

**William Stearns Davis**

*The Beauty  
of the Purple*

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# PROEM

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BY THE OAKS OF ST. THEODORE

This is the story which the monks who wrote the annals of the Christian Empire of Constantinople desired other ages to accept as true.

In the year which later generations would reckon as 705 A.D., on a certain midsummer's day a droning peace brooded over the village of St. Theodore. The village was very small, only a few white-walled, red-tiled houses and barns clustered around the grey stuccoed dome of the little church before which opened a market-place. The latter was sprinkled with a dozen oak-trees useful for tying cattle when the Thracian farmers gathered to barter their rural products. This, however, was not a market day, and the signs of life were few except just by the church where sprawled the low buildings of a tavern and posting station. Here travellers sometimes changed horses, for St. Theodore lay on the highroad betwixt Constantinople and Adrianople, and here also diverged a way southward to Kallipolis if one wanted to cross to Asia without first going to the capital.

It was, to repeat, a sleepy moment in the early afternoon. The long-haired "pope" of the church, having intoned his last office to an empty nave, was sitting with his red-cheeked wife at one of the small tables in the shade by the tavern door, each meditating over a pot of thin country wine. Two farmers' churls were throwing dice for a stake of

three coppers at the next table, while a drover, an unkempt man in a dirty sheepskin coat, leaned on his crook-topped staff and recounted his adventures to Simmias, the idling inn-keeper.

“Yes, the pigs were sold at a good price,—praised be the Panagia!<sup>[1]</sup> The recent uproars in Constantinople have made almost a famine, though the country is still so unsettled that I feel lucky to have trudged back these fifty miles with this wallet (he slapped his thigh) without attack or adventure. When I saw the old tavern I said, ‘Only three miles more to the farm,’ and turned in to wet my throat after the dust.”

“So old Justinian Slit-nose is back in the palace?” suggested Simmias, rubbing his face with a much-spotted apron.

“He’s back and his temporary supplanters are in heaven or a place more fiery. *Ai!* but there was a strange sight! The merchant who bought the pigs got me a seat in the Hippodrome; up high, of course, but I could see very well. You know all about the Hippodrome?”

“I saw the ‘Blue’ chariots win there four years ago,” assented the inn-keeper.

“Well, that of course was when Justinian II was in exile. St. Kosmas smite me, but I can’t remember how in these queer days they change around their ‘Sacred Clemencies’ in the palace. Tiberius Aspimar must have been reigning then. As I remember it’s just ten years since Leontios deposed Justinian, slit up his nose and packed him off to exile in Scythia; then after three years Tiberius deposed Leontios, shaved off *his* nose in turn and clapped him in a monastery.”

The publican plucked at his own nose, as if to make sure that familiar ornament was still in normal condition.

“Then, d’you see,” continued the drover, “after seven odd years, Justinian breaks away from exile, gets help from the Bulgarians and retakes Constantinople.”

“Haven’t we heard all that?” retorted the other.

“No doubt,” condescended his customer, “but perhaps you haven’t heard what lately befell in the city while I was there. After Tiberius Aspimar had been deposed they dragged his nigh-forgotten rival Leontios out of his monastery. The restored Justinian had the two usurpers haled around the streets in chains, of course with a mob hooting and throwing offal. Then as many of us as could packed into the Hippodrome, everybody roaring and applauding together. Whereupon in came Justinian, clad in purple and gold, so splendid he could be seen clear across the arena, with all his ‘Protectors’ shining in silvered armour around him. He took his seat in the Kathisma—that’s the imperial box, you know—amid greater uproar still; and next they dragged in Leontios and Tiberius Aspimar. Poor wretches! They must have been nigh dead already. With my own eyes I saw them forced to prostrate themselves on the top step of the throne, and then Justinian put his right foot on the neck of one and his left on that of the other. Whereupon all the courtiers, Protectors and the Blue and Green faction leaders around the Kathisma took up a great chant, something from the Psalter, I think: ‘Thou shalt tread upon the LION and the ASP, the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under thy feet!’ And there those two miserable creatures had to lie while the chariots raced, and

while we all wagered and cheered like mad. After that I've heard they took the usurpers away and chopped their heads off, also that Justinian burned out the old Patriarch's eyes and set up a new 'Holy Beatitude' on the archbishop's throne in Hagia Sophia. *Ai!* These have been brisk days in Constantinople."

