn't know that there were boards behind them. In a moment one of the swords flashed out and cut him across the back of his thighs, and then he was down too, with the two Huns slashing at his neck. And nobody else raised a hand, stirred, made any attempt to stop what was going on. The two Huns held up their bloody swords into the sunlight, piercing the purple canopy, and then they turned and made off to the left. And still nobody raised a hand, stirred, or made any attempt to stop them.

Then a mighty groan swept over the Field; the manoeuvres had paused; officials stepped forward uncertainly. Nobody knew who was in the conspiracy or what was going to happen next. Nothing happened. Every man glanced at the others beside him. And there on the bloody dais lay the corpses of the Emperor and his chief minister. At last one of the officials strode across and pulled some of the hangings over the bodies, and then other officials stirred, began issuing orders. High officers were muttering together. The troops were rapidly moving off the grounds. Prosper gave a deep sigh. Well, something had happened, the foundations of the State were once more shaken, and all he felt was a worse boredom, otherwise nothing had changed. As far as he could make out, no pursuit of the assassins had been instituted. There was no show of anger or joy; not even any astonishment. Patiens, who had been conferring with some higher officers, came over. "Draw the men up round the dais. There'll be a carriage or something along soon." His face was gloomy and uncertain.

"Who's in charge? Whose command is it?"

Patiens shook his head and scowled. Then he hesitated and bent closer. "Petronius Maximus, I think. Anyway, we'll soon know." He repeated in a louder voice. "Draw your men round the dais."

Maximus was a leading senator, of the Anician family, who had held most of the high State offices, he had been the centre of the conspiracy against the Emperor. His election to the murdered man's place was a matter of course. This election, which expressed the power that had been temporarily passing into the hands of the Roman Senate with the dissolution of the bureaucratic mechanism of the Empire, belonged to an area of politics about which Prosper had no knowledge. He felt more out of things than ever; and now the lady Elaphia was his only stay. For she was still in the important sphere of palace politics. Maximus was anxious to consolidate his position by linking his family up with the females of the Theodosian line which had become extinct on the male side with Valentinian's death. He was arranging to marry his son to one of the princesses, and, being himself a recent widower, he was determined to marry the widow of the man whom he had murdered.

The atmosphere of tension and blood animated Elaphia; she became something more than an automatism of greedily passive lust. Her face had a touch of natural colour; her eyes sparkled—though they still had the effect of not being able to focus on the person to whom she spoke. Prosper guessed that she was being flattered and courted by Maximus, who was bringing all possible pressure to bear on the dowager-Empress and her daughters in order to reconcile them to his marriage projects. And so for once she showed a hint of warmth; of her own accord she told Prosper that she would speak of him to Maximus and have him promoted. But this favour, for which he had so long been eagerly angling, now left him cold, though he did his best to seem thankful. Shortly after he was spoken to by Maximus, a pouchy-eyed, yellow-faced man, who had developed a shifty look and couldn't control the movements of his eyebrows as he spoke. "We want good faithful men," said Maximus, trying to speak heartily. "You have been well recommended to me. A great new future is now opening for the Western Empire. You will have full scope for your energies. I want young men, I don't mind what their families are. I want them young and faithful and active . . ." He squinted uneasily at some curtains that had moved. "Yes, yes, the world . . . conditions . . . well, we'll see. . . . Where did you say you came from? Hmmm, yes. . . ." Prosper didn't feel much happier after the interview.

He was depressed by his failure to have intuited at all what was in the wind when the murder of Valentinian had been organised. He began listening suspiciously to all the rumours chattered about in the palace; he even tried to overhear what was being said in the streets. He felt that he was out of his bearings; he no longer trusted his own intuitive grasp.

And his affair with Elaphia was disgusting him; he dared not even hint that he knew she had other lovers. He hated her lean sodden body; and he felt that she knew what he felt and that she got a perverse pleasure out of forcing him to embraces for which he had no appetite. But perhaps, he thought after all, that was allowing her too much intelligence; she probably thought she was fascinating to him.

The rumours were endless. The events of the last couple of years—the threat from the Huns, the death of Actius, the death of the Emperor—had increased a hundredfold the credulity of the citizens. Sporadic outbursts of plague or of millenary enthusiasm complicated the situation; and increasing difficulties about the corn supply were bringing the lowest levels of the populace near the famine line. Tumblers, horse-racers, jugglers, and buffoons played in the Circus, and farces filled the theatres. The starving populace was ready at any moment to riot over the horse-races or a suggestion of heresy; cheats or spells spoiling the races were regarded with the same horror as an heretical opinion infecting the city and bringing down God's wrath. Passing by one of the lesser churches, Prosper was drawn by the noise to look in. Mass had finished, and Confessions had begun. The ordinary way of saying confession was to stand up among the congregation and tell one's life-story and one's latest backslidings; but here the church was packed with a heaving crowd all screaming about their sins, their pacts with the devil and their abusing of their wives contrary to nature despite St. Paul's express prohibition, and their visions of battles in the sky, and so on. Prosper withdrew sickened; he objected because such behaviour weakened his already weak sense of security. Obviously something was going to happen; and his knowledge of the fact (whispered all over the palace) that Maximus had been talking in his sleep last night did not make him feel any happier.

