

Chapter 17. Christianos ad Leones

{189} BY the time that they had got round again to the unlucky baker's, the mob had been swollen to a size which even the area of the Forum would not contain, and it filled the adjacent streets. And by the same time it had come home to its leaders, and, indeed, to every one who used his reason at all, that it was very far from certain that there were any Christians in Sicca, and if so, still very far from easy to say where they were. And the difficulty was of so practical a character as to keep them inactive for the space of several hours. Meanwhile their passions were excited to the boiling point by the very presence of the difficulty, as men go mad of thirst when water is denied them. At length, after a long season of such violent commotion, such restless pain, such curses, shrieks, and blasphemies, such bootless gesticulations, such aimless contests with each other, that they seemed to be already inmates of the prison beneath, they set off in a blind way to make the circuit of the city as before they had paraded round the Forum, still in the knight-errant line, looking out for what might turn up where they were sure of nothing, and relieving the intense {190} irritation of their passions by locomotion, if nothing more substantial was offered to them.

It was an awful day for the respectable inhabitants of the place; worse than anything that even the most timid of them had anticipated, when they had showed their jealousy of a popular movement against the proscribed religion; for the stimulus of famine and pestilence was added to hatred of Christianity, in that unreasoning multitude. The magistrates shut themselves up in dismay; the small body of Roman soldiery reserved their strength for the defence of themselves; and the poor wretches, not a few, who had fallen from the faith, and offered sacrifice, hung out from their doors sinful heathen symbols, to avert a storm against which apostasy was no sufficient safeguard. In this conduct the Gnostics and other sectaries imitated them, while the Tertullianists took a more manly part, from principle or pride.

It would require the brazen voice which Homer speaks of, or the magic pen of Sir Walter, to catalogue and to picture, as far as it is lawful to do either, the figures and groups of that most miserable procession. As it went forward it gained a variety and strength, which the circuit of the Forum could not furnish. The more respectable religious establishments shut their gates, and would have nothing to do with it. The priests of Jupiter, the educational establishments of the Temple of Mercury, the Temple of the Genius of Rome near the Capitol, the hierophants of Isis, the Minerva, the Juno, the Esculapius, viewed the popular {191} rising with terror and disgust; but these were not the popular worships. The vast homestead of Astarte, which in the number and vowed profligacy of its inhabitants rivalled the vaults upon the Forum; the old rites, many and diversified, if separately obscure, which came from Punic times; the new importations from Syria and Phrygia, and a number of other haunts and schools of depravity and crime, did their part in swelling or giving character to the concourse. The hungry and idle rabble, the filthy beggars who fed on the offal of the sacrifices, the drivers and slaughterers of the beasts sacrificed; the tumblers and mountebanks who amused the gaping market-people; dancers, singers, pipers from low taverns and drinking-houses; infamous creatures, young and old, men and boys, half naked and not

43 half sober; brutal blacks, the aboriginal race of the Atlas, with their appetites written on
44 their skulls and features; Canaanites, as they called themselves, from the coast; the
45 wild beast-keepers from the amphitheatre; troops of labourers from the fields, to whom
46 the epidemic was a time of Saturnalia; and the degraded company, alas! how numerous
47 and how pitiable, who took their nightly stand in long succession at the doors of their
48 several cells in the deep galleries under the Thermæ; all these, and many others, had
49 their part and place in the procession. There you might see the devilish emblems of
50 idolatry borne aloft by wretches from the great Punic Temple, while frantic forms,
51 ragged and famished, wasted and shameless, leapt and pranced around {192} them.
52 There too was a choir of Bacchanals, ready at a moment with songs as noisy as they
53 were unutterable. And there was the priest of the Punic Saturn, the child-devourer, a
54 sort of Moloch, to whom the martyrdom of Christians was a sacred rite; he and all his
55 attendants in fiery-coloured garments, as became a sanguinary religion. And there,
56 moreover, was a band of fanatics, devotees of Cybele or of the Syrian goddess, if
57 indeed the two rites were distinct. They were bedizened with ribbons and rags of
58 various colours, and smeared over with paint. They had long hair like women, and
59 turbans on their heads. They pushed their way to the head of the procession, being
60 quite worthy of the post of honour, and, seizing the baker's ass, put their goddess on the
61 back of it. Some of them were playing the fife, others clashing cymbals, others danced,
62 others yelled, others rolled their heads, and others flogged themselves. Such was the
63 character of the frenzied host, which progressed slowly through the streets, while every
64 now and then, when there was an interval in the hubbub, the words "Christianos ad
65 leones" were thundered out by some ruffian voice, and a thousand others fiercely
66 responded.

67 Still no Christian was forthcoming; and it was plain that the rage of the multitude must
68 be discharged in other quarters, if the difficulty continued in satisfying it. At length some
69 one recollected the site of the Christian chapel, when it existed; thither went the
70 multitude, and effected an entrance without {193} delay. It had long been turned to other
71 purposes, and was now a store of casks and leather bottles. The miserable sacristan
72 had long given up any practical observance of his faith, and remained on the spot a
73 keeper of the premises for the trader who owned them. They found him, and dragged
74 him into the street, and brought him forward to the ass, and to the idol on its back, and
75 bade him worship the one and the other. The poor wretch obeyed; he worshipped the
76 ass, he worshipped the idol, and he worshipped the genius of the emperor; but his
77 persecutors wanted blood; they would not submit to be cheated of their draught; so
78 when they had made him do whatever they exacted, they flung him under the feet of the
79 multitude, who, as they passed on, soon trod all life and breath out of him, and sent him
80 to the powers below, to whom he had just before been making his profession.

