GRAHAM JOHN WILLIAM

NEÆRA. A TALE OF ANCIENT ROME

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Содержание

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PART I

CHAPTER I

Anno Domini Twenty-six, Tiberius Caesar, the ruler of the world, left Rome, with a small retinue, never to return. In the following year he arrived at the island of Capreae, and there took up his permanent abode. It was a spot which already possessed substantial proofs of imperial favour, in the shape of villas, baths, and aqueducts built by the orders of the Emperor Augustus. It well merited the partiality displayed, for there are few places to be found more favoured by nature, in point of situation, than this small, lofty, iron-bound mountain-island of Capreae.

Opposite, at a distance of three miles, approaches the tip of a sharp promontory of the mainland, which divides two bays curving away on either hand. That on the north, from the earliest times, has had the reputation of being the loveliest in the world. That on the south, although not comparable, has yet considerable

beauty. Capreae, therefore, stands aloof amid the blue waters, at the apex of these two semicircles, surveying both from its lofty mountain and sheer cliffs.

Why the Emperor Tiberius left Rome and secluded himself, for the remainder of his life, in this small island, away from the seat of his empire, has never, with certainty, been explained. Whether it was for political reasons, or for the purpose of giving full indulgence to those vicious habits which rumour so freely ascribed to him, is not within the scope of these pages to be determined. He hastened to continue to his new home those same marks of favour which his deified predecessor had begun. Armies of workmen assailed the summits of the cone-like hills and wave-washed cliffs. New villa-palaces arose on every hand, so that the narrow limits of the island hermitage might afford to Caesar the utmost variety possible. Of the twelve projected villas, each named after a deity, some three or four had been completed and occupied at the time of our story, whilst the building of the remainder was actively proceeding. In the autumn of the year thirty, the date of our story, Tiberius had hidden himself away from his people for about three years, and, already, dark rumours were flitting abroad of strange enormities and dread cruelties shrouded in that outline of mountain amid the sea. The seclusion of the imperial hermit was strictly preserved, and unauthorised feet were jealously warned from his rocky retreat. Curiosity became more inflamed and imagination more rampant. To turn the invisible Caesar into something akin to an ogre or monster

was an easy and natural outcome of the insular mystery.

One thing, however, is certain, that, although lost, as the Emperor may be said to have been, to the eyes of the world, the world and its affairs, in turn, were never hidden from him. Caesar remained Caesar – sleepless, prompt and vigorous amid his mysterious rocks. Day after day, couriers came and went with tidings from every corner of the known world. The vast empire, like a sprawling giant, had Capreae for its heart, which impelled the life-blood ceaselessly to every extremity of its veins and arteries.

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On an October morning, one of the long, swift boats, used in the imperial despatch service, left the landing-place in the little Marina, on the north side of Capreae, and shot away toward the barren promontory of Minerva opposite.

The vessel was one of a number used for the busy service of communication with the mainland, and was built on fine, sharp lines to attain high speed. Plenty of power was lent by the brawny arms of a dozen stout slaves, whose oars swept the craft along, with the gently rippling sea foaming under its sharp bows. The morning was bright, and a delicious autumn serenity softened mountain and sea with a mellow haze; so that in default of a breeze to fill the large sail stowed neatly away under the bulwarks, the rowers bent their backs with a will to their work.

There was one passenger on board – a young man with a soldierly air. He seemed not more than two or three-and-twenty years of age, with large, handsome, boldly-cut features, of the true Roman cast, and keen, dark eyes. The expression of his face, something stern and proud in repose, was, perhaps, heightened by a naturally dark complexion, still swarthier with sun and wind. He lay wrapped in a large military cloak, beside the steersman, whose chatter he acknowledged, now and again, by a nod, or occasionally a brief word, or smile which softened all severity of visage with a gleam as bright as the sunny sky above.

After leaving the chill shadow of the terrific, perpendicular cliffs of the island, the passage across the straits to the mainland was rapidly made. As the vessel glided finally to its destination alongside a small landing parapet of stone, on the shore of the promontory, the young man arose, flung back his cloak, and sprang lightly ashore. He showed a manly stature of at least six feet, and a spare, sinewy frame of the best athletic build, deep in the chest and thin in the flank. No other garb, than that which clothed him, could more admirably display these fine proportions.

There was the richly-chased, polished cuirass, moulded closely to the lines of the body from throat to abdomen, and imitating them as accurately as a plaster cast. From this hung the short drapery of a kilt, or philibeg, nearly to the knee, leaving the leg, downward, bare to the high boots, which were laced up to the swell of the calf. The muscular arms of the young

officer were likewise uncovered, save for a short way beneath the shoulder. The large cloak, before noticed, which hung gracefully from his left shoulder, greatly enhanced the effect of this military panoply, particularly suiting the tall stature of the wearer. It was fastened at the neck by a gold buckle, and could be shifted to either shoulder, or to the back, or wrapped around the body altogether. On military service, a polished, crested helmet would have completed the costume; but, at present, after the usual Roman fashion, the young man's head bore no covering but its own dark, close-curling hair. For arms, he wore the short, straight, Roman sword, and a poniard.

Just as it may be remarked at the present day, of a certain exclusive portion of our own military service, so the unusual richness of the young officer's appointments, as contrasted with those of the legionaries, denoted him to be one of the Pretorian Guard, the household troops, lately gathered into a permanent camp at Rome, and brought fairly into a position for entering on their future famous career in the affairs of the city and empire.

As he left the boat its crew saluted him. Returning the courtesy, he flung the perspiring slaves some pieces of money, and walked rapidly up the shore towards a group of buildings, comprising the posting establishment, which had newly sprung into existence, as a necessary adjunct to the Emperor's abode. A signal had been waved from the despatch-boat before reaching the shore, and when he arrived at the door of the stables he found the ostlers awaiting him with a horse ready caparisoned for the

road.

'Back to Rome, Centurion?' said one, saluting him.

'Back to Rome,' replied he, girding his cloak close around him.

'A good journey!' chorused the stablemen.

Two or three coins rattled on the gravel for answer, and the Pretorian vaulted on to the horse's back, and galloped away.

Riding as rapidly as the path would permit, and without drawing rein, it was not long before the lovely plain of Surrentum broke on his view, embosomed in the circling vine and olive-clad mountains, edged by the blue waters of the sea, clothed with luxuriant fruit-groves, and studded with the villas of the noble and wealthy, who had retired hither to revel in the soft, salubrious air of this most lovely spot of a lovely land.

But our horseman paid little attention to the exquisite scene. His thoughts were otherwise absorbed. He passed the girdling hills, and closed with the town of Surrentum itself. At the posting station, in the midst, he changed horses and went on, scarcely giving time for an idle crowd to gather round. He did not, however, go very many hundred yards on his second stage, before he suddenly drew rein on the very outskirts of the town, where the last houses straggled out amid garden-plots and fields. It was at a point where a by-road debouched upon his own, almost at right angles. It seemed to lead back to the town by a roundabout course, and was lined on either side, in a straggling, intermittent way, by gardens and cottage-houses, in the manner of a country

village street. The dwelling nearest to where he stood, at the end of the lane, was about a hundred yards distant. It was a small, humble house, like the majority of its neighbours, and was the outpost habitation of the town in that direction. It was detached and flanked on the town side by a small olive-grove. In the rear of the premises was an outbuilding; a workshop, to judge by its black, smoking chimney. The house itself was open-fronted as a shop.

The Centurion turned down this lane, and, when within a few yards of the house, dismounted and led his horse through a gap in a ruinous wall to the inside of the enclosure, where he tethered him amid some trees. Thence he walked up to the house, and looked inside the open shop, pausing with a fixed gaze.

The interior was fitted with shelves, on which was displayed a stock of pottery of a kind for which Surrentum was noted. It was not upon these, however, that the rapt eyes of the soldier rested, but upon the tall, lithe figure of a girl, who was busily engaged in taking the articles down and dusting them. Her back being toward him, he entered the shop with a stealthy step and stood behind her without her knowledge. Pausing, for a moment, to gaze upon the figure and the glossy coils of the luxuriant brown hair of the unconscious girl, he bent down and whispered in her ear the name 'Neæra!'

She started violently, and the bowl, which she was wiping, fell from her fingers and shivered with a crash on the floor.

'Oh, sir, is it you?' she murmured.

Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes fell.

'Yes, Neæra, it is I – but only for a few niggard moments. I am on my way back to Rome. 'Tis six weeks since I saw you, Neæra – you look pale! have you fared well?'

'Quite well,' was the brief, constrained reply.

'And your father and mother?'

'Both are well – they are within if you will be pleased to see them.' She moved as if to go to the interior of the house, but he laid his hand gently on her arm and detained her.

'In a moment, Neæra – do you wish to be rid of me?'

She gave a hasty, timid glance into the street, and he led her aside into a recess which was less overlooked.

'You neither look at me nor speak, Neæra – are you displeased to see me? Would you rather have had the weary six weeks prolonged into twelve?' She raised her head and looked at him with an appealing expression in her beautiful gray eyes, but, in a brief moment, her gaze fell once more. 'Still you do not say whether I am welcome or not, Neæra?' he persisted.

'Spare me from an answer, I pray you,' she replied, in an almost inaudible tone.

His swarthy cheeks flushed with a yet deeper colour, and he drew himself up. 'As you will,' he returned; 'but if your answer would be "Nay," say it without hesitation or fear; for I would have the truth from your heart, even at the expense of a little courtesy.' Her agitation increased, and her fingers worked nervously with the dusting cloth she held. Those fingers, though stained and

roughened with toil, were slenderly and delicately formed. He took them in his own, and, in spite of her attempt to withdraw them, kept them in his grasp.

'What has happened, Neæra?' said he, looking into her downcast face. 'Has anything that I have done angered you, or rather, that I have left undone, since I have been chained to duty in yonder island for six weeks? It is long indeed, but we must reflect that had the Prefect no business with Caesar then our meetings would be far seldomer. To Caesar and Prefect I owe the happy chance of seeing you, and on them for a while still depend future opportunities. But what is troubling you, Neæra? You are pale and worn – what has happened?'

'Nothing but reflection – ah, sir, have pity on me – it was better not to have returned at all.'

'Ah, is it so? – that is easily mended!' he replied, in bitter astonishment.

'Don't blame – don't kill me with scornful tones!' she said, with more courage, even though the courage of despair; 'think, as I have been thinking through these bitter weeks – oh, so bitter! It is right – it is just that you see me no more. What is there in common between us? I am a poor potter's girl – am rude in speech and manner; you are nobly born and rich – ' Her voice trembled with extreme agitation, and she stopped abruptly as if she could trust it no longer. A smile of infinite tenderness and pity illumined his fine features.

'Had I needed but one thing more to clench my love, you have

given it me,' he said, catching her hands again and drawing her towards him.

'No – it were better to love one of your own station,' she panted, trying to repulse him.

'It is too late to tell me that. Come, look at me, child!'

'No, I have been foolish and am to blame. I ought to have seen that your way of life cannot be mine. My father has also said it, and he is wise.'

'Ay, he has said it, but you?'

'I say it is truth and must be followed.'

'Foolish! You only bind me the faster to you. Your joint wisdom is vain against my conviction. What! are we to part because a weak, foolish fancy seizes you, that your speech and bearing are not like the artificial, superfine graces of the proud dames who loll away their lives in palaces? Gods forbid! Why, there are those of your sex in Rome – ay, even in Surrentum, who would deem me as the dust beneath their feet.'

'And there are others, also, whom you would look upon in the same fashion,' replied the girl.

'True! and many of them of family and wealth far beyond mine.'

'Yet what you have of both is far above me, and therefore, between us, all remains the same.'

'Surrentum cannot better you in a lawyer's wit, Neæra,' he said, with a smile, 'but you spend it in so poor a cause. There remains something far beyond rank and wealth.'

‘Whatever it is, it is not for us in common,’ she said, striving to appear calm; ‘it is over now. I have been weak and foolish, and oh, how I have suffered for it! Forgive me, Centurion, if you can forgive me – go from me and forget me – all our folly.’ As she looked him full in the face there was a depth of anguish in her eyes which filled him alike with pity and joy. At the same time she held out her hand, but he folded his arms across his breast. ‘Centurion!’ he repeated, in a tone of reproof; ‘Neæra, have you forgotten my name?’

His bearing and speech throughout had never shown a sign of hesitation which might have encouraged her in her determination. He stood before her vast, immovable, and calmly resolute. Her glance drooped, and her outstretched hand and arm gradually fell to her side. Then she buried her face in her hands.

He bent closer till his breath played on her hair. ‘Neæra,’ he said, ‘you have been kinder and called me Lucius ere now. Enough of this madness – this folly of saws and maxims! Misdoubting girl, I love you for what you are, and above all on this earth. To thrust me away were to wreck me wholly; and you would not though you possess the power. For I have gathered it from your lips, your eyes, your sweet face, that you have some measure of love for me in return. Is it not so? Speak, Neæra!’

She trembled violently, and, yielding to an irresistible impulse, he threw his arms around her and pressed a fervent kiss upon her cheek.

She freed herself with a desperate exertion, and stood off,

panting and shaking in extreme emotion, with her cheeks aflame.

'Neæra!' he ejaculated, advancing to her again.

'No, no! Leave me – go and forget me, if you would be merciful and kind! – oh, you are cruel! Alas, can I ever look in my father's face again!'

The sound of a footstep in the passage leading to the interior broke upon their ears. She cast one swift look of lofty reproach, mingled with sorrow, upon the young man, and then drooped her head upon her breast.

A short, thick-set man presented himself in the shop. His hands, his coarse garments, and even his face, were stained with the grime of the furnace and the smearings of clay; but through these outward tokens of the common artisan shone the unmistakable signs of superior intellect, in the brilliancy of his eyes, deep set under thick brows, and in a massive forehead, which was very broad and full at the base. His hand, which he raised with a gesture of surprise, as his gaze rested on the young couple, was of the shape usually supposed to be peculiar to the gifted artist and mechanic, being long, square-tipped, and sinewy, with an immense flexibility and power of thumb. Reading the tell-tale faces of the pair with a rapid glance, his countenance instantly assumed a grave sternness, unlike the preoccupied expression which previously rested upon it.

'What – Centurion! Martialis!' he said, coldly, and even with an amount of haughtiness which might, ordinarily, have been deemed incommensurate with the relative stations of himself and

his visitor.

Although his tone was quiet and free from anger or emotion of any kind, there was an unusual quality in it which seemed to strike the girl not the less acutely, for she hid her pale face in her hands.

'Yes, Masthlion, even I!' returned the Pretorian, stepping forward and offering his hand.