Then the rumours sharpened, grew more concise and circumstantial. The Vandals, after passing through Spain, had settled in North Africa; had been allowed by the imperial Government to occupy an area which that Government had no power of reconquering; and now it was said that King Gaiseric had sent various ultimatums to Maximus—that he was on the point of sailing to attack Rome; that he had sailed. Prosper met Patiens in a passage and drew him aside. "Is it true? . . . But what preparations are being made to repel the attack? I can't see anything being done. This is suicidal . . . if the reports are correct, that is." Though he had no feeling of loyalty to Maximus, he couldn't bear to see a situation ignored; it hurt him like a glaring lack of symmetry which his fingers itched to correct. Patiens mumbled that he wasn't in the confidence of the men higher up, he didn't know what was being done, he didn't know if the reports were correct. He shrugged his shoulders. Best to keep quiet. But Prosper couldn't bear to see things being let slide like

that; he fretted with a sense of wasted chances; he even rehearsed a dramatic appeal to Maximus, whereby Maximus would be persuaded to put the defences of Rome in the hands of the dashing young officer promoted to a general overnight. But he did nothing; the feeling of a situation totally out of hand was heavy over him as over the others.

Suddenly there came the news that the Vandals had landed at the mouth of the Tiber. Until that moment the rumours had not been fully credited; everyone hoped that the Emperor had something up his sleeve, that he was conducting at least negotiations with Gaiseric or that he had been mustering troops somewhere out of sight. But now there was no doubt of the city's danger. Horsemen had ridden on foaming steeds to tell of the great fleet which they had seen with their own eyes, the host that they had seen landing. . . . And nothing whatever had been done for Rome's defence. The last touch came when the detachments of Burgundian mercenaries on guard threw their officers over the walls, and either deserted to Gaiseric or went drinking in the slum-taverns.

Prosper stood on a balcony with a good view of the street, in charge of a dozen men; somebody had given him orders to have archers ready and to shoot on the mob if it became threatening. But he had been unable to find who was making himself responsible for the order, and so he had omitted the archers. He had no intention of being torn to pieces by an infuriated Roman mob for the sake of shifty-eyed Maximus. The streets all round the palace were filling with a noisy crowd, who were demanding to see and hear the Emperor. An officer with whom Prosper was on good terms came into the balcony to have a look at the street. He seemed in such good spirits that Prosper imagined some favourable turn must have occurred.

"Where's his Sacred Majesty?" Prosper asked.

"Being barbered," lisped the other.

"What's he going to do?"

"Aren't they fierce?" smiled the other, leaning on the balustrade and, whistling to himself. "Excuse me for being a trifle distract. You know, a girl holds a fellow off for six months, and then last night. . . . O, look at that old fool, somebody hit him over the head. Aren't they fierce?"

"I was ordered to have a company of archers all ready," said Prosper morosely; he hated having had to disobey an order, and still felt uneasy, disorganised. "But I couldn't find who was ordering it. A page came up to me, not a proper messenger at all. On such a serious matter, at least . . ."

"Don't you do anything. Not a thing." The officer clapped him on the back. "Let's have a little party tonight. I want to celebrate. . . ." He went off whistling. The noise of the crowd was growing louder; it was certainly fierce. The guards of the outer approaches had been withdrawn; Prosper had seen them slouching off at the side, looking as if

they were ashamed of the weapons in their hands. A rush from the crowd, and one of the postern-gates was broken in; in a few moments all the rose-beds were trampled down.

Prosper left his men, after a word to the centurion, and went inside. Slaves and freedmen were running about, shouting, getting in one another's way. Seeing a man whom he knew to be a secretary of some importance, he caught his arm. "Who's in command? I can't even find out whom I'm supposed to be obeying. I went to the office . . ."

The secretary wrenched himself free. "Mind your own business. Take your men back to the barracks." Then from a distance he added, "If you want to. It's nothing to do with me."

Prosper could not bear to desert a post, but after a short consideration of the scene below from the balcony he decided to follow the secretary's advice. He made no effort to march his men along; he curtly told them to get back to the guard-room as quickly as they could. As he passed through one of the lesser halls he heard a tremendous roar outside; it was so loud that he could not tell from which side of the palace it came. Later he knew that that was the moment when a Burgundian soldier among the crowd in the street had recognised Maximus trying to slip out of the palace in a hooded cloak. The people chased the Emperor down the street, pelting him with stones and kicking him, then the soldier ran in and finished him off with a sword-stroke. After the body had been thoroughly mangled, the crowd threw it into the Tiber.

Prosper, hearing the uproar, paused and then turned to go up to the room of Elaphia. Partly because in her was lodged his last image of security, and partly because he wanted to release his exasperated nerves in telling her at last what he thought of her. But she wasn't in the room; the maid said that she was with the princesses, who were overjoyed at the disaster come on their father's murderer. "And what do you think of it all?" he asked, stroking his chin. Everything was so utterly jolted and confused and upset that it seemed to him suitable and amusing to ask even a slave-girl her opinion; and only afterwards did he realise how shaken he must have been to ask such a question of a slave-girl, even as a joke, a sardonic rebuke of the gods of idiot circumstance.

"It must be the will of God, or it wouldn't happen," she said, lowering her dark liquid eyes.

"Of course," he said, and roared with laughter. He was glad, after all, that Elaphia hadn't been in the room; there was no point in making an enemy of her—at least, not until he had made sure that she couldn't be of further use to him. But he had to do something to throw off the feeling of topsy-turvy frustration. He turned to the girl, picked her up, and carried her to the recess in the backroom where he knew she had her bed. "So whatever happens is the will of God, is it?" he asked her as he laid her down; her arms half-clung to him for a moment, and then she gave him a scared smile. "Is it?" he insisted.