81 Their next adventure was with a Tertullianist, who stationed himself at his shop-door,
82 displayed the sign of the cross, and walking leisurely forward, seized the idol on the
83 ass's back, broke it over his knee, and flung the portions into the crowd. For a few
84 minutes they stared on him with astonishment, then some women fell upon him with
85 their nails and teeth, and tore the poor fanatic till he fell bleeding and lifeless upon the
86 ground.

87 In the higher and better part of the city, which they now approached, lived the widow of
88 a Duumvir, who in his day had made a bold profession of Christianity. {194} The well-
89 connected lady was a Christian also, and was sheltered by her great friends from the
90 persecution. She was bringing up a family in great privacy, and with straitened means,
91 and with as much religious strictness as was possible under the circumstances of the
92 place. She kept them from all bad sights and bad company, was careful as to the
93 character of the slaves she placed about them, and taught them all she knew of her
94 religion, which was quite sufficient for their salvation. They had all been baptized, some
95 by herself in default of the proper minister, and, as far as they could show at their tender
96 ages, which lay between thirteen and seven, the three girls and the two boys were
97 advancing in the love of truth and sanctity. Her husband, some years back, when
98 presiding in the Forum, had punished with just severity an act of ungrateful fraud; and
99 the perpetrator had always cherished a malignant hatred of him and his. The moment of
100 gratifying it had now arrived, and he pointed out to the infuriated rabble the secluded
101 mansion where the Christian household dwelt. He could not offer to them a more
102 acceptable service, and the lady's modest apartment was soon swarming with enemies
103 of her God and His followers. In spite of her heart-rending cries and supplications, her
104 children were seized, and when the youngest boy clung to her, the mother was thrown
105 senseless upon the pavement. The whole five were carried off in triumph; it was the
106 greatest success of the day. There was some {195} hesitation how to dispose of them;
107 at last the girls were handed over to the priestesses of Astarte, and the boys to the
108 loathsome votaries of Cybele.

109 Revenge upon Christians was the motive principle of the riot; but the prospect of
110 plunder stimulated numbers, and here Christians could not minister to their desires.
111 They began the day by the attack upon the provision-shop, and now they had reached
112 the aristocratic quarter of the city, and they gazed with envy and cupidity at the noble
113 mansions which occupied it. They began to shout out, "Bread, bread!" while they uttered
114 threats against the Christians; they violently beat at the closed gates, and looked about
115 for means of scaling the high walls which defended them in front. The cravings of
116 famished men soon take form and organization; they began to ask relief from house to
117 house. Nothing came amiss; and loaves, figs, grapes, wine, found their way into the
118 hands and mouths of those who were the least exhausted and the least enfeebled. A
119 second line of fierce supplicants succeeded to the first; and it was plain that, unless
120 some diversion were effected, the respectable quarter of Sicca had found a worse
121 enemy than the locust.

122 The houses of the government *susceptor*, or tax collector, of the *tabularius* or registrar,
123 of the *defensor* or city counsel, and one or two others, had already been the scene of
124 collisions between the domestic slaves and the multitude, when a demand was made
125 upon {196} the household of another of the Curia, who held the office of Flamen Dialis.
126 He was a wealthy, easy-going man, generally popular, with no appetite for persecution
127 at all, but still no desire to be persecuted. He had more than tolerated the Christians,
128 and had at this time a Christian among his slaves. This was a Greek, a splendid cook
129 and perfumer, and he would not have lost him for a large sum of money. However, life
130 and limb were nearer to him even than his dinner, and a Jonah must be cast overboard

131 to save the ship. In trepidation, yet with greater satisfaction, his fellow-domestics thrust
132 the poor helpless man out of the house, and secured the door behind him. He was a
133 man of middle age, of a grave aspect, and he looked silently and calmly upon the
134 infuriated and yelling multitude, who were swarming up the hill about him, and swelling
135 the number of his persecutors. What had been his prospects, had he remained in his
136 earthly master's service? his fill of meat and drink while he was strong and skilful, the
137 stocks or scourge if he ever failed to please him, and the old age and death of the worn-
138 out hack who once has caracoled in the procession, or snorted at the coming fight.
139 What are his prospects now? a moment's agony, a martyr's death, and the everlasting
140 beatific vision of Him for whom he died. The multitude cry out, "To the ass or to the
141 lion!" worship the ass, or fight the lion. He was dragged to the ass's head and
142 commanded to kneel down before the irrational beast. In the course of a minute he had
143 lifted up {197} his eyes to heaven, had signed himself with the cross, had confessed his
144 Saviour, and had been torn to pieces by the multitude. They anticipated the lion of the
145 amphitheatre.

146 A lull followed, sure to be succeeded by a fresh storm. Not every household had a
147 Christian cook to make a victim of. Plunder, riot, and outrage were becoming the order
148 of the day; successive messengers were sent up in breathless haste to the capitol and
149 the camp for aid, but the Romans returned for answer that they had enough to do in
150 defending the government buildings and offices. They suggested measures, however,
151 for putting the mob on a false scent, or involving them in some difficult or tedious
152 enterprise, which would give the authorities time for deliberation, and for taking the
153 rioters at disadvantage. If the magistrates could get them out of the city, it would be a
154 great point; they could then shut the gates upon them, and deal with them as they
155 would. In that case, too, the insurgents would straggle, and divide, and then they might
156 be disposed of in detail. They were showing symptoms of returning fury, when a voice
157 suddenly cried out, "Agellius the Christian! Agellius the sorcerer! Agellius to the lions! To
158 the farm of Varius—to the cottage of Agellius—to the south-west gate!" A sudden yell
159 burst forth from the vast multitude when the voice ceased. The impulse had been given
160 as at the first; the tide of human beings ebbed and retreated, and, licking the base of the
161 hill, rushed {198} vehemently on one side, and roared like a torrent towards the south-
162 west. Juba, thy prophecy is soon to be fulfilled! The locusts will bring more harm on thy
163 brother's home than imperial edict or local magistrate. The decline of day will hardly
164 prevent the visitation.