Simmias crossed himself with deliberation. "When I pray to the saints to-night," said he, "I shall give thanks that I sell wine in a quiet village and am neither Emperor nor Patriarch. Fine titles are fine things, but a firm neck and two good eyes seem better. Hei?—but what's that moving in the road?"

As a matter of fact two of the roads which converged near the church were clouded with dust, the one from the city obviously by two or three vehicles, the one from the north apparently by the approach of a large flock of sheep. The wagons rolled in rapidly and soon were halting at the tavern while Simmias ran forward.

"What are the *kyrios*' commands?"<sup>[2]</sup> he began.

The "kyrios" in this case was a tall grey man with a remarkably lengthy beard and a long dark cloak which made the pope rise abruptly from his table, ready to crave the blessing of a hegumen over a great monastery. But the newcomer, who now descended, was clearly a secular personage. He wore many rings and a heavy gold chain with a large gilt medal about his neck, and instead of the tall monastic hat a kind of black turban. His aquiline countenance made the pope sit down muttering, "A Jew."

"More probably a Syrian," whispered his wife; "see, the little girl leaving the second wagon has a crucifix hung



around her neck.”

Not one but two girls, aged about eleven and nine, were now clambering from under the canvas hood of the second wagon. They were bright-eyed, winsome young mortals, the older with dark, the younger with much lighter hair, but both with healthy cheeks, rosy lips and a gaze most desirous to take in all the world. An elderly maidservant descended after them, ordering sharply “not to wander”—which mandate their animal spirits, repressed by the long ride, made it hard to obey. Meantime the Syrian gentleman was joined by two other quasi-Orientals also of peculiar yet venerable aspect, who had been riding with him. The third wagon was laden with baggage, and several competent servants made haste to water the horses and summon the hostler for forage.

In the interval Simmias respectfully informed “His Most Reverend Lordship” that a government regulation required him to take the names of all travellers halting at St. Theodore. The gentleman waved his hand graciously.

“Write then that I am Kallinikos of Heliopolis—by profession a scholar of all fair learning, of late lecturer in the Imperial University at Constantinople, but now journeying to Thessalonica to expound Plato in the schools of that city. These are my daughters, Sophia and Anthusa Maria, and thus far have come with me my erudite fellow-countrymen Barses and Chioba. They, however, leave me here, going afoot to Kallipolis to get shipping for foreign parts to keep alive the divine fire of our ancient learning perchance among the western Barbarians.”

This last flourish was lost on the publican as he scratched down the names on a smudgy waxen tablet. "These are your servants, I suppose," he remarked, then tactlessly added, "and your wife——"

The scholar frowned. "I am a widower," he replied curtly.

"A thousand pardons, *kyrios*; I'm only doing my duty. Now you and your very learned friends will doubtless have some of our good Thracian wine and a few figs while the horses are resting.—Holy Mother, what's that!"

This exclamation followed a piercing scream which sent the whole tavern population into the market-place. What followed took far less time than it needs for the telling. Down the Adrianople road had shambled a huge flock of sheep, baaing and bleating and nosing one another desperately to get to the little river which they sniffed as flowing just beyond the church. Onward they came, headed by an august bellwether, an emperor among rams, with huge horns and terrifying frontlet. As he led on the van of his ewes, lo! the younger maid, Anthusa Maria, roving composedly about the market-place, suddenly found herself directly in front of him. The sight of the formidable beast froze the very blood in her veins. She stood helpless to flee, paralyzed even as a bird before the proverbial serpent, shrieking and trembling from head to foot. The ram halted one ominous instant, fixed his eyes on her, bellowed raucously, and charged.