"Yes," she whispered.

The killing of incompetent emperors in the street might be a relief to the feelings; but it didn't solve the problem of an army of Vandals advancing on a city without adequate defences. All the civil officers had either fled or gone into hiding, the only functionaries still active were ecclesiastical. As Prosper moved about the doomed city and listened to the mob appealing for help outside the Vatican Palace, he had the same sensation as on the day when he saw the aged and fierce-eyed Bishop of Rome, Leo, leaving the Hunnic camp. Once more the Government had simply faded out, and the Roman Bishop had stepped into its place.

From rumours in the palace Prosper knew that the Bishop was already in negotiation with Gaiseric; and when the news came that the Vandal host was within a few hours' march of the city, the Bishop gathered some hundreds of his clergy and set forth from the Ostian Gate. Within a couple of hours the word had gone round the city. Gaiseric had promised to spare the lives of the citizens as long as no resistance was made, he would also graciously order that no houses be set on fire and no captives be tortured. But Rome in return must be delivered up to the pillaging of the Vandal host. Prosper heard the news with equanimity; he had hid some days ago all his valuables in a hole which he and Eutharic dug, behind a bush, under a wall in the palace garden. But in general a kind of melancholy relief greeted the news, there was a sound of low moaning over the city, the shrines were thronged with weeping and praying multitudes. And yet, mixed with all the outcry and supplication, Prosper seemed to sense a strange exultation, a hope of profound changes, an awe centred on the Bishop Leo. The Roman populace, so inured for centuries to consider themselves the heart of the world, seemed in a way to acclaim any events that made their city the scene of dramatic fulfilments, even if the fulfilments brought ruin. Haggard men began announcing the long-desired Second Coming at the street corners, and in a lane of the Subura Prosper saw that a crowd had anticipated the Vandal ransacking by breaking in the door of a wine-shop and sharing out the wine. But for the most part the citizens knelt and wailed, not too loud, in the basilicas and chapels.

The Vandal vanguard entered through a deserted gate. The populace didn't feel too sure about that promise to refrain from slaughter. But after the tramp of the host had begun to echo through the main streets of the Aventine quarter, men and women and children ventured out of their doors, at first in small groups, then in swelling crowds which lined the streets and silently eyed the conquerors. The first troops marched fast to their allotted destinations, occupying the various gates and public offices. Everything was very orderly, and no plundering had started. But towards evening the host had almost all entered; and the later detachments did not keep the discipline of those which had had objec-

tives in view. They begun to break ranks, to knock at the doors of shuttered shops, to grab hold of bystanders and demand information. Those citizens who failed to answer with sufficient politeness and readiness were knocked on the head and left in gutters; but failure in politeness might well be classified under the heading of resistance to a conquering host. Nobody complained that the truce was not being observed; it was more sensible to answer all inquiries speedily and politely. With nightfall the smashing in of shop shutters increased, but the plundering was still tentative and many areas were untouched.

Prosper had intended to stay in the palace; but he found such large numbers of Vandals marching into it, that he and Eutharic went out by one of the back doors. His gilded helmet and baldric were buried in the garden, and the rest of his weapons had been put on the top of a cupboard on the odd chance that they wouldn't be noticed. He felt curiously weak and defenceless as he walked through the streets without the familiar weight of a sword at his side. Without plan, he made his way to the house of Serena.

She herself opened the door. "Well, it's like your cheek," she said, after she had let him and Eutharic in. "After our last conversation . . . and besides, you knew I'd taken up with that notary."

"Yes, but I knew you always liked cheek."

"If I like the person who's being cheeky."

"And besides," he said, taking her in his arms, "your notary has run off bleating for his wife to hide him under her gown, while I'm here. I suppose you've hidden your jewellery."

"Even God doesn't know where it is."

"Good. Now we can await our fate."

He felt happy; ever since he had seen Serena's face again, he had felt happy. A new lightness pervaded him, a lightness which he hadn't felt since the day when the Huns wounded and captured him. He simply didn't care. All these years he had been planning and knitting his energies in contriving a career, and now it had all gone up in smoke; and he felt amused, free. Why, he must have been mad to leave Serena for that worthless Elaphia. He gave her a gentle smack on the rump and suggested that he and Eutharic were thirsty.

"I don't know what's happened to either of my girls," she said. "It seems they must be among the first casualties in the female population. No doubt they are appeasing the carnal appetites of the conquerors at this moment. However, they are neither of them virgins. I'll have to find you the wine myself."

"Leave it to Eutharic. He knows where everything is." He stretched himself out on a couch and yawned. "It's unfortunate you're so lovely, my beloved. Some Vandal is sure to carry you off."

"Well, you wouldn't expect me to cut off my nose or something to save myself, would you?" She arranged her hair in a silver mirror. "Yes, I

am lovely. How mistimed ! Perhaps the best way you could express your love at this juncture would be to give me a black eye and tear some of my nicest tresses out." She smiled into the mirror. "Carthage isn't a bad place, I believe. Still, I dislike sea-travel. . . . That's right, Eutharic. How clever you are. Put the flagon down there."

