

Alaric; OR, THE TYRANT'S VAULT. A SICILIAN STORY OF EARLY TIMES. CHAPTER I.

Not far from the city of Syracuse, when it was the metropolis of all Sicily, an object of longing to ambitious conquerors, and one of the finest cities in the world; not far from this place, upon the shore of the sea, stood a man, who had just landed from a vessel that was now sailing away towards the North. He was quite young—not over five-and-twenty—tall and well-proportioned; with a muscular system finely developed; and possessing a face not only striking in its mainly beauty, but remarkable, in one so young, for its stern, resolute, and self-reliant expression. His dress was light and simple, and evidently of Greek manufacture; the lower limbs being clothed in close-fitting goat-skin, above which he wore a shirt of white linen, confined at the waist by a belt of fine mail. Upon his head was a cap of woven stuff, the top drooping over the right ear; and his feet were shod by a pair of sandals. His only weapon was a short, heavy sword, which hung in a leathern scabbard, from his belt of mail. He stood for awhile, gazing about, as though undecided what course he should pursue; but finally he espied an old fisherman, not far off, who had just come down upon the beach and towards him he made his way.

"A bright, pleasant morning good sir," said the youth. "The old man cast his net from his shoulders and gazed up. He carefully scanned the features before him, and then replied: "Aye, fair sir, it is a pleasant morning. We have many such on this coast." "And just it seems sometimes, I suppose," suggested the first speaker. "He is a wise man who little heeds the storms he cannot quell," said the fisherman, with a nod of the head which seemed to give his words more meaning than the circumstances under which they were spoken would imply. "You are right, there," responded the other. "But tell me—where can I find Artabanus, the hermit?" The fisherman took another careful look into his interlocutor's face, and then answered: "He lives upon yonder mountain, which is called Catalano. Do you wish to see him?" "Yes." "Then follow the path that leads to yonder cot, until it brings you to a small stream. Cross that, and then upon your right hand you will see beaten track. He lives in a cave near the top of the mountain, and this track will lead you directly thither."

The young man thanked his informant and was upon the point of turning away, when the latter resumed: "I mean no offense. Your face looks familiar. It has the cast of a countenance I fancied I had seen before." "You'll at least remember of having seen such an one on this morning," said the young man; and as he thus spoke he turned away. "Aye," muttered the old Sicilian, half to himself, but yet loud enough to reach others ears; "and I call on Neptune to witness that I have seen it before. Such faces are not multiplied—they are not plenty in Syracuse these times. Alas! more's the pity." The youth hesitated for a moment, as though he would turn back, but he overcame the disposition, and kept on. When he had begun to ascend the mountain, he stopped and looked behind him, and saw that the fisherman was already upon the water. "Can it be," he said to himself, "that my face is so little changed? I think I remember that old man, for he has spread his nets long in the waters; but how should he remember me? I pray the gods that there be not many in Syracuse that will yet be so observant."

With this the traveler kept on up the mountain until he had reached a broad table of rock, from whence he could see the bay, and the city beyond. The great metropolis was spread out before him, with its massive walls, its temples, and its palaces, and a tear started down his cheek as he gazed upon the scene. He clasped his hands upon his bosom, and with a few muttered words, he started on again. He crossed the stream, and took the path which he had been directed; but he did not follow it as one who was a stranger to its windings. He pursued his path with an ease and assurance, and at times, with an abstractedness which could well have been indulged in only by one who knew well the way he was going. Up the steep, rocky height he climbed, and when he finally stopped, it was before the entrance to the cave—a cave which nature had fashioned in the mountain's side, and sheltered from the sun's fervid heat, and the fury of the storm. At the mouth of this cavern sat an old man, over whose head some four score years had rolled. His hair and beard were white as the snow which had settled upon the mountain, and it floated in silken, wavy masses over his shoulders and breast. A mantle of gray cloth enveloped his frame, and his feet were shod with heavy sandals. He was engaged over an old man's cup, but as he heard the sound of approaching footsteps he closed the volume and raised his head. "Good morning, my son," he said, with a look of simple welcome. "Kind father, I greet thee," the youth returned, at the same time extending his hand. "How!" cried the aged man, starting to his feet, as the accents fell upon his ear. He shaded his eyes with the palm of the left hand, and gazed eagerly into his visitor's face. "Dost thou speak?" he added. "Is it Alaric—my old pupil?" "Aye, good Artabanus, I am Alaric—come once more to see thee."

