

CHAPTER III.

"SHE believes in God who is one, all-powerful, and just," said Petronius, when he found himself again in the litter with Vinicius. "If her God is all-powerful, He controls life and death; and if He is just, He sends death justly. Why, then, does Pomponia wear mourning for Julius? In mourning for Julius she blames her God. I must repeat this reasoning to our Bronzebeard, the monkey, since I consider that in dialectics I am the equal of Socrates. As to women, I agree that each has three or four souls, but none of them a reasoning one. Let Pomponia meditate with Seneca or Cornutus over the question of what their great Logos is. Let them summon at once the shades of Xenophanes, Parmenides, Zeno, and Plato, who are as much wearied there in Cimmeric regions as a finch in a cage. I wished to talk with her and with Plautius about something else. By the holy stomach of the Egyptian Isis! If I had told them right out directly why we came, I suppose that their virtue would have made as much noise as a bronze shield under the blow of a club. And I did not dare to tell! Wilt thou believe, Vinicius, I did not dare! Peacocks are beautiful birds, but they have too shrill a cry. I feared an outburst. But I must praise thy choice. A real 'rosy-fingered Aurora.' And knowest thou what she reminded me of too? — Spring! not our spring in Italy, where an apple-tree merely puts forth a blossom here and there, and olive groves grow gray, just as they were gray before, but the spring which I saw once in Helvetia, — young, fresh, bright green. By that pale moon, I do not wonder at thee, Marcus; but know that thou art loving Diana, because Aulus and Pomponia are ready to tear thee to pieces, as the dogs once tore Actæon."

Vinicius was silent a time without raising his head; then he began to speak with a voice broken by passion, —

"I desired her before, but now I desire her still more. When I caught her arm, flame embraced me. I must have her. Were I Zeus, I would surround her with a cloud, as he surrounded Io, or I would fall on her in rain, as he fell

on Danaë; I would kiss her lips till it pained! I would hear her scream in my arms. I would kill Aulus and Pomponia, and bear her home in my arms. I will not sleep to-night. I will give command to flog one of my slaves, and listen to his groans —"

"Calm thyself," said Petronius. "Thou hast the longing of a carpenter from the Subura."

"All one to me what thou sayst. I must have her. I have turned to thee for aid; but if thou wilt not find it, I shall find it myself. Aulus considers Lygia as a daughter; why should I look on her as a slave? And since there is no other way, let her ornament the door of my house, let her anoint it with wolf's fat, and let her sit at my hearth as wife."

"Calm thyself, mad descendant of consuls. We do not lead in barbarians bound behind our cars, to make wives of their daughters. Beware of extremes. Exhaust simple, honorable methods, and give thyself and me time for meditation. Chrysothemis seemed to me too a daughter of Jove, and still I did not marry her, just as Nero did not marry Acte, though they called her a daughter of King Attalus. Calm thyself! Think that if she wishes to leave Aulus for thee, he will have no right to detain her. Know also that thou art not burning alone, for Eros has roused in her the flame too. I saw that, and it is well to believe me. Have patience. There is a way to do everything, but to-day I have thought too much already, and it tires me. But I promise that to-morrow I will think of thy love, and unless Petronius is not Petronius, he will discover some method."

They were both silent again.

"I thank thee," said Vinicius at last. "May Fortune be bountiful to thee."

"Be patient."

"Whither hast thou given command to bear us?"

"To Chrysothemis."

"Thou art happy in possessing her whom thou lovest."

"I? Dost thou know what amuses me yet in Chrysothemis? This, that she is false to me with my freedman Theokles, and thinks that I do not notice it. Once I loved her, but now she amuses me with her lying and stupidity. Come with me to her. Should she begin to flirt with thee, and write letters on the table with her fingers steeped in wine, know that I shall not be jealous."

And he gave command to bear them both to Chrysothemis.

But in the entrance Petronius put his hand on Vinicius's shoulder, and said, —

“Wait; it seems to me that I have discovered a plan.”

“May all the gods reward thee!”

“I have it! I judge that this plan is infallible. Knowest what, Marcus?”

“I listen to thee, my wisdom.”

“Well, in a few days the divine Lygia will partake of Demeter's grain in thy house.”

“Thou art greater than Cæsar!” exclaimed Vinicius, with enthusiasm.

CHAPTER IV.

