

Domitia

By Mrs. Richard S. Greenough

I was born in a far-distant land, beside the Tiber, upon one of the seven hills of Rome. My father was the head of the great house of the Savelli; my mother was Geltrude of Milan. I was their eldest child. Five years after I was born, a little sister came into the world; and after six more of waiting and of prayers, an heir was born, to my parents' great relief, and to the joy of the whole house, and, indeed, I may say of all Rome; for it would have been felt as a misfortune to the city had so ancient a house become extinct.

The Pope sent his chamberlain to congratulate my father, and to bear a precious jewel with his benediction to my mother; and my father feasted the poor of the city for six successive days.

From that time, the happiness of the palazzo was without a cloud. I look back upon the ensuing years as does a prisoner upon the remembrance of green hills, and smiling gardens, and blue, open skies.

I was always a grave and thoughtful child, and my spirits had hitherto been secretly depressed by the reflection that it was my duty to have been a boy; but now I became reconciled to my sex, and when I sat beside my mother, and watched her as she played with my little laughing brother, I felt as much happiness as a child's heart can contain.

My sister was very unlike myself. She was a fair and frolicsome child, the favorite of all who saw us, as indeed it was but right that she should be, for she was far more gay and mirthful than I had ever been. But our mother never showed any partiality between us. She seemed to love me as well as she did my sister; and, even when the heir was born, it diminished in nothing her tenderness and care.

We saw but little of our father. He was always busied in weighty matters, or engaged in the civil feuds which desolated the city. He was a man of proud and distant bearing, and we feared more than we loved him. Our affection was lavished on our mother. As I look back upon her, I thank God for the inestimable blessing of having been tended and nurtured by one so like to an angel.

We lived in Rome during the winter, but, during the summer, at our castle above the Alban Lake. It was always a season of rejoicing to my sister and myself when we saw the long line of covered carts which bore our household gear, escorted by their mounted guard, issue from the massive gate of our palace in Rome, and wind its way across the Campagna, towards our summer stronghold; for, when we were at Rome, our parents lived in great state and ceremony. There were constant entertainments to be given or to be attended, and we saw our mother but at rare intervals. We were left much to the care of our nurse Flavia. She had been my father's foster-mother, and held dearer than aught else the renown and glory of our house. She used, in the long winter evenings, while we sat round the lamp, to tell us stories of the ancient deeds of our forefathers, and of the beauty and grace of our ancestresses. Sometimes she would mingle with these histories legends wild and fearful of the former masters of the city, until we scarcely dared to draw our breath, and would be undressed and laid in our beds, silent and shivering with dread. Those were happy evenings, when our mother would send for us to come to her tiring-room, and would talk to us while her women braided her long hair, and adorned it with jewels and strings of pearls, and while they attired her in her magnificent robes; but she had little time for us, and often she would whisper, as she kissed me good-night,—

“Courage, Leonora mia! the summer will soon come.”

And she was as happy as were my sister and myself, when she could leave all the pomp of the city, and retire with us to the hills of Gandolfo, where we were together all the day long, and no vexatious festival called her from us at night.

She would sit at her embroidery-frame in the great window that overlooked the Campagna; and Cecilia and I would sit on our little cushions at her feet, and she would teach us many things, all made sweet to us by her gentle smile and loving voice. Then, when the heat of the day was past, she would wander along the slopes of the hills around, leading us by the hand, or sit on some mossy stone while we wove coronals of flowers to deck her fair white brow. I have never seen any one so beautiful as was my mother.

Around the outer wall of the castle, between the terrace and the moat, were small grated windows which communicated with the dungeons below. It was one of the great pleasures of my sister and myself, to save the daintiest portion of our daily fare, then to creep with it to the terrace, and throw it stealthily down to the prisoners, running away as fast as we could for fear that the guards would see us.

We fancied that they never guessed our errand; but doubtless they had orders from our mother not to interfere with us.

One day we had saved some apricots, and had stolen softly with them to the grating of the dungeon of an old man, who was our especial favorite. As we peeped down, he saw us; and, joining his hands, in the dim twilight below, he implored us by all that we loved best to hasten away, and tell our father that he had found that which was worth his ransom a thousand times over.