A dozen rescuers had run from the tavern, but all would have been too late to save Anthusa. Then, unwarned, out of the dust cloud of the advancing herd, came flying a human form. In full charge, the ram was caught by the horns,

whirled about with a marvellous concentration of strength and skill, and flung upon his back, kicking in vain fury.

The victorious champion was instantly the centre of a gesticulating, congratulating throng composed of every one from Kallinikos to the pope's wife.... "Such a rescue! If the ram had charged Anthusa would have been killed, or at least had all her bones broken, or at least had all her breath knocked out!" So the other drovers behind guided the sheep onward to the river, and in a great flurry they had the rescuer across to the tavern.

Speedily it was evident that if the Lady Anthusa had been slightly older she might have been embarrassed to express with maidenly decorum proper thanks to her deliverer, for the vanquisher of the great ram made the good pope (who knew his Scriptures) recall a certain other lad who once "kept the sheep" yet was "ruddy and withal of a beautiful countenance and was goodly to look upon." The present youth stood straight and tall with features not perfect but sufficiently regular, short reddish hair, a reddish first beard, a firm but friendly mouth, a clear eye and a high forehead. His dress was simple yet neat, and superior to that worn by most drovers. His sandal thongs were of green leather. In his belt hung a long ivory-hilted dagger. One glance at his shoulders told (without the proof upon the ram), "He is very strong"; a second glance at his face would have added, "He is very intelligent and can be trusted."

Congratulations being over, natural inquiries followed. The youth stated with perfect frankness that he came from Mesembria, a coastal city at some distance, where his parents were prosperous peasants, and that now, with a

favourite servant Peter and other adjutants, he was driving some five hundred sheep to Constantinople upon assurances of a good market. They had come through without mishap, despite rumours of Bulgarian raiders. Loud were his apologies that his ram had thus terrified the little *kyria*—it was the first misadventure of the journey. As for himself, they had christened him Konon, but he had long since been called Leo (“Lion”) “because,” he added simply, “I have always wished to be a soldier, and have never disliked a chance for brave fighting.”

One of the Syrians regarded him closely.

“You are from Mesembria, young sir, yet your Greek seems of an Eastern flavour?”

“No doubt, worshipful father,” answered Leo; “my parents are from the Isaurian mountains on the confines of Cilicia. They were part of that great band of Isaurians who were compelled, when I was a babe, to migrate to Thrace by command of the Emperor. In my home my parents still keep up their Asiatic style of speech, although at our monastery school I hope I learned fair Greek as well as how to turn over a few books.”

“I knew you were no ordinary Thracian,” remarked Kallinikos, with a shrug. “Isaurians as a nation have greater fame as bandits than as readers. But this is a surly return for your brave promptness! Well, young master, we must be journeying. The angels know when we shall meet again. By your looks I’m fearful you’d refuse some money. Anthusa, my dear——”

“Yes, father,” from the girl who with recovered colour was clinging to his long sleeve.

“Go over to Master Leo and thank him for his strength and courage. You are not too old to pay him with a kiss.”

Blushingly the reward was given: still more awkwardly was it received. Leo appeared happy when the ceremony was over. Presently, the horses having been baited and rested, Kallinikos still with dignity paid precisely the proper sum to the host. He bade a private and solicitous farewell to the two Syrians. The girls climbed into the wagon and waved vigorously to Leo as the little party drove away. The young peasant gazed after them until the wagons vanished up the Adrianople road, then, declining the broad hint of Simmias that he should order refreshment, walked to where a line of evergreen oaks behind the church indicated a clear stream and a placid meadow. His drovers with their barking dogs had driven the sheep along the marge, where they could nibble in safety, while Peter, the head servant, laid out simple provisions and the party arranged for its siesta.