IN fact, Petronius kept his promise. He slept all the day following his visit to Chrysothemis, it is true; but in the evening he gave command to bear him to the Palatine, where he had a confidential conversation with Nero; in consequence of this, on the third day a centurion, at the head of some tens of pretorian soldiers, appeared before the house of Plautius.

The period was uncertain and terrible. Messengers of this kind were more frequently heralds of death. So when the centurion struck the hammer at Aulus's door, and when the guard of the atrium announced that there were soldiers in the anteroom, terror rose through the whole house. The family surrounded the old general at once, for no one doubted that danger hung over him above all. Pomponia, embracing his neck with her arms, clung to him with all her strength, and her blue lips moved quickly while uttering some whispered phrase. Lygia, with a face pale as linen, kissed his hand; little Aulus clung to his toga. From the corridor, from chambers in the lower story intended for servant-women and attendants, from the bath, from the arches of lower dwellings, from the whole house, crowds of slaves began to hurry out, and the cries of “Heu! heu, me miserum!” were heard. The women broke into great weeping; some scratched their cheeks, or covered their heads with kerchiefs.

Only the old general himself, accustomed for years to look death straight in the eye, remained calm, and his short eagle face became as rigid as if chiselled from stone. After a while, when he had silenced the uproar, and commanded the attendants to disappear, he said, —

“Let me go, Pomponia. If my end has come, we shall have time to take leave.”

And he pushed her aside gently; but she said, —

“God grant thy fate and mine to be one, O Aulus!”

Then, falling on her knees, she began to pray with that force which fear for some dear one alone can give.

Aulus passed out to the atrium, where the centurion was waiting for him. It was old Caius Hasta, his former subordinate and companion in British wars.

"I greet thee, general," said he. "I bring a command, and the greeting of Cæsar; here are the tablets and the signet to show that I come in his name."

"I am thankful to Cæsar for the greeting, and I shall obey the command," answered Aulus. "Be welcome, Hasta, and say what command thou hast brought."

"Aulus Plautius," began Hasta, "Cæsar has learned that in thy house is dwelling the daughter of the king of the Lygians, whom that king during the life of the divine Claudius gave into the hands of the Romans as a pledge that the boundaries of the empire would never be violated by the Lygians. The divine Nero is grateful to thee, O general, because thou hast given her hospitality in thy house for so many years; but, not wishing to burden thee longer, and considering also that the maiden as a hostage should be under the guardianship of Cæsar and the senate, he commands thee to give her into my hands."

Aulus was too much a soldier and too much a veteran to permit himself regret in view of an order, or vain words, or complaint. A slight wrinkle of sudden anger and pain, however, appeared on his forehead. Before that frown legions in Britain had trembled on a time, and even at that moment fear was evident on the face of Hasta. But in view of the order, Aulus Plautius felt defenceless. He looked for some time at the tablets and the signet; then raising his eyes to the old centurion, he said calmly, —

"Wait, Hasta, in the atrium till the hostage is delivered to thee."

After these words he passed to the other end of the house, to the hall called *œcus*, where Pomponia Græcina, Lygia, and little Aulus were waiting for him in fear and alarm.

"Death threatens no one, nor banishment to distant islands," said he; "still Cæsar's messenger is a herald of misfortune. It is a question of thee, Lygia."

"Of Lygia?" exclaimed Pomponia, with astonishment.

"Yes," answered Aulus.

And turning to the maiden, he began: "Lygia, thou wert reared in our house as our own child; I and Pomponia love thee as our daughter. But know this, that thou art not our daughter. Thou art a hostage, given by thy people to

Rome, and guardianship over thee belongs to Cæsar. Now Cæsar takes thee from our house."

The general spoke calmly, but with a certain strange, unusual voice. Lygia listened to his words, blinking, as if not understanding what the question was. Pomponia's cheeks became pallid. In the doors leading from the corridor to the *œcus*, terrified faces of slaves began to show themselves a second time.

"The will of Cæsar must be accomplished," said Aulus.

"Aulus!" exclaimed Pomponia, embracing the maiden with her arms, as if wishing to defend her, "it would be better for her to die."

Lygia, nestling up to her breast, repeated, "Mother, mother!" unable in her sobbing to find other words.