Chapter 18. Agellius Flits

165 {199} A CHANGE had passed over the fair face of Nature, as seen from the cottage of
166 Agellius, since that evening on which our story opened; and it is so painful to
167 contemplate waste, decay, and disappointment, that we mean to say little about it.
168 There was the same cloudless sky as then; and the sun travelled in its silent and certain
169 course, with even a more intense desire than then to ripen grain and fruit for the use of
170 man; but its occupation was gone, for fruit and grain were not, nor man to collect and to
171 enjoy them. A dark broad shadow passed across the beautiful prospect and disfigured
172 it. When you looked more closely, it was as if a fire had burned up the whole surface

173 included under that shadow, and had stripped the earth of its clothing. Nothing had
174 escaped; not a head of khennah, not a rose or carnation, not an orange or an orange
175 blossom, not a *boccone*, not a cluster of unripe grapes, not a berry of the olive, not a
176 blade of grass. Gardens, meadows, vineyards, orchards, copses, instead of rejoicing in
177 the rich variety of hue which lately was their characteristic, {200} were now reduced to
178 one dreary cinder-colour. The smoke of fires was actually rising from many points,
179 where the spoilt and poisonous vegetation was burning in heaps, or the countless
180 corpses of the invading foe, or of the cattle, or of the human beings whom the
181 pestilence had carried off. The most furious inroad of savage hordes, of Vandals, or of
182 Saracens, who were destined at successive eras to come and waste that country, could
183 not have spread such thorough desolation. The slaves of the farm of Varius were
184 sorrowfully turning to a new employment, that of clearing away the wreck and
185 disappointment of the bright spring from flower-bed, vineyard, and field.

186 It was on the forenoon of the eventful day whose course we have been tracing in the
187 preceding Chapters, that a sharp-looking boy presented himself to Agellius, who was
188 directing his labourers in their work. "I am come from Jucundus," he said; "he has
189 instant need of you. You are to go with me, and by my way; and this is the proof I tell
190 you truth. He sends you this note, and wishes you in a bad time the best gifts of
191 Bacchus and Ceres."

192 Agellius took the tablets, and went with them across the road to the place where
193 Cæcilius was at work, in appearance a slave. The letter ran thus:—"Jucundus to
194 Agellius. I trust you are well enough to move; you are not safe for many days in your
195 cottage; there is a rising this morning against the Christians, and you may be visited.
196 Unless you are ambitious of Styx and Tartarus, follow the boy without {201}
197 questioning." Agellius showed the letter to the priest.

198 "We are no longer safe here, my father," he said; "whither shall we go? Let us go
199 together. Can you take me to Carthage."

200 "Carthage is quite as dangerous," answered Cæcilius, "and Sicca is more central. We
201 can but leap into the sea at Carthage; here there are many lines to retreat upon. I am
202 known there, I am not known here. Here, too, I hear all that goes on through the
203 proconsulate and Numidia."

204 "But what can we do?" asked Agellius; "here we cannot remain, and you at least cannot
205 venture into the city. Somewhither we must go, and where is that?"

206 The priest thought. "We must separate," he said. The tears came into Agellius's eyes.

207 "Though I am a stranger," continued Cæcilius, "I know more of the neighbourhood of
208 Sicca than you who are a native. There is a famous Christian retreat on the north of the
209 city, and by this time, I doubt not, or rather I know, it is full of refugees. The fury of the
210 enemy is extending on all hands, and our brethren, from as far as Cirtha round to

211 Curubis, are falling back upon it. The only difficulty is how to get round to it without
212 going through Sicca."

213 "Let us go together," said Agellius.

214 Cæcilius showed signs of perplexity, and his mind retired into itself. He seemed for the
215 moment to be simply absent from the scene about him, but soon {202} his intelligence
216 returned. "No," he said, "we must separate,—for the time; it will not be for long. That is, I
217 suppose, your uncle will take good care of you, and he has influence. We are safest just
218 now when most independent of each other. It is only for a while. We shall meet again
219 soon; I tell you so. Did we keep together just now, it would be the worse for each of us.
220 You go with the boy; I will go off to the place I mentioned."

221 "O my father," said the youth, "how will you get there? What shall I suffer from my fears
222 about you?"

223 "Fear not," answered Cæcilius, "mind, I tell you so. It will be a trying time, but my hour is
224 not yet come. I am good for years yet; so are you, for many more than mine. He will
225 protect and rescue me, though I know not how. Go, leave me to myself, Agellius!"

226 "O my father, my only stay upon earth, whom God sent me in my extreme need, to
227 whom I owe myself, must I then quit you; must a layman desert a priest; the young the
228 old? ... Ah! it is I really, not you, who am without protection. Angels surround you, father;
229 but I am a poor wanderer. Give me your blessing that evil may not touch me. I go."

230 "Do not kneel," said the priest; "they will see you. Stop, I have got to tell you how and
231 where to find me." He then proceeded to give him the necessary instructions. "Walk
232 out," he said, "along the road to Thibursicumbur to the third milestone, {203} you will
233 come to a country road; pursue it; walk a thousand steps; then again for the space of
234 seven *paternosters*; and then speak to the man upon your right hand. And now away
235 with you, God speed you, we shall not long be parted," and he made the sign of the
236 cross over him.