Masthlion met the open, frank gaze of the young officer for a moment; then, as if not noticing the proffered greeting, he dropped his eyes to the floor and remained for a few seconds in deep thought. Then raising his head he said —

'Centurion, I should be grieved to say that you are unwelcome, yet, I say plainly, that the honour of your visit is not altogether free from that feeling. Not from personal dislike, I am bound to say. I will be frank with you. I am a poor fellow, who earns a modest living for my family by the hard labour of my hands. You are of the knightly order, and hold high office in Caesar's service. You are wholly above the station of me and mine. As you do not honour my humble dwelling for the sake of buying my handiwork in the way of trade, I have, therefore, a right to reflect and inquire what object your presence has.'

'You have a perfect right, Masthlion,' replied the other, 'and, although you know, as I think, right well already, I commend your method of putting the matter thus plainly. I have as little inclination to allow any misunderstanding and ambiguity to creep about my actions as you have, and I will, therefore, give you

freely, and without hesitation, an answer as clear as your question – I love your daughter Neæra!'

The potter nodded in a manner which showed that the reply was no other than expected. His glance roved from one to the other, whilst his daughter's head drooped so low that her face was completely hidden.

'It is a matter which demands further talk, and, as there is no reason why it should take place in the sight of neighbours and passers-by, perhaps you will enter my poor house, Centurion.'

'Willingly – I desire nothing better,' was the reply.

Masthlion, heaving a deep sigh, took his daughter by the hand and led the way along the inner passage. Martialis followed them into a small room, furnished simply with a table, some stools, and a couch; whilst, for ornament, some brackets and shelves bore a few exquisitely-finished specimens of glasswork, together with some small figures sculptured in stone, the fruits of the potter's self-taught genius. From the door Masthlion called aloud for his wife, and she hastily appeared. She was a spare woman, with patient eyes. Her face had been comely, but was worn and faded with the hardship and anxiety of a long struggle against hunger and want in their early wedded life.

A significant glance passed between her and her husband as she perceived what had occasioned the demand for her presence.

She made a silent obeisance to the visitor, and waited for her husband to speak.

As for Neæra, she stood with her head still bowed on her

breast.

Her lover's tall, erect form, draped in its ample flowing cloak, seemed to fill the little room. His eyes rested with calm confidence on Masthlion, who began in grave measured tones: —

'Wife, the Centurion Martialis hath told me that he loves our daughter.' Here he paused a few moments, looking on the floor. 'What we should tell him is this, that she is our only child, the one light of our house. But had we twenty, we must be assured, as far as possible, of good and honourable keeping ere we let one go from our roof. You understand this, Centurion?'

'Perfectly; it is only natural and proper. Do what you think best for your assurance.'

'First, then! is it from mere fancy that you would try to take my daughter away, and then to cast her off when that fancy has burnt itself out, after the fashion of many of your order?'

'No,' said the young man, drawing himself up with sparkling eyes; 'I told you I loved her – now I tell you she must be my wife, or none other.'

'And are you sure you would always rest in the same mind as now?'

'Ah, as far as human thought and perception can go, I have no doubt of it,' returned Martialis proudly.

Masthlion shook his head and sighed; and his wife, from long habit of waiting on his looks, unconsciously did the same, though without offering any remark of her own.

'It is ever the way with the young – eager and heedless!' said

the potter. 'Centurion, as an older man, and one who has not lived in the world with blind eyes, I must tell you that I disagree with you. You are attracted by the child's fair looks, and you know not, or forget, that familiarity will weaken their influence over your senses. The gods made women fair to please the hearts of men; but, did they bestow upon them no other qualities, they would become nothing more than mere toys to be bandied about at will. Looks attract first; but it is the disposition, and the accomplishments of the mind, which are necessary to weave a lasting bond of esteem and love. Where, within these humble walls, has this poor child learnt those manners and graces which, from habit, you require, before all, in a companion? Where could she have gathered the refinements which would be necessary to the wife of one of your station? Could you present her to your fine friends and family? She would shame you at every turn – at every word. The first blush of your fancy would wear off. You would grow angry and disgusted. You would repent of your bargain, and the rest would be nothing but bitterness, reproaches, and unhappiness – if not worse. This is a picture more to be depended on than yours, Centurion. Go, therefore, and if you think over it, as you ought to do, without allowing your feelings to bias your reflections, you will see that I am right, and you will come no more. Thus there will be one rash, ill-advised affair the less in the world.'

'Masthlion, your daughter has already told me this,' answered the Centurion, with a smile.

'Did she so?' cried the potter, casting a look of pride and satisfaction at the girl. 'Then she did wisely and obediently – and bravely too, if I guess aright. Alas! your proudest dames could have done no better. Come and kiss me, my brave girl!'

Neæra glided to him, and hid her face in his shoulder.

Martialis folded his arms and watched them. The potter had unconsciously dealt a deathblow to his own cause, if it needed one at all. Their eyes met at that moment. The acute perception, or instinct, of the artisan interpreted too well the calm, resolute light of the young man's glance, so warm with the picture of the fair girl before him, and he groaned inwardly as he restlessly stroked his daughter's glossy locks. He knew not what to say, so heavily did the sense of his helplessness press upon him.

'It is a year since I stopped one day at the old fountain-basin yonder,' said Martialis, stretching out his arm. 'I had ridden far and was thirsty, and Neæra was filling her pitcher. It was thus I met her first. I went on my way, but her image haunted my mind. I sought her again, and discovered that her looks did not belie her heart. I have chosen her to fill my mind, even as you would have me choose; not from a light fancy of the eyes alone, but because I know she is pure, noble, and good in spirit. As for the rest, you may magnify, from ignorance, my position and importance. Neæra is naturally predisposed toward those trifling changes which you deem necessary, and she would glide into them instinctively and unconsciously. Masthlion, these arguments will be vain, so use them not. I ask you to give me

your daughter Neæra, in betrothal.'

The potter did not reply straightway, but, smoothing the trembling girl's head ceaselessly with his hand, he stood with his brow contracted in painful thought, and his eyes bent on the ground.

'In good faith, Centurion,' he said, after an uneasy silence, 'you rend my heart between doubt and anxiety, and a desire to act generously as well as prudently. Can I deliver up my child to a stranger? Were you of this district I could judge better of you. You are honest and fair-spoken, and your looks correspond to your speech. But yet you are no more than a stranger, and Surrentum knows you not.'

'I would fetch Rome, if I could, to aid you,' said the young man. 'You are pleased to be satisfied with my appearance; I, for my part, will await your further inquiries with confidence.'

'I have no suspicion of your character, noble sir, but prudence requires proof. I cannot give you a decided answer, for now we are at odds and evens. You are sanguine and confident of the future; I am not. Hawks should pair only with hawks, and sparrows with sparrows. More words at present, however, would be spent to no purpose – the matter requires time and reflection.'

'The child Neæra is not goods or chattels, husband – is she to have no word for herself?' remarked his wife quietly.

'Ay, truly, Tibia; thou hast ever a word in season,' answered the potter to his delighted spouse. 'The gods forgive me for a thoughtless blockhead. It would be a fine way of making a pot

without first proving if the clay be fit. What say you, Neæra – do you love this young man?'

The girl clung closer, and buried her face deeper in his shoulder, but her silence was eloquent.

The soldier's bronzed face gathered a deeper tinge, and his ears were strained to catch the accents which he expected to follow, but which came not.

'Come, my child,' continued Masthlion earnestly; 'I want thee to say truly what thy heart prompts thee to say. If thou lovest him speak it then; there is no crime or harm in it that I can see. You have heard what has passed, and I can call your confession, if it is what I expect it to be, only by as hard a name as a misfortune. Speak!'

A simple 'Yes' was the reply, in a voice so low and yet so clear that it caused her lover's blood to bound in his veins with exquisite joy. He stepped forward as if to take her, but the hand of Masthlion restrained his eager advance.

'Enough,' said the potter, 'the mischief is done, it is clear, but yet the matter must rest as it is for a time. I am yet unconvinced, and I give not my consent so heedlessly to a partnership so brimful of hazard. I must be better assured. In the meantime, Centurion, I ask of thee one condition.'

Martialis was burning with eagerness, for his beloved now stood before him ready to his arms, with downcast eyes and cheeks blushing with sudden joy and hope.

'Name it!' he said quickly.

'It is that you neither visit nor correspond with this child without my knowledge.'

'It is no more than I have done hitherto,' said Martialis.

'I believe it, and it is much to your credit,' returned Masthlion. 'Now go, Centurion. Stand by our agreement; and may the gods direct the matter to the best end – for I need their help.'

'Farewell!' said the young man, reaching forward to clasp Neæra to his breast.

'No!' said the potter, once more stretching his ruthless arm before him.

The Centurion frowned; but the cloud fled when he saw the tender, curving lips of Neæra moving, as though silently fashioning his name, and her beautiful eyes, more beautiful still, with the light of love and hope and joy. From the divine smile on her face he drew consolation, as he grasped the earthy hand of the potter instead of hers.

With a lingering look he drew his cloak around him, and hastened away at a pace which received additional lightness and speed from his feelings. A couple of minutes more and he was galloping at a headlong speed on the road to Rome.

As soon as their visitor had departed, Masthlion withdrew to his workshop at the rear of his premises. He found it vain, however, to try and use his tools during the disturbed state of his mind; for every now and then he discovered himself standing motionless with them in his hand, his thoughts being far away. After a wasted half hour, therefore, he threw them down, and,

washing his hands and face, left the house to wander away on a lonely ramble along the edge of the sea, and up the ravines of the hills, in order to give unrestrained liberty in his meditations.

The mountains were looming dark and purple in the gathering gloom, and a chilly breath from the dusky sea was stirring the leaves when he turned his steps homeward. He found his simple supper and his wife and daughter awaiting him. An unusual restraint weighed upon them all. The customary familiar chat was lacking, and the meal passed quickly and in silence.

When Neæra put her arms round her father's neck for her nightly caress, she whispered, 'Have I done wrong in loving him, father? Are you displeased with your Neæra?'

'I am not displeased, child. I blame no one for loving; yet would I be less anxious had you loved some humbler man.'

'He is noble and good, father.'

'The gods grant it true.'

'If you will it I will see him no more.'

'Nay, you talk foolishly – I hope I am neither harsh nor selfish. Get to bed, child, and try if you can sleep, though your heart be galloping, this moment, to Rome.'

'Say you are not angry with me then!' she murmured.

'I blame you not, silly girl; I blame six feet or more of human flesh, and a handsome face, which hath beguiled your silly girlish thoughts. Heaven only knows how much more mischief of the same nature they are guilty of already, for I do not – now go!'

Her lips pouted a little, but she left the room with a light step.

The firm, determined mouth of the man quivered, and the moisture dimmed his deep-set eyes. He passed his hand over his massive brow and gave a deep sigh.

'Wife!' he said briefly, 'I am going to Rome.'

'To Rome!' echoed Tibia fearfully, for the mention of the great city always loaded her simple rustic mind with a sense of mystery and danger.

'Ay, to Rome,' rejoined Masthlion; 'the time has come when I must try and find your brother, if alive. Silo will give me a passage in his trader – 'tis about his time to be touching here Tiberward.'

CHAPTER II

On the following day, in Rome, about the seventh hour, or noon, a small party descended the slope of the Janiculan Hill toward the Tiber.

Though not included in the more famous cluster of the seven hills across the river, which formed the heart of Rome, the Janiculum, with its long straight ridge running nearly north and south, was the greatest in altitude, and commanded the noblest and most extensive view of the city itself, as well as the loveliness of the surrounding plain, as far as the circling Apennines beyond.

With the straight line of the hill as a base, a sharp curve of the river forms the other two sides of a triangle, enclosing a level tract of ground. This was the Transtibertine district, which formed the fourteenth, and largest, region of the city, as arranged by Augustus. In interest and importance it was perhaps the least, being populated by the lowest classes, particularly fishermen, tanners, and the like. It was also the original Ghetto, or quarter of the Jews, which now occupies the bank of the river immediately opposite.

The obvious advantages of dwelling above the crammed and stifling valleys naturally brought the hills, in time, from the princely and fashionable Palatine, almost wholly in the hands of the powerful and wealthy classes. The Janiculum, as a suburban mount, was greatly lacking in the noble buildings and

ancient traditions which clothed the urban seven. Neither was it fashionable, for it lay too far from the public places of the city, most frequented by society. Nevertheless, there were some who preferred its fresher and purer air, its nobler prospect and its greater seclusion, to the advantages and attractions of a more central residence.

One of these was a wealthy man who had long retired from a busy, public life, to devote himself to the quiet pursuits of study, in a house he had built, and gardens he had laid out, on a commanding eminence of the hill.

The name of Quintus Fabricius had once been celebrated in the city as that of a senator distinguished for uprightness, firmness, and liberality, but his public fame had almost passed away with a new generation. He was now, at the time we speak of, far better known throughout Rome in connection with a domestic matter, which will unfold itself in the following pages.

He was of an old family; and if wealth, taste, and an easy conscience could make a man happy, surely he might be said to be truly so. We will follow him, for it is he, and his five slaves, who form the small party previously mentioned.

They walked in three divisions. Two powerful slaves led the van, whose especial care was to clear a way for their master through the crowded, tortuous lanes. When their cry of 'Place, place,' was unheeded, they enforced a passage, after the usual custom, by a rough and ready use of their brawny arms and shoulders. The remaining three slaves walked in the rear, each

bearing some trifling burden of personal attire or convenience belonging to their master. In the centre walked Fabricius himself.

He was tall and spare, but with a slight stoop. His features were regular and handsome. His hair, though closely cropped, was yet thick and luxuriant, but white as snow. He could not have been less than seventy-five years of age; but the vigorous, free motions of his limbs, and the healthy hue of his aged, wrinkled face, denoted a still sound constitution, preserved by a temperate mode of life. His dark eyes, though somewhat sunken, were yet bright and quick. As he now passed along, engaged with no train of thought in particular, their expression was one of settled melancholy abstraction. His mouth was closely knit and firm, but, occasionally, as some poor neighbour saluted him, his lips curved into a kindly smile. His vigorous old age, and the natural nobility of his appearance, were calculated to inspire respect; but there were also distinctions in his dress which marked his rank. His toga was made of wool, in its natural colour of greenish white, a fashion of garment which was preserved by men of distinguished rank long after the toga itself had fallen into disuse. On the right breast of his short-sleeved tunic, where it peeped from beneath the graceful folds of the toga, might be seen a glimpse of the 'Angustus Clavus,'[1] or narrow purple stripe, which was woven into the garment, and ran down

[1] The 'Clavus' was a very distinctive token in the later Roman days. The 'Latus Clavus' was a broad purple band running down the centre of the tunic; it was worn only by senators. The 'Clavus Angustus,' as described above, was a sign of equestrian rank. A senator retiring from office changed the former for the latter.

perpendicularly from each shoulder. The high buskins on his feet were each fastened in front by four black thongs, ornamented by a small crescent, the exclusive, sartorial badge of senatorial rank. Such little particulars were trifling enough in extent, and unnoticeable to a stranger, but to a Roman eye they denoted at once the rank and importance of the wearer. They were, however, unnecessary in the poor and crowded suburb through which he and his slaves passed leisurely towards the river. He was well known to the humble inhabitants, in consequence of the proximity of his mansion, which stood on the height overlooking them; and, also, by acts of liberality and good-nature, which ever met with full appreciation. Hence, as he wound his way through the crowded and not altogether sweet-flavoured district, his vanguard of slaves before mentioned had only occasion now and again to use their voices to open a free passage. The people gave way readily, with gestures of respect.