"Sit down—sit down, my son. Thy presence has started a host of varied emotions to life within me, and I must recover my thoughts ere I can talk with thee in reason." "Thank the gods, I find thee alive and in health," replied the youth, as he let go the old man's hand, and took a seat upon a wood-bench close by. "Aye—I am well in body," returned Artabanus. "But," he added, thoughtfully continuing to gaze earnestly into his companion's face as he spoke, "the body is but a small part of man, and the hills of the flesh are very joys when compared with some of the pains to which the soul may be subject. But tell me of thyself. Where hast thou been?" "I have been in Greece," replied the youth. "When I fled from these shores, eight years ago, I sought refuge there, and there I have remained ever since. Oh! I wept this morning, as I gazed down upon the city of my birth. I had thought I had done weeping over those memories; but when I again gazed upon Syracuse they came crowding upon me with a power which I could not resist. I saw the very temple beneath the walls of which my father and my brother were slain; and I could see the roof beneath which my mother died. Artabanus, there were not many of the patrician families escaped that foul butchery."

"No, Alaric. Of all who were loyal to the true interests of the people, I have seen only yourself return. There were a few escaped, but not many. Were there any with you to Greece?" "No, father. I escaped alone. I saw my noble parent cut down—I saw my brother fall—and when I knew I had no relative left in the city, I fled. Fortune favored me. I found a small boat by the sea shore, and I put out alone upon the dark waters. I floated away to Melita, and from thence I gained a passage to Greece. The tyrant still reigns in Syracuse?" "Alas! yes. And his deeds are evil, and the people suffer. We have had no peace in Sicily since good Helixus died. Thou wert but a mere child then." "I was seven years old. I remember the good king well, for my father, you know, was one of his chief officers." "Aye—you were older than I thought," said the hermit, musingly. "And I remember that there was some mystery connected with the good king's death," remarked Alaric. "Am I not right?" "There was not much mystery," answered the old man. "He was weak and weary, and he left the throne that he might die in peace; and death soon came to him. But why hast thou returned to Syracuse?" "Can you not guess?" returned the youth. "I might guess many things, my son." "And yet but one of them would be right. I have said that I left no relative behind me when I made my escape from this place; but I did leave one whom I loved—one about whom my affections were entwined with a life that could not die. You know of whom I speak."

"Aye—you speak of the mason's daughter, Ianthe." "Yes, father. Is she alive?" "She is." "And well?" "She is well." "And," pursued the youth, in a more eager tone, "is she still free?" "Why? Have you thought that she would remember you in love through the years that have passed?" "Oh! do not tell me that she has ceased to love me. True, she was a child in years, but I loved her then, and my love has grown stronger in the separation which has followed. I know there is danger to me here, but I came with a will to meet it." "But suppose your very life were in danger if you sought the maiden?" "You may warn me of danger, if you will, but do not seek to place the barrier of fear between me and my desire, for I know not the emotion. You, Artabanus, taught me when I was a boy, and your wise lessons have not departed from my mind. You taught me that there were many things more to be feared than death, and I have come, prepared rather to die than live all alone in a distant land, with the sad memories of my unhappy country for my only heritage."

"And you would not turn from death, should it raise its threatening front between yourself and Ianthe?" The old man's gaze grew more earnest as he thus spoke, and a spark within which seemed to gleam some newly awakened hope, burned in his eye. "My father," answered Alaric, with a flushing cheek; "I could almost feel offended did I think you doubted me, but I do not think so. Show me that Ianthe loves me, and not even Pyrrho himself, with blood-stained crown of Sicily upon his brow, shall have power to startle me from my course, while life is mine."

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"O—the gods be praised!" ejaculated the young man. "But," added the hermit in a changed voice, "there must be danger in thy path. Pyrrho holds his throne only through the fear and enslavement of the people, and he knows it. Your father was one of his bitterest enemies, and he was also one of the first whom the usurper found it necessary to put out of the way. You are not only the very image of your noble parent, but you must remember that you had arrived almost at the full stature of manhood when you fled from Syracuse. You were then seventeen, and from seventeen to five-and-twenty, especially in one so early developed as you were, there is not much change. You were a man then, and you are no more now. So you must expect that you will be known and recognized. But let us speak of this hereafter. First do you see Ianthe, and when you have found all right in that quarter, we will consider further."