237 "That old chap gives himself airs," said the boy, when Agellius joined him; "what may he
238 be? one of your slaves, Agellius?"

239 "You're a pert boy," answered he, "for asking me the question."

240 "They say the Christians brought the locusts," said Firmian, "by their enchantments; and
241 there's a jolly row beginning in the Forum just now. The report goes that you are a
242 Christian."

243 "That's because your people have nothing better to do than talk against their
244 neighbours."

245 "Because you are so soft, rather," said the boy. "Another man would have knocked me
246 down for saying it; but you are lackadaisical folk, who bear insults tamely. Arnobius says
247 your father was a Christian."

248 "Father and son are not always the same religion now-a-days," said Agellius.

249 "Ay, ay," answered Firmian, "but the Christians came from Egypt: and as cook there is
250 the son of cook, and soldier is son of soldier, so Christian, take my word for it, is the son
251 of a Christian."

252 "Christians boast, I believe," answered Agellius, "that they are of no one race or country,
253 but are {204} members of a large unpatriotic family, whose home is in the sky."

254 "Christians," answered the boy, "would never have framed the great Roman empire;
255 that was the work of heroes. Great Cæsar, Marius, Marcus Brutus, Camillus, Cicero,
256 Sylla, Lucullus, Scipio, could never have been Christians. Arnobius says they are a
257 skulking set of fellows."

258 "I suppose you wish to be a hero," said Agellius.

259 "I am to be a pleader," answered Firmian; "I should like to be a great orator like Cicero,
260 and every one listening to me."

261 They were walking along the top of a mud wall, which separated Varius's farm from his
262 neighbour's, when suddenly Firmian, who led the way, leapt down into a copse, which
263 reached as far as the ravine in which the knoll terminated towards Sicca. The boy still
264 went forward by devious paths, till they had mounted as high as the city wall.

265 "You are bringing me where there is no entrance," said Agellius.

266 The boy laughed. "Jucundus told me to bring you by a blind way," he said. "You know
267 best why. This is one of our ways in and out."

268 There was an aperture in the wall, and the bricks and stones about it were loose, and
269 admitted of removal. It was such a private way of passage as schoolboys know of. On
270 getting through, Agellius found himself in a neglected garden or small close. Everything
271 was silent about them, as if the inhabitants {205} were away; there was a great noise in
272 the distance, as if something unusual were going on in the heart of the town. The boy
273 told him to follow him as fast as he could without exciting remark; and, leading him by
274 lanes and alleys unknown to Agellius, at last brought him close upon the scene of riot.
275 At this time the expedition in search of Christians had just commenced; to cross the
276 Forum was to shorten his journey, and perhaps was safer than to risk meeting the mob
277 in the streets. Firmian took the step; and while their attention was directed elsewhere,
278 brought Agellius safely through it. They then proceeded cautiously as before, till they
279 stood before the back door of the house of Jucundus.

280 "Say a good word for me to your uncle," said the boy, "I have done my job. He must
281 remember me handsomely at the Augustalia," and he ran away.

282 Meanwhile Cæcilius had been anxiously considering the course which it was safest for
283 him to pursue. He must move, but he must wait till dusk, when the ways were clear, and
284 the light uncertain. Till then he must keep close indoors. There was a remarkable
285 cavern in the mountains above Sicca, which had been used as a place of refuge for
286 Christians from the very time they had first suffered persecution in Roman Africa. No
287 spot in its whole territory seemed more fit for what is called a base of operations, from
288 which the soldiers of the Cross might advance, or to which they might retire, according
289 as {206} the fury of their enemy grew or diminished. While it was in the midst of a
290 wilderness difficult of access, and feared as the resort of ghosts and evil influences, it
291 was not far from a city near to which the high roads met from Hippo and from Carthage.
292 A branch of the Bagradas, navigable for boats, opened a way from it through the woods,
293 where flight and concealment were easy on a surprise, as far as Madaura, Vacca, and
294 other places; at the same time it commanded the vast plain on the south which
295 extended to the roots of the Atlas. Just now, the persecution growing, many deacons,
296 other ecclesiastics, and prominent laymen from all parts of the country had fallen back
297 upon this cavern or grotto; and in no place could Cæcilius have better means than here
298 of learning the general state of affairs, and of communicating with countries beyond the
299 seas. He was indeed on his way thither, when the illness of Agellius made it a duty for
300 him to stop and restore him, and attend to his spiritual needs; and he had received an
301 inward intimation, on which he implicitly relied, to do so.

302 The problem at this moment was how to reach the refuge in question. His direct road lay
303 through Sicca; this being impracticable at present, he had to descend into the ravine
304 which lay between him and the city, and, turning to the left, to traverse the broad plain,
305 the Campus Martius of Sicca, into which it opened. Here the mountain would rise
306 abruptly on his right with those steep cliffs which we have already {207} described as
307 rounding the north side of Sicca. He must traverse many miles before he could reach
308 the point at which the rock lost its precipitous character, and changed into a declivity
309 allowing the traveller to ascend. It was a bold undertaking; for all this he had to
310 accomplish in the dark before the morning broke, a stranger too to the locality, and
311 directing his movements only by the information of others, which, however accurate and
312 distinct, could scarcely be followed, even if without risk of error, at least without
313 misgiving. However, could he master this point before the morning he was
314 comparatively safe; he then had to strike into the solitary mountains, and to retrace his
315 steps for a while towards Sicca along the road, till he came to a place where he knew
316 that Christian scouts or videttes (as they may be called) were always stationed.