The main street of the district which they traversed brought them, in a few minutes, nigh to the river, just where it curved round the point of land. In a right line before them stretched the Aemilian Bridge, leading direct to the Palatine Mount and the city; to the left hand forked another road over the island of the Tiber. At this junction the leading slaves halted and turned to learn their master's pleasure as to his intended route. The old man hesitated as if undecided, and, as he did so, a slim personage presented himself before the stationary group. Two or three rings on his fingers proclaimed his gentility as a Roman

knight, and every fold of his toga was disposed with the most scrupulous exactness. He might be about forty years of age, with straight black hair, a long nose, curved very much downwards, and small black eyes, rather too prominent and close set to be called handsome. As he halted, his lips parted in a smile, which displayed a row of brilliant white teeth. The slaves of Fabricius, on perceiving him, made him marked obeisance.

'Titus Afer!' murmured one of them in his master's ear.

Fabricius looked up from his momentary deliberation or abstraction.

'Ha, nephew, is it you?' said he.

'Even so, dear uncle. You seem to be on the horns of a dilemma,' returned the new-comer; 'have you started out to dine, uncle, not having settled where to turn in for your dinner?'

'Why, no; I am going to dine with my old friend Florus on the Quirinal – but you, nephew?'

'Oh, I! – it is of no consequence – I was coming just to spend an hour with you. It is three days since I have seen you. With your permission I will turn and go along with you, for a space, on your way, whichever it is!'

'By the Circus Flaminius; it is less crowded, though a little longer in distance,' said Fabricius.

He gave a slight motion of his hand, indicating the left turn, and they took their way over the Cestian Bridge unto the island of the Tiber, sacred to Aesculapius. Thence by the bridge of Fabricius they were quickly on the opposite bank, and passing

round by the outer side of the Capitoline.

So far they walked in silence. The elder seemed absorbed in abstraction, and the younger to be waiting, as if in deference to his relative's cogitations. At length the old man turned his head toward the slaves who followed and waved his hand. They fell back farther in rear.

'Were you coming to tell me aught of your mission, Titus?' he began.

'I went as you desired,' returned his nephew, nodding.

'It was good of you, as ever, nephew; but to no purpose, I suppose – as ever,' said the old man, adding the last words with a weary, half-suppressed sigh.

'None at all!' rejoined Afer, with another and deeper sigh. 'The woman was six-and-twenty years old if she was a day; and, as for her appearance, she was as likely to have grown from your Aurelia, as a barn-door fowl from an eaglet. These tales and rumours are detailed by knavish people simply to work upon your weakness, uncle, and to squeeze your purse – why listen to them?'

'Ah, nephew – how can I shut my ears?'

'You are an unfailing, bottomless gold-mine to these people.'

'Oh!' cried the old man fervidly, throwing up his open palm to the blue heavens, and looking up with a burning glance of his sunken, sorrow-laden eyes, 'if the good gods would only give me back my lost darling, the joy of my old age, – my gold, and all that I have, to the last farthing, might be flung, if need be, broadcast over the streets of Rome.'

The black brows of the nephew knitted at the vehement words.

'And, truly, if what you have spent already, uncle, on this vain quest were sown broadcast, there would scarce be a gutter vagabond in the city that would not be the richer. You have done all you can do, and I have helped to the best of my ability.'

'You have, nephew, right nobly. Think not that I have forgotten it.'

'Then why cast good after bad? Will you not be assured after all these silent years of the hopelessness of all efforts?'

'If I lived to a hundred years, nephew, I could never sever hope from me – it is part of me.'

'And I have none left, though I grieve to say it, and, moreover, my reason is less governed by feeling than yours – poor Aurelia!'

'The gods overlook us,' said Fabricius, with a quiver in his voice, while the lips of the other curled in scorn.

'The impudent scoundrel, whom you sent to pilot me to his supposed discovery, demanded two thousand sesterces ere he would budge. It is horrible, but I was forced to pay the extortioner. I would not mention it, uncle, but for my misfortune of being not too well provided with property.'

'It shall cost thee no more than it ever has,' returned Fabricius; 'thou shalt have it back and another two thousand, as well, for thy kindness.'

'Nay – I should seem to make a trade of robbing you like the rest of them.'

'Say no more, nephew, I insist upon it.'

The other shrugged his shoulders and was silent, and so they reached the foot of the Quirinal Hill, upon which the house was situated where Fabricius was to dine. Here Afer halted.

'You are for the bath then?' said Fabricius.

'Even so; and then to dine with Apicius.'

'Ah! we old-fashioned men dine at an old-fashioned hour. This Apicius gives feasts such as we could never dream of.'

'The finest in Rome.'

'Well, every one to their own tastes. Florus and myself will, no doubt, enjoy our modest entertainment as much as Apicius his profusion, though it cost nothing in proportion. It is a foolish, empty way of spending one's money, Titus.'

'From necessity I am not likely to copy it, uncle. Nevertheless, if he choose to throw a portion of his away on me, I will not refuse it.'

'Yet there is a subtle danger in it, for – '

'Nay, nay, uncle,' said his nephew, laughing; 'if you begin to moralise your dinner will grow cold. So I will go and tell you later how mine was served.'

'Come then to see me soon, nephew – a good appetite. Farewell!'

Fabricius and his slaves turned to ascend the hill, and Afer watched them going. 'Nothing will cure him of this delusive hope, it is clear,' he muttered. 'Assuming, therefore, that all this profitless expense is unavoidable, it is only just and prudent that it should flow mainly into the purse of his heir, and not

into the swindling hands of scamps and aliens, in order to feed wine-shops and brothels. Hermes himself will give me witness that I spoke truth when I said that yon vagabond demanded two thousand sesterces ere he would budge. So he did, but he only got two hundred in the end. What a brilliant idea – what a stroke of genius it was, on my part, to obtain the monopoly of this infatuation! Formerly, every one of sufficient impudence could work upon his credulity, and extort their own terms from the foolish old man; but since my appointment as superintendent of inquiries, I regulate all to suit my own ideas. It pleases him and it benefits me. Who could do better? Not the deities themselves.'

'But if your terms were more liberal your custom would increase, as well as your profits, noble Afer,' said a deep voice in his ear.

The knight wheeled round with the swiftness of light, and the severity of the sudden surprise was seen in the rush of blood which suffused his otherwise pale face. His brows knitted so as almost to hide the furious glance of his eyes.

Before him stood a man whose superior bulk, lighter complexion, broader and less marked physiognomy, betrayed other than the Latin blood. He was dressed in the rough woollen tunic of the common citizen, girded with a belt of untanned leather, whilst his feet were shod with a kind of sandal, having strong leather soles. The short sleeves of his tunic displayed his hairy, muscular arms. His chin was bristly and needed the razor, and his hair unkempt and disordered. He might be anything in

the lowest strata of the city community, but there was that in his loafing, cunning appearance, which seemed not to belong to an honest, industrious mechanic. His attitude, as he stood regarding his superior, whom he had so familiarly accosted, was cool and careless, and his smile as full of impertinence as assurance.

If a glance could have laid him dead upon the pavement, he would have fallen, straightway, before the rage, hate, and contempt which flashed upon him from the glowing eyes of Afer. But, unabashed, he altered not a jot of his bearing.

'Is it thou?' uttered Afer, in a voice thick with passion; 'how darest thou lurk at my elbow and play the eavesdropper?'

'It needed no extra sharp ear to catch what you said, patron. But for the noise of the streets you might have been heard somewhere between this and the Palatine. It is dangerous to think in such a loud, public voice, and I recommend you to shake off the habit, for your own good, patron.'

The familiar style of this speech in no way allayed the storm in the mind of the knight, and he shook like an aspen leaf, with a passion impossible wholly to hide.

'You are not in the humour to see me, patron – you are angry with me,' added the man coolly; 'it is as plain as anything can be.'

'Take heed, or your presumption, which is growing beyond all bounds, will run you into a certain amount of danger – impudent vagabond, is it for such as you to accost me thus? More respect, I bid thee, or beware!'

The menacing tone of the knight, and the dangerous, evil

expression on his face, might have been judged sufficient warning in an ordinary case, but the man's hardihood was in no way daunted.

'Presumption, patron,' he echoed; 'there, with your honour's leave, I must differ with you. I consider myself – in regard to the intimate relations between us – a most modest, respectful, and untroublesome client. Why, it is full three months since I presented myself to your honourable presence. I have seen you at chance times – for I am compelled now and again to encourage wearisome existence by the grateful sight of your person – but these have only been glimpses at a distance. Nor would I intrude myself upon you now, only that hard necessity compels me. In fact, patron, my treasure is drained to the last sesterce, which went this very morning to inspire my failing strength with a draught of vinegar, which they called wine.'

'I have nothing to give you – you are importunate beyond reason. You have, already, had much more than was stipulated. That you know as well as I. I will give you no more, so be off!'

'What, patron, and without as much as the cost of a mouthful of dinner? cast me off to starve?' – this with a burlesque of righteous horror in his looks and gestures – 'I, too, who have had the blessed fortune to do you such service! Some reptile has bitten my noble patron and changed his nature. Poor Cestus, then, may go and hang himself, or throw himself to fatten the pike in the Tiber; but no – you cannot, surely, refuse poor Cestus, thus empty and naked before you.'

'Silence!' cried he of the toga, as fiercely as he could, without attracting the attention of the passers-by. 'Good-for-nothing spendthrift, you have had enough to have made you wantless for the remainder of your life, with an ordinary amount of care in its use!'

'I only follow the fashion of many of my betters, patron. To be free with one's treasure is an excellent way of becoming popular and powerful – none better – in Rome at least.'

'Enough, I have said! If you are wise you will leave your insolence behind you, among your pot companions, when you seek to come before me.'

'Surely, patron, when you consider the matter calmly, you can hardly refuse me a small present,' said Cestus, assuming instantly a mock respect, which was only too palpably impudent.

The knight bit his lip, and the heaving of his breast stirred the folds of his toga with rapid pulsations.

'You fool!' he said bitterly; 'do you imagine I would beggar myself to enrich you? No – I can afford no more!'

'May I be cursed if I should ever think of bringing you to the same sad state as mine,' was the satirical answer. 'Far from that, I know, so well, that the fountain of your purse is fed from a stream which flows unfailing out of Latium, even as the grateful spray of Orpheus, on the Esquiline yonder, is fed by the aqueduct from the waters of heaven. You will excuse the style for once, patron: you know I was once in the household of a poet.'

These words drew upon him another viperous look, but being

in a position which rendered him careless of such exhibitions of his superior's feelings, he continued his simile. 'It is wonderful to me, patron, that you are content to see such scanty driblets filtered through a worn old fountain, when you might, so easily, direct the full glorious flood straight to your own coffers. My devotion to your welfare is my only excuse for my tongue. But, patron – you are a most patient, enduring man.'

'I am – of your insolence, you dog,' was the rapid and burning answer. 'A less enduring man would have had your ribs tickled, or your tavern cup flavoured long ere this, most noble Cestus.'

The man palpably changed colour and winced; but if the words of his patron had not the effect of quelling him, they instantly changed his easy impertinence and effrontery into a sullen, dogged front.

'Come,' growled he, with a dark, lowering visage, 'if we get to threatenings, you shall find that two can play at that game. Give me some money and let me go – I must have it, and no more trifling!'

'Good! If you *must* have it you must, and I cannot refuse,' answered the knight, whose humour seemed as suddenly to change, as if in triumph, for he actually allowed a smile to part his lips. 'I grieve that words of mine should have ruffled you. As I am not in the habit of carrying about with me such an amount of money as you will doubtless consider proper to ask, perhaps you will do me the favour to walk with me as far as my house, dear Cestus?'

Cestus hesitated, and looked doubtingly on the unexpected spectacle of his patron's politeness. His cunning nature was suspicious.

'What a changeable man!' was the bland remark of the other; 'a minute ago he was demanding his wants, like a robber tearing spoil from a victim. Now when he is asked to walk a short way to receive it, he hangs back.'

'No tricks, master – or else!' said Cestus, eyeing him keenly.

'Tricks! Certainly not. You are very coarse. Come!'

Afer then led the way with the man at his heels, so close indeed that he turned and motioned him to keep at a greater distance. Their course lay through the middle of the Subura, a district which lay in the valley, between the Eastern hills and the Fora. It was one of the most ancient districts of the city, as well as the most densely peopled, and noted for its crowded thoroughfares, its low society, its noise and dirt. Occasionally the traffic would come to a dead-lock, amid much shouting and forcible language, caused, perhaps, by the stoppage of some heavy wain, laden with blocks of building material, hauled along with ropes. Or, again, some great man, in his litter, surrounded by his servants, thought fit to halt, for some purpose, in the narrow ways. His suite would, thereupon, become the nucleus of a squeezing crush of pedestrians, who cast frowning glances at the litter and its occupant. At another place, his greatness, moving along, would meet with a like obstruction, and there would be seen the spectacle of rival slaves battling a passage through. Nor were

the customs of the tradesmen calculated to increase the public convenience, for they intruded their business into the already too limited space. Their stalls jutted out, and even then failed altogether to confine their occupations. A cobbler hesitated not to ply his awl in public, nor a barber to shave his customer outside his door. The gutters were frequented by noisy hucksters plying their trade, and selling all kinds of articles, from sulphur matches to boiled peas and beans. Importunate beggars were rife with every sorrow, complaint, and ailment; from the lame, sick, and blind, to the shipwrecked sailor, carrying a fragment of his ill-starred ship over his shoulder, as a proof of his sad lot. Down the narrower alleys were noisome, reeking dens crammed with the scum of the city. Thieves, murderers, blackguards, bullies loafed about; fallen women also loitered and aired themselves till the evening approached, when all this daylight idlesse of human filth betook itself to its frightful occupations of crime and wickedness, either in its own refuges, or flooded abroad upon the city. Yet this district, from its central position, was necessarily frequented, and even inhabited, in a few cases, by the higher orders of society. To imagine an unsealed Whitefriars, or a tract of the east end of modern London, cramped and narrowed, after the style of the old Roman city, and placed between two fashionable quarters, would give the best idea of the character of the Subura of Rome. It was the peculiar situation of the city which led to this intermixing of classes. In a city of a plain, where no part of the ground offers any advantage over another, the wealthy naturally form

a district select from the poor. In Rome, the great and wealthy sought the elevated and pleasanter faces of the hills, while the poorer people remained beneath. Thus the intermediate valleys, however populated, unavoidably became thoroughfares, and no doubt, to a certain extent, the haunts of all classes.