The second day opened with a more organised plundering-drive. The poorer citizens attempted to join in, but were discouraged by being knocked on the head if found usurping the privileges of the conquerors. Looting and pilfering by the citizens did not cease after that, but were conducted on a smaller scale and mostly at night. The main attack was carried out by the Vandals, operating in region after region. The churches and public buildings were systematically stripped. Men on ladders tore the gilt bronze roof off the Capitol; not a single copper cooking-pot was left in the palace. The treasures of the State, centuries old, were collected by Gaiseric's agents, such objects as the gold table and seven-branched candlestick, carried off by Titus from the Temple of Jerusalem for his triumph, were now carried off for the triumph to be held by Gaiseric in Africa. The imperial wardrobe and plate, even all the furniture of the palace, were seized and packed for removal. The Princess had come out, attended by all her ladies in waiting, to welcome the King who was saving her from an abhorred wedlock; but she was herself welcomed by having all the jewellery torn from her person.

Daily the pandemonium grew worse. Fires were continually starting off; but what saved the city was the fact that the Vandal officials were frightened. If the fires got out of hand their huge stacks of booty would be burned. So every morning salvage-parties of pressed citizens were made to pull down houses and quench fires. Large portions of the poorer sections were burned down, but the main part of the city escaped. The churches wailed with the prayer used ordinarily for a death-bed: "Deliver O Lord thy servant as thou didst deliver Enoch and Elias from the common death as thou didst deliver Noah from the Deluge Job from his torments Issaac from the sacrifice Moses out of the hand of Pharoah the Three Young Men out of the furnace Susannah from the false declaration" . . . and so on . . . "so deign to deliver the soul of thy servant." After the first wild splurges, the looting became more regularised; but whereas some streets had the ill luck to be visited again and again, a few were missed altogether. To sit indoors and hear the bursts of noise, to see the flares and glows of night-fires, and to do nothing about it, was intolerable to Prosper; but he had no choice. Once or twice he wandered out, with Eutharic close behind; and when he saw how scattered and disorderly were the greater part of the Vandal host, he felt how easy it would be to massacre them, if only a concerted attack could be made. His restive mind tried to work out schemes for turning the tables. But all they came to was the killing of one lonely Vandal lurching drunken

in a deserted street a good way off from Serena's house. Eutharic drew close to Prosper, who saw that he had a knife.

"All right," said Prosper, and with a certain amount of satisfaction watched Eutharic knife the Vandal in the throat. Then he gripped Eutharic's wrist and twisted it "Drop that knife I told you not to carry any weapons."

For a moment it seemed that Eutharic was going to resist. Then he smiled and opened his hand. The knife clattered on the stones, and they ran.

It was not till the sixth day that Serena's rooms were visited. Five Vandals—or rather one big raw-boned Vandal with mad blue eyes and two Moors and two African-Romans of mixed breed—burst in and begun breaking up everything, they pulled down the curtains, and slashed at the cushions and beds, and chopped at the legs of tables. Not out of any set purpose, but in a tipsy attempt to find out what was worth carrying off. In fact they carried off nothing except some pins with imitation sapphire-heads which Serena hadn't thought worth while hiding but which they quarrelled over; after getting together large parcels of ornaments in the torn-down curtains they heard a brawl in the street and rushed off. Prosper and Eutharic sat in a silent fury in the small kitchen while the raid was going on, but Serena amused herself by watching the men and encouraging them with jokes that they didn't hear. The next day three looters came crashing in; two of them carried out a cabinet, but dropped it on the stairs and left it broken in the street. The third ravished Serena, and then went to sleep on the floor, he woke a couple of hours later and stumbled into the kitchen, demanding food. Prosper ignored him, but Eutharic gave him some sausage, and the man, a Vandal, began to get so friendly that it seemed he would stay for good in the apartment. Then he remembered something and went off, with promises to return.

"I'll protect you," he said. "If there's any nonsense, say Gunthamund will bite their throats out."

That was the last they saw of him. But the next night, after they were all asleep, four men broke down the front-door (though it wasn't locked or barred) and ravished Serena and the serving-girl who had turned up in the afternoon incoherently tearful; and again Prosper felt utterly shamed, unmanned, crouching in the dark kitchen and listening to the noises. Except for a couple of stools and a solid chest, there was nothing left unbroken in the rooms by now, and all the windows were uncurtained and unshuttered.

All the food had been eaten up, and it was impossible to buy any more. The next night Prosper and Eutharic went out prowling, and finally found a food-store which had only recently been nosed out and sacked by the Vandals. Scrabbling about among other shadowy forms, they managed to find some half-cured fish left in a barrel and Eutharic picked up a large sausage from under the broken shelves. They had a fight before they

could get away with the goods, but they kicked and lashed their way out of the door; the fighting was strangely quiet—hissing breaths and dull thud of blows—since everyone feared to attract the attention of passing Vandals. Then next night they managed to get a small sack of flour from a half-burned bakery

When they got home with the flour-sack, they thought that Serena was by no means as impressed and pleased as she ought to have been. She listened to the story of how they'd found the bakery, and then she said, "Yes, and now there's something else to do . . ." Prosper couldn't see her face; there was only a faint moonlight mixed with the glow from some fires a number of blocks away, and she had her back to the window. But her voice was curiously hard and remote; she usually had a calm warm voice. She made an effort "There's a man in there . . . I killed him." Then she broke down and wept, lying helplessly against the wall on the broken couch, with no effort to wipe the tears from her eyes "O, I'm tired"

Prosper cursed her, and then, as she seemed too far gone to give any further explanations, he went with Eutharic into the front room and found the corpse.