317 This being his plan, and there being no way of mending it, our confessor retired into the
318 cottage, and devoted the intervening hours to intercourse with that world from which his
319 succour must come. He set himself to intercede for the Holy Catholic Church throughout
320 the world, now for the most part under persecution, and for the Roman Empire, not yet
321 holy, which was the instrument of the evil powers against her. He had to pray for the
322 proconsulate, for Numidia, Mauretania, and the whole of Africa; for the Christian

communities throughout it, for the cessation of the trial then present, and for the fortitude and perseverance of all who were tried. He had to pray {208} for his own personal friends, his penitents, converts, enemies; for children, catechumens, neophytes; for those who were approaching the Church, for those who had fallen away, or were falling away from her; for all heretics, for all troublers of unity, that they might be reclaimed. He had to confess, bewail and deprecate the many sins and offences which he knew of, foreboded, or saw in prospect as to come. Scarcely had he entered on his charge at Carthage four years before, when he had had to denounce one portentous scandal in which a sacred order of the ministry was implicated. What internal laxity did not that scandal imply! And then again what a low standard of religion, what niggardly faith, and what worn-out, used-up sanctity in the community at large, was revealed in the fact of those frequent apostasies of individuals which then were occurring! He prayed fervently that both from the bright pattern of martyrs, and from the warning afforded by the lapsed, the Christian body might be edified and invigorated. He saw with great anxiety two schisms in prospect, when the persecution should come to an end, one from the perverseness of those who were too rigid, the other from those who were too indulgent towards the fallen; and in proportion to his gift of prescience was the earnestness of his intercession that the wounds of the Church might be healed with the least possible delay. He then turned to the thought of his own correspondence then in progress with the Holy Roman Church, which had lately lost its bishop by martyrdom. This indeed was no unusual {209} event with the see of Peter, in which the successors of Peter followed Peter's steps, as Peter had been bidden to follow the King and Exemplar of Martyrs. But the special trouble was, that months had passed, full five, since the vacancy occurred, and it had not yet been supplied. Then he thought of Fabian, who made the vacancy, and who had already passed through that trial which was to bring to so many Christians life or condemnation, and he commended himself to his prayers against the hour of his own combat. He thought of Fabian's work, and went on to intercede for the remnant of the seven apostles whom that Pope had sent into Gaul, and some of whom had already obtained the martyr's crown. He prayed that the day might come, when not the cities only of that fair country, but its rich champaigns and sunny slopes should hear the voice of the missionary. He prayed in like manner for Britain, that the successful work of another Pope, St. Eleutherius, might be extended even to its four seas. And then he prayed for the neighbouring island on the west, still in heathen darkness, and for the endless expanse of Germany on the east, that there too the one saving name and glorious Faith might be known and accepted.

His thoughts then travelled back to Rome and Italy, and to the martyrdoms which had followed that of St. Fabian. Two Persians had already suffered in the imperial city; Maximus had lost his life, and Felix had been imprisoned, at Nola. Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt had already afforded victims to the persecution, {210} and cried aloud to all Christians for their most earnest prayers and for repeated Masses in behalf of those who remained under the trial. Babylas, Bishop of Antioch, the third see in Christendom, was already martyred in that city. Here again Cæcilius had a strong call on him for intercession, for a subtle form of freethinking was there manifesting itself, the issue of which was as uncertain as it might be frightful. The Bishop of Alexandria, that second of the large divisions or patriarchates of the Church, the great Dionysius, the pupil of

368 Origen, was an exile from his see, like himself. The messenger who brought this news
369 to Carthage had heard at Alexandria a report from Neocæsarea, that Gregory, another
370 pupil of Origen's, the Apostle of Pontus, had also been obliged to conceal himself from
371 the persecution. As for Origen himself, the aged, laborious, gifted, zealous teacher of
372 his time, he was just then engaged in answering the works of an Epicurean called
373 Celsus, and on him too the persecution was likely to fall; and Cæcilius prayed earnestly
374 that so great a soul might be kept from such high untrue speculations as were
375 threatening evil at Antioch, and from every deceit and snare which might endanger his
376 inheriting that bright crown which ought to be his portion in heaven. Another remarkable
377 report had come, viz., that some young men of Egypt had retired to the deserts up the
378 country under the stress of the persecution,—Paul was the name of one of them,—and
379 that they were there living in the practice of mortification and prayer so singular, and
380 had {211} combats with the powers of darkness and visitations from above so special,
381 as to open quite a new era in the spiritual history of the Church.

382 And then his thoughts came back to his poor Agellius, and all those hundred private
383 matters of anxiety which the foes of the Church, occupied only with her external aspect,
384 little suspected. For Agellius, he prayed, and for his; for the strange wayward Juba, for
385 Jucundus, for Callista; ah! that Callista might be brought on to that glorious
386 consummation, for which she seemed marked out! But the ways of the Most High are
387 not as our ways, and those who to us seem nearest are often furthest from Him; and so
388 our holy priest left the whole matter in the hands of Him to whom he prayed, satisfied
389 that he had done his part in praying.

390 This was the course of thought which occupied him for many hours, after (as we have
391 said) he had closed the door upon him, and knelt down before the cross. Not merely
392 before the symbol of redemption did he kneel; for he opened his tunic at the neck, and
393 drew thence a small golden pyx which was there suspended. In that carefully fastened
394 case he possessed the Holiest, his Lord and his God. That Everlasting Presence was
395 his stay and guide amid his weary wanderings, his joy and consolation amid his
396 overpowering anxieties. Behold the secret of his sweet serenity, and his clear
397 unclouded determination. He had placed it upon the small table at which he knelt, and
398 was soon absorbed in meditation and intercession.