Through the teeming Subura, then, we will follow our two characters. They each threaded their way after their own manner. The knight, slim, supple, and quick, slipped along like an eel, avoiding all contact and gliding through every opening with the accustomed ease of a person city bred. On the other hand the Subura was the home of Cestus, to whom every nook and corner was familiar. This fact, combined with his superior weight and bulk, rendered his movements more careless and independent of passers-by, some of whom came into collision with him, to their own sorrow. He was, moreover, recognised by more than one fellow inhabitant as he passed along. Two or three fellows, as idle and rough looking as himself, leered knowingly at him from the open front of a wine-shop where they were lounging. Another one nodded and winked to him from out of a reeking, steaming cook-shop where he was munching a light meal of the simplest character. Among the many street idlers, one greasy vagabond, with an evil, bloated face, went so far as to catch his arm and whisper, with a coarse laugh, 'What, Cestus, boy, hast hooked thy patron? Thou wilt come back like a prince!' But Cestus shook him off, and having cleared the Subura, he and his patron entered on a less crowded path, and the short, steep ascent

of the Esquiline Hill.

At the summit they passed a statue of Orpheus. He was represented playing on the lyre to a group of wild animals, exquisitely modelled in the attitudes of rapt attention to the inspired music. The group was placed in the centre of a large circular basin for the reception of the spray, which usually danced and sparkled from the head of the immortal musician. On this day, however, for some reason, the fountain was dry.

As he passed, the knight turned round, and, pointing with his finger to draw his follower's attention to the fact, said, with a cold smile, 'My Cestus, when you likened the supply of my funds to the feeding of that fountain, you made a bad comparison – it is a bad omen, good and faithful man. Do you accept it? – I do.'

Cestus was in no way behind the age in superstition.

'Humph!' muttered he, bestowing a parting glance at the dry figures and empty basin; 'plague on the aediles for falling short of water just at this time! No matter – water, or no water! omen, or no omen! I shall still remain a faithful client to my patron.' And he followed on with a grin. After proceeding another hundred yards Afer stopped before the porch of a dwelling, small and modest, but pleasantly situated, overlooking no small portion of the city.

'Step in, man, and drink a cup of wine while we arrange terms,' said he, with ironical politeness.

But some suspicion was awakened in the breast of the other and he did not stir. 'Bring it to me – I will wait here,' said Cestus, with a shake of his head.

'But you have not told me what you want.'

'Six thousand will serve me.'

'You are growing modest, Cestus – come and I will give it you.'

But Cestus still refused to proceed inside the house.

'Why – what do you fear?' demanded Afer.

'You said something over there, where we met, that I liked not, patron,' returned Cestus doggedly; 'there is something about you now that bodes no good. I will, therefore, put no wall between me and the open street.'

'What I said over there was true enough,' said the knight, drawing near and fastening upon him a peculiar look; 'there are scores in Rome who would have said "dead men tell no tales," and, acting on that, would have made you a breathless carcase long ago, if they had suffered the behaviour which you have favoured me with. Fool, do you think I would hurt you any more than you would harm me. No; you are as necessary to me as I to you – I have more work for you to do – come!'

He went inside, and proceeded to one of the doorways which opened off the spacious hall, or atrium, as it was called, which had a tesselated floor and a small fountain in the midst. At the sound of his foot appeared two or three slaves to wait upon him. Cestus followed more slowly, with a keen, wary glance at the various doors and passages around, as though they might, at any moment, belch forth vassals to fasten on him. The knight lifted the curtain of an apartment and beckoned him to follow. He did so, and found himself, with no small amount

of misgiving, in a small room, lighted by a narrow window of glass. There were a couple of couches, for furniture, and a small carved table, and, for ornament, three or four bronze statues of exquisite workmanship. In addition to these the walls were adorned with frescoes of mythological subjects, done by no unskilful hand. Afer, standing with the curtain still uplifted in one hand, pointed with the other to a couch, and, bidding his follower wait, disappeared. Cestus remained motionless, watching the screen of the doorway, with all his senses strained like a beast of prey, to catch the least sound. But nothing reached his ear, till, at the end of a quarter of an hour, his patron returned. He came to the table and threw a bag thereon. It jingled as it fell, and the eyes of Cestus flashed and fastened on the precious object.

'There, my worthy Cestus, are six thousand sesterces; take them and use them economically.'

The broad hand of the man fell upon the bag and thrust it away in the breast of his tunic.

'What – are you not going to tell it over to see that I cheat you not?' said Afer mockingly.

'No – I can trust your counting, noble patron,' answered Cestus hurriedly; 'and now I will go, for I am craving with hunger.'

'And thirst!' added Afer, clapping his hands loudly.

The echo had hardly died away when a young Greek slave entered, bearing a cup and a larger vessel of variegated glass. At a nod from his master he filled the cup with wine from the flagon and handed it to Cestus. But that individual hesitated and

declined with some amount of confusion. Nothing but the direst need could have compelled him to make such a sacrifice.

'I dare not drink with an empty stomach – I dare not indeed; 'tis rare wine, but allow me to go, or I shall drop from sheer want of food, most noble patron – indeed I shall!'

'Then I will drink it for you, O man of tender stomach – you grow delicate,' said Afer, with a derisive laugh; 'fortune to us both!'

He drained it off, and the slave disappeared with the emptied cup.

'If I want thee soon I can hear of thee at the same place, Cestus?'

'As usual!'

'I will keep you no longer. Go and feed on the best sausages you can find.'

'Thanks, noble patron – you will find me ever ready and devoted.'

'As I found thee this morning. Expect to hear of me very soon.'

With these words they emerged into the hall, and Cestus, drawing a long breath as he saw the way clear, went off at a pace which utterly belied his fainting state.

CHAPTER III

From the centre of his atrium Afer watched his well-furnished client retreat down the passage or lobby which led to the street, and marked, with a sour smile, the hasty stride, or almost leap, with which he vanished out of the sunlight which filled the porch. He stood a while with lips compressed, as, with a heart aching with wrath and mortification, he pondered on what had passed, on the sum of money he was lacking, and the hateful manner of its extortion. Then he turned and bade his slaves prepare to accompany him to the bath, which was an indispensable daily luxury to a Roman, and usually indulged in previous to the dinner hour.

Though not what Rome would call a wealthy man, T. Domitius Afer was of sufficient means, and from his connection with Fabricius, we may gather, of sufficient right of birth, to rank him among the equestrian order. His house, though small, was incontestably ruled by a master possessing the somewhat rare quality of exquisite taste. Harmony and symmetry reigned over all its appointments, ordered by the still more rare magic of the hand, which rounds off the formal chilliness of perfect chastity and regularity, by an artful and timely touch of graceful negligence.

There was no painting, statue, nor carved vase, nor couch, which might not, from its beauty and delicacy of design and

finish, have had a place amid the household magnificence of Caesar. The combination of faculties which we call taste can perform wonders of delight with the meanest appliances. It requires inexhaustible resources, together with barbaric ignorance and coarseness, to shock the senses.

Afer remained some minutes pacing up and down the atrium of his house in deep thought. Then rousing himself he beheld his slaves awaiting his departure, with towels, unguents, and other necessaries. Without further delay, therefore, he left the house and proceeded to some private baths in the neighbourhood, where he enjoyed the company of some acquaintances, as well as the physical refreshment of what moderns call a Turkish bath. When he had leisurely gone through this delightful process; when he had finally been scraped with the strigil, rubbed dry and anointed from head to foot with a perfumed unguent, his youthful Greek attendant robed him with most elaborate care to suit his exacting taste, and he left the baths to step into a kind of sedan chair, which awaited him at the doors. He was borne thus, the short distance which intervened, to the house of one Apicius, on the Palatine, the most fashionable quarter in Rome, and finally to become almost the exclusive property of the emperors.

He alighted in a courtyard, whereon opened the magnificent entrance of a very large and imposing mansion. He went in. The lofty interior gleamed with rich marbles and gilding, and the air was laden with the scent of the perfumed fountain which twinkled and sparkled in the shaft of light, descending from the

blue sunny sky through the square opening in the centre of the roof. Beyond was the vista of the entire length of the house, through its columns and peristyle to a portico and ornamental garden beyond. The sumptuous magnificence which met the eye at every turn, the priceless statuary, the frescoes on every wall, the rare, polished, carved wood and stone, the ivory, gilding, and tapestries, betokened the lavish extravagance of vast wealth. Crossing the spotless floor of marble, Afer was ushered into a reception room of the same rich character, where lounged or stood some half dozen guests engaged in conversation. Our knight's attire, though of irreproachable taste and fashion, was modest compared with the superlative richness displayed by some of those he now rubbed against.

Charinus was a dandy of the first water, whose glorious garments, oppressive perfumes, smooth, well-tended, effeminately handsome face and languid hauteur, at once betrayed his disposition and ambition. Flaccus was a dandy, whose still youthful and ambitious mind animated a physical organisation long since bereft of vigour and beauty. Art did its best to disguise the ruthless blight of time, and age put a good face on its impotence, whilst it was being racked with follies and excesses which belonged to its grandchildren. So the withered old trunk stuck itself over with green boughs, seeking to hide its sapless rottenness, but succeeding only in rousing the laughter of men.

In the puffy face, and uncertain wavering eyes of Pansa,

together with his nervous, trembling fingers, could be seen the demon of drunkenness; whilst his seat apart, and his sullen, dejected, downcast looks, marked a nightmare depression of spirits, during a brief separation from the wine cup.

Torquatus, unlike Flaccus, retained no foolish vanity in his advanced years, and his simple attire bore a strong contrast to the rest. Curiosity might be awakened as to the reason why he was included in the company present, for peevish, snappish acidity was plain as written symbols in his prying, sharp, small eyes, in his hard, withered, wrinkled face, and thin, sourly down-drawn lips. To the host, in the middle of these, Afer proceeded to pay his respects. Unheedful, unanswering to the chatter around his chair, the lord of the house sat absorbed in his reflections. He leant his head first on one hand and then on the other, shifting continuously and restlessly, as if a prey to uneasy thoughts. His face was pale, and his brows slightly contracted. Ever and anon, when his attention was desired to hear something of interest, he gave a nod, or glimmering smile, rather weary and ghastly than otherwise. His dress was the envy even of the dandies, his guests; for his 'synthesis,' or loose upper garment, which all wore, as more convenient for table than the toga, was made of silk – a fabric, at that time, in Rome, of such extravagant cost, as to be forbidden by imperial edict only a few years before the date of this story. The appearance of Afer before him roused him from his reverie.

'Welcome, my friend,' said he, extending his hand, and

shaking himself, as if to clear away all thoughts that interfered with his duties as host; 'welcome to my poor house!'

'I trust you marked the poverty as you came through,' rasped the voice of Torquatus, the sour, ever on the watch to vent a sneer.

'I came hastily to greet Apicius, our generous host,' returned Afer, as he exchanged courtesies with the smiling guests, all of whom he knew.

'And faster still to eat his dinner,' added the old man.

'Ho! ho! Torquatus, I see you are in your best humour,' cried Apicius, joining in the laugh, with more vivacity and briskness in his appearance.

'Who arrived first to his appointment, Apicius?' inquired Afer.

'When my slave called me to the room, I found Torquatus here alone to greet me,' replied the host.

'Then has Torquatus the best right to the best part of your dinner, noble host, since his eagerness to eat it outstripped us all. Hungry Torquatus!'

Loud laughter from all drowned the snarling reply of the old man, but his scowling eyes spoke volumes.

'Thou hast it fairly,' said Apicius, when the merriment ceased; 'but don't be ill-humoured, Torquatus – it so ill becomes thee.'

The juvenile mirth of Flaccus shook his sides at this, and dislocated some of the enamel on his face; and ere the amusement had subsided, the heavy purple curtain of the doorway was drawn aside to admit another comer, a man in the

prime of his age, of tall commanding presence and handsome countenance. He bestowed one rapid glance upon the occupants of the room, and ere their eyes, in turn, were drawn towards him, his lips were wreathed in a bland smile.

'The Prefect Sejanus!' announced the slave at the door.

As the name of the most powerful man in Rome fell on the ears of the company, it banished the laughter from their lips. Following the example of their host, they pressed around the new arrival, eager to salute him. Flaccus, the elderly dandy, who was a small man, tried to strain himself, like the frog in the fable, into an individual of imposing appearance. Torquatus posed himself into a caricature of a philosopher of elevated and dignified severity. Even the nerveless Pansa elevated his tremulous eyes, and rose from his chair. But when the first greetings were over, the conversation soon fell back once more into a current of liveliness and jest, under the influence of the imperial minister's good humour and indiscriminate affability.

'Come, friends, it is time to get to table,' said Apicius; 'and for the laggards who are yet absent, let them abide by what their unpunctuality may bring them. Ha! here comes one. Caius, I cannot enter my dinner as an equal attraction to love; but yet, for once – '

'What is the finest feast to a man in love! Heed him not, Martialis,' said Sejanus, grasping the hand of the newcomer. The latter, a young man of about thirty, smiled in response to a shower of badinage which followed this initiative, until a slave entered

and announced the feast in readiness to be served.

'Come, then!' cried the host; 'we lack one, but he is ever behind – 'tis part of his religion. Let him take the empty place when he thinks fit.' So saying, he took Sejanus, as his most distinguished guest, by the hand, and, followed by the others, led the way to the dining apartment, where a table, blazing with an equipage of precious metal, awaited them.

It is no purpose of these pages to enter into a detailed description of the extravagance, the innumerable and curious dishes, of a Roman banquet of the first order. Antiquaries have already done so in accounts which are easily to be met with. The recital of the ingenuity, invention, and wealth lavished on a meal is extraordinary to modern measurement of luxury and extravagance. Fish, fowl, and beast were brought from the ends of the earth, in order that jaded appetites might nibble at them, or at some particular part of them, dressed by a *chef* of the highest art; and, in the present instance, nothing was likely to be lacking from the feast of one who won historic fame as a gourmand.

Nor was the entertainment deemed sufficient of itself, but it must be served in an apartment of splendour equal to the occasion. That of Apicius did not aspire to the novelty and outlay brought to bear on the saloon of Nero's golden house of a few years later, which was constructed like a theatre, with scenes which changed at every course. But, for a private individual, of a period just launching fairly into degraded luxury, his dining-room was, perhaps, the most magnificent in the city.