\* \* \* \* \*

Leo sated his hunger and spread out his cloak a little apart from the drovers. The day was sultry. An hour's slumber would not hinder the journey, but the young man (so he clearly remembered it later) saw the two venerable Syrians sitting at a slight distance in the shade, consuming a wallet of bread and dried fish. They silently beckoned him to join them, and leaving his men he obeyed. The twain were marvellously alike in costume and person, and presumably were brothers: they gravely offered him a small silver cup of wine superior to any he had ever before tasted. He noticed now that their garments, although very plain, were of remarkably fine material, and that each wore a girdle ornamented with gold plates set in gems, and embossed apparently with the signs of the zodiac. Their manner, however, excited confidence, and Leo was soon chatting freely, explaining how the proximity of a small convent to his parents' farm had given him a tolerable education; but that, although he had no distaste for letters, he felt no vocation for a religious life, because all his ambition was to become a soldier.

"Why then, stalwart sir," questioned Barses, the elder Syrian, benevolently, "have you not enrolled in one of the Emperor's cavalry 'themes'? Your broad shoulders commend you to any recruiting centurion."

Leo laughed ingenuously. "I will tell you, good fathers. I've a mother who rules me in everything. She has an ambition for me that's so high that as long as she lives—and the saints lengthen her days!"—he crossed himself—"I fear I

must stay a simple trader of sheep. She swears that I must never enter the army save as a 'Protector.' ”

“A lofty ambition, Brother Barses,” commented Chioba, the second Syrian, looking upon his companion fixedly. “The Emperor’s life guard is reserved for youths of noble blood and courtly influence, and many even of these are denied the honour. There are few enough peasants from Mesembria in that corps.”

“Well, so I told my good mother an hundred times,” rejoined Leo, “yet she always repeats, ‘No son of mine is good enough to lay down his bones as a common private. Join the Protectors or follow the sheep.’ Heigh-ho! It’s hard to be thwarted by a beloved parent!” The young man seemed far from being down-hearted, however, and Chioba continued the conversation, albeit on more general matters:

“Your mother should know that the day may come when he who can serve as a simple archer, nay, as a mere rower in the fleet, can please God better than the pious monk who wears out his knees with long prayers.”

The young man surveyed the others incredulously. “Why, venerable *kyrioi*, no churchmen ever talked to me like that. It’s on my conscience that last week I told old Father Eukodimos that while I presumed that God loved the monks the best, I’d have to risk getting less of His love by refusing to enter the convent.”

“This is a deep matter, we will not argue,” rejoined Barses incisively. “Nevertheless, it was written of old, ‘To everything there is season and a time for every purpose under heaven.’ But I say to you—with your own eyes you shall behold the day when all the monks in the Empire shall

join in one prayer, 'That God make the hands of all Roman soldiers mighty in battle!' What know you, young man, of the state of the Empire and the power of its foes?"

"Only what is said everywhere: that the Saracens press in from the east and the Bulgarians from the north: that there is riot and mutiny in the army: that the treasury grows bare though taxes ever increase, and that every time an Emperor is changed there is a woeful spilling of Christian blood. Even in Mesembria we hear all that. But old peasants always add, 'When was there a time when the years were not called evil and the foe dangerous? The Roman Empire is ordained of God, and being ordained of God will endure forever.' "

Barses laid a long gaunt hand on that of Leo.

"Young man, give ear. No Empire is eternally ordained of God, and any Empire can perish save as its sons fight for it valiantly. We from Syria know the power of the Saracens, the Misbelievers who call on their Anti-Christ. Syria, Egypt and now Africa bend to their yoke. Every year adds to their emirates while churches become mosques. Our children forget the Gospels for the Koran. Daily are victories reported to the Kalif in Damascus. While rival emperors slay one another and the witless racing factions howl in the Hippodrome, the Kalif counsels with his divan, 'How can we strike off the very head of Christendom? How can our Prophet give us dominion over Constantinople?' Every day brings the hour of their great enterprise nearer, and that sore ordeal shall you witness with your two eyes."

Leo recoiled. The manner no less than the words of the Syrian made him ejaculate, "God forbid!"