Chapter 19. A Passage of Arms

399 {212} HOW many hours passed while Cæcilius was thus employed, he did not know.
400 The sun was declining when he was roused by a noise at the door. He hastily restored
401 the sacred treasure to its hiding-place in his breast, and rose up from his knees. The
402 door was thrown back, and a female form presented itself at the opening. She looked in
403 at the priest, and said, "Then Agellius is not here?"

404 The woman was young, tall, and graceful in person. She was clad in a yellow cotton
405 tunic, reaching to her feet, on which were shoes. The clasps at her shoulders, partly
406 visible under the short cloak or shawl which was thrown over them, and which might, if
407 necessary, be drawn over her head, seemed to serve the purpose, not only of fastening

408 her dress, but of providing her with sharp prongs or minute stilettos for her defence, in
409 case she fell in with ruffians by the way; and though the expression of her face was
410 most feminine, there was that about it which implied she could use them for that
411 purpose on an emergency. {213} That face was clear in complexion, regular in outline,
412 and at the present time pale, whatever might be its ordinary tint. Its charm was a noble
413 and majestic calm. There is the calm of divine peace and joy; there is the calm of
414 heartlessness; there is the calm of reckless desperation; there is the calm of death.
415 None of these was the calm which breathed from the features of the stranger who
416 intruded upon the solitude of Cæcilius. It was the calm of Greek sculpture; it imaged a
417 soul nourished upon the visions of genius, and subdued and attuned by the power of a
418 strong will. There was no appearance of timidity in her manner; very little of modesty.
419 The evening sun gleamed across her amber robe, and lit it up till it glowed like fire, as if
420 she were invested in the marriage *flammeum*, and was to be claimed that evening as
421 the bride of her own bright god of day.

422 She looked at Cæcilius, first with surprise, then with anxiety; and her words were, "You,
423 I fear, are of his people. If so, make the most of these hours. The foe may be on you
424 tomorrow morning. Fly while you can."

425 "If I am a Christian," answered Cæcilius, "what are you who are so careful of us? Have
426 you come all the way from Sicca to give the alarm to mere atheists and magic-
427 mongers?"

428 "Stranger," she said, "if you had seen what I have seen, what I have heard of today, you
429 would not wonder at my wish to save from a like fate the vilest being on earth. A
430 hideous mob is rioting in the city, {214} thirsting for the blood of Christians; an accident
431 may turn it in the direction of Agellius. He is gone; where is he? Murderous outrages
432 have already been perpetrated; you remain."

433 "She who is so tender of Christians," answered the priest, "must herself have some
434 sparks of the Christian flame in her own breast."

435 Callista sat down half unconsciously upon the bench or stool near the door; but she at
436 once suddenly started up again, and said, "Away, fly! perhaps they are coming; where is
437 he?"

438 "Fear not," said Cæcilius; "Agellius has been conveyed away to a safe hiding-place; for
439 me, I shall be taken care of; there is no need for hurry; sit down again. But you," he
440 continued, "you must not be found here."

441 "They know *me*," she said; "I am well known here. I work for the temples. I have nothing
442 to fear. I am no Christian;" and, as if from an inexplicable overruling influence, she sat
443 down again.

444 "Not a Christian yet, you mean," answered Cæcilius.

445 "A person must be born a Christian, sir," she replied, "in order to take up the religion. It
446 is a very beautiful idea, as far as I have heard anything about it; but one must suck it in
447 with one's mother's milk."

448 "If so, it never could have come into the world," said the priest.

449 She paused for a while. "It is true," she answered {215} at length; "but a new religion
450 begins by appealing to what is peculiar in the minds of a few. The doctrine, floating on
451 the winds, finds its own; it takes possession of their minds; they answer its call; they are
452 brought together by that common influence; they are strong in each other's sympathy;
453 they create and throw around them an external form, and thus they found a religion. The
454 sons are brought up in their fathers' faith; and what was the idea of a few becomes at
455 length the profession of a race. Such is Judaism; such the religion of Zoroaster, or of
456 the Egyptians."

457 "You will find," said the priest, "that the greater number of African Christians at this
458 moment, for of them I speak confidently, are converts in manhood, not the sons of
459 Christians. On the other hand, if there be those who have left the faith, and gone up to
460 the capitol to sacrifice, these were Christians by hereditary profession. Such is my
461 experience, and I think the case is the same elsewhere."

462 She seemed to be speaking more for the sake of getting answers than of objecting
463 arguments. She paused again, and thought; then she said, "Mankind is made up of
464 classes of very various mental complexion, as distinct from each other as the colours
465 which meet the eye. Red and blue are incommensurable; and in like manner, a Magian
466 never can become a Greek, nor a Greek a Cœlicolist. They do but make themselves
467 fools when they attempt it." {216}

468 "Perhaps the most deeply convinced, the most tranquil-minded in the Christian body,"
469 answered Cæcilius, "will tell you, on the contrary, that there was a time when they hated
470 Christianity, and despised and ill-treated its professors."

471 "I never did any such thing," cried Callista, "since the day I first heard of it. I am not its
472 enemy, but I cannot believe in it. I am sure I never could; I never, never should be able."

473 "What is it you cannot believe?" asked the priest.