"There's a sewer-opening only round the corner," said Eutharic, who always kept a strategic eye on such details.

They gathered up the corpse and carried it cautiously down into the street, waiting in the shadow of the half-unhinged door until some chanting Vandals had gone by. Then they hurried round the corner and dropped the body into the sewer.

Relieved, they slid back into the house. Serena had already recovered. "We can't hide this flour in the dark. . . . The sack's too big to go under the boards. First thing tomorrow morning . . . You managed all right?"

"Yes, but don't do it again. You'll get our throats cut"

"He said he was going to take me off to Africa . . ."

"How did you do it?"

She began speaking blithely, boastfully. "He was snoring, drunk . . . I found the place over his heart between the ribs, and I held a big tire-pin over it and knocked it in with the back of my mirror." Then she broke down again, violently shivering. "O, I'm afraid. Hold me."

Prosper held her tight till the shivering-fit slackened. An uproar burst out close at hand; a woman was running along the street, screaming. Would it ever end? Everywhere the streets were full of ravaged bodies, smashed furniture, it seemed that he would never get out of his ears the cries and moans of ravished women and children. Rome, the Eternal City, the source of triumphantly expanding civilisation! He recalled the emotion with which he had entered the city, his feeling that he had come at last to a sure haven where he could proceed to build up a stable career. For a moment a religious tremor passed over him, a memory of

the Bishop of Rome's cold and powerful face, a desire to abase himself and to crawl to an altar knocking his head on the stone floor, a consuming hunger for the Flesh and Blood of the Son. Serena was breathing easily, steadily, warm against his breast; a tenderness suffused him. He kissed her on the brow, and she snuggled closer. An unwonted curiosity, a wish to penetrate into her life, her thoughts, seized hold of him; he would have liked her to tell him about her childhood, her youthful dreams, her first kiss, her first surrender to a man. We know nothing of one another, he thought; and realised how little he knew of himself. For a moment he felt passionately the need to do something to rouse people, himself, to an enduring consciousness of the human lot. To forgive, to rebuild the world, to be humble. He prayed directly to Christ, without a saint-intermediary: a most unusual thing for him to do. Hoarse voices were brawling out in the street; again there was a skurry, and a long piercing woman-cry which seemed as if it would never end. Serena's lips moved, murmured, but he could not hear what she was saying. When would it all end?

It lasted fourteen days and nights. Then Gaiseric decided to remove his host. His agents reported that all the royal booty was ready packed, and the last barge carrying a heap of large marble and bronze statues went floating down the Tiber. To delay any longer would be to demoralise the host beyond hope of recovery; the fires were becoming more dangerous; there were signs of dysentery and other diseases. The march out began and was rapidly completed. The surviving citizens crept out through their broken doors; the famished crowds who had been crushed in the shrines and chapels staggered into the open air. A low hum of sickly awakening life hung over the city, like the smoke of the last fires. Food, food! And there was no food. Gangs went slouching about, looking for any supplies which the Vandals had missed. Looting recommenced. Women were wailing in the streets for their daughters whom the Vandals had carried off to be slaves and prostitutes.

But the worst burden of fear was gone. Eutharic found a couple of swords abandoned in an alley, and when a gang of riff-raff tried to break into Serena's rooms in search of food, he and Prosper soon scared them off. Prosper felt a little less humiliated, worthless. But the spring of his old energy had ceased to flow. He sat for hours at a time, looking down into the street and unable to recall any thoughts when he was jerked back into himself. Serena seemed in much the same mood; she spoke cheerfully, but without verve, and relapsed into blankness when there was no task to be done. Eutharic alone was quite unaffected.

Gradually the city settled down to a ghost of its old routine. The civic organisation had not yet started to function again, but Leo, the Bishop of Rome, was zealously doing all that was possible to preserve order and obtain food. Prosper took to walking in the streets, though he still felt

like a man in an utterly foreign land. A sense of bondage weighed him down. Then came news that Avitus had been proclaimed emperor in Gaul. At Rome the whole State-form had been so shattered that no one had ventured to think of setting up an emperor in place of the mangled Maximus; but Avitus, as military chief in Gaul, had gone to Tolosa to make sure that the Visigoths remained pacific during the convulsions at the heart of the Empire, and Theodoric had decided to try his hand at king-making. He had suggested and insisted that Avitus be proclaimed Emperor of the West, and it had been done. There were no forces in Italy capable of resisting, even if they had wished to resist, the will of the Gallic imperial forces backed by Theodoric.

Now was the time when Prosper might have looked for favour at Court. Avitus had known his father, not very closely, but closely enough to recommend Prosper for speedy advancement in the palace corps. And since he would have to encounter the jealousies and intrigues of the Roman magnates, he would surely want a strong bodyguard. But the heart had gone out of Prosper's Court ambitions; he had no conviction that Avitus would last. He continued to brood, and began to quarrel with Serena, till at last, in a fit of temper, he moved out of her apartment and went back to the palace. There he found the domestic functionaries feebly and loudly trying to keep order among their decimated bands of slaves. He set to work to get some discipline into the soldiers who were hanging around; and after a while others, who had been dispersed about the city or its environs, began to swell the corps. Other officers turned up, and soon took the control out of his hands.