Along with the cunning of workers in ivory and precious metals, the hand of the painter and sculptor had adorned it with the best children of their genius. In the centre of the apartment was placed the square dinner-table, which had the repute of costing the owner a fortune in itself. It was made from the roots of the citron tree, whereby the perfection of beautiful markings was obtained. It was highly polished, and the massive legs which supported it were of ivory and gold, elaborately carved at the extremities into the semblances of lions' feet. On three sides of the table were ranged three couches of the same costly workmanship. They were spread with deeply-fringed cloth of gold and cushions to match. The latter were to assist the diners in their attitude, for the Roman reclined at full length at his meals; and, while he reached for his food with his right hand to the table, on a lower level than the couch, his left elbow and hand, aided by the cushions, supported his head and upper part of his body in a convenient lounging posture.

The knotty face of Torquatus involuntarily twisted into a grimace of delight as he and his companions stretched themselves in their places around the glittering table. The failing eyes of Pansa emitted a feeble flash as they fell on the old jars of Falernian wine of the Opimian brand, the most celebrated vintage of all, and perfectly priceless.

When all the diners were placed according to the marshalling of the slave who acted as master of ceremonies, the slippers of each guest were drawn off by their own domestics, who

attended them to table. A company of musicians struck up a slow measured strain, and the professional carver of the establishment forthwith commenced to show his dexterity in dividing the dressed viands to the beat of the music. Then the diners spread their napkins of fine linen edged with gold fringe, and directing their servants to set before them whatever delicacy they fancied, they forthwith gave their utmost energy and attention to the business of the evening with a zest as critical as keen.

Torquatus gobbled and ravened like a beast of prey. The hard, protuberant muscles of his face heaved and fell, and worked, incessantly, under the skin, which soon began to shine and glisten with perspiration. Charinus, the exquisite, nibbled at the most curious and highly-seasoned delicacies, with the pampered appetite of a gourmand. The first deep draught of old Falernian restored Pansa and restrung his drooping nerves. His eyes brightened, his face lightened, and, with a smack of his lips, he reached briskly forward to the golden platter, which his slave had just placed before him. It was the custom of his countrymen to temper their wine with water; but, beyond cooling it with the snows of the Apennines, Pansa approved of no such folly, so that his slave troubled the water pitcher no more than to give an appearance of decency. As cup rapidly succeeded cup his vivacity returned and his tongue became witty. It was a marvellous restoration. The guest who in the greatest measure followed his example, though still at a considerable distance, was Caius Martialis, who occupied the place next and above his host,

on the left hand, or third couch. Dissipation had placed its marks on the noble features of this young man, and he appeared to drink and talk with an increasing recklessness, and even desperation.

Whilst in the middle of the first course the last guest entered the room to make up the number of nine – three to each couch, the number of the muses. The new-comer was rather short in stature and thick-set, with squat, dark features, as though descended from negro blood. As he came into the room he glanced round with a supercilious look. Scarcely bending to his host, he bowed more markedly to Sejanus, whilst the remainder of the company he seemed to ignore utterly. The seat reserved for him was the lowest on the couch next his host – the worst at the table. He took it with a scowl, amid the ill-concealed smiles of the others. Apicius himself, after bidding him welcome, sank back on his cushions with a sigh of triumph and relief. Zoilus the millionaire, the son of a slave, the great rival of himself in the extravagance of Rome, had on a splendid silk garment, but it was only edged with gold, whereas his own was most beautifully figured and wrought with the same all over.

The enormous acquired wealth of this individual, and his ostentatious use of it, made him a very noted leader of fashion; but, while people applauded and truckled to him they scoffed aside at his innate vulgarity and arrogance. He began his dinner, at once, by asking haughtily and ill-humouredly for some unusual dish. It was at once supplied. Apicius ate calmly on, and the rest smiled and winked covertly. It was a trial of strength between

the champions of luxury. The same thing happened more than once throughout the banquet; but nothing, however rare, in the range of culinary art was lacking from the plate of Zoilus that his ingenuity could suggest. The face of Apicius, though calm and stoical, covered a heart devoured by anxiety. A slight defection of his cook, a slight oversight in the study of their records, a trifling mistake or misadventure in the combination of their ingredients, might have opened the way for his rival's adverse, if courteous criticism. But everything was perfect. The household, from its officers downwards, had surpassed itself. The result was the perfection of culinary and decorative art, combined with the utmost variety and rarity. Praises flew from lip to lip. Some were fired into ecstasies of admiration and wonder; pleasure sat on every countenance, except that of Zoilus. He had remained silent for full a quarter of an hour. His ingenuity was exhausted, and his enemy's armour unpierced. It was the culminating point of the complete pre-eminence of Apicius. He gave a sign, and the butler, with much solemnity and ceremony, set a magnificent dish on the table with his own hands, amid a flourish of the musicians.

The guests looked on curiously.

Apicius announced the name of the delicacy which steamed on the gleaming gold. He bade them try it. Its style was entirely new and novel to Rome. A portion was cut and handed to Sejanus; after him the others were served. Its delicious and novel flavour was proved by the enraptured expressions of each feaster as he

tasted the portion set before him. It had only one fault, as Pansa said, with a sigh – there was not enough of it. Zoilus was left to the last, and the only remaining piece on the dish was placed before him. Livid and trembling with passion he motioned it away, muttering something about his inability to digest it. Apicius, therefore, with mock regret, beckoned the slave to transfer it to himself.

'Good!' said he, when he had finished it, speaking to his steward, whose glance hung upon him. 'Tell Silo, Hippias, and Macer, that they have surpassed themselves. Their master is well pleased with them – with you all. He will not forget.'

It is to be regretted that history has preserved only the tradition of this remarkable production of Apicius' kitchen, the fame of which subsequently filled aristocratic circles. Further than relating that the foundation of the dish was the carcase of a small unknown animal, captured in the limits of the empire, and brought home by a recently arrived ship, all details are wanting.

Gradually, after this interesting incident, the guests, languidly, fell more at their ease on their cushions, with laden stomachs and appeased appetites. Beyond nibbling furtively at sweet dainties and fruits, there was only inclination left to sip at the precious wine, and to employ their tongues and laugh at each other's wit. But from this stage Apicius himself relapsed once more into his former fit of silent, unconscious abstraction. The minutes gathered into hours, and chatter and jest flew uninterruptedly around. Only at times the host was roused by

the jesting challenges of his guests, rallying him on the subject of his absorbed reflections. Among the numerous glorious entertainments of Apicius this, the guests admitted to each other in many an aside, was the most perfect Rome had yet known. And yet, instead of being blithe and jocund with success, the hospitable entertainer reclined with melancholy, fixed eyes – opening his lips only to sip his wine from time to time. This could not fail to have an effect eventually, for what ought to have been the inspiration of their conviviality was cold, fireless, and mute. They struggled on for some time, but, at length, their cheerfulness sank beneath the chilling influence of those fixed, sad, downcast eyes and heedless ears. A social meeting largely takes its tone from its leader, and when the conversation became slower and more fitful, Afer exchanged glances with Sejanus and Flaccus with Charinus. Meaning looks went round from each to each to the seemingly unconscious Apicius, and from Apicius back to each other. Zoilus had no love or good-feeling to detain him. More or less discomfited and snubbed, he waited no longer, kicking against the pricks, but seized the opportunity and began to rise, briefly hinting that his absence was necessary.

'Stay!' said Apicius, suddenly starting, as if from a dream, at hearing these words spoken in his ear. 'Stay yet for a few moments, Zoilus. I – I implore your pardon, friends, for I see I have fallen a prey to my reflections and forgotten you. It was behaviour unworthy even of a barbarian – I pray you give me your indulgence!'

‘Nay, noble Apicius, every one is liable to be overridden by his thoughts,’ said Sejanus.

‘True, and I will forthwith give you the clue to mine,’ was the reply.

‘Ha! we will, therefore, begin again,’ quoth Pansa, in thick tones, holding up his empty goblet for his slave to refill.

They all laughed, and then bent their eyes on the face of Apicius with renewed interest.

‘Nothing, dear friends, but the most sorrowful thoughts could have led me to exhibit such conduct toward you,’ said their host. ‘It has been my greatest ambition – ever my pride and pleasure to see my friends happy around my table.’

‘Dear Apicius, you have ever succeeded, and not the least this day,’ said Martialis gently.

A murmur of approval ran round the couches.

‘You do me honour,’ resumed Apicius; ‘you have been good friends and companions hitherto, and I have done, humbly, my best to return your love. Be patient, I will not detain you long; and especially as you will never again recline round this table at my request. I am grieved to say it,’ continued he, after allowing the expressions of startled surprise to pass, ‘but I am resolved to change my condition, and Rome will know me no more.’

Ill-concealed joy lighted up the vulgar face of Zoilus, but the visages of Torquatus, Flaccus, and Pansa were blank and thunderstruck at this unlooked-for announcement.

‘Say not so, Apicius!’ quoth Martialis, turning his prematurely

worn, but noble face toward his host, 'you rend our hearts.'

Apicius, with a fond look, laid his hand gently on the speaker's shoulder, but did not speak.

'This is rank treason that cannot pass,' said Sejanus jestingly. 'Rome cannot spare thee, noble Apicius – thou shalt not even leave thy house – I shall send a guard of my Pretorians, who shall block thee in.'

A faint smile rested on the lips of Apicius at this conceit.

'We shall see how that plan will act, Prefect,' said he. 'Send thy Pretorians – a whole cohort – only you must be quick.'

Torquatus sat dumb and forgot his jibes; the remainder listened for what was to follow.

'It is true, my friends, I am about to quit the pleasures, the bustle, the virtues and vices of our beloved city of the hills. I am eager for perfect serenity, far from the struggling crowd, and I go shortly to see it.'

'Whither? We will seek you out – I, at least,' interrupted the voice of Martialis next to him.

'Thou shalt learn ere very long, my Caius. Which among you does not, at certain times, if not constantly, wish for the tranquillity of the rustic, whose music is the whisper of the groves, the rippling of the stream, and the notes of the birds? Eating simply, sleeping soundly, rising cheerfully. Contented with what the gods have given him – the summer sun, the pure air, the green pastures, sweet water and the vine-clad slope; a heart unvexed by ambitions, envyings, ingratitudes. When I see him

wander, wonderingly, through the streets, I envy him his brown cheek, his clear skin, his cheerful simplicity, his vigorous body which cleaves the torrent of pallid citizens. He seems to breathe the odour of the quiet groves and dewy grass. I am sick at heart and weary, friends. I loathe the sight of my once loved city of the hills – the marble, the stone, the thronging people. Peace! Peace! That song of Horace haunts me. Hear it, although you know it well – it will help you to divine my spirit in a little degree.' He then recited the beautiful song of Horace, the sixteenth of his second book, of which we offer the following translation, inadequate as it is: —

'Whosoever tempest-tossed
Upon the wide Aegean waters,
Prays the gods for peace and rest,
When darkling the moon is hid
Amid the murky clouds,
And guiding stars shine not
To cheer the sailor's breast.

'War-torn Thrace cries Peace!
And Peace! the quivered Median bold:
But, Grosphus, it is neither bought
With purple, gems, nor gold.
For neither riches
Nor the lictor of a consul's nod,
Can drive the troubles of a mind aloof,
Nor flout the cares which flit

About a gilded roof.

‘With him who lives with little
Life goes well;
Whose father’s cup
Shines bright upon a simple board:
Whose slumbers light
Are never harmed by fear, nor sudden fright,
Which tells of hidden hoard.

‘Why strain ourselves to gain so much
In this short life of ours?
Why change our childhood’s homes for lands
That glow with other suns?
What banished man whose fate is such
He fain would shun himself?

‘Grim, cankering care climbs up the brazened ships,
And swifter than the stag,
Or eastern wind which sweeps
The storms and rattling rain,
It leaveth not the bands of horsemen
Trooping o’er the plain.

‘Be happy for the day,
And hate to think on what may follow!
Tempering all bitterness
With an easy laugh;
For no such happiness there is

As knows no sorrow.

'Swift death bore off Achilles, and old age
Hath shrunk Tithonus —
Time, mayhap, will give to me
That which it denies to thee.'

This foreign rendering can give only a faint idea of the effect which Apicius produced upon his hearers, by the beauty of his elocution, in his native tongue; for it was given in a voice of singular, pathetic melancholy. The hot burning tears dropped silently from the down-turned face of Martialis. Then, for a brief moment, he raised his swimming eyes toward his friend. All that was purest and noblest in his nature struggled with those welling drops, from beneath the load of a careless, misguided life, and beautified his weary face. The voices of the others were raised in entreaties and arguments, and even Torquatus summoned a snarling joke. But Apicius was firm, and only shook his head.

'Think not that I go heedlessly,' said he; 'we have passed many delightful hours together. Although I shall henceforth be absent, I would not have my memory altogether die amongst you. I have, therefore, to ask each of you to accept of a slight memorial which may, at various times, as I hope, recall something of Apicius and his days.'

'But you tell us not where you go,' murmured Martialis once more.

'Patience, Caius – you shall know; it is within easy reach, on

an easy road.'

Martialis made a gesture of pleasure, and Apicius gave a sign to his butler. On a sideboard stood a row of nine objects of nearly equal height, entirely draped and hidden by white gold-fringed napkins thrown over them. They were curious and unusual, and had, many times, already, excited the inward curiosity of the company.

The slave advanced to these and carefully took the first. At a nod from his master he placed it before Martialis, on the table, with the snowy white napkin still hiding whatever was beneath. The next was placed before Sejanus. The others before Charinus, Flaccus, Torquatus, Pansa, Afer, and Zoilus in rotation. One was left. Apicius pointed to his own place. The slave put it down before him, and the table was ranged round with these mysterious white-robed objects.

'Friends,' said Apicius calmly, 'beneath those covers you will find the presents which I give to you in token of our fellowship. I have striven to the best of my ability to render them suitable and useful to their owners. Look at them and accept of them, I pray.'

They all, with more or less eagerness, lifted the napkins from their allotted gifts and sat gazing thereat, at Apicius, and each other with mingled expressions of ill-suppressed anger, mortification, and disappointment. The napkin before Apicius was still untouched, and he received the rancorous glances which were shot towards him, with a calm, scornful expression.

Before Sejanus was a small representation of a lictor's fasces,

a miniature axe bound up in a bundle of twigs; but in addition to the axe was the model of an iron hook, such as was used to drag the bodies of traitors and malefactors down the Gemonian steps into the Tiber.

The cheek of the conspirator flushed, and from beneath his gathering brows he flashed a look as dangerous and dark as a thundercloud.

'Be not offended, Prefect,' said Apicius; 'I act as a true friend who fears not the truth, and not as a parasite, who bestows nothing but what may prove pleasant to the ear.'

His cold, mocking tone belied his words, and, ere he finished, Zoilus, with a face purple with rage and fury, had jumped from his seat and dashed the article he had uncovered to the floor. It was a small figure of a negro, carved in ebony, having its nakedness barely draped in a ludicrous fashion with a little cloak of figured silk.

'What!' cried Apicius jibingly; 'displeased with the image of your grandfather?'

But Zoilus, speechless and shuddering with his boiling feelings, rushed from the room with his slaves. He was followed by a titter, which the biting satire of the proceeding even wrung from the offended natures of the others.