We dared not attempt to approach our father, who then chanced to be on one of his rare visits to the castle; but we ran to our mother, and told her all. She went immediately to our father, and, as we learned afterwards from our nurse Flavia, requested leave to send her leech to the old prisoner. Our father, supposing him stricken with illness, consented; and she forthwith despatched the leech—a wise and prudent man, in whom she had great confidence—to the prisoner.

As he followed the keeper of the dungeons down the damp and narrow stone steps, they heard fearful shrieks issuing from the old man’s cell. They made all the haste they could; but, ere the keeper could undo the heavy fastenings of the door, the sounds had ceased. When they entered, the old prisoner was lying on his back; his glazing eyes were staring wide in horror; his features were frightfully distorted. They sought to raise him. He was dead.

The dungeon was thoroughly searched, but nothing was found there. This event greatly distressed and terrified my sister and myself, and it was long before we had the courage to pass that side of the terrace; and when the night was closing in, and the wind waved the trees in the castle-garden, we often used to fancy that we heard the death moans of the old prisoner, and would whisper ghastly guesses to each other of the cause of his mysterious end.

But years passed on; and little by little we forgot, as children do, to speak or to think of the old prisoner; little dreaming how fearfully he was to be recalled to our memories, and with what shudderings of terror and anguish we were to receive the key to that buried mystery.

But I must not tarry. It was the summer time. Early one morning my mother and myself, mounted on our Spanish jennets, and attended by our escort, left the castle for a canter around the lake, and through the cool and leafy galleries which lead over the hills towards the villages beyond. We were talking and laughing gayly, as we circled the hollow cup in whose depths lie the placid waters of the lake, when suddenly, from amidst the ruins of the Emperor’s villa, which

my great grandfather had destroyed in order to build the fortress, rose a kestrel. It soared high into the air above our heads; then, dropping like a stone, it alighted on the head of my mother's horse, and pecked furiously at its eyes.

The blinded animal, maddened by pain and fright, plunged wildly to and fro, unwitting whither it went; then, just as my mother was freeing her foot from the stirrup, in order to leap from its back, it sprang towards the precipitous bank, tottered, and rolled down the steep declivity, bearing her with it.

I cannot dwell on this great anguish. Few words must suffice me now.

She was borne to the castle, and laid upon her bed. She still breathed faintly; but we knew that her hour had come. Mercifully, her consciousness did not return. She was spared the last farewell.

We knelt, weeping and praying, about the bed, until the leech, who had his hand upon her pulse, laid it down reverently by her side. Then our sobs and tears broke forth unrestrained; and the priest advanced to bless her lifeless clay. But, as he stood before her, her eyelids were suddenly lifted, revealing a look so fierce, so haughty, that he started back in terror. We sprang to our feet, and crowded around her. With an impatient motion of her hand she waved us away, and, slowly rising, stood upon her feet.

She cast her eyes gloomily around her, then walked to her inner room, entered, and closed the door.

My sister and myself stood gazing in consternation upon each other. Could this indeed be our gentle, gracious mother? Had she been snatched from the jaws of death to be given back to us thus changed?

The priest was the first to speak. He approached us, and, in an uncertain and troubled tone, begged us to come, with all the household, to the chapel, there to give thanks for our mother's preservation. White and anxious, we obeyed.

The chapel was but dimly lighted by its narrow windows, cut high in the walls. Before the altar burned four great waxen tapers. The air was so damp—for the chapel was partly under-ground—that each candle seemed surrounded by a small, yellow cloud.

The priest began to recite the consecrated words of thanksgiving, but his face was pale, and his voice trembled as it left his lips; and the responses of the assembled household, kneeling before him, rose on the chilly air like groans.

When the service of thanksgiving was over, I took my sister's hand, and went with her to the door of our mother's apartments. We knocked softly. She did not answer. We tried the lock; it was fastened from within. We listened. We heard a faint, tapping sound. It ceased, then recommenced. It seemed to come from different parts of the chamber in turn. There was something in the sound that frightened us still more. The servants gradually assembled at a little distance from us. They, too, heard the low sound. They whispered to each other below their breath.

At last the hour of the mid-day meal sounded; and the *maestro di casa*, with his wand, came to announce to my mother, as was his office, that she was served.