474 "It seems too beautiful," she said, "to be anything else than a dream. It is a thing to talk
475 about, but when you come near its professors you see it is impossible. A most beautiful
476 imagination, *that* is what it is. Most beautiful its precepts, as far as I have heard of them;
477 so beautiful, that in idea there is no difficulty. The mind runs along with them, as if it
478 could accomplish them without an effort. Well, its maxims are too beautiful to be
479 realized; and then on the other hand, its dogmas are too dismal, too shocking, too
480 odious to be believed. They revolt me."

481 "Such as what?" asked Cæcilius.

482 "Such as this," answered Callista. "Nothing will ever make me believe that all my people
483 have gone and will go to an eternal Tartarus."

484 "Had we not better confine ourselves to something more specific, more tangible?" asked
485 Cæcilius, gravely. "I suppose if one individual may have that terrible {217} lot, another
486 may—both may, many may. Suppose I understand you to say that you never will
487 believe that *you* will go to an eternal Tartarus."

488 Callista gave a slight start, and showed some uneasiness or displeasure.

489 "Is it not likely," continued he, that you are better able to speak of yourself, and to form a
490 judgment about yourself, than about others? Perhaps if you could first speak confidently
491 about yourself, you would be in a better position to speak about others also."

492 "Do you mean," she said, in a calm tone, "that my place, after this life, is an everlasting
493 Tartarus?"

494 "Are you happy?" he asked in turn.

495 She paused, looked down, and in a deep clear voice said, "No." There was a silence.

496 The priest began again: "Perhaps you have been growing in unhappiness for years; is it
497 so? you assent. You have a heavy burden at your heart, you don't well know what. And
498 the chance is, that you will grow in unhappiness for the next ten years to come. You will
499 be more and more unhappy the longer you live. Did you live till you were an old woman,
500 you would not know how to bear your existence."

501 Callista cried out as if in bodily pain, "It is true, sir, whoever told you. But how can you
502 have the heart to say it, to insult and mock me!"

503 "God forbid!" exclaimed Cæcilius, "but let me go on. Listen, my child. Be brave, and
504 dare to look at {218} things as they are. Every day adds to your burden. This is a law of
505 your present being, somewhat more certain than the assertion which you just now so
506 confidently made, the impossibility of your believing in that law. You cannot refuse to
507 accept what is not an opinion, but a fact. I say this burden which I speak of is not simply
508 a dogma of our creed, it is an undeniable fact of nature. You cannot change it by
509 wishing; if you were to live on earth two hundred years, it would not be reversed, it
510 would be more and more true. At the end of two hundred years you would be too
511 miserable even for your worst enemy to rejoice in it."

512 Cæcilius spoke, as if half in soliloquy or meditation, though he was looking towards
513 Callista. The contrast between them was singular: he thus abstracted; she too, utterly
514 forgetful of self, but absorbed in him, and showing it by her eager eyes, her hushed
515 breath, her anxious attitude. At last she said impatiently, "Father, you are speaking to
516 yourself; you despise me."

517 The priest looked straight at her with an open, untroubled smile, and said, "Callista, do
518 not doubt me, my poor child; you are in my heart. I was praying for you shortly before
519 you appeared. No; but, in so serious a matter as attempting to save a soul, I like to
520 speak to you in my Lord's sight. I am speaking to you, indeed I am, my child; but I am
521 also pleading with you on His behalf, and before His throne." {219}

522 His voice trembled as he spoke, but he soon recovered himself. "Suffer me," he said. "I
523 was saying that if you lived five hundred years on earth, you would but have a heavier
524 load on you as time went on. But you will not live, you will die. Perhaps you will tell me
525 that you will then cease to be. I don't believe you think so. I may take for granted that
526 you think with me, and with the multitude of men, that you will still live, that you will still
527 be *you*. You will still be the same being, but deprived of those outward stays and reliefs
528 and solaces, which, such as they are, you now enjoy. You will be yourself, shut up in
529 yourself. I have heard that people go mad at length when placed in solitary confinement.
530 If, then, on passing hence, you are cut off from what you had here, and have only the
531 company of yourself, I think your burden will be, so far, greater, not less than it is now.

532 "Suppose, for instance, you had still your love of conversing, and could not converse;
533 your love of the poets of your race, and no means of recalling them; your love of music,
534 and no instrument to play upon; your love of knowledge, and nothing to learn; your
535 desire of sympathy, and no one to love: would not that be still greater misery?

536 "Let me proceed a step further: supposing you were among those whom you actually
537 did *not* love; supposing you did *not* like them, nor their occupations, and could not
538 understand their aims; suppose there be, as Christians say, one Almighty God, and
539 {220} you did not like Him, and had no taste for thinking of Him, and no interest in what
540 He was and what He did; and supposing you found that there was nothing else
541 anywhere but He, whom you did not love and whom you wished away: would you not be
542 still more wretched?

543 "And if this went on for ever, would you not be in great inexpressible pain for ever?

544 "Assuming then, first, that the soul always needs external objects to rest upon; next, that
545 it has no prospect of any such when it leaves this visible scene; and thirdly, that the
546 hunger and thirst, the gnawing of the heart, where it occurs, is as keen and piercing as
547 a flame; it will follow there is nothing irrational in the notion of an eternal Tartarus."

548 "I cannot answer you, sir," said Callista, "but I do not believe the dogma on that account
549 a whit the more. My mind revolts from the notion. There *must* be some way out of it."

550 "If, on the other hand," continued Cæcilius, not noticing her interruption, "if all your
551 thoughts go one way; if you have needs, desires, aims, aspirations, all of which demand
552 an Object, and imply, by their very existence, that such an Object does exist also; and if
553 nothing here does satisfy them, and if there be a message which professes to come
554 from that Object, of whom you already have the presentiment, and to teach you about
555 Him, and to bring the remedy you crave; and if those who try that remedy say with one

556 voice that the remedy answers; are you not bound, {221} Callista, at least to look that
557 way, to inquire into what you hear about it, and to ask for His help, if He be, to enable
558 you to believe in Him?"

