

# TWICE FREED

PATRICIA ST. JOHN

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# 1

IT WAS MID AFTERNOON IN EARLY JULY AND the parched world was, in general asleep.

The black flocks, for which the valley was famous, huddled under the poplar trees, and the reapers drowsed in the shade of their stooks of corn or under their wooden carts.

In the well-to-do houses, set high above the pasture land, prosperous land owners and farmers and wool merchants slept soundly on their couches, while their slaves dozed guiltily, with one ear cocked, under the vines in the courtyard. Even the vultures hung motionless as though stuck flat against the blue.

Only up in the gorge, where the air seemed to swim over the burning rocks, something moved. A brown-skinned boy of twelve, naked except for a loin cloth and sandals, was climbing the canyon with the grace and agility of a young wild cat. He cared nothing for the sweat that was streaming down his face or for the rocks that blistered his hands, for this was his hour of freedom. From early dawn till late at night he belonged to his master and outwardly bowed to his discipline; but at this hour he belonged to himself and lived and conquered and exulted.

Here in the canyons nothing could withstand him. In winter he cut paths through the snow drifts, and in spring he breasted the cascades and the waterfalls. In summer the fierce afternoon heat could not daunt him and he climbed on, with one eye on the sun which was now to the west of him. When the shadow of the rock above him reached

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the border of the olive grove below, he knew he must turn home. But he still had time to reach the old fallen pine that blocked the ravine, and to dive into the green pool that lay on the further side of it.

The gorge was narrowing now, and the pines and stunted oaks and junipers cast their shade across the ravine. The stream was no more than a trickle, but it was cool and sweet, and he dashed the water over his face and body and felt he could go on climbing all day. He always yearned to go further - up to the bitter salt lake, Anava, where the absinthe flowers grew and where the river Lycus was born, up to the snows of Mount Cadmus - but the shade was creeping toward the olive grove, and his master would be stirring in his sleep. He cursed and spat.

At least he would have time for a quick swim in the green pool that was so deep that it never dried up. He scrambled up on to the fallen tree, and then stopped dead, his mouth open and his eyes dilated with a strange superstitious fear. For a little girl was sitting on the trunk, dangling her legs over the water, singing softly to herself.

She was about nine or ten years old, small and slender, with smooth dark hair hanging to her waist. Her cheeks were flushed with heat, and her lap was full of the flowers she had been gathering - drooping scabious and buttercups and forget-me-nots from the stream's edge. So absorbed was she that she did not see the boy approaching.

Who was she? Her simple tunic was of rich material, her sandals were new and expensive. Her bearing, even as she played, was that of a little queen. He watched her intently, crouching on the trunk, for he was still not sure of her identity. Was she some daughter of Cybele, the great mother of Nature, to whose arms the dead returned like homing children? Well, if she was, there was nothing to fear, for she was certainly no demon. He drew a little nearer, and a twig snapped under his feet.

She looked up and gave a start but she showed no great

surprise or fear. For she was a practical child, and to her a boy was a boy. Besides, he looked a nice boy, and she was just beginning to feel slightly afraid of what she had done.

"What are you doing up here, boy?" she asked, in perfect Greek. "I thought everyone was asleep."

"What are you doing?" he retorted rather severely, for he was convinced now that she was nothing but a human girl. "It is a long way up the canyon for a little maid to stray alone. And, anyway, who are you?"

"I'm Eirene," replied the child. She spoke guardedly and watched him gravely, as though wondering how much it was safe to reveal. And he gazed back at her, the tremulous sunlight falling upon her through the pine boughs, so alone and defenceless among the crags of the ravine; and he found himself longing to know all about her, to gain her trust and, if need be, to protect her.

"But where is your home, Eirene? I've never seen you playing with the little girls of Colosse."

"I live in Laodicea," she replied, still watchful, still hesitant.

"Laodicea!" he repeated in astonishment, for Laodicea was ten miles across the valley. "Surely you never came here alone, and will no one be looking for you?"

"Yes, they will!" Her eyes suddenly twinkled with amusement, and her confidences came pouring out. "They will be getting crazy about me. I came over this morning with my father. He makes cloaks, and he came to talk to Master Philemon about wool. But they went in to dine together, and I was left with my nurse and the slaves. My nurse started to talk to Philemon's slaves, and she didn't want me to hear. She gave me some food and told me to go out into the vineyard, but there was nothing to do in the vineyard. I wanted to climb and see what lay at the top of the canyons, so I ran away. I climbed right up here, and I should have gone further, but the green pool stopped me."

"But weren't you afraid, so high up, all alone?"