Torquatus sat scowling before a small stand, on which was placed a common wooden platter having a copper coin in the centre. Pansa evinced his disgust of a similar stand bearing a diminutive cup of silver. The figure of a very ancient goat on

its hind legs, having a garland of roses around its horns, caused Flaccus to fume and fret immoderately. Afer smiled scornfully upon a miniature gilded weather-vane; whilst a mirror, upheld by an Apollo, with an averted face, was regarded by Charinus with ineffable disdain.

Thus had Apicius amused his invention. A small bronze casket was deemed sufficient for Martialis. It was unpretentious in its outward appearance; but a fast-locked box ever provokes curiosity.

'Lift it, Martialis!' snapped Torquatus derisively, 'and see whether it be filled with iron, or chaff, or what is lighter still – emptiness.'

'There is the key, my Caius,' said Apicius, in answer, drawing the article from his breast and handing it to his friend. 'Before you leave the house you shall use it – at present, sad necessity must deprive any one of the pleasure of seeing what the box contains. Dear friends,' he added, turning his eyes upon them, 'I grieve that my trifling tributes should not, by appearances, have pleased you. Had I been less truthful and more liberal, probably you would have overwhelmed me with gratitude. At least I have ever found it thus. There is little more to add save farewell – Caius, give me thy hand.'

The hand was extended and grasped fervently by Apicius, who then lifted the napkin before him. A richly chased gold cup, studded with jewels, was exposed, gorgeous and glowing, to the expectant gaze of all. The eyes of Torquatus, Flaccus, and Pansa

kindled. Sejanus still sat motionless, with a cloud resting on his pale, immobile face. The sad brooding eyes of Martialis showed no change.

'That is my father's cup,' continued Apicius; 'Martialis, thou wilt preserve it – it is too rich for my future needs of simplicity. I will drink to the future welfare of you all. May the gods send you plentiful pastures of liberal purses and groaning tables; and may ye die the death of noble, virtuous, uncovetous men. Listen, dear friends,' he said, with a bitterly scornful emphasis of the adjective, 'I have lived to the age of forty years. With your help and the help of others I have spent of my patrimony sixty-four thousand sestertia.'[2]

A movement of sensation passed round the couches at this calm statement of such enormous extravagance.

'In the process I have discovered how rarely the immortals make true friends, and how idle it is to try and gain them with the glitter of gold alone. I have met with but one in my career who has followed me for love – Caius, true friend, may the gods repay you, for Apicius cannot.' He raised the goblet in his hand; it was partly filled with wine. Looking round the company, while he poised the flashing cup, he said: 'Vultures, I have done. I have had my pleasure – I have spent my patrimony – what is left I give to thee, Caius – that casket will vouch for it. I want it not; it is not worth living on for. *Vale!*'

He emptied the cup at a draught, threw it from him on to the

[2] About £500,000, or half a million of money

table, and then proceeded to sink back to his former position on the cushions. Ere he reached them, the smile on his lip became suddenly contorted into a horrible grimace. The pallor of his face changed to a ghastly lividness. His body and limbs gave a spasmodic twist of agony, and he fell back a breathless corpse.

The room was filled with consternation and confusion. Martialis, with a horrible suspicion, sprang up and encircled his friend. Slaves sped away for a physician, and the remainder, together with the guests, gathered round the dead Apicius with startled looks.

'Come!' said Sejanus to Afer in a low voice, 'we can do nothing here but waste time. Apicius has given the signal to depart. His only true friend will attend to him – the slaves will probably see to the house – and themselves.'

'The fool,' muttered Afer, following the imperial minister out of the room, 'he has lost his fortune and dies – I go to get one and live.'

The company fast melted away. Charinus, with haughty, measured step, and sublimity of indifference on his unruffled face. Pansa, stupefied with wine and fright, leaning on the necks of his slaves, who, indeed, nearly carried him. Torquatus, with a keen eye for any movables and an opportunity. So they departed to blow this strange business over the city.

A group of frightened domestics remained huddled in one corner of the room. Martialis waved them away, and he was left, amid the gold and glitter of the chamber of death, bending and

sobbing alone, over the dead body of his friend.

CHAPTER IV

The entrance of one of the household domestics, bringing a physician, roused the young man from the first stupor of his shocked feelings. He rose to his feet and assumed a stoical calmness.

'I am a physician,' said the new-comer, breathing somewhat heavily, by reason of the pace at which the slave had hurried him thither. Martialis made a gesture toward the dead man and sank his chin on his breast. It needed no more than a moment for the practised eye of the mediciner to see that life had been suddenly and utterly snatched away.

'I can do nothing,' said he, letting the hand of Apicius fall. 'Out of which cup did he drink?'

Following a slight motion of the young man's head, he went and picked up the jewelled goblet, which remained on its side, near the edge of the table, where Apicius had thrown it. He put his nose to it and sniffed the dregs. There was no odour but that of wine, yet the man of science shrugged his shoulders significantly.

'There still remains in the cup enough for the death of two or three, most noble sir,' said he.

'I might do worse than try to prove your words,' remarked Martialis bitterly.

'The gods forbid! Aesculapius himself could not save you if you did!'

'To whom and to what place am I to send if I should want you again?'

'I should be ever grateful for your notice, noble Martialis. I am Charicles, and may be found without difficulty in the Vicus Tuscus.'

Martialis nodded, and Charicles, with much humility and expression of sympathy, withdrew.

''Twas for himself then,' he muttered, as he passed quickly through the deserted hall. 'O precious drug, swift and sure as light, when did you ever fail or disgrace me!'

The eye of Martialis fell on the casket which Apicius had bequeathed him. He stood regarding it for a few moments, and then turned to a slave who remained, and said, with renewed vigour of faculties, 'Let the kinsfolk of Apicius be brought hither at once, if not already sent for – Plautia, his sister, Sabellus, his uncle; and go you, yourself, bring with you back, in all haste, Festus the lawyer, from nigh the forum of Caesar – haste!'

The slave disappeared and left him once more alone. He stood and gazed on the face of the dead, and his grief broke beyond his control. Half-smothered sobs broke from his lips, and his eyes were blind with hot pouring tears.

'Oh Apicius,' he groaned, 'if thou wert weary of the world, hadst thou so little regard for our love and companionship? This is thy retreat from men so easily found! Easy indeed – thou didst not err. All may reach it when they list, gods be praised! For in whose ear can I whisper, as I whispered in thine, all that

oppressed me? Gone – gone, Apicius! Thou hast forsaken thy friend – selfish – selfish! Did you deem the void would be filled by another of your blood? Oh, miserable thought!'

He lay stretched on a couch murmuring in broken sentences, but, as the leaden minutes lagged on, he became more composed. The sound of a voice without made him leap to his feet. The next instant the heavy curtains were thrust back, and a young, richly-attired female stepped into the apartment. Despite the crushing blow the heart of Martialis had received, it gave a bound at the entrance of the new-comer. Her stature was above the feminine standard, and her figure large and voluptuous, but perfect in symmetry and grace. Whilst giving the impression of robustness and vigour, its stately carriage admirably matched the brilliant and haughty beauty of her face. The gaze of Martialis was riveted on her. Scarcely deigning to return the look, she swept up to the suicide and bent over him. Drawing herself up again she cast her glance over the room, – the disordered table with its litter of plate and luscious fruits, fallen cups and crumpled napkins, all glittering in a jumble of confusion under the light of the huge candelabra. Thence her brilliant black eyes flashed upon him who stood by, with infatuation and misery written on his face.

'Speak, Martialis, what led him to do this?'

'I know no more, Plautia, but what he said before us all here but now,' answered the young man, sweeping his hand toward the table; 'he was tired of life – he had spent his patrimony – poverty haunted him – so he drank and died, ere one could move

or speak.'

'Poverty!' echoed she. She looked round again upon the extravagance which glowed in every part of the room, and her red lips curled in scornful incredulity.

'Even so,' he rejoined.

The farewell and eccentric gifts of the dead host to his guests were yet remaining on the table where they had been put. Her eyes rested on them in curiosity.

'What are these?' she demanded again.

Martialis explained their presence, and, being particularly interested, she was not satisfied until she had learnt to whom each article had been appropriated.

'And that he gave to you?' said she, pointing to the bronze casket.

'He did,' replied Martialis.

'Know you what it contains?'

'I can only guess.'

'Well?'

'With his last breath he bequeathed to me all that remains of his effects. The box, doubtless, contains the documents relating thereto,' said the young man, in a voice trembling with emotion.

'Doubtless – you were his nearest friend and companion,' remarked the lady; 'of me, his sister, doubtless, he said nothing. What little there was in common between us was not much tempered with love and good-humour.'

'Alas, Plautia, take what there is! I want it not – I would give

it a hundred times over to gain one kind look from your eyes. He was your brother – born of the same mother – to me he was more than a brother. There he lies before us. Cannot his dead body, bereft of likes and dislikes, soften your heart to me who loved him most?'

'Martialis, you knew his intention before this night,' said she, disregarding his pleading tone as she would the whining of a dog.

'No, before Heaven – or maybe we had never seen this bitter night.'

"Tis strange, and you two secretless friends, as I have heard you say.'

'This, at least, was dark to me, as to every one else, until he drank from yon fatal cup and fell back where he lies.'

Plautia took up the cup from the table where Charicles had placed it, and, with a natural curiosity, smelled at it, as he had done.

'Take care!' ejaculated Martialis, as the golden rim seemed to graze her ripe lips. 'There is yet sufficient left to harm more than one – so the physician has said – beware lest a drop smear thy lip.'

'Tush, Martialis! – I am not so tired of life,' she replied contemptuously, setting down the goblet; 'who comes?'

'Festus, the lawyer, or thy uncle, Sabellus.'

'Festus?'

He pointed to the box, and, at the same time, an old man entered, wrinkled, grave, and thin. He made a profound obeisance, and then looked inquiringly from one to the other.

‘Martialis summoned thee, he hath need of thee, Festus,’ exclaimed Plautia haughtily; and, passing to the door, she summoned the domestics.

‘It is true I sent for thee,’ said Martialis briefly.

‘This is a woeful sight,’ said the lawyer, as the slaves crowded in, and, under the directions of the lady, lifted their dead master and bore him away to his own room. ‘It was only this very morn that I saw him and spoke with him in the forum of Caesar, as well and content as ever he was, to all seeming.’

Martialis took the key of the casket and placed it in the lawyer’s hand.

‘Open the box – it was the gift of Apicius to me, his friend.’

Plautia took up her position on one of the couches, stretching her magnificent form on the place and cushions which had before been occupied by Sejanus the Prefect. The long, loose, flowing drapery of the Roman female clung and moulded itself to the voluptuous curves of her figure. Gems and trinkets of gold glittered amid the wreathed and plaited masses of her bluish-black hair, and numberless jewels flashed upon the fingers of her dainty white hands. Her features were slightly aquiline, but perfect and delicate in outline, and her ivory-like skin was warm and glowing with the tints of a ripe peach. With her bold, imperious, black orbs she looked like a queen as she reclined, the most apt and brilliant centrepiece of that apartment of gorgeous splendour.

The grave, elderly Festus, as he opened the casket, cast at

her a glance filled with admiration. Martialis buried his face in his hands, as if fearful of allowing his hungry eyes to rest upon her, except at intervals, when the matter in hand called for some remark.

When the lawyer opened the casket he found therein several papers. After glancing at each in turn, he took one up and said, 'This is the will of M. Gabius Apicius, bequeathing his property solely to Caius Julius Martialis, knight, his friend.'

'Read!' said that unhappy personage in a hollow tone.

Festus obeyed. The task was brief and did not occupy many minutes. The remaining papers were found to be informal inventories of effects. Martialis bade him read them also. They were long; including, as they did, everything of value in the house. Plautia signified her impatience long before it was ended, and, during its progress, a slave entered to announce that Sabellus of the Aventine was not to be found.

When the wearisome monotone of the lawyer at length ceased, Martialis raised his pale face from his hands.

'Ah!' exclaimed the lawyer suddenly; 'here I find the value of the whole computed. Deducting the debts due, and a few minor bequests, the balance amounts to an estimate of ten thousand sestertia.'[3]

Plautia started on her cushions at the statement.

'What!' she demanded, contracting her fine black brows; 'ten thousand sestertia, free?'

[3] Nearly £90,000.

'Absolutely, as the will expressly states,' replied Festus. 'The whole total reaches a huger sum, but there are debts, as before mentioned. No money is spoken of – these inventories must be realised.'

'Was this the poverty he fled from? Why, it is a fortune – a heaven to the greater part of mankind!' she exclaimed.

'Ay, but not to the mind of Apicius,' interrupted the voice of Martialis; 'for remember – scarce a coined piece within his coffers. Everything gone but what the walls of the house compass. Had Apicius lived it was necessary to live as hitherto. To do that he must needs have despoiled his home – the noblest in Rome – of its treasures. Rather than strike, to all, the note of disgrace and ruin, he did as he did. It was pride, not fear – it is too plain. But small or great as the remnant may seem to thee, Plautia, thou art his nearest of kin – to thee, therefore, it belongs. I have no claim but what the love of a friend has given me. I render it up – take it therefore.'

'A noble deed!' quoth Festus.

The glance of Plautia softened a little, and she held out her jewelled, white hand to the young man. With eyes aflame he seized it, and covered it with kisses.

'It is truly high-minded and generous of thee, Martialis,' she said.

'Take it – I need it not!' he answered eagerly.

'Foolish!' she rejoined, drawing her hand away and accompanying her words with a mocking smile. 'Bid Festus teach

thee to be wiser than rob thyself.'

'It is a question for his own heart to decide,' remarked the lawyer, replacing the papers in the box.

'Festus has done his part and I will keep him no longer – say no more!' said Martialis.

The lawyer rose at this hint, and at the same moment a voice came from the doorway. Looking thither they beheld a tall cloaked figure standing in the doorway, regarding them and their surroundings with keen eyes.

Martialis started. 'Lucius!' he exclaimed.

'Even so, brother,' returned the new-comer.

It was indeed the Centurion, bearing the stains of hard travel on his garments and a jaded air on his face.

Plautia rose to her feet. Her cheeks were suffused with a sudden flood of crimson, and her bosom stirred her tunic with deeper and more rapid pulsations. A delicious tremor seemed to melt her natural stateliness of carriage. Her eyes, so full of haughtiness and will, encountering the calm gaze of the Pretorian, sank like a timid child's, shaded beneath a deep sweeping fringe of eyelashes.

A deadly sickness crept about the heart of Caius Martialis, for his senses, preternaturally sharpened, saw all.

'Do you seek me?' he demanded, scarcely able, or caring, to conceal the bitterness of his tones.

The Centurion dropped his cloak from his shoulder and stepped forward, whilst, at the same time, Festus, the lawyer,

glided from the room.