559 "This is what a slave of mine used to say," cried Callista, abruptly; " ... and another,
560 Agellius, hinted the same thing ... What is your remedy, what your Object, what your
561 love, O Christian teacher? Why are you all so mysterious, so reserved in your
562 communications?"

563 Cæcilius was silent for a moment, and seemed at a loss for an answer. At length he
564 said, "Every man is in that state which you confess of yourself. We have no love for Him
565 who alone lasts. We love those things which do not last, but come to an end. Things
566 being thus, He whom we ought to love has determined to win us back to Him. With this
567 object He has come into His own world, in the form of one of us men. And in that human
568 form He opens His arms and woos us to return to Him, our Maker. This is our Worship,
569 this is our Love, Callista."

570 "You talk as Chione," Callista answered; "only that she felt, and you teach. She could
571 not speak of her Master without blushing for joy ... And Agellius, when he said one word
572 about his Master, he too began to blush ..."

573 It was plain that the priest could hardly command his feelings, and they sat for a short
574 while in silence. Then Callista began, as if musing on what she had heard.

575 "A loved One," she said, "yet ideal; a passion so {222} potent, so fresh, so innocent, so
576 absorbing, so expulsive of other loves, so enduring, yet of One never beheld;—
577 mysterious! It is our own notion of the First and only Fair, yet embodied in a substance,
578 yet dissolving again into a sort of imagination ... It is beyond me."

579 "There is but one Lover of souls," cried Cæcilius, "and He loves each one of us, as
580 though there were no one else to love. He died for each one of us, as if there were no
581 one else to die for. He died on the shameful cross. 'Amor meus crucifixus est.' The love
582 which he inspires lasts, for it is the love of the Unchangeable. It satisfies, for He is
583 inexhaustible. The nearer we draw to Him, the more triumphantly does He enter into us;
584 the longer He dwells in us, the more intimately have we possession of Him. It is an
585 espousal for eternity. This is why it is so easy for us to die for our faith, at which the
586 world marvels."

587 Presently he said, "Why will not *you* approach Him? why will not you leave the creature
588 for the Creator?"

589 Callista seldom lost her self-possession; for a moment she lost it now; tears gushed
590 from her eyes. "Impossible!" she said, "what, I? you do not know me, father!" She
591 paused, and then resumed in a different tone, "No! *my* lot is one way, yours another. I
592 am a child of Greece, and have no happiness but that, such as it is, which my own
593 bright land, my own glorious race, give me. I may well be {223} content, I may well be

594 resigned, I may well be proud, if I possess *that* happiness. I must live and die where I
595 have been born. I am a tree which will not bear transplanting. The Assyrians, the Jews,
596 the Egyptians, have their own mystical teaching. They follow their happiness in their
597 own way; mine is a different one. The pride of mind, the revel of the intellect, the voice
598 and eyes of genius, and the fond beating heart, I cannot do without them. I cannot do
599 without what you, Christian, call sin. Let me alone; such as nature made me I will be. I
600 cannot change."

601 This sudden revulsion of her feelings quite overcame Cæcilius; yet, while the
602 disappointment thrilled through him, he felt a most strange sympathy for the poor lost
603 girl, and his reply was full of emotion. "Am I a Jew?" he exclaimed; "am I an Egyptian. or
604 an Assyrian? Have I from my youth believed and possessed what now is my Life, my
605 Hope, and my Love? Child, *what* was once my life? Am not I too a brand plucked out of
606 the fire? Do I deserve anything but evil? Is it not the Power, the Mighty Power of the
607 only Strong, the only Merciful, the grace of Emmanuel, which has changed and won
608 me? If He can change me, an old man, could He not change a child like you? I, a proud,
609 stern Roman; I, a lover of pleasure, a man of letters, of political station, with formed
610 habits, and life-long associations, and complicated relations; was it I who wrought this
611 great change in me, who gained {224} for myself the power of hating what I once loved,
612 of unlearning what I once knew, nay, of even forgetting what once I was? Who has
613 made you and me to differ, but He who can, when He will, make us to agree? It is His
614 same Omnipotence which will transform *you*, if you will but come to be transformed."

615 But a reaction had come over the proud and sensitive mind of the Greek girl. "So after
616 all, priest," she said, "you are but a man like others; a frail, guilty person like myself. I
617 can find plenty of persons who do as I do; I want some one who does not; I want some
618 one to worship. I thought there was something in you special and extraordinary. There
619 was a gentleness and tenderness mingled with your strength which was new to me. I
620 said, Here is at last a god. My own gods are earthly, sensual; I have no respect for
621 them, no faith in them. But there is nothing better anywhere else ... Alas! ... " She
622 started up, and said with vehemence, "I thought you sinless; you confess to crime ... Ah!
623 how do I know," she continued with a shudder, "that you are better than those base
624 hypocrites, priests of Isis or Mithras, whose lustrations, initiations, new birth, white
625 robes, and laurel crowns, are but the instrument and cloak of their intense depravity?"
626 And she felt for the clasp upon her shoulder.

627 Here her speech was interrupted by a hoarse sound, borne upon the wind as of many
628 voices blended into {225} one and softened by the distance, but which, under the
629 circumstances, neither of the parties to the above conversation had any difficulty in
630 assigning to its real cause. "Dear father," she said, "the enemy is upon you."