On Aulus's face anger and pain were reflected again. "If I were alone in the world," said he, gloomily, "I would not surrender her alive, and my relatives might give offerings this day to 'Jupiter Liberator.' But I have not the right to kill thee and our child, who may live to happier times. I will go to Cæsar this day, and implore him to change his command. Whether he will hear me, I know not. Meanwhile, farewell, Lygia, and know that I and Pomponia ever bless the day in which thou didst take thy seat at our hearth."

Thus speaking, he placed his hand on her head; but though he strove to preserve his calmness, when Lygia turned to him eyes filled with tears, and seizing his hand pressed it to her lips, his voice was filled with deep fatherly sorrow.

"Farewell, our joy, and the light of our eyes," said he.

And he went to the atrium quickly, so as not to let himself be conquered by emotion unworthy of a Roman and a general.

Meanwhile Pomponia, when she had conducted Lygia to the cubiculum, began to comfort, console, and encourage her, uttering words meanwhile which sounded strangely in that house, where near them in an adjoining chamber the *lararium* remained yet, and where the hearth was on which Aulus Plautius, faithful to ancient usage, made offerings to the household divinities. Now the hour of trial had come. On a time Virginius had pierced the bosom of his own daughter to save her from the hands of Appius; still earlier Lucretia had redeemed her shame with her life. The house of Cæsar is a den of infamy, of evil, of crime. But we,

Lygia, know why we have not the right to raise hands on ourselves! Yes! The law under which we both live is another, a greater, a holier, but it gives permission to defend oneself from evil and shame even should it happen to pay for that defence with life and torment. Who goes forth pure from the dwelling of corruption has the greater merit thereby. The earth is that dwelling; but fortunately life is one twinkle of the eye, and resurrection is only from the grave; beyond that not Nero, but Mercy bears rule, and there instead of pain is delight, there instead of tears is rejoicing.

Next she began to speak of herself. Yes! she was calm; but in her breast there was no lack of painful wounds. For example, Aulus was a cataract on her eye; the fountain of light had not flowed to him yet. Neither was it permitted her to rear her son in Truth. When she thought, therefore, that it might be thus to the end of her life, and that for them a moment of separation might come which would be a hundred times more grievous and terrible than that temporary one over which they were both suffering then, she could not so much as understand how she might be happy even in heaven without them. And she had wept many nights through already, she had passed many nights in prayer, imploring grace and mercy. But she offered her suffering to God, and waited and trusted. And now, when a new blow struck her, when the tyrant's command took from her a dear one, — the one whom Aulus had called the light of their eyes, — she trusted yet, believing that there was a power greater than Nero's and a mercy mightier than his anger.

And she pressed the maiden's head to her bosom still more firmly. Lygia dropped to her knees after a while, and, covering her eyes in the folds of Pomponia's peplus, she remained thus a long time in silence; but when she stood up again, some calmness was evident on her face.

"I grieve for thee, mother, and for father and for my brother; but I know that resistance is useless, and would destroy all of us. I promise thee that in the house of Cæsar I will never forget thy words."

Once more she threw her arms around Pomponia's neck; then both went out to the œcus, and she took farewell of little Aulus, of the old Greek their teacher, of the dressmaid who had been her nurse, and of all the slaves.

One of these, a tall and broad-shouldered Lygian, called Ursus in the house, who with other servants had in his time

gone with Lygia's mother and her to the camp of the Romans, fell now at her feet, and then bent down to the knees of Pomponia, saying, —

"O domina! permit me to go with my lady, to serve her and watch over her in the house of Cæsar."

"Thou art not our servant, but Lygia's," answered Pomponia; "but if they admit thee through Cæsar's doors, in what way wilt thou be able to watch over her?"

"I know not, domina; I know only that iron breaks in my hands just as wood does."

When Aulus, who came up at that moment, had heard what the question was, not only did he not oppose the wishes of Ursus, but he declared that he had not even the right to detain him. They were sending away Lygia as a hostage whom Cæsar had claimed, and they were obliged in the same way to send her retinue, which passed with her to the control of Cæsar. Here he whispered to Pomponia that under the form of an escort she could add as many slaves as she thought proper, for the centurion could not refuse to receive them.

There was a certain comfort for Lygia in this. Pomponia also was glad that she could surround her with servants of her own choice. Therefore, besides Ursus, she appointed to her the old tire-woman, two maidens from Cyprus well skilled in hair-dressing, and two German maidens for the bath. Her choice fell exclusively on adherents of the new faith; Ursus, too, had professed it for a number of years. Pomponia could count on the faithfulness of those servants, and at the same time consoled herself with the thought that soon grains of truth would be in Cæsar's house.