As he ended, the sound ceased; then, after a little pause, the door was thrown open, and our mother appeared on the threshold. She seemed to tower above our heads, so haughty was her bearing. Her eyes, once so soft, had now a cold and cruel stare; her lips, whose wont it was to be so smiling, were now compressed and stern. She moved on with a stately step, passing my sister and myself without a glance. We followed her, as she swept slowly down the corridor, and timidly took our accustomed places beside her at the table. She frowned.

“Draw back, ye little apes,” she said. And, the tears streaming down our cheeks, we rose, and took our seats at the foot of the table.

Our mother looked with a mixture of curiosity and disgust upon the viands on the table. There was only one dish that she tasted. It was composed of lampreys stewed with honey and spices; and the manner of its preparation was a secret handed down among the servants of the *credenza*.

She demanded Falernian wine to drink; nor did she once touch to her lips the water which formed her habitual beverage.

When the meal was ended,—Cecilia and myself had eaten nothing,—our mother rose, and returned to her own apartments.

My sister and myself had no longer courage to follow her. We went to the room which we shared together, and there abandoned ourselves to all the agony of our grief.

When we grew calmer, and I was able to reflect, I came to the conclusion that this sudden and unaccountable change in our mother must be the result of the shock she had received; and, after bathing my eyes, and composing my demeanor, I ordered the leech to be summoned.

He had lived in the castle ever since I was a child; and I had a great affection for him. But, when he appeared, with his kind and compassionate look, I knew not how to frame the questions I wished to ask. My sister sat weeping by my side, and her affliction gradually melted away all my self-command; and I began to weep also, not having been able to say a word.

“My gracious young lady,” he said at length, seeing me incapable of explaining why I had summoned him, and knowing but too well the cause, “let not your mind be disturbed by the contemplation of a phenomenon which, in its nature, is but temporary. The vital spirits of the Princess have received so great a shock as to be for the moment displaced; and those which belong to the spleen and the liver have gone to the brain. But this disturbance is accidental; and the balance will soon be restored by the healing power of Nature. Meantime, I earnestly pray you, that your affection for the Princess, your mother, may not incline you to lay too much stress upon any casual differences in her deportment; for it is not to her daughter that I need say, that God never before assembled such a multitude of excellent and lovely graces in a human form as he has deigned to show to the world in the person of that most exalted lady, your mother.”

Having said this, and perceiving me to be somewhat comforted by his words, the leech withdrew.

But, alas! neither the morrow nor the next day, nor all the days that followed, saw the hoped-for change in our mother. We seemed to be living in a dream; our former life had disappeared, and, with it, all our pleasures and happiness were gone. No more did we sit at her feet, and learn wisdom from her gentle lips; no more did we wander by her side over the green hills, no more weave gay flowers into garlands to deck her head. We were forbidden to approach her presence; and, did she ever chance to meet us wandering disconsolately through the silent corridors, she would scowl at us, and bid us to our chamber. On our little brother only did she ever smile; but, strange to say, the child, who had hitherto adored her, now shrieked whenever he was brought before her, giving every sign of the utmost terror and dislike.

She never confessed nor went to mass. She was imperious and exacting towards everybody; so difficult to please, that her women trembled whenever their duties summoned them to attend her. But the greater part of the time she spent shut up alone in her apartments; and then again was constantly heard the same low tapping.

So weeks passed on, each day seeming more dreadful than the last. My little sister pined and faded; her gayety was all gone. She would sit silent, hour after hour, looking on the ground, the tears stealing down her cheeks, until I would take her in my arms, and we would weep together.

Our father was away, warring with the Pope against Venice; the old priest had no comfort to give us; the leech, when we questioned him, only shook his head, and bade us pray and try to hope. We prayed, earnestly and constantly; but we had lost the power to hope.

I have said that my mother never confessed nor heard the mass; but something even more dreadful I discovered at this time.

In one of the great halls of the castle, among the ancient statues ranged along the walls, was a small bronze figure of Mercury, greatly prized by our father because of its delicate workmanship, and the precious jewels which formed its eyes. One day this disappeared, nor could any one tell what had become of it. It was in its accustomed place at night, and in the morning it was gone. There was great grief and distress through the castle at its loss; for all the servants and retainers feared that they might be suspected of having stolen it.