"No," replied Eirene with spirit. "I like being alone. I get sick of my nurse. She is so afraid of my father she never takes her eyes off me at home. It is Eirene this, Eirene that, till I could scream. Why should I do what she wants and go where she takes me, all day long? Don't you ever want to get away from everybody and do what you like, instead of doing what you are told all the time?"

The boy laughed aloud. Here was indeed a kindred spirit!

"Yes," he replied, "indeed I do. That is why I come up the ravine: to get away from everyone and do what I like. Sometimes, when I have time, I swim across the pools and go higher up into the rocks, up to where the eagles live. One day I shall go even further. One day I shall follow the river right to its source. One day I shall climb right to the top of the peak and look over the whole land of Phrygia and away to the sea westward. And then one day, I shall cross that sea. They say the land of Greece is the most beautiful in the world."

He stopped, surprised at his own outburst, for he usually kept his longing to himself. His thoughts came back abruptly to the little creature at his side, who sat staring up at him, eyes alight, sharing his visions.

"You ought to go home!" he said. "Your nurse will be out of her mind. And what about your mother? Did you leave her in Laodicea?"

A shadow passed over the child's face. "She died two years ago," she said simply. "When she was alive it was different. She never watched me all the time. She let me play, pick flowers and go where I liked. When she was alive, I was free."

"Have you no brothers or sisters to play with?"

"No, there's only me. My father says I am all he has and very precious to him; so my nurse never dares to stop looking after me. My father is a very busy man, always down at the looms, or going to look at wools, or travelling down to Ephesus or

Miletus with his merchandise. Sometimes I think he forgets all about me.”

“I don’t suppose he does really,” said the boy, comfortingly. “Come, Eirene, we must go home now, at once. Swing over the bough like that and you will reach the rock with the tips of your toes. Now, down to the next one and into the stream bed. It is easier there. Loop you dress into your girdle and take my hand. Now just jump from rock to rock as I do, and we’ll soon be down.”

He glanced anxiously at the shadows below him. Already half the olive grove was immersed in shade. He was very late, and his master Philemon had an important guest and would have been yelling for him for the past hour. He had not known what had been happening in his master’s house, as he had been sent out early with a message to the shepherds in a distant pasture up the valley, and he had not been expected back until after Philemon’s siesta. Perhaps he could invent some story about difficulty in finding the flocks. That might at least delay his beating until his master could investigate. In any case it did not matter too much. He was used to beatings. What mattered now was the nimble little creature who held his hand so tightly and laughed so gaily she missed her footing, skipping from one side of the stream bed to the other. He must hand her over safe and sound to her nurse.

And say goodbye? She was the only daughter of a rich Laodicean merchant and he a poor slave at Colosse. Why should his mind refuse so doggedly to say goodbye? They were nearly out of the canyon now, and he reached up to help her down from a boulder too high for her. But before he could take hold of her he was startled by a piercing scream behind him, and turning his head quickly, he received a stinging slap in the face then another and another from a strong young slave, while the nurse screamed hysterically and held out her arms to the child.

“Oh, Mistress Eirene, Mistress Eirene, you cruel girl,”

shrieked the nurse. "How could you disobey me and run off with this wicked, wicked boy? Oh, Mistress Eirene, I've been nearly out of my mind, hunting through the vineyards where I told you to stay. How could you listen to a low slave and run away from your own poor nurse? Oh, beat him again, Menander, beat the breath out of him!"

Menander, holding the boy fast, noticed that he neither struggled nor made any attempt to escape. He lifted his hand to strike him again but was arrested by a sudden shriek of rage above him. Eirene stood poised on the boulder like a small commanding fury, her eyes blazing, trembling with anger.

"Let him go this instant, Menander," she shouted. "Do as I tell you immediately or I'll tell my father of you. How dare you hit that good boy?"

She suddenly ceased to be a commanding fury and burst into tears, a frightened hurt little girl whose happy afternoon had been spoilt. Kicking her nurse aside, she slid off the boulder all by herself and took her stand defiantly beside the boy.

Menander had let go. He had a healthy fear of his little mistress' temper.

"Does my father know I'm lost yet?" asked Eirene, sniffing hard. The tears were still running down her cheeks, but she had drawn herself up to her full small height and held her head high.

"No, Mistress Eirene," twittered the nurse. "He is still talking business, but he will call for you at any moment now. I pray you come back quickly."

"I shall not come back if you say any bad things about this boy," retorted Eirene. "I shall stay here and be lost, and my father will be very, very angry with you both for losing me. He will probably punish you both when I tell him."

It was only too likely. The nurse started to plead tearfully. Menander scratched his head. The boy looked her straight in the face.