The resemblance between the brothers was traceable in the mould of their features. But, whilst those of the soldier were scarcely so finely carved as were his elder brother's, they were considerably more manly and decided. The expression of spirit and determination which was characteristic of his bronzed face and fearless glance, were less perceptible on the countenance of the civilian. The vigour and robustness of the younger eminently fitted him to press forward in the battle and strife of the world; whilst the characteristics of the elder were of a more delicate organisation, which seeks the calmer atmosphere and placid occupations of retirement and study. The personal appearance of the Centurion, which has already been alluded to, spoke for his habits. His commanding stature, rude health and strength and perfection of physical training were all at the service of the readiness and resource of mind which seemed to lie charactered in the glances of his eyes. On the other hand, the person of Caius was medium-sized, and the signs of habitual ease, indulgence, luxury and pleasure, were only too plainly stamped on his face, to the deep injury of its native nobleness and delicacy.

'Do you seek me?' said the latter.

'No – I seek the Prefect. Not at the camp, I was directed to follow him here. No porter in the lodge to tell me – no slave visible. I found a light here – if I have intruded I am grieved, but you paid no attention to my knock.'

'Sejanus has left some time ago – a long time.'

'Whither, then, Caius, do you know?'

'No – nor care – faith not I!' was the careless and somewhat uncourteous answer.

'You have travelled far?' broke in Plautia's voice; deeper, softer, and more melodious than hitherto.

'I have, Plautia, and I trust the Prefect will not lead me much farther.'

'Whence have you come? You are fatigued – I see it in your face. You must, then, have ridden a prodigious distance; for your fame, as a horseman, has reached even me. You are a very centaur, so rumour tells me.'

'Rumour tells many idle and foolish things, but, as I have posted fifty leagues without stopping, save to change horses, since my last brief resting-place, I may claim to feel somewhat weary. I am thirsty too – with your leave, I will drink a cup of wine with infinite relish.'

He turned toward the sideboard where the wine-flagons stood; but, ere he could take a second step, she glided past him, and selecting one of the vessels, raised it with her own hands. Caius looked on and gnawed his lip.

'I will be my own cupbearer,' cried the Centurion; 'you do me too much honour, lady.'

As he relieved her of the pitcher, he would have been scarcely human not to have dwelt with admiration on her brilliant beauty, which was unusually flushed and animated. She parted with the jar, and, at the same time, flashed a glowing glance upon him

with her lustrous eyes.

He turned round from those dangerous orbs to fill with the wine the nearest cup which stood on the table. The eyes of his brother Caius suddenly gleamed with a hard, steel-like glint, and his face turned, simultaneously, deathly white. Lucius half turned as he raised to drink from the cup he had filled. The bumper had barely reached his lips when a scream burst from the throat of Plautia. With the cry she sprang forward and dashed the vessel from his hand on to the polished floor. The wine splashed them both and the goblet fell with such violence as to be dented. It was that one which had already played such a fatal part that night.

Transfixed with astonishment the Centurion gazed upon the beautiful girl, whose face crimsoned and paled, and whose bosom heaved and fell tumultuously.

'It was the cup – the poisoned cup!' ejaculated she.

'The poisoned cup!' cried he, looking with increased surprise from one to the other.

A terrible revulsion of feeling swept through, and shook, the frame of the elder Martialis. At the look of his brother he gave a hysterical gasp and dropped his head into his hands.

Plautia pointed to the fallen goblet with an impressive gesture, and said, 'It has already taken the life of one man this night. Had you drunk therefrom you would have shared his fate. That cup yet reeks of the fatal drug. Though I saw you not fill it, fortune be praised that my poor eyes perceived it ere your lips touched its horrid brim.'

'How, the death of a man?' repeated the bewildered Centurion.

'Even so! From that very cup at the close of this night's feast,' said she, waving her hand over the glittering disorder of the table, 'Apicius, of his own will, drank a poisoned draught.'

The young soldier was horror-struck. He looked around and shuddered.

'Apicius – poisoned himself!' he muttered. 'This is a dreadful tale – and for what reason, in the name of the gods?'

'Your brother can tell you better than I – he was his bosom friend, and, moreover, was present,' answered Plautia, turning away, as if to hide a sudden burst of feeling.

'Nay!' said Lucius hastily, and with deep sympathy, 'I will trouble you no more with my presence. I will learn, in sad time enough, the terrible tale – I would spare you the pain of a fresh recital. Alas, I dreamt not what had happened, and yet I remarked it strange that Apicius was not here. You will pardon me, Plautia. 'Tis a sudden and bitter blow – farewell!'

He gathered up his cloak, and, as he turned to the door, he spurned the goblet with his foot, muttering some expressions of abhorrence and disgust.

'Stay, Centurion,' said Plautia, 'go not without quenching your thirst. If I was lucky enough to rob you of your first draught, here is wine enough, and of the purest.'

While she spoke, she quickly filled another drinking vessel with wine and water.

'See,' she said, coming forward with it, 'I will be answerable for it. Drink without fear – I will be your taster.'

She accordingly drank two or three mouthfuls and offered him the ample remainder. He drank as briefly as herself and merely out of courtesy.

'You said you were thirsty.'

'I *was*. It seems to have left me.'

'Had you drunk before, you would have been, now, far beyond all thirst on earth.'

'I am indebted to your keen eye and prompt arm for my life, therefore. I trust chance may enable me, some day, to repay the debt.'

'Tush, Centurion, you are jesting. You, the Pretorian Achilles, acknowledging to the hand of a weak girl!'

The young man bowed coldly, for the style of the speech was not very agreeable to his mind.

'Farewell, Plautia. I trust you may speedily find comfort in your affliction. Do you come, brother? My way lies with yours for a space.'

Caius shook his head.

'Nay!' said Plautia, 'he must remain, where my brother hath left him, in charge. But I will beg your escort, Centurion, as far as you will give it, through the streets; for I came hither in haste, with scarce a follower.'

'That shall be my task, Plautia. It belongs to me rather than to him,' interposed Caius, starting up fiercely.

'To whomsoever I choose to give it,' said the lady, with an accent of supreme haughtiness.

'It must be as Caius says, nevertheless,' observed the Centurion quickly. 'I have that about me which must be delivered without further delay, and I have dallied too long already. Forgive me the discourtesy, lady, for my duty must take me back to the camp, in such direction and haste as would prove inconvenient to you. It is unavoidable, and I must risk your displeasure in deference to my business. Farewell!'

Bowing toward her, the Pretorian abruptly left the apartment and the house. Plautia bit her lip and clenched her hand; and, when the voice of Caius uttered some remark, she turned suddenly and fiercely upon him. She shot a basilisk glance upon him and pointed, without a word, to the jewelled cup on the floor. His cheek paled and his eyes wavered, and finally fell before the incisive eloquence of her look and gesture.

He essayed to speak and move toward her, but an imperious wave of her hand rooted him to his place in confusion. The next instant she was gone, and he was left, once more alone, to wrestle with the tortures of remorse, jealousy, and despair, which writhed together on the cold background of his grief.

His brother, on quitting the gloomy house of Apicius, turned his tireless steps toward the permanent fortified camp, or barracks, which had been formed by the present emperor to accommodate the household troops, on the north-east edge of the city, beyond the slope of the Viminal and Esquiline and

the wall of Servius. His road lay tolerably straight across the city, under the Carinae, partly through the Subura, and finally along the Vicus Patricius, which followed the valley between the Esquiline and Viminal hills. Then, directly in front of him, rose the ramparts and walls which harboured about ten thousand horse and foot.

The origin of these celebrated troops is said to rest with Scipio Africanus, who, in the first instance, formed a company of picked men to guard his person. This cohort was exempted from all other duty and was granted larger pay. Their number was increased from time to time, until the Emperor Augustus established them in cohorts of a thousand men each, horse and foot, to protect his power and person. They were chosen only from Italy and the old colonies, and we have already hinted at their superior privileges, pay, and equipment. Careful to avoid any appearance of despotism, Augustus retained only a small portion of them in Rome, and scattered the rest among the neighbouring towns. It remained for the fears or craft of the Emperor, his successor, from whom our young Centurion now bore a despatch in his breast, to assemble them all into one body within their strong, fortified camp in Rome, thus fairly starting them on their future path, in which they rivalled the janissaries of the eastern emperors in making and unmaking the rulers of the empire.

Of these troops Sejanus was the commander, and entering the camp, the Centurion proceeded to his quarters to find, to his

satisfaction, that his search was at an end.

Sejanus was sitting thoughtfully in a chair, with his brows contracted and deep lines furrowing his forehead.

'Ah, Martialis!' he cried eagerly, as his eyes rested on the form of his officer; 'I heard you had returned.'

'I followed you, Prefect, to the Palatine,' replied Lucius.

'To the Palatine! Ah, then you must know what has happened there. It will be all over Rome to-morrow. You have a despatch?'

He held out his hand, and the Centurion placed a sealed letter therein.

Turning his back on the messenger, the Prefect tore open the cover and read the contents by the soft light of a silver lamp, which barely illuminated the luxurious apartment. Pleasure and delight straightway broke over his face like the first light of dawn shooting athwart the dark earth. He perused the epistle twice, and smoothed his countenance ere he turned to the waiting Centurion.

'You have been an expeditious courier, as usual, my Lucius,' he said, in a brisk, elated tone. 'When did you leave Capreae?'

Martialis related the time and particulars of his journey.

'Thou art made of iron, I verily believe,' returned the Prefect smilingly; 'after such fatigue I am loth to use thee again. I work thee too hard; but there is another service imminent, and I would have none perform it but whom I could trust.'

'I am ready. What fatigue I feel will pass with a night's rest,' answered his officer.

'What should I do without thee? It is the willing horse gets ever the most work; but this matter is particular.'

Then before he told his officer the nature of the service required, he proceeded to put to him a number of questions in relation to his experiences during his mission. When he had exhausted his ingenuity concerning everything he could think of, pertaining to matters in the imperial household, he relapsed into silent reflection for a few minutes, during which he paced up and down the room.

'Centurion!' he said, at length, 'Drusus leaves Capreae and comes to Rome shortly. To-morrow, after nightfall, take a troop of twenty men and ride to Ostia. Drusus will arrive there in a galley. You must stop it and arrest him. Bring him to Rome, under guard, at night, and place him in charge of the keeper of the palace on the Palatine. All will be in readiness to receive him. Be careful and secret. Leave and enter the city by night; and, when you have completed your mission, hasten to report the same to me without delay. Now to bed!'

Martialis was not loth to obey, and, seeking his room, was in a few minutes sleeping the profound slumber of tired limbs, an easy conscience, and bright hopes.

CHAPTER V

From the house of Apicius and the spectacle of his sudden and awful end Sejanus had first gone to the modest abode of Domitius Afer. There they remained closeted by themselves, engaged in earnest conversation, until shortly before the meeting of the Prefect and his officer, as described.

Previous to this Afer had quietly sent off a message to Cestus by the Greek Erotion. That astute youth threaded the inmost haunts and foul intricacies of the Subura with sure confidence, and succeeded in discovering the object of his search, deluged with wine, and revelling in the heat of a brutal orgy, amid ruffians and women of the lowest type. Assailed by the obscene chorus of this satanic crew, the Greek, with the readiness and aptness of his race, exchanged witticisms with a fluency and smartness which equalled, if not exceeded, their own. Seizing an opportunity, he whispered into the ear of the intoxicated Cestus the instruction to meet his master in the gardens of Maecenas, on the following morning, at a particular spot, at a particular hour. The fellow, with a leer, nodded and agreed, and the young slave departed to report the result of his errand.

The gardens of Maecenas were on the north-eastern side of the Esquiline, nor must the term gardens be accepted in the modern sense; for, to suppose that they were ornamental grounds, and duly kept in order by a staff of servants, would be misleading.

They seemed to be, and there were many such in Rome, open places for the common recreation and airings of the populace. These, to which Afer repaired to keep his appointment with Cestus, had been formed by the celebrated patron of literature and art, upon ground which, hitherto, had held bad repute, as the burial-place of the lowest orders of the people. It seems, even, to have been no uncommon matter for the bodies to be thrown down and left without any covering of earth whatever. To clear this charnel ground, and change it from a horrid repository of mouldering bones and putrefying flesh into a pleasant lounge for the people, was one of the generous works of Maecenas. It lay outside, and adjoining, the ring wall of Servius, and we may conclude the place was not altogether denuded of its sepulchral memories, since it was here that Canidia, the witch of Horace, came to perform her incantations, and invoke the shades of the dead amongst the tombs.

Though this particular part without the wall had the most need of purifying measures, and bore the most infamous memories, it did not form the whole extent of the gardens. They extended within the wall, for a certain distance along the hill, toward the city. Near this extremity was situated the noble mansion of Maecenas himself, commanding a fine prospect of the city from its windows.

Past this dwelling, and at every step treading on ground so often pressed by the famous Roman poet and his patron, Afer took his way to await the arrival of Cestus. He passed through

the Esquiline Gate of the huge rampart of Servius, and entered the outer portion of the gardens. It was the busy time of labour, and the morning itself was somewhat raw and chilly, so that very few individuals were to be seen scattered here and there over the open park. The few who did loiter about were of the class that honest labour could well spare.

In the portion of this large tract which had been devoted to the burial of the dead, were still many tombs scattered up and down. They were grass-grown, neglected, weather-beaten, and still more defaced by the climbings, scramblings, and mischievous peltings of children and youths. Among them was one of larger size and more pretentious appearance than any other. It was circular in shape, and constructed of massive masonry, which defied all attempts at destruction. It bore no inscription, and was conspicuous for nothing but its superior bulk. There was a tradition among the people of the neighbourhood, that it marked the spot where an erring scion of a noble house had sunk so low as to meet death and burial as a common malefactor, in days past when the place was reserved for the wretched fate of the dregs of pauperism and crime. Though disowned by his outraged family during his depraved life, the death of the reprobate aroused the inextinguishable feelings of kinship. Family pride could not leave even this dishonoured member without some mark of attention due to his birth, if to nothing else; but no chisel was suffered to raise a letter or figure on the tomb which arose. Darkness and oblivion were the fittest shrouds of disgrace, and the muteness

of the masonry lent a mysterious affirmation of the legend to the minds of posterity.

It was to this prominent object the knight bent his way across the park-like gardens in the raw morning air. With many backward glances in search of the yet invisible Cestus, he finally reached the mysterious, moss-grown pile of stones, and after pacing up and down the grass for some time, with fitful and angry mutterings on the laggard's account, he began to think of returning. Stray passengers came and went, with a solitary, melancholy air, across the bleak, empty track, but still no form answering to the powerful frame of the Suburan made its appearance.

'The drunken fool has either not slept off his debauch or else not ended it,' said Afer angrily to himself, turning his eyes for the twentieth time toward the Esquiline Gate. 'A fine thing if I am to wait in the damp grass for a vagabond; I'll go back: maybe I shall meet him on the way.'