“God forbids nothing,” persisted Barse, “when lawlessness, pride, iniquity work the ruin of Empires. Forty years ago in the reign of the Fourth Constantine the Infidels came and assailed Constantinople. You know how they dashed themselves upon the walls in vain. Now yet again will their hosts advance, and beside this second onslaught the former shall be merely as the first patter of rain before the thunderbolt. For these many years what has there been in the Roman armies save mutiny? What in the palace save tyranny? What in the capital save corrupting luxury? What in God’s church save contending doctors and clutching bishops? Great was Babylon, yet for its sins Babylon fell. Great was Old Rome, yet for its sins Old Rome fell. Great is New Rome, that is to say Constantinople, but think not that God will be more kind to Constantinople than to Old Rome and to Babylon.”

The young shepherd drew back yet more: the two strangers had fixed their strange eyes on him, their gaze as piercing as swords.

“Why, venerable sirs,” protested the youth in discomfort, “all this to me? Am I of the great patricians to counsel about the Empire’s safety? Who are you that have the right to talk thus darkly and wildly?”

“Take then this answer,” returned Chioba, still holding Leo spellbound. “We are masters of the foreknowledge of the East, permitted to read the horoscopes of the nations. Twelve years shall the Moslem terror wax in strength until nigh overmastering, then in the thirteenth shall a gracious God vouchsafe deliverance. And that deliverance shall come from a man of the people——”

“What man?” cried the youth, his flesh creeping as he listened.

The two seers appeared to be speaking no longer directly to him, but seemed in dialogue between themselves.

“This is the youth our science told us we should meet,” spoke Barses.

“It is he,” responded Chioba.

“Sprung from Asia, but bred in Europe; born from peasant stock, yet not unlettered; bred of the cleanness of the land, and not amid the corruption of cities; strong of limb, clear of eye, faithful of purpose,—this is he.”

Whereat Chioba took up the speech, “He shall fling back the Infidels. He shall purify the state. He shall renovate the Church. For hundreds of years he shall prolong the life of this Christian Empire.”

“Master Leo,” suddenly interposed Barses, still compelling awestruck attention, “do you not desire to be a Protector?”

“Most certainly.”

“And a *spatharios*?”

“Aide-de-camp to the Emperor? Why, yes.” Leo began to smile again. The jest seemed evident. The Syrians were clearly indulging in a somewhat forced pleasantry.

“And a patrician?”

“Of course—if you can make me one!”

“And Emperor?”

“By the Panagia, sirs, why not ask if I wish to have yonder brook pebbles turned forthwith into gold? Who would refuse to be Emperor?”



“So many an Augustus has said on his day of acclamation. Later he has perished miserably. It is a fearful thing to be Emperor.”

“Good then,” laughed the youth, making to rise, “I will cancel that particular wish. There are others I must forgo with greater pain.”

But Chioba retained him with a grasp of remarkable firmness, and Leo broke out in protest: “Why do you gaze thus upon me? I begin to dislike you both. What have I, the son of plain Christian folk, to do with Syrian astrologers even if they profess the true religion?”

Chioba, however, still held him at arm’s length, while Bares spoke once more, as if addressing his companion, but with rising voice:

“He shall bear great burdens. On him shall rest the fate of millions. He shall know sorrow, care and the crushing anxiety lest after having dared all things he should fail. But after the winter shall come the time of the singing of birds, after the storm brightness, after the conflict peace. Victory over the Infidel shall attend his arms, and new life and healing shall he bring the afflicted Empire. Nations shall obey his laws, strong princes shall spring out of his loins, and a thousand years after him men shall extol his name, Leo the Isaurian, Leo Augustus, Deliverer and Emperor.”

The shepherd leaped angrily to his feet, his eyes blazing.

“You make pitiful sport of an unpretending youth. The Holy Apostles forbid that such a burden should rest upon me! I beseech you both—talk as reasonable men.”

But Chioba turned on him a smile inscrutable, tantalizing and quizzical. “For this end, nevertheless, you are

summoned of God. Forget it not: turn not aside to the right hand nor the left, turn not for pleasure of men nor love of women. Remember you belong not to yourself, but to the Holy Christian Empire until the Infidel peril is ended.”