Among the changed habits of our mother was this,—she would allow no one to enter her oratory. She would often shut herself up there, and sing strange songs that we had never heard before. The priest was one day passing, and he stayed to listen; but all at once he crossed himself, stopped his ears, and hastened away. He forbade any one in the castle, for the future, to pass through that gallery; nor would he ever tell what it was that he had heard.

One day Flavia came to me with her finger upon her lips, and whispered to me to follow her. She led me to a room in which the linen was kept. It was built in a projecting angle of the courtyard, and on one side was a high, lozenge-shaped window. She bade me mount upon a table under this window, and look out. I did as she told me, and saw that the window commanded across the court-yard a view of the interior of my mother's oratory. But all within was changed. The great ebony crucifix lay on the ground; the picture of St. Catherine of Sienna, on which I had gazed with reverence ever since my infancy, had been torn down; the bowl of holy water had disappeared; and the books of devotion were cast in a heap on one side. In the centre of the room, upon an antique altar of carved ivory, which had formerly served my mother as a stand for flowers, stood the little bronze statue of Mercury; and before it was a basket containing a piece of honeycomb, and a vase filled with what looked like milk. My mother sat in front of the statue. I saw her lips moving, but I could hear nothing; the distance was too great.

As I gazed upon this unexpected sight, the room grew indistinct, and every thing seemed wavering about me. Then I felt old Flavia's arms clasp me; and the next thing I knew I was lying on the floor, and she was rubbing my hands.

When I recovered, I remained for a while as if stunned. I could scarcely bring myself to believe that the pious hands, which had so often clasped my own, and held them up in supplication to the holy Virgin and the blessed Jesus, had prepared that pagan offering, and performed those sacrilegious rites; that those pure lips, whose daily wont it had been to chant sweet hymns of gratitude and praise, could be perverted to the deadly sin of breathing forth adoration to a heathen god of bronze. The horrible thought that my mother had forfeited her salvation, that her soul was for ever lost, filled me with unutterable grief and terror.

When I could speak, I bade Flavia, who was rapidly telling her beads, say what cause she could imagine for all that was so dreadful and so strange. And she, looking fearfully around, said that not only she herself, but all the household, were persuaded that her mistress had been bewitched by the kestrel; and that old Rinaldino was watching night and day, hidden among the bushes by the lake, hoping to bring it down with his cross-bow. For, that if it were killed and cooked, and my mother should eat but the tiniest morsel of its flesh, the enchantment would be broken, and she would become as she was before.

But, although Flavia's faith in the bewitchment was firm, I was not persuaded; nor did old Rinaldino ever bring home the kestrel, so that the experiment could never be tried.

I made Flavia promise that she would tell no one of the unholy rites in my mother's oratory; and she kept her word. It remained a secret, known but to us two alone.

The strange tappings, which so constantly sounded from my mother's apartments, at length ceased, to our great relief; for, incessant though they had been, none of the household could ever become accustomed to the sounds, and they continually alarmed every one. But, after a few days of quiet, our mother ordered another suite of rooms on the same side of the house to be prepared for her, and she took possession of them when they were ready. No sooner was she established in her new apartments, than the strange, tapping sound began again, greatly disturbing all in the castle. Once the priest came in his consecrated robes, and brought holy water, and sprinkled it on the door, and said the awful form of exorcism; but the faint, unremitting tappings went on all the while, and continued after he had ceased; and he went away shaking his head.

So time went on. One night I could not sleep. My sister and myself had always of late retired at sundown. It was less painful to be in our own room together, than to be wandering in the great unlighted halls below, or standing at the door of our mother's apartment, never opened to us now. Cecilia was quietly sleeping by my side; but I was lying plunged in mournful thought, when I heard some one enter the room beside us,—old Flavia's. The door leading into our chamber was ajar, and I heard all that passed.