She wrote a few words also, committing care over Lygia to Nero's freedwoman, Acte. Pomponia had not seen her, it is true, at meetings of confessors of the new faith; but she had heard from them that Acte had never refused them a service, and that she read the letters of Paul of Tarsus eagerly. It was known to her also that the young freedwoman lived in melancholy, that she was a person different from all other women of Nero's house, and that in general she was the good spirit of the palace.

Hasta engaged to deliver the letter himself to Acte. Considering it natural that the daughter of a king should have a retinue of her own servants, he did not raise the least difficulty in taking them to the palace, but wondered rather that there should be so few. He begged haste, however, fearing

lest he might be suspected of want of zeal in carrying out orders.

The moment of parting came. The eyes of Pomponia and Lygia were filled with fresh tears; Aulus placed his hand on her head again, and after a while the soldiers, followed by the cry of little Aulus, who in defence of his sister threatened the centurion with his small fists, conducted Lygia to Cæsar's house.

The old general gave command to prepare his litter at once; meanwhile, shutting himself up with Pomponia in the pinacotheca adjoining the œcus, he said to her, —

“Listen to me, Pomponia. I will go to Cæsar, though I judge that my visit will be useless; and though Seneca's word means nothing with Nero now, I will go also to Seneca. To-day Sophonius, Tigellinus, Petronius, or Vatinius has more influence. As to Cæsar, perhaps he has never even heard of the Lygian people; and if he has demanded the delivery of Lygia, the hostage, he has done so because some one persuaded him to it, — it is easy to guess who could do that.”

She raised her eyes to him quickly.

“Is it Petronius?”

“It is.”

A moment of silence followed; then the general continued, —

“See what it is to admit over the threshold any of those people without conscience or honor. Cursed be the moment in which Vinicius entered our house, for he brought Petronius. Woe to Lygia, since those men are not seeking a hostage, but a concubine.”

And his speech became more hissing than usual, because of helpless rage and of sorrow for his adopted daughter. He struggled with himself some time, and only his clinched fists showed how severe was the struggle within him.

“I have revered the gods so far,” said he; “but at this moment I think that not they are over the world, but one mad, malicious monster named Nero.”

“Aulus,” said Pomponia, “Nero is only a handful of rotten dust before God.”

But Aulus began to walk with long steps over the mosaic of the pinacotheca. In his life there had been great deeds, but no great misfortunes; hence he was unused to them. The old soldier had grown more attached to Lygia than he himself had been aware of, and now he could not be recon-

ciled to the thought that he had lost her. Besides, he felt humiliated. A hand was weighing on him which he despised, and at the same time he felt that before its power his power was as nothing.

But when at last he stifled in himself the anger which disturbed his thoughts, he said, —

“I judge that Petronius has not taken her from us for Cæsar, since he would not offend Poppæa. Therefore he took her either for himself or Vinicius. To-day I will discover this.”

And after a while the litter bore him in the direction of the Palatine. Pomponia, when left alone, went to little Aulus, who did not cease crying for his sister, or threatening Cæsar.

CHAPTER V.

AULUS had judged rightly that he would not be admitted to Nero's presence. They told him that Cæsar was occupied in singing with the lute-player, Terpnos, and that in general he did not receive those whom he himself had not summoned. In other words, that Aulus must not attempt in future to see him.

Seneca, though ill with a fever, received the old general with due honor; but when he had heard what the question was, he laughed bitterly, and said, —

"I can render thee only one service, noble Plautius, not to show Cæsar at any time that my heart feels thy pain, or that I should like to aid thee; for should Cæsar have the least suspicion on this head, know that he would not give thee back Lygia, though for no other reason than to spite me."

He did not advise him, either, to go to Tigellinus or Vatinius or Vitellius. It might be possible to do something with them through money; perhaps, also, they would like to do evil to Petronius, whose influence they were trying to undermine, but most likely they would disclose before Nero how dear Lygia was to Plautius, and then Nero would all the more resolve not to yield her to him. Here the old sage began to speak with a biting irony, which he turned against himself: "Thou hast been silent, Plautius, thou hast been silent for whole years, and Cæsar does not like those who are silent. How couldst thou help being carried away by his beauty, his virtue, his singing, his declamation, his chariot-driving, and his verses? Why didst thou not glorify the death of Britannicus, and repeat panegyrics in honor of the mother-slayer, and not offer congratulations after the stifling of Octavia? Thou art lacking in foresight, Aulus, which we who live happily at the court possess in proper measure."