He was awaiting the arrival of Avitus. A plan was slowly forming in his mind. And then Avitus arrived with a large bodyguard of Visigoths and Gallo-Romans; and it was some weeks before Prosper had a chance to speak with him. Finally, after bribing various chamberlains, he got his audience. Avitus remembered him and was very amiable, but rather distracted—the intrigues of the Roman senators against him had already begun—and he lost no time in complaining about his regret in not being able to reward his friends as he would have liked. "But everything in due time. There are so many problems outstanding. I'll see that everyone gets his deserts once I get elbow-room." Though Avitus had a much stronger character than Maximus, Prosper felt much the same in this interview as when Maximus had been saying the same kind of thing. Avitus showed the same crushing burden already bearing him down—the result of the desperate effort to infuse energy into a vast paralytic bureaucracy. No matter what steps were taken, the landed aristocracy resisted and corroded the State-power still further; and every time the State-power tried to win them over, it sapped its own strength, it sapped the mercantile and small-producer middle classes whom it taxed ever more heavily while leaving the great magnates almost exempt from taxation. A vicious circle went on narrowing. Prosper could not have

laid his finger on what was wrong; but his conviction of the hopeless flaw was now complete.

"I don't want much," he said. And explained about his claim to the estate of his dead uncle. "I know that now the Bishop has got possession I can't hope to assert a full claim. But I hoped you might be able to see that I get partial justice."

"Partial justice!" Avitus was going to be angry; then he remembered that he was talking to the son of one of his fellow-nobles of the Auvergne. "Yes, there's no need for mincing words. I want to do what I can to help you, but my hands are tied to a certain extent. At least for the moment. Later on I believe that things will be better. A strong man is needed at the helm. Well, we'll see. I'll begin in your case by restoring to you that estate your father lost in a lawsuit a few years ago—there was a lot of gossip about it, I recall the whole thing. I'll state that I reverse that decision. That will start you off not so badly, young man. You see, apart from matters of high policy, the case is complicated by the fact that there's a direct heir, the dead man's son, who is doing nothing to oppose the Bishop's actions. The testament of Sollius, I believe, was burned with the rest of the house."

Prosper thanked him; he hadn't really expected to gain anything at all. Avitus had been fairly shrewd; he clearly didn't want to come into direct clash with the Bishop, and by merely dealing with an isolated legal judgment he didn't have to make any general criticism, one way or the other, as to the Bishop's right to the estate of Sollius. Further, he probably calculated that the Bishop would take the reversal of that isolated lawsuit in Prosper's favour as a tacit acknowledgment of his right to the rest of Sollius's land; and as the estate concerned by the reversal was only a minor part of that land, there would be little temptation to object. Thus Avitus was *managing neatly to please both Prosper and the Bishop*.

Prosper bowed and asked for leave-of-absence so that he might settle his affairs in Gaul. He had no intention of returning to the palace corps unless events took a sharply different turn, and he was sure that that turn wouldn't appear. No, he meant to stick to what he had gained; the estate might not be much, but it was ample to keep him in all that he now valued in life; no matter what political changes swept over Auvergne he'd cling to that bit of land. Let the Visigoths come, if they must, he'd then lose some of the estate, but he'd manage to hang on to enough of it for his needs. At the moment news had come that Theodoric was invading Spain with all his forces, hoping to extend his control southwards, and it seemed that Auvergne was going to have a breathing-space.

And so, with letters establishing his claim, he set off with Eutharic to ride back to Lugdunum. Not that he meant to rely only on the Emperor's legal decision; as soon as he got to Lugdunum he intended to collect about a score of stout fellows and to seize the estate before his claim was

formally made. Well, I didn't come out of it all with empty hands, he thought. And then, as he and Eutharic sat in an inn at Pisae, a whim sprang into his mind. Empty hands? Why, he'd take more than the right to a family estate, he'd take something of a family as well. He had recalled the girl Theodora whom he had left at Mediolanum; and decided to break his journey, turn off at Genua northwards, buy the girl back for a few gold pieces, and then return to Genua and the coast-road. He recalled the wild little creature she had been; it would be nice to start off his home-coming with a quick boyish little pet whom he could call daughter and who would subtly remind him of past adventurings.

He felt impatient as they neared Mediolanum. What if the stone-cutter had treated the girl badly? He'd wring the fellow's neck if he had. What if the girl had run off, died, had a street-accident? . . . But when he found the house—after being baffled and forced to hunt out the parish-priest who had suggested the family—there was Theodora, astonishingly like and unlike what he remembered of her. How she had shot up! But while he was still staring at her, she flushed and smiled oddly, and she was quite different from what he expected. She was shy, and had to be pressed to welcome him, but when she did once clasp her arms round his neck, it was a long time before he could get her to let go.

"She's a good quiet girl," said the stone-cutter's wife, "though a little sulky."

And Prosper made Theodora stand over in the light from the window. Why, she was quite handsome, in a year or two she'd be a beauty. She had a soft creamy skin, and long dark eyelashes over disconcertingly clear grey-blue eyes. She didn't say a word but stood looking at him all the while, with that odd half-smile around her eyes—no, it wasn't shyness, it was a kind of deliberate reserve. It was a fact that she disconcerted him a little.

"Do you remember how you used to ride behind me?" He wanted to fondle her soft curly hair, but she didn't answer, she just looked at him as if she were waiting. . . . And he himself couldn't relate her to the wild little brat who had darted about among the horses' hooves and thrown stones at the boys. She looked soft and dreamy and gentle, it wouldn't be long now before she was nubile. Well, he would have to marry somebody soon. He smiled. "You're quite a young lady now, you can't ride on a horse's rump now, eh? We'll have to find a small carriage and a couple of horses. Well, I wouldn't have believed it."