"What! are you already a-bed, Flavia mia?" said the voice of Caterina, one of my mother's tiring-women. "Much peace may you find there! Know ye not that now-a-days the whole household is afraid to sleep? Half of us watch, while the other half take their rest. Who knows what may happen, any night, ere morning? And the days are bad enough, the saints know. What think you! yesterday, as I was braiding the Princess's hair, I did not arrange it to suit her, and she caught up the long golden bodkin which lay on the table before her, and plunged it a full inch into my breast, and she menaced Camilla with being thrown into the lake to feed the fishes because she fastened on a bow awry."

"Heaven defend us!" exclaimed Flavia. "Surely we have need to pray that old Rinaldino may speedily bring down the kestrel, to end this accursed spell."

"Of course we do," replied Caterina. "We pray morning, noon, and night. It is no time to neglect the saints when people are in danger of their lives."

"But tell me, what was it about the merchant yesterday?" inquired Flavia. "I was here with my gracious young ladies, and saw and heard nothing."

"It was strange enough!" answered the tiring-woman. "The Princess saw him from her window, as he entered the court-yard, and ordered that he should bring his goods to her. She tossed them over scornfully, though he had the most exquisite head-tires, and silks, and velvets for bodices, and laces and embroideries, that were ever seen; nor would she allow the poor man to say a word in praise of his wares. At his first sentence, she fastened such a look upon him that he stammered and drew back, and stood mute, until she asked him what it was that he had in a drawer that he had not opened. He said that it was something he had bought from a peasant,—an antique lyre. She commanded him to show it instantly; and he produced a discolored piece of ivory, curiously carved with eagles' heads and foliage work, with all the strings gone. The Princess immediately bought it, and ordered him to carry away all the rest of his merchandise; and she forthwith despatched a messenger to Rome, for a goldsmith, and commanded that he should bring gold wire; and he has been at work all today."

As she spoke, a strain of music floated up through the open window, so strange in its intonations that I had never listened to the like; and I heard from below my mother's voice, singing in cadence; but I could not catch the words. It was a low, irregular chant, at times swelling into a fierce, vindictive wail. My flesh crept as I lay hearkening to it.

"Holy Virgin! whoever heard such sounds as those?" exclaimed Caterina, in affright. "How shall I ever dare to go through the corridors to my own room! Thank Heaven that it is not my night to disrobe the Princess. I would rather walk barefoot over red-hot ploughshares. But I must go. The longer I tarry the more afraid I shall be."

And I heard her timid foot-fall die along the echoing length of the gallery.

The strange measure ceased after a while, but still I could not sleep. Midnight tolled from the great watch-tower, and still I had not closed my eyes, when I fancied I heard a muffled tread passing along the corridor. I sat up in bed, and distinctly saw a gleam of light shoot along the ground, shining from beneath my door. I rose hurriedly, threw a robe over my shoulders, and, when I could no longer hear the footsteps nor see the light, I noiselessly unclosed the door and passed out into the gallery.

I followed softly the direction the footsteps had taken; at length I saw a faint beam before me. Still more cautiously I pursued my way. I tracked it to the chapel. I paused and looked in as I gained the door. The chapel was empty. The moonbeams streamed down from the narrow and lofty windows, and showed a black opening before the altar, where a stone had been raised and laid aside. I advanced and looked down. At my feet, I saw a rapidly descending passage. The faint light of the moonbeams showed but its opening, then it lost itself in utter darkness.

I drew back an instant, then, with a prayer to the blessed Madonna to protect me, I entered the subterranean way. I was obliged to grope my steps, holding by the side wall, for I could see nothing. I walked in this manner a long while, always going deeper and deeper into the earth, as I perceived by the rapidly descending slope. At length I saw from below a faint, grayish light. I pressed on, and finally arrived at the extremity of the passage.

Hidden myself, I looked without. Before me lay the calm, still waters of the lake. Between rose the crumbling foundations of Domitian's villa, with scattered blocks of stone heaped upon one another, half-covered by rank weeds and clambering vines. But my eye rested only an instant on these. There was that before my sight which riveted it.

Upon a broken column, the moonlight shining full upon her, sat my mother. On the ground before her crouched a withered, witch-like form.

"Speak, counsel me!" said my mother, in the harsh, commanding tones now habitual to her. "Ye were crafty once; at my behest be crafty yet again."

"Yes, once," answered the croaking voice of the hag; "but how can I now propitiate him who inspires with craft? His temples are ruins, his altars are cast down."