Thus speaking, he raised a goblet which he carried at his belt, took water from a fountain at the impluvium, freshened his burning lips, and continued, —

"Ah, Nero has a grateful heart. He loves thee because thou hast served Rome and glorified its name at the ends of

the earth; he loves me because I was his master in youth. Therefore, seest thou, I know that this water is not poisoned, and I drink it in peace. Wine in my own house would be less reliable. If thou art thirsty, drink boldly of this water. The aqueducts bring it from beyond the Alban hills, and any one wishing to poison it would have to poison every fountain in Rome. As thou seest, it is possible yet to be safe in this world and to have a quiet old age. I am sick, it is true, but rather in soul than in body."

This was true. Seneca lacked the strength of soul which Cornutus possessed, for example, or Thræsea; hence his life was a series of concessions to crime. He felt this himself; he understood that an adherent of the principles of Zeno, of Citium, should go by another road, and he suffered more from that cause than from the fear of death itself.

But the general interrupted these reflections full of grief.

"Noble Annæus," said he, "I know how Cæsar rewarded thee for the care with which thou didst surround his years of youth. But the author of the removal of Lygia is Petronius. Indicate to me a method against him, indicate the influences to which he yields, and use besides with him all the eloquence with which friendship for me of long standing can inspire thee."

"Petronius and I," answered Seneca, "are men of two opposite camps; I know of no method against him, he yields to no man's influence. Perhaps with all his corruption he is worthier than those scoundrels with whom Nero surrounds himself at present. But to show him that he has done an evil deed is to lose time simply. Petronius has lost long since that faculty which distinguishes good from evil. Show him that his act is ugly, he will be ashamed of it. When I see him, I will say, 'Thy act is worthy of a freedman.' If that will not help thee, nothing can."

"Thanks for that, even," answered the general.

Then he gave command to carry him to the house of Vinicius, whom he found at sword practice with his domestic trainer. Aulus was borne away by terrible anger at sight of the young man occupied calmly with fencing during the attack on Lygia; and barely had the curtain dropped behind the trainer when this anger burst forth in a torrent of bitter reproaches and injuries. But Vinicius, when he learned that Lygia had been carried away, grew so terribly pale that Aulus could not for even an instant suspect him of sharing in the deed. The young man's forehead was covered

with sweat; the blood, which had rushed to his heart for a moment, returned to his face in a burning wave; his eyes began to shoot sparks, his mouth to hurl disconnected questions. Jealousy and rage tossed him in turn, like a tempest. It seemed to him that Lygia, once she had crossed the threshold of Cæsar's house, was lost to him absolutely. When Aulus pronounced the name of Petronius, suspicion flew like a lightning flash through the young soldier's mind, that Petronius had made sport of him, and either wanted to win new favor from Nero by the gift of Lygia, or keep her for himself. That any one who had seen Lygia would not desire her at once, did not find a place in his head. Impetuousness, inherited in his family, carried him away like a wild horse, and took from him presence of mind.

"General," said he, with a broken voice, "return home and wait for me. Know that if Petronius were my own father, I would avenge on him the wrong done to Lygia. Return home and wait for me. Neither Petronius nor Cæsar will have her."

Then he went with clinched fists to the waxed masks standing clothed in the atrium, and burst out, —

"By those mortal masks! I would rather kill her and myself."

When he had said this, he sent another "Wait for me" after Aulus, then ran forth like a madman from the atrium, and flew to Petronius's house, thrusting pedestrians aside on the way.

Aulus returned home with a certain encouragement. He judged that if Petronius had persuaded Cæsar to take Lygia to give her to Vinicius, Vinicius would bring her to their house. Finally, the thought was no little consolation to him, that should Lygia not be rescued she would be avenged and protected by death from disgrace. He believed that Vinicius would do everything that he had promised. He had seen his rage, and he knew the excitability innate in the whole family. He himself, though he loved Lygia as her own father, would rather kill her than give her to Cæsar; and had he not regarded his son, the last descendant of his stock, he would doubtless have done so. Aulus was a soldier; he had hardly heard of the Stoics, but in character he was not far from their ideas, — death was more acceptable to his pride than disgrace.