She regarded him demurely.

5. *Last Words*

Audax and two of the villagers were jogging along, with the loaded donkeys roped behind.

"That's something new," said one of the men.

They paused on the ridge to look down into the valley, where a number of men were at work on a stone fence. Audax was puzzled at first; then he recognised what the rough buildings probably represented.

"A monastery is being started."

"It wasn't there spring last year," said the man suspiciously.

"Well, it wouldn't be a bad place to put up at for the night. We're hours behind hand through that wrong turning we took."

"I haven't been this way since spring last year. . . ."

"I'm not complaining. But we might as well stop here."

Some weeks ago Audax had raised at a village-meeting the question of tools; he wanted better ploughs than the crude wooden things that hardly scratched the hard earth. Other farming tools as well. One of the villagers could work the smithy, but he had no iron. Iron therefore must be bought. The proposal had been resisted by some of the old men, who didn't want any changes and said that there hadn't been a famine for ten years at least; perhaps the spirits wouldn't send any more, especially if everyone behaved themselves. But the meeting agreed with Audax. What scant money the villagers had was collected, and all the available wool, of which there was a fair stock; and Audax, as the proposer of the iron-buying, was deputed, with two others, to ride off and sell the wool and get what iron he could. And now on the second evening out the three men had struck a new monastery being built in a valley.

They rode down a narrow track. The monks had seen them, and a man in a brown pallium came out of the chapel and advanced towards the entrance of the settlement. Not until he was out of the saddle and face to face with this man did Audax recognise him.

"Paulinus," he cried, and seized the other's arm.

Paulinus, who was darkly tanned, did not show such excitement, but he smiled slowly; his face was leaner, sharper, and his eyes had a cold clarity which they had lacked.

"Well, on second thoughts I'm perhaps not so surprised," went on Audax. "No, not at all." It wasn't surprise so much as a shock, a need to brace himself and to resist, which he was feeling. He kept his grip of Paulinus's arm as they walked up towards the buildings. "Can we stay for the night? You don't seem curious about me at all. I should have thought my changes were even more startling than yours."

"No, I'm not surprised," answered Paulinus, and this time his smile was strangely gentle, calm. It suggested spiritual depths which Audax had never suspected Paulinus of possessing.

"But I am, after all," said Audax. "Not surprised to find you withdrawn from the world. I've done that myself in my own way. It's a kind of maturity I feel in you. You know, the way that a really good statue seems more solid than a living person, more foursquare. . . . I'm talking nonsense."

"You feel the presence of Christ in me," said Paulinus, still smiling. "I speak in humility."

The sense of attack, of the need for resistance, increased in Audax. "Well, it can't be helped," he said, without being sure what he meant. "I mean . . . I'm not referring to what you said." He was afflicted with a conviction of cross-purposes, of wasted effort; the lightness died out of his heart. "And so you have found peace, eh? I can't say that I have. But then I haven't sought peace. I've sought struggle."

"The true peace is a perpetual struggle. The harvest of God is watered with salt tears."

Paulinus went aside to speak to some of the monks who had come up; he gave them instructions about the reception of the guests and the stabling of the horses and donkeys. Audax watched him with something of fascination; the assurance and dignity which Paulinus radiated were new qualities, and yet the old and the new Paulinus were linked somehow by a touch of charm, of mildness. Audax fought to keep down the antagonism which he felt. He eagerly assented to Paulinus's offer to show him over the monastery. They went over the grounds, and Paulinus explained his plans, the difficulties still confronting the monastery, his hopes. Audax was struck by the fact that many of the details which were taking up Paulinus's consideration were identical with those which had cropped up in his own efforts to help the village towards a fuller use of its communal resources. Once again he felt how close he was to Paulinus, and yet how far apart. They had always been like that, and now they had gone totally divergent ways to meet on a new level of life, opposed and yet wrestling with problems so closely allied. He wanted to express this thought, but he had a feeling that Paulinus would not respond.

The evening meal of bread and vegetable soup was eaten at a table in the open, at one side of the chapel. Audax and the two villagers took their places with the monks. Paulinus blessed the meal and one of the monks read scripture. Audax was unwillingly moved by the warm and close bond which obviously bound all the monks together, their devoted toil and piety seemed for a moment infinitely desirable. He compared this compact union, so deliberately yet spontaneously knitted, with the looser and refractory union of his village-community; and then, as he observed a momentary shadowing and harshness in Paulinus's face, he was ashamed of his faltering. The village might have its faults, but it left a more generous space for the free play of differences, the impacts of growth. And yet . . .

After the meal, he and Paulinus climbed on to a ledge a little way up the hill and watched the gathering dusk. They both had the feeling that there was something which had to be had out between them; and there was a mingled regret and antagonism in their attitudes.

"You haven't asked me anything about myself," said Audax at length.

"I see that you have changed. You are no longer an idler. You are connected with labour of some kind. That is good. I have no wish to belittle it. But it is only good in the final sense if it is leading you to the Way of Life, to the foot of the Cross."

"Well . . ." Audax began conciliatingly, with a wish to pretend a closer harmony with Paulinus's words than was true. "No, we're not talking in metaphors. Otherwise I might agree with you. How close we are, Paulinus! Must we fight?"