"Not all," replied my mother. "Milk and honey still send up their pleasant odors to his nostrils. Mercury, O favorable god, listen and hear!"

And she clasped her hands, and looked upward to the silent sky.

I pressed tightly on my heart to still its throbbings, and bent my ear again.

"Ye have searched in the private chambers so far with no reward," said the old woman; "yet ye are certain that it lies towards the north?"

"Most certain," replied my mother. "He would not dare deceive me."

"And ye have by night sounded the walls and floor of the halls below, and still have found nothing?"

"Ye know it," answered my mother, in her imperious voice.

The hag sunk her head upon her knees, and pondered awhile in silence. Then she rose, gathered up some pebbles, which she carefully examined, rejecting many, and replacing them with others. This done, she climbed upon a heap of stones that rose out of the lake, and, repeating a low chant, threw them in, one by one. The last fell from her hand. There was silence; then, mournfully rising from the opposite bank of the lake, came the cry of an owl. The creature hooted three times, then twice, and again once.

The hag chuckled, and, rubbing her hands together, returned to my mother, who still sat on the ruined column.

“Ye heard,” she said. “Did you understand?”

“I heard,” replied my mother; “but am I a loathsome witch, to understand?”

“Nay, great as ye are, ye have need of old Catta,” rejoined the old woman, laughing hideously.

“Cease prating, and expound to me,” said my mother, scowling.

“Look in the dungeons, O august one!” answered her companion. “Minerva herself assures you that you shall find it there.”

My mother rose.

“I’ll reckon with you, sorceress, should you have told me false.”

“Nay, mighty one,” whined the hag, “have I not many a time merited and received reward from those hands? Have ye forgotten who it was that, when Domitian”—

“Hush!” interrupted my mother, stamping her foot and clenching her hand; “ye make me wish for that same dagger now.”

The hag cowered down among the stones, and my mother turned away towards the entrance of the subterranean passage.

As I saw her coming towards me, I felt every limb turn into ice; then the blood made a rush in my veins, and I fled up the passage. I gained the chapel; I flew through the corridors; reached my own room, locked the door, and barred it with the articles of furniture nearest at hand; then sank upon the ground with a hope that I was dreaming. But again the stealthy footsteps and the glimmering lamp glided past, and then I knew that all was true.

I lay, I know not how long, before I rose and crept shivering to my bed. I folded the sleeping child in my arms as if to shield her. She nestled close to me, and kissed me in her slumber. After this I remember nothing save one long, frightful night, during which I seemed to be ever falling from the brink of some precipice, or hunted by beasts of prey, or buried in the subterranean passage, or drowning in the waters of the lake.

At last my consciousness returned: but I found myself too weak to speak or to move. I could see through my half-closed lids that I was in my own room, but that my sister was no longer beside me. Old Flavia sat sleeping in a chair at the foot of the bed; a night-lamp was burning in the corner. Eleven o’clock struck,—midnight,—still Flavia slept on.

As I lay, I heard again the stealthy footsteps, and again I saw the gleam of light pass beneath my door.

I felt a wave of feverish strength run through me. I rose, and, creeping from the room, I followed as before. Again I passed through the dark passages to the chapel; the gaping stone stood open; down the subterranean way I pursued my mother. I looked out again upon the gleaming waters of the waveless lake. I saw her again sitting among the ruins, and before her stood the hag. Through the stillness the sound of their voices came again, clear and distinct to my ear.

“And still it remains hidden?” my mother was saying.

“Sealed in a hollow stone, beneath the highest step leading to the vestibule,” repeated the old woman. “It would puzzle the architect himself to say where that is now.”

And she glanced around on the ruins with a low laugh.

“Peace with your jests!” said my mother, sternly. “Your business is to listen to one who allows small comment.”

The hag shrank back.

“I have searched every cranny of the fortress save one,” she continued, “and that I shall examine to-night. And now follow me. We will explore it together.”

I turned as she rose, and sped up the passage till I reached the chapel. There I hid myself behind the altar and waited.

Presently I heard the footsteps of my mother and the old woman. As they ascended into the chapel, I heard the hag sniff the air.

“Do I not scent human breath?” she said.