When he returned home, he pacified Pomponia, gave her

the consolation that he had, and both began to await news from Vinicius. At moments when the steps of some of the slaves were heard in the atrium, they thought that perhaps Vinicius was bringing their beloved child to them, and they were ready in the depth of their souls to bless both. Time passed, however, and no news came. Only in the evening was the hammer heard on the gate.

After a while a slave entered and handed Aulus a letter. The old general, though he liked to show command over himself, took it with a somewhat trembling hand, and began to read as hastily as if it were a question of his whole house.

All at once his face darkened, as if a shadow from a passing cloud had fallen on it.

"Read," said he, turning to Pomponia.

Pomponia took the letter and read as follows: —

"Marcus Vinicius to Aulus Plautius greeting. What has happened, has happened by the will of Cæsar, before which incline your heads, as I and Petronius incline ours."

A long silence followed.

CHAPTER VI.

PETRONIUS was at home. The doorkeeper did not dare to stop Vinicius, who burst into the atrium like a storm, and, learning that the master of the house was in the library, he rushed into the library with the same impetus. Finding Petronius writing, he snatched the reed from his hand, broke it, trampled the reed on the floor, then fixed his fingers into his shoulder, and, approaching his face to that of his uncle, asked, with a hoarse voice, —

“What hast thou done with her? Where is she?”

Suddenly an amazing thing happened. That slender and effeminate Petronius seized the hand of the youthful athlete, which was grasping his shoulder, then seized the other, and, holding them both in his one hand with the grip of an iron vice, he said, —

“I am incapable only in the morning; in the evening I regain my former strength. Try to escape. A weaver must have taught thee gymnastics, and a blacksmith thy manners.”

On his face not even anger was evident, but in his eyes there was a certain pale reflection of energy and daring. After a while he let the hands of Vinicius drop. Vinicius stood before him shamefaced and enraged.

“Thou hast a steel hand,” said he; “but if thou hast betrayed me, I swear, by all the infernal gods, that I will thrust a knife into thy body, though thou be in the chambers of Cæsar.”

“Let us talk calmly,” said Petronius. “Steel is stronger, as thou seest, than iron; hence, though out of one of thy arms two as large as mine might be made, I have no need to fear thee. On the contrary, I grieve over thy rudeness, and if the ingratitude of men could astonish me yet, I should be astonished at thy ingratitude.”

“Where is Lygia?”

“In a brothel, — that is, in the house of Cæsar.”

“Petronius!”

“Calm thyself, and be seated. I asked Cæsar for two things, which he promised me, — first, to take Lygia from the house of Aulus, and second to give her to thee. Hast

thou not a knife there under the folds of thy toga? Perhaps thou wilt stab me! But I advise thee to wait a couple of days, for thou wouldst be taken to prison, and meanwhile Lygia would be wearied in thy house.”

Silence followed. Vinicius looked for some time with astonished eyes on Petronius; then he said, —

“Pardon me; I love her, and love is disturbing my faculties.”

“Look at me, Marcus. The day before yesterday I spoke to Cæsar as follows: ‘My sister’s son, Vinicius, has so fallen in love with a lean little girl who is being reared with the Auluses that his house is turned into a steambath from sighs. Neither thou, O Cæsar, nor I — we who know, each of us, what true beauty is — would give a thousand sesterces for her; but that lad has ever been as dull as a tripod, and now he has lost all the wit that was in him.’”

“Petronius!”

“If thou understand not that I said this to insure Lygia’s safety, I am ready to believe that I told the truth. I persuaded Bronzebeard that a man of his æsthetic nature could not consider such a girl beautiful; and Nero, who so far has not dared to look otherwise than through my eyes, will not find in her beauty, and, not finding it, will not desire her. It was necessary to insure ourselves against the monkey and take him on a rope. Not he, but Poppæa, will value Lygia now; and Poppæa will strive, of course, to send the girl out of the palace at the earliest. I said further to Bronzebeard, in passing: ‘Take Lygia and give her to Vinicius! Thou hast the right to do so, for she is a hostage; and if thou take her, thou wilt inflict pain on Aulus.’ He agreed; he had not the least reason not to agree, all the more since I gave him a chance to annoy decent people. They will make thee official guardian of the hostage, and give into thy hands that Lygian treasure; thou, as a friend of the valiant Lygians, and also a faithful servant of Cæsar, wilt not waste any of the treasure, but wilt strive to increase it. Cæsar, to preserve appearances, will keep her a few days in his house, and then send her to thy insula. Lucky man!”

