

Aegisthus and Clytemnaestra; if I ruled Rome it could be done, but not in times like these. No; but you shall be a king — the King of the Wood! and I shall be the most pious of all the votaries of Diana!" She said it lightly; but his eyes were fixed in fear and horror upon her.

The Roman look came fierce into her face. "You dare!" she cried, "for me you dare!" and with a single movement she threw an arm about his neck and fastened her mouth on his, while with the other hand she drew a sword from beneath her cloak, and put it in his hand. Tensely he gripped it, and returned her caress with fury. "I will do it," he cried; "may great Diana aid!" She tightened her clasp on him. "I am condemning you to death," she hissed, "I am your murderer. My mouth drinks up your blood. I love you." The slave was silent; he abandoned himself more fiercely than he had ever yet done to her caresses; they had sealed their guilty love by the one passion on earth that is mightier than that — the lust of blood!

#### IV.

The next day the hue-and-cry was up; for the slave had run away. But in a day the news came back that search was useless; he had taken sanctuary with Diana at Nemi across the lake.

The Lady Clodia consoled her husband easily. "He was a worthless fellow, idle and impudent," she said; "he was not worth his keep. If he had not run off, I should have asked you to sell him."

But the slave only remained in sanctuary three days; in that time he learnt all that he wanted to know. He disappeared, and none knew whither.

He was in Rome itself. Clodia had furnished him with an ample purse, and with the disguise which had served him on his journey. He had taken lodgings with a shoemaker, representing himself as a sailor from Sicily. Here he led an austere life, refusing the temptations of Rome. He spent many hours every day with famous swordsmen, and trained his hands to war, and his fingers to fight. He kept his body in admirable condition by constant attendance at the gymnasia and the baths, and his soul by unwearied attendance at the temple of Diana.

The only thing that he neglected was his purse; and though Clodia had been royally liberal, it became clear to him at the feast of the Sun, which we now call Christmas, that he must take the giant step which led back to Clodia — or on to death.

Accordingly, on the very next day, he left Rome, and took his way across the Campagna to the Alban Hills. He was a very different man to the slave who had sat drowsing on the steps of the villa. Not only was he alert and active, every inch an athlete, but the months of love and of freedom had kindled his eye; he threw back his head as he marched, and sang aloud the war songs of the Romans.

Almost had he come to the first foot of the spur when he espied an old woman by the wayside. She asked him alms, and offered to tell his fortune. He remembered his poverty; then with a laugh bethought him that he would never need money again, and tossed his purse with its few golden coins to the beldam. She grasped it eagerly, amazed. "I see a wonderful fortune for you, my lad," she cried. "You are going to be a prosperous farmer; you will have love, you will have honor and fame and every blessing, for many a year. But beware of going to Nemi; if you go there, you will die there." With that, and confused benedictions from Jupiter and Diana and Mars and many another, she hobbled off.

An ill omen thought the youth. But he kept sturdily on his

way. Yet revolving it in his mind, now a thousand times more active than it had been in his slave-days, he suddenly saw a secret meaning to the oracle. He actually was going to be a farmer — of sorts; he meant to gather one of the fruits of earth. He must succeed, else love and honor could never come to him; and as for dying at Nemi, why, of course he would die there!

But not now! "It was Diana herself, who came to hail me!" With that he quickened his pace, and breasted joyously and confidently the slopes of the hills.

As night fell, began to come to the neighborhood of the temple. His step became wary. Presently he came to a point long since marked down by him, where an avenue in the trees permitted a sight of the shrine, and of the pathway trodden by the dreadful king on that night of spring which saw the two corpses, fruit of the fatal oak. Here he buried the sword that Clodia had given him, for none but the king himself might bear arms in that sacred wood. He then crept a little — a very little — further along the avenue to where there was a mound of turf beneath a great beech. Here he hid himself, covering his body with fallen leaves, and waited.

It was a fearful night. Snow lay here and there upon the ground. The trees were sombre and spectral, black and jagged against a lowering and stormy sky, and the rising wind made melancholy music in the branches, its own howl like a wolf's. It eddied in the hollows of the hills, and even stirred the icy waters of the lake that lurked in the black crater. The moon rose early; already she was high mid-heaven, as the watcher saw when the wind tore the clouds apart, and let her pallid witch-glamour fall on the staggering earth. As on that fatal night of spring, her ray fell also on the glint of steel. The king still kept his lonely vigil, still prowled in darkness and in terror of storm.

The hours passed with infinite stealth; the wind now loosed its fury from the Apennines, and rocked the forest impotently. The moon went down; besides, the clouds, black with snow, now covered all the heaven.

The watcher could no longer watch; he could not see his own hand. Impatience spoke in him; he changed his plan, and creeping forward, came by degrees — he had measured the distance to an inch — to the edge of the clearing where the great oak stood on whose boughs the king had hanged the bodies of his victims eight or nine months earlier. He could see nothing and hear nothing; but he knew the king was there; he thought he detected something rhythmical which might be his pace. For about half an hour he kept still; the wind died down a little; and he could hear the king, who was singing to himself a savage hymn of war and triumph. Now snow began to fall thickly, and a silhouette was visible against the gray background. It grew bitter cold.

The watcher had not foreseen any of this. He had imagined the scene as it had been three months before, glowing in autumn beauty. The present murk seemed to him a direct miracle of Diana.

For now he saw his opportunity. The king began to shiver with the cold; he laid his sword at the foot of the great oak, and swung his long arms upon his breast. It was pure inspiration for the other; he could see enough to be sure that the man's back was turned to him; he broke out and rushed on him, like a bull. The king turned by instinct, but too slowly, for his first thought had been to grasp his sword. Before he knew it, the sturdy lad had got him by the waist, and flung him far into the wood. For a second he lay half stunned; then he picked himself up, only to find his assailant gone.