And my mother answered,—

“Not a soul in the castle but sleeps. The sentinels on the outer wall alone wake at this hour.”

They left the chapel, and I followed them through many windings not known to me before; for I had never been allowed to go into this part of the castle. At length they passed through a heavy door, and down a flight of stone steps. When I had reached the foot of the steps, looking out from the shadow of an angle, I saw her apply a master-key to the door of a cell. They passed within. I stole to the door and looked.

My mother drew a small bronze dagger from her girdle, and tapped in succession upon each stone. Each returned the same dull sound. Around the walls, over the floor she moved, tapping gently upon every separate block. The hag stood watching her.

The lamp upon the floor shed its faint light upon my mother’s stately, white-robed figure, and dimly showed the wrinkled hideousness of the old woman.

Suddenly my mother smote upon a stone beneath the grated window. I heard a sound different from all that had preceded it,—a faint tramping, a low wailing, as of a distant multitude hurrying to and fro, in fear and dread, below the ground.

She flung down the dagger and stood erect, her eyes blazing like those of a tiger when it sees its coveted prey. The old woman sprang forward with the lamp, and bent over the stone. She scratched away the mould that covered it.

“Here is the sign in very truth, O august one!” she said. “Now let us raise it.”

And she sought with her bony fingers to draw it from its cavity. She paused, after striving in vain, and muttered low curses.

My mother bent over it, and examined it for a moment.

“See you not the Christian sign, made by the slaves who placed it here?” she exclaimed.

The hag drew back in terror. “We can never raise it,” she said. “O mighty one! leave this place. I feel already the torments. Come, let us go.” She caught hold of the folds of my mother’s dress.

“Peace, fool!” said my mother, frowning upon her companion. “Shall Domitia tremble because of your grovelling fears? Speak, say what will avail to raise the stone?”

“The hand of a Christian only,” stammered the hag, looking fearfully at the block.

“I have not far to seek,” said my mother. “That fair-haired child will suit my purpose well.”

And she moved towards the door.

I tarried no longer in the shadow without. I advanced, and stood before them.

The old hag turned her bleared and evil eyes upon me. My mother towered up as if about to crush me into the earth.

“O thou that bearest the semblance of my mother!” I said, “behold I offer to your need the hand of a Christian maiden to raise the stone. That fulfilled, I adjure you, by the living God, vanish, and disquiet my father’s house no more.”

My mother shivered as I spoke, and the old hag cowered and moaned.

I moved onward to the stone. I signed three times over it the holy cross, then raised it from its bed. When I lifted it, again I heard the faint trampling, the low wailing, as of a distant multitude, rushing to and fro in fear and dread, below the ground.

As I gave it into my mother’s hands, I saw that her form had begun to fade and grow indistinct, and that of the old woman also. As I stood, they became fainter and fainter. At length I could see the lines of the stone wall through their transparent figures. So, slowly and without a word they vanished, bearing with them the close-sealed stone with its hidden secret.

When their last trace had vanished, I knelt on the dungeon floor and prayed. And as I prayed I heard, as it were within my soul, a voice, saying,—

“My child, you have given me rest. My mortal body now will be undisturbed. The gates of paradise are opening to my soul.”

I felt an air-pressed kiss upon my forehead. Then there was silence and stillness all around.

As the stars began to fade, I regained my chamber. Flavia still slept. I lay down upon my bed, and waited till the day had fully dawned; then I wakened her, and ordered her to dress me and lead me to my mother’s apartments. With many wondering and apprehensive words she obeyed.

The door was locked. I commanded it to be forced. The whole household was gathered around.

When the door at length yielded, we entered. Within, upon her bed, lay my mother, as we had placed her, when we brought her up, dying, from the borders of the lake. A gentle, radiant smile was on her face, a look as of a reflection from eternal peace.

With stifled cries and ejaculations the more timid shrank back, while the bolder, softly drawing near, stood and gazed and wept.

The priest advanced and blessed the lovely, lifeless clay; and, as he spoke, the morning sun rose, and its rays streamed through the open window and rested on her face, sweet and gracious as that of one of God’s holy angels.

All day, with my little sister and brother, I knelt beside our mother; and, when the night came, we buried her in the chapel; and over the tomb our father raised a monument to her who rests in God.