“You rave wildly,” protested Leo, his wrath still kindling.

“Nevertheless,” replied Chioba calmly, “we ask you not to believe but only to remember. In all that shall come after forget not our saying and the oaks and the stream by St. Theodore. Our journey is long, Brother Barses, we must be going, for we are to carry our warning concerning the Saracen even to the Lords of the Western Franks.”

They rose and picked up quaintly carved staffs, preparing to take the road, but Barses held out his hand as if desiring a friendly parting:

“Master Leo, you have said that you desired to become a Protector. That is a bold but not quite a superhuman desire. Do you still cherish it?”

“Of course—if it were possible.”

The Syrian pointed with his long staff toward the sun. He seemed writing figures in the air. “Mark then these words. Ere the sun has sunk half way to the horizon you will be a Protector. Remember *then* all else that was spoken by Barses and Chioba.” ...

\* \* \* \* \*

... Leo glanced about him. His head was upon the soft grass. He heard the brook purling over the round stones, and the wind in the oak leaves. The Syrians were nowhere, but to him came, running, Peter the herdsman. "You surely slept hard, young *kyrios*; at least I called many times and never an answer. We must get the sheep together and hasten."

"Where are the strangers?" the youth demanded.

"I was not looking particularly, but I think I saw them pack their wallets some time since and take the road to Kallipolis."

"A curse go with them," muttered Leo, "if I did not merely dream all they seemed to say—what with their senseless talk, their wagging beards, and their snake-bright eyes. What could have been their jest? And so I am to be Protector in a little while? A pretty spot for induction into the corps! They say it is always done in the great court of the Palace."

The dogs and drovers were again herding the sheep into the little market-place and Leo strode vigorously about, mustering his bleating army. But there were to be more visitors to St. Theodore that afternoon. Even while the sheep were forming their fleecy companies, great clouds of dust were seen rising over the rolling hills which covered the Constantinople road. "Horsemen: many horsemen and at speed," hastily observed Simmias, shading his forehead, and Leo was ordering Peter to hurry the sheep back to the stream side (for armed bands often meant lawless foraging) when straight into the village galloped at full speed four

riders whose tall bay steeds had carried them far ahead of the advancing squadrons.

The newcomers rode horses of superb mane, coat and limb. The housings of three of them gleamed with silver. Silvered, too, were the peaked helmets and the coats of mail of their riders, who carried lances whence streamed blue banderoles. Over the cavaliers' backs clattered light targets likewise of silver plate, marked in the centre with crimson eagles having outspread wings. Their cloaks and the tunics under their cuirasses were of blue silk brilliantly embroidered. There were pearls on their sword hilts and on their golden baldrics. All three of them were handsome, proud-visaged young men who carried their armour superbly, but every curvet and gesture indicated that their attention was fixed on the least doings of the fourth rider, their chief.

As the horsemen whirled up, Leo as by instinct stood unafraid at military attention. Behind him shuffled and crowded the drovers and the sheep, but come what might he would not let himself be plundered unresisting. All his gaze also was upon this fourth rider.

The leading horseman wore likewise a silvered helm, cuirass and shield, but his tunic was a very deep red. Around his helmet ran a circlet of large pearls. His feet were cased in tall leather leggings dyed a brilliant purple, and each set at the ankle with a conspicuous gold eagle. All these things Leo took in at a glance as the four swept by him. They entered the market-place at full gallop, then the leader jerked back the reins and sent his powerful steed almost down upon the haunches.

“Halt!” he ordered in a voice sharp as edged steel. The three aides reined automatically and vaulted to the ground.

“Cool wine!” enjoined the leader, turning his face towards the little group that had assembled before the tavern: and at sight of him first Simmias and next all his guests and myrmidons in sheer terror dropped upon their knees, nor for a moment kept wits enough to heed the demands flung at them. Under the pearl-wreathed helmet showed forth a face aged, sensual and cynical, but every particular feature was forgotten in the realization that the nostrils had been slit hideously and then almost cut away. There was no mistaking this latest visitor to St. Theodore.