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Artabanus started to his feet and grasped the youth by the hand. "Noble Alaric!" he cried, with a joyful enthusiasm, "thou art worthy of the maiden's hand. She does love thee—she cherishes thy memory within her heart as the most precious thing of earth, and for long years she has lived upon the hope that thou wouldst return to her."

"O—the gods be praised!" ejaculated the young man. "But," added the hermit in a changed voice, "there must be danger in thy path. Pyrrho holds his throne only through the fear and enslavement of the people, and he knows it. Your father was one of his bitterest enemies, and he was also one of the first whom the usurper found it necessary to put out of the way. You are not only the very image of your noble parent, but you must remember that you had arrived almost at the full stature of manhood when you fled from Syracuse. You were then seventeen, and from seventeen to five-and-twenty, especially in one so early developed as you were, there is not much change. You were a man then, and you are no more now. So you must expect that you will be known and recognized. But let us speak of this hereafter. First do you see Ianthe, and when you have found all right in that quarter, we will consider further."

"I shall find her with her father?" "Yes—and his house is just where it was eight years ago." "I will go and seek her, then, and—"

"Hold, my son. You had better wait till nightfall ere you enter the city, and also exchange that Greek shirt for a garment less likely to attract attention, for I assure you that too much care cannot be taken."

Alaric was impatient to see Ianthe, but he saw the force of the hermit's reasoning, and he was willing to wait. So he sat down by his old teacher's side again—sat as he had sat years before, when receiving instructions from the same lips—and listened to the story of the wrongs that had been done in Sicily during the last eight years. Hour after hour passed away, and Artabanus had still more to tell of the tyrant's cruelty. "Merciful heavens!" cried the youth, freed almost to phrenzy by the recital, "have the people borne all this?" "They have borne it under the fear of their lives. Pyrrho's soldiers are posted at every place where a murmur can arise."

"And how long shall it last?" "Till some spirit with a heart big enough to love Sicily more than life, and a soul that fears not the tyrant, shall arise in Syracuse!" pronounced the old man solemnly. Alaric started as he met the glance of his aged companion, for there was a meaning upon it more than mortal import. He dared not trust himself to speak then, but the feelings that had sprung to life in his own soul were so wild and strange that he only fairly started him. He arose and walked out upon the mountain, and ever and anon, as his eye rested upon the distant city, the tumult in his soul came to startle him again. He did not seek to analyze the emotion, for it was so bold and gigantic, so gentle-like in its misty proportions, that he dared not handle it with reason. After a while Artabanus came out and touched him upon the shoulder. "Alaric," spoke the old man, "it is waxing late, and we may be on the move. Let us eat a crust of bread, and then we will descend the mountain together. I must go with you as far as the fisherman's cot, for there we must find a more fitting garb for you. Glycon is my friend, and may be trusted to the verge of the grave."

The frugal supper was soon dispatched, and then the two descended the mountain together. At the fisherman's cot they stopped, and found that Glycon had just returned from his day's labor. Artabanus took him apart, and having explained to him as much of Alaric's story as he deemed advisable, he asked for some garments that would answer for the youth to wear. The fisherman led the way to his scanty wardrobe, and the necessary garments were soon selected. Alaric's leggings of goat-skin were replaced by long hose of blue cloth, and his white linen shirt was exchanged for a dark brown frock, beneath which he could easily conceal his short sword. After this the hermit accompanied him to the southern shore of the bay, and there stopped. "We had better not be seen together beyond this point," said the old man. "From here the way is plain, and you have had caution enough. At the gate you will not be stopped, unless some of the guard should take the whim to question you. Be wise, now, and cautious, and let me see you to-morrow."

"I will not forget." "And," pursued the youth, in a more eager tone, "is she still free?" "Why? Have you thought that she would remember you in love through the years that have passed?" "Oh! do not tell me that she has ceased to love me. True, she was a child in years, but I loved her then, and my love has grown stronger in the separation which has followed. I know there is danger to me here, but I came with a will to meet it."

"But suppose your very life were in danger if you sought the maiden?" "You may warn me of danger, if you will, but do not seek to place the barrier of fear between me and my desire, for I know not the emotion. You, Artabanus, taught me when I was a boy, and your wise lessons have not departed from my mind. You taught me that there were many things more to be feared than death, and I have come, prepared rather to die than live all alone in a distant land, with the sad memories of my unhappy country for my only heritage."

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