"I fight with no man. Only with the evil spirit in them"

Audax swept his arm across the scene. "I feel how much is fine and right in what you're doing. But what will it end in? Say you live twenty more years. I can see a prosperous settlement, and you as a trusted old despot. Everything rigidly fixed. All this close brotherliness gone . . ."

Paulinus paused, then he said mildly, "Far be it from me to deny the tendency of all earthly forms to corruption, or the tendency in myself apart from the inflowing of grace to become all that you prophesy. And yet what you say is totally irrelevant."

"No, it isn't. I've thought a lot on this subject. Can't you see that the Church is cloven to the roots? Its unity is gone. The bishops and you represent totally opposed principles. And the bishops will get you. They'll let you monks build up your settlements and cultivate the waste and create all kinds of new wealth. And then they'll simply take it all. I mean, the Church that's now rooted in the world, in conserving the world and all its evil, will take your products, your love—will simply use you to strengthen the very things you most loathe."

"No," said Paulinus, still as calm as ever. "It won't be like that. And even if you were right in your way, you would still be wrong. You would merely be pointing to the fact that God who is immutable must use changing forms in a changing world in order to realise his eternal purpose. I feel sure, I know for sure, that the purpose of God is flowing about us here. And even if it were true what you say—that the church of God has been cloven since the apostolic days and has taken into itself the evil which it must conquer—yet the truth of my claim remains. That purpose which flows here will conquer. It is we that will absorb the evil—what you designate by the episcopal controls—I have no wish to quibble over terms. It is we that will conquer."

Audax was silenced for a while. He was suddenly convinced of a truth in Paulinus's words. What he disliked in the monastic form was its narrowness; he could never forgive or forget the monks who had tried to get Zonaras mobbed for his medical science and who had wanted to use exorcisms only to cure sickness. And yet the monastic forms revealed an organisation of brotherhood and community-of-goods which far transcended any other forms possible in his world. But they excluded so much, the free adventure of mind, the delighted unions of sex. And that was how the episcopal forms came in; they provided at least a flavouring

of the apostolic ideal while controlling and ordering the actual world in the sole way that seemed possible. But if only the monastic and the episcopal forms—the rigid concentration of brotherhood and the administrative orderings of a fully complex society—could be somehow fused, then freedom and unity would be truly actualised. Then his vision faded, and only the immediate facts remained, the chasmic divisions which everywhere split the human world.

"You mean you'll fight the bishops," he said harshly. "Well, that sounds good. Better than I expected." He knew that Paulinus hadn't meant that, but he felt angry.

"No, I mean that God will bring about the changes in his own good time. Our duty is the task before us."

Scores of objections sprang into Audax's mind. He wanted to begin a learned wrangle about the usurpations of bishops, deny that they were a natural development of the early *episcopos*, or that they represented in the present Church what the wandering apostles had represented in the first days, he wanted to drag Paulinus into a discussion on the Day of Judgment and prove that all his ideas and actions were self-contradictory, because he went on acting in terms of a temporal programme instead of merely awaiting the great event of Reversal and Transformation. But as the words struggled in his brain, he found them turning back upon himself, he too was riddled by contradictions in all his ideas and acts. It seemed again that there was no basic difference between him and Paulinus, merely a divergence in the angle of approach. And yet a tense antagonism held him, impotently dissolved on moments of passionate warmth, when he yearned to be able to find the common point between them and establish it for all time.

Paulinus stared out over the dimming valley, the last scarving reds of sunset faded out beyond the fir-clump on the ridge. Voices came clear and liquid, drops of merging sweetness in the quiet waters of assured brotherhood. All the arguments of Augustine's *City of God* floated through his mind, the fading scene which communal toil had stamped with an abiding significance loomed in gently burning wrath-forms. Nothing, and yet everything; a mere work of hands, and yet the base of the City of God, a stony patch of ungrateful earth, and yet a harvest-field watered with angelic manna. And he knew how Audax was revolving in his mind all those contradictions and discords by which he himself had been tormented in the past, and which could not survive one cadence of the psalming voices, one harvest-sweep of the rhythmic arms, one bell-note of response chiming amid the stars in the nightly solitude of prayer. He was sorry for Audax, and yet not sorry, he wanted to pray for him, to argue and convert him. But his mind answered that the time of Christ could not be hurried, and he did not feel that any word uttered at this moment could help. Is it my own weakness, this inability to help a man whom I love? And then he crushed down the cry. I love only

that which is Christ in him or in any other man, there is no respecting of persons in that love. But as for my own unworthiness, that is another matter; that is a failure, a wound for which I must beg the cauterising hand. And yet he could not settle his mind on himself at all; he was drawn outwards into this flowing peace, and his soul lost its troubled hues, it became a transparent depth, flowing yet poised on the inscrutable axis.

Audax too felt his antagonism weaken. He drowsed. He was glad that he had met Paulinus once again, though nothing could come of it; and he thought with a keen steady joy of Phoebe, and the voices of the villagers at the assembly by the Stone, and the task of the morrow, the iron that had to be bought. And perhaps, next year or a hundred years hence, for himself or his children or his children's children, the call to arms, the call of a widening freedom. Somebody was kindling a fire down below. Like that small fire in the enormous dusk he felt the tradition which he and the men with whom he was now united were carrying in their hearts, in their daily lives. We have not failed, he thought, and remembered Leo's death without bitterness.