“Mercy, great Emperor,” began Simmias, when at last chattering words came to him, “we are dust: we are dung: we crave your famous and ever abundant pardon!”

“Pardon for what?” roared Justinian. “If you’ve done anything evil do you suppose I’ll spare you! Mice and lizards—you’ve not the courage for any genuine villainy! Move briskly, don’t grovel, do what’s commanded—then you can keep your skins.”

The Emperor shot his eyes around the market-place, and took in the closely packed sheep and their master drover. When he fastened his gaze on Leo the youth raised his arm in soldierly salute. He did not fall on his knees.

Justinian threw up his distorted face with a brattling laugh: “Sacred wounds! What’s here? A shepherd who salutes like a centurion! And this great flock of sheep? True manna from heaven, considering the plight of our commissariat. Question him, Demetrios—whose sheep are they and who is the fellow himself?”



The spatharios so ordered approached Leo and briefly learned all he desired.

“May it please the august Basileus,”<sup>[3]</sup> he reported, “the lad says his father is a prosperous peasant of Mesembria. The sheep are to sell in Constantinople.”

“Tell him,” quoth the Emperor, “that the fat citizens will never grow fatter upon all that mutton. Here we have been constrained to march suddenly to save Philippopolis from the Slavs, with the capital so stripped of provisions that we’ve had to forage along the way to feed the army. These five hundred sheep are a gift from the angels. Give orders to the camp treasurer so his father won’t weep over our requisitions, but first bid the tall boy to step nearer.”

“The Emperor would speak to you,” announced the spatharios to Leo.

The young peasant, not without awkwardness, but with a manly step, approached the great war horse. He saw the hideous face turn towards him.

“Tell me, sirrah,” began Justinian, “why you didn’t fall on your knees and bleat like all those other clowns.”

“I would some day be a soldier, Sacred Clemency,” responded Leo without trembling; “soldiers do not kneel before their masters. They salute their commanders, meaning that they are ready to die at their bidding.”

“Nobly said. Heard you that, Demetrios? I hope all the Protectors mean the same when they salute me.—But why do you call me ‘Sacred Clemency’?”

“I’ve heard that is the respectful way to address an Emperor.”

“And you think I am always very ‘clement’? Ha!”—the mutilated face broke again into laughter.

“I’m only a youth from Mesembria. People will talk, but I’ve no right to believe anything but good of those whom God has set over us.”

“Better and better still. If only all people had obeyed *that* Holy Gospel I wouldn’t be spurring over this accursed road to-day. You say you want to become a soldier? Haven’t you ever met a recruiting officer?”

“Often, Sacred Clemency, but my mother forbids me to enlist as a private. She consents to my enlisting only on a condition which is the same as forbidding me.”

“Your mother? Oh, Blessed Lord Jesus, who is it that obeys one’s mother any more than one’s emperor in these fearsome days! This grows ever more wonderful, Demetrios. And what is the strange condition which deprives our imperial service of such a strong-limbed fellow as you?”

“Your Sacred Clemency would be overwhelmed with anger if I told it.”

“Pah! Say it out. You aren’t Leontios or Tiberius Aspimar to need beheading.”

“May it please the Emperor, my mother is so vain that she says I can only serve if I am made a Protector.”

The three aides-de-camp nowise suppressed a loud guffaw, which however died away instantly at a withering glance from Justinian.

“Why is this, laughing jackasses? Finely have my high-born Protectors guarded me in the past! A band of silver-sheathed turncoats I call you. Leontios you ‘guarded’ lately, then Tiberius yesterday and Justinian again to-day. I wonder

whom you'll 'defend' to-morrow! God's lightning blast me if I don't recruit up the corps with more heed to valour and fidelity than to long pedigrees. What's your name, my brave cockerel?"

"Leo, please your Sacred Clemency."