“Is this true? Does nothing threaten her there in Cæsar’s house?”

“If she had to live there permanently, Poppæa would talk about her to Locusta, but for a few days there is no danger. Ten thousand people live in it. Nero will not see

her, perhaps, all the more since he left everything to me, to the degree that just now the centurion was here with information that he had conducted the maiden to the palace and committed her to Acte. She is a good soul, that Acte; hence I gave command to deliver Lygia to her. Clearly Pomponia Græcina is of that opinion too, for she wrote to Acte. To-morrow there is a feast at Nero's. I have requested a place for thee at the side of Lygia."

"Pardon me, Caius, my hastiness. I judged that thou hadst given command to take her for thyself or for Cæsar."

"I can forgive thy hastiness; but it is more difficult to forgive rude gestures, vulgar shouts, and a voice reminding one of players at mora. I do not like that style, Marcus, and do thou guard against it. Know that Tigellinus is Cæsar's pander; but know also that if I wanted the girl for myself now, looking thee straight in the eyes, I would say, 'Vinicius! I take Lygia from thee, and I will keep her till I am tired of her.'"

Thus speaking, he began to look with his hazel eyes straight into the eyes of Vinicius with a cold and insolent stare. The young man lost himself completely.

"The fault is mine," said he. "Thou art kind and worthy. I thank thee from my whole soul. Permit me only to put one more question: Why didst thou not have Lygia sent directly to my house?"

"Because Cæsar wishes to preserve appearances. People in Rome will talk about this, — that we removed Lygia as a hostage. While they are talking, she will remain in Cæsar's palace. Afterward she will be removed quietly to thy house, and that will be the end. Bronzebeard is a cowardly cur. He knows that his power is unlimited, and still he tries to give specious appearances to every act. Hast thou recovered to the degree of being able to philosophize a little? More than once have I thought, Why does crime, even when as powerful as Cæsar, and assured of being beyond punishment, strive always for the appearances of truth, justice, and virtue? Why does it take the trouble? I consider that to murder a brother, a mother, a wife, is a thing worthy of some petty Asiatic king, not a Roman Cæsar; but if that position were mine, I should not write justifying letters to the Senate. But Nero writes. Nero is looking for appearances, for Nero is a coward. But Tiberius was not a coward; still he justified every step he took. Why is this? What a marvellous, involuntary homage paid to

virtue by evil! And knowest thou what strikes me? This, that it is done because transgression is ugly and virtue is beautiful. Therefore a man of genuine æsthetic feeling is also a virtuous man. Hence I am virtuous. To-day I must pour out a little wine to the shades of Protagoras, Prodicus, and Gorgias. It seems that sophists too can be of service. Listen, for I am speaking yet. I took Lygia from Aulus to give her to thee. Well. But Lysippus would have made wonderful groups of her and thee. Ye are both beautiful; therefore my act is beautiful, and being beautiful it cannot be bad. Marcus, here sitting before thee is virtue incarnate in Caius Petronius! If Aristides were living, it would be his duty to come to me and offer a hundred minæ for a short treatise on virtue."

But Vinicius, as a man more concerned with reality than with treatises on virtue, replied, —

"To-morrow I shall see Lygia, and then have her in my house daily, always, and till death."

"Thou wilt have Lygia, and I shall have Aulus on my head. He will summon the vengeance of all the infernal gods against me. And if the beast would take at least a preliminary lesson in good declamation! He will blame me, however, as my former doorkeeper blamed my clients; but him I sent to prison in the country."

"Aulus has been at my house. I promised to give him news of Lygia."

"Write to him that the will of the 'divine' Cæsar is the highest law, and that thy first son will bear the name Aulus. It is necessary that the old man should have some consolation. I am ready to pray Bronzebeard to invite him to-morrow to the feast. Let him see thee in the triclinium next to Lygia."

"Do not do that. I am sorry for them, especially for Pomponia."

And he sat down to write that letter which took from the old general the remnant of his hope.