"Leo, 'Lion'—by all good omens! But what do you know of arms? You've swung something better than a scythe, I warrant."

"I'm unskilled with many weapons but my friends say I have a ready hand and a good eye. Sometimes I have flung the javelin."

Justinian nodded to the second spatharios. "Give him your lance, Genesisios. It's an over-heavy weapon, but it'll prove him. Now, my fine younger brother to Achilles, mark that knot on the oak bough over yonder. It's a mettlesome distance, but see how near you can come to striking it."

"I can only try, Sacred Clemency." Leo's heart had been pounding at first: now, however, he was perfectly cool. An inward sense was telling him that he was completely his own master. It was a fair sight to see his supple form poise itself and swing. The lance sang through the air and quivered high on the tree in the centre of the knot. The Emperor gave a deep "*Euge!*" and his aides exchanged frankly admiring glances.

"What else can you do? Can you wrestle?" demanded the monarch.

"I've shown a little skill, but among my fellows merely," calmly responded the shepherd, brushing back his hair.

"Good, then; we'll prove how little. Eustasios"—the third adjutant stepped forward—"you pass for the first wrestler in

the corps. Strip off your cuirass and give this bold rascal a fall.”

Only the implicit obedience due to the purple leggings prevented Eustasios from refusing this unwelcome behest. To soil his patrician hands with the person of that dusty shepherd was anything but to his liking, but the commanding eye of the despot kept him from more than an impatient gesture. The two men stripped to their tunics. Already the van of the cavalry had cantered into the market-place and a swarm of gleaming staff officers was gathering around Justinian, whose fondness for sudden pranks and follies was abundantly known.

Eustasios approached his adversary with an unpleasant smile, muttering just as they grappled, “Now learn, my young swaggerer, not to boast again.” But Leo, good-humoured and apparently quite at ease, parried his opening tricks, then suddenly had him round the middle with a grip of steel. The unfortunate aide felt his ribs crack. Almost before the new arrivals had ceased asking one another, “What is the Basileus’ latest pleasure?” behold the “Very Exalted” Eustasios, whose father was a Senator, whose uncle a Logothete, and whose great-uncle had been a Patriarch, lay on the dust of the market-place of St. Theodore, with Leo the peasant standing over him, and all his own comrades joining in sardonic applause.

The victor brushed the sand from his arms and neck, complacently assisted his late foe to rise, and respectfully looked towards the Emperor. Justinian beckoned towards his staff:

“Makrinos,” he summoned, and a high officer, his breast covered with broad gold medals, advanced and saluted; “how many vacancies are there now in the Protectors?”

“I think ten, Sacred Clemency.”

“I think nine, Illustrious Strategos. In these times of disloyalty we cannot ask too closely concerning noble ancestors. This lad from Mesembria can serve me better than by herding sheep or carrying a spear as a common private. It will also sound well to have men say, ‘Justinian is terrible to his foes, but honours sturdy worth before pedigrees.’ Therefore enroll this Leo among your Protectors, and assign him suitable armour, horses and allowance.” A perceptible murmur began to spread through the staff, but ceased before one bold sweep of the imperial hand: “And say to his new comrades that he is not to be mortified or misprized because his parents do not own a high palace upon the Mesē. *This is my will—*—”

The autocrat had spoken. If the Emperor chose to lift an inferior subject from the dust, and enroll him in the privileged life guard what loyal officer had the right to say him nay? Instantly Leo was embraced by a score of noble arms, and flattering lips were lauding the monarch’s “remarkable judgment” and welcoming the new member of the Protectors.

“Thus shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour,” murmured the astonished village pope, silent witness of the whole proceeding.... A led horse was put at Leo’s service, then a shrill trumpet blew and the whole force of cavalry went whirling away. Some quartermaster’s men drove off the sheep, while the infantry

divisions advancing by a parallel road did not enter the village.

\* \* \* \* \*

Soon all was droning quiet again around St. Theodore.  
The sun was precisely half way betwixt zenith and horizon.