The expectation was realised. He had only gone a very short distance when his eyes were gladdened by the expected figure of the Suburan, who came up breathing hurriedly. Afer surveyed his bloodshot eyes and disordered dress, his uncombed locks, and general hang-dog, not to say ferocious, aspect, with which a night of revelry, succeeded by very brief slumbers, had endowed him.

'Good-morrow!' said the knight, in reply to salutations and apologies. 'I perceive you have succeeded in appeasing your ravenous appetite, my Cestus – I see it in your face. You have

also drunk wine to aid digestion, which has probably interfered with your sleep.'

'It is the danger of the ravenous stomach that it overloads itself when it gets the opportunity,' replied Cestus, with a grin and a hiccough.

'You are drunk yet, my good fellow!' proceeded the knight calmly.

'Nay, patron, I am sober enough to walk steadily and keep a secret. Besides, I found that the aediles, or the gods, have caused the fountain of Orpheus to play again this morning; so that, when I passed it just now, I dipped my head into his clear basin, which makes me as fresh as a young girl meeting sunrise.'

'You have that appearance. Did you accept the renewed flow of the fountain this morning as a favourable omen, reversing that of yesterday?'

'I never thought of it in one way or another, patron. I was in too great haste and concern lest I should keep your worship waiting.'

'You are very considerate! Taking the circumstances of your case into account, I am of the opinion that you have carried out this appointment with remarkable credit. Do you know why I have brought you here?'

'Something which needs only two pairs of ears,' said Cestus, with a swift glance around at the deserted fields.

'Shrewd as ever, Cestus! I mean to unfold a plan by which we may both make our fortunes. Am I to rely on your perfect faith, secrecy, and promptness as before?'

'Patron, you are the cleverest man in Rome, and I would not quit you to serve the greatest. Whenever you call upon me to help you I come instanter, knowing that the business will be something clever and instructive. The pleasure of serving you, therefore, has as much weight with me as the pay – it has indeed.'

'The fluency and readiness of your language will never leave you; it is the admirable fruit of your residence with a poet. It has already been of immense service to you; but for the present it will be sufficient for you to be brief and to the point. I wish to know if you are prepared to carry out my wishes, even though they may incur some desperate action, which, if discovered, would end most certainly in the executioner's axe?'

'I should like to hear more particulars, patron – I would be pleased to do anything with a fair show of safety; but, at the same time, I have no desire to be a bull-headed fool.'

'I think, with ordinary precautions, there will be not much danger. The streets of the city are, at night-time, as a rule, dark and secret enough for a thrust or two, and an easy departure before the watch decides to interfere.'

'Oh, if that is all, I make no doubt but that we shall soon come to terms,' said Cestus, with a sinister smile on his bristly lips. 'Is it desired of me to meet by chance, or to escort some friend of my noble patron home – ?'

'To Hades!'

'Exactly,' rejoined the Suburan, grinning.

'Concerning your reward, I shall require you to name a lump

sum, and to promise, thereafter, to trouble me no more.'

'That means dismissing me from your worship's employ.'

'I shall never lose sight of you, believe me,' said the knight, with a cold smile.

'I know your goodness has always been most anxious for my welfare,' returned Cestus ironically.

'What figure would you consider sufficient to reward you for the pangs of conscience, and the risks incurred, by ending the life of a respectable member of society?'

'The pay would vary according to the possible amount of hue and cry raised by those belonging to the deceased,' said Cestus cunningly. 'For an ordinary citizen I would not demand so much as for a person of rank and importance.'

Afer smiled.

'To what degree of boldness would five hundred sestertia inspire you?' he asked calmly.

'What!' almost yelled the ruffian. His eyes stared as if to start from his head, and his breath came in gasps, as though he had been plunged into ice-cold water. 'Five hu – five hundred sestertia! Patron – why – for that you might bid me tap a senator, a consul – Sejanus – Caesar himself.'

'Enough!' replied Afer. 'I am glad you consider the terms liberal; I myself am sure of it. You will not have the desperate office of harming any one of those you have mentioned.'

'So much the better! Patron, you are the easiest of masters.'

'It is a bargain then – you will be prompt, faithful, and secret?'

'Have I ever failed?'

'I cannot remember that you have; it is to your interest, as to mine, to remain so trustworthy. I have told you that before, and your common-sense cannot but perceive it. Five hundred sestertia are not to be picked up every day for the light labour of a few hours, together with the simple task of keeping one's mouth shut concerning the matter. You are not such a fool, I think, as to destroy a profitable business connection, Cestus.'

'You speak truly indeed, noble Afer – have no fear therefore. I am ready to receive your commands and instructions for the business.'

'The first is this,' said the knight emphatically, 'that from the first moment, until the affair is satisfactorily settled, you abstain from the wine-pot.'

'I will swear by the aqueducts, patron.'

'Good! You will require, say, three stout fellows to help you. You will select them and pay them a certain sum, and tell them no more than that they are to help in a highway theft. You can, no doubt, find individuals who are accustomed to such work.'

'Leave that to me. But their pay, patron?'

'It shall be exclusive of your own, and shall be discharged by me, my careful Cestus. They need not cost much.'

'Certainly not! I have a job in hand – I want them to help me, and I pay them so much. I need not say another word, and they will not ask a question.'

'Exactly! You comprehend me perfectly. It is a positive

pleasure to arrange details with an intelligent person like yourself, Cestus.'

'You are flattering, patron. Who is this individual who is so unfortunate as to stand in your displeasure?'

'I repeat it is a pleasure to do business with you, Cestus,' resumed Afer calmly. 'Previous to the actual execution of your task, I shall require you to act a little part. I shall require you, in fact, to clean and adorn yourself in order to make a visit.'

'Oh, oh!' murmured Cestus doubtfully.

'You are to be a decoy duck of the very best plumage, for a short time. You will make an excellent one. Your poetical training will stand in excellent stead. Indeed, there is no telling, but what the part will give a new turn to your genius. We shall be seeing you treading the stage some day.'

'You are pleased to jest, noble patron, instead of allowing me to reflect whether this part of the business is within my power or not to carry out.'

'I have no anxiety on that point, Cestus. Listen! You will have to improve your outward appearance, in order to represent an honest mechanic in his holiday clothes – that is, as nearly as possible. That done, you will have to go as far as the Janiculum and ask an audience of a certain patrician who dwells there. He had once a granddaughter who was lost when a child.'

'Ah, now I smell a rat! You are going to outdo yourself,' cried Cestus eagerly.

'You understand, I perceive. You are merely to go to this

gentleman with a story, told in your best language and style, that you are a messenger from a repentant man on his deathbed, who confesses that he formerly stole the child. The dying man is most anxious for an interview with the gentleman he has wronged, for the purpose of imploring his pardon and revealing the whereabouts and position of the girl, who, he says, is yet living. When you have succeeded in arousing the gentleman's interest and eagerness, as you doubtless will, he will almost surely send you to me. I shall not be in Rome, and shall be careful to let him know beforehand. He will, therefore, recollect himself, and, as we may hope, decide to accompany you to this dying man. All this must be timed to fall tolerably late at night, which will also give the affair all the more appearance of genuineness. On the way to that dying man my worthy uncle must be left by the roadside, for ever oblivious of missing child and present grief.'

'By Pluto!' cried the Suburan, smiting his thigh in delight and admiration, 'the very thing I advised you only yesterday. I marvel you have not done this before; but then your worship is so merciful. However, better late than never, and it was bound to come at some time. Bacchus, what a cunning plan! Fate cut you out for a great man, and a thousand Fabricii could not stay you.'

'No names – walls have ears!' said the knight sternly.

'True,' replied Cestus. 'It was my delight which let it slip. *Euge*, Cestus! Five hundred sestertia for simply helping an old man on the road to the Elysian fields – why, patron, the pay is so princely, and the task so light, that I feel somewhat ashamed of accepting

the terms.'

'You are perfectly at liberty to return whatever your conscience considers to be superfluous,' remarked Afer.

'Well, we will see how matters turn out,' answered Cestus, with a grin. 'No doubt when the sad news is brought to your wondering ears, you will be in a dreadful state of mind, and will lay the bloodhounds on the track of the villains all over the city?'

'It may, very probably, be necessary to act in some such way,' responded the knight, with a shadowy smile. 'Let me see,' he murmured, as he passed his hand over his brow, and remained in deep thought for a few moments; 'come to-night, and we will arrange everything.'

'To-night!'

'And, Cestus, be secret; and beware of the wine-pot.'

'Never fear; it is only when Cestus is idle that he amuses himself in that way. Give him work, and work to some purpose, like this, and his head remains clear as water – and when your honour lays the plan there is no more to be added.'

'Engage your comrades to-day. To-morrow I shall go to Tibur – the day after to-morrow meet me at the Sublician Bridge at nightfall.'

'But I shall see you to-night, as you said?'

'Yes; and on the evening of the day after to-morrow I will be at the Sublician Bridge. It will involve much riding, but I can be nigh you and yet return to Tivoli before morning breaks.'

Cestus held up his hands in affected admiration.

'You are inspired, patron! But hold; how if the old man will not come forth with me? What then comes of all this fine scheme?'

'Nothing,' replied Afer calmly. 'We shall have to wait and devise again.'

'I care not for this complicated notion. I prefer to have not so many cooks to the broth. There is nothing so sure, and so easy, as a little dust of a certain kind in his wine or meat.'

The knight shook his head.

'It is too effective, my Cestus, and too common. It would not fail to be talked about. No; our rough footpads leave the least suspicion.'

'Well, you are perhaps right; for when the watchmen find the old man in the gutter next morning, it will be said that he met his end at the hands of thieves, who gave him a knock a little too heavy – not the first since this good city was built.'

Afer nodded and said,

'Come to-night, as I bade you.'

'I will. Am I not to have the honour of following you toward the city?'

'No,' replied the knight, turning away; 'I go to the camp. Be discreet – this will make us or mar us.'

Cestus bowed and loitered away leisurely in the direction of the Esquiline Gate, whilst Afer walked quickly toward the Viminal Plain, on the border of which lay the ramparts of the Pretorian camp.

CHAPTER VI

Whilst this conversation, which we have related, was passing between Afer and his client, a small coasting vessel was ascending the river Tiber, making slow headway against the current. In the little poop-house, along with the captain of the craft, was standing Masthlion, an interested observer of all that passed within view, as they wound up the famous stream.

To go back a little. We left the potter retiring to rest full of a determination to proceed to Rome. He arose next morning with a mind unchanged, and soon after dawn took his way to the cliffs. As he was about to set his foot to descend the steps which led down to the Marina, the head of an ascending individual showed up above the level. He was a short, thick-set man, with a mahogany complexion, shaggy beard and moustache. Each made an exclamation and then shook hands.

'I was coming with no other reason than to seek tidings of you, Silo.'

'Good! – here I am myself, Masthlion.'

'I thought it about your time. Are you for the Tiber?'

'Direct.'

'When?'

'At noon, or before. I don't want to lose this wind,' said the sailor, casting his eye to the eastward.

'I have business in Rome – give me a passage.'

'In Rome! You? What has bitten you? Come, and welcome.'

'I will come about noon then.'

'An hour before, Masthlion; and if I want thee before that I will send.'

The potter went home, and after gathering a few articles of clothing and food together in a wallet, he quietly resumed work until the time came for departure. During this period Neæra glided into the workshop. A new and radiant expression beamed on her face and sparkled in her beautiful gray eyes. The delicate colour of her cheek was deeper. An unconscious smile seemed to play on her lips, as though responding to the springs of joy and hope within. The loosely-girded tunic of coarse, poor fabric could not hide the graceful curves of her lithe figure, which promised a splendid maturity. Her household work had caused her to tuck up her sleeves, and her revealed arms and wrists gleamed white and round. Her loveliness seemed to the potter literally to bloom afresh as he glanced at her.

'Father,' said she, 'you are going to Rome?'

'I am, child, and Silo's felucca sails by noon at the latest,' he answered, without raising his head.

'You are going because of me, father?' she continued, drawing nearer.

He did not answer.

'It is I who am sending you to Rome, father?'

'You have said it, child. But I shall, at the same time, satisfy a lifelong desire to see the great city; and I may be able, likewise,

to pick up a hint or two from the Roman shops.'

'As far as I am concerned, father, you need not give yourself the trouble.'

'Wherefore?' asked the potter, in doubt as to her meaning.

'Because I can save you the journey.'

Masthlion smiled.

'You go to seek to know whether Lucius be a true man or false,' she continued, with animation and a heightened colour; 'you may stay at home, for I can tell you.'

'And whence did you gain the knowledge I am truly in want of, child?' he said.

'Here!' she answered proudly, as she laid her hand over her heart.

A smile of admiration, and yet compassionate, rested on her father's lips, as he gazed into her kindling eyes, and watched the glowing hues spread over her exquisite face. New graces, fresh nobility and dignity, unknown before, seemed to blossom forth upon the maiden beneath his wondering eyes. His acute brain comprehended the change; it was no longer the child, but the woman.

'The foolish heart is so often mistaken, Neæra,' he said, touched by her simple faith; 'it would not be wise to trust entirely thereto.'

But she only shook her head.

'Facts are against you,' he continued; 'how many have acted from their impulse and have lived to use their eyes and minds

soberly afterwards? But no, – no more of that! I had rather try and bale the bed of the sea dry than attempt to cure a lovesick girl of her folly. Meanwhile, I shall go to Rome, as I intended, and try to satisfy my own mind, after the fashion of cold, heartless men.'

'You expect to come back with bad news of Lucius, and thus forbid me to think of him again.'

'That I never said.'

'No, but you think it. I warn you that you will be disappointed, and that your journey will go for nothing.'

As she said this, she wound her arms caressingly round his neck, and then slipped from the room.

Masthlion's eyes dulled, as though a reflected gleam had vanished, and, heaving a sigh, he meditatively pursued his work. It was about an hour before noon when a young urchin made his appearance with a message from Silo, to hasten him on board, without delay. He went, accompanied by his wife and Neæra; and as soon as he set foot on board the coaster, his impatient friend cast off and hoisted sail.

The fair wind blew, and Silo, the sturdy skipper, was thoroughly amiable. A fair wind and a good cargo, homeward bound, would render even a nautical Caliban gracious.

Next morning they passed round the long mole, or breakwater, of the port of Ostia, which lay at the mouth of the Tiber, and, thereon, Masthlion's eyes noticed a tall soldierly figure, standing and evidently watching them keenly. Beneath the closely wrapped cloak the surprised potter recognised the proportions

and carriage of his daughter's lover, and was even close enough to make out, or fancy he did, the young man's features, beneath his polished crested helmet. Assuring himself on this point, the potter shrank farther within the cover of the poop-house, until all danger of recognition had passed.

Toward evening they arrived at their destination, which was the emporium of Rome, situated under the shadow of the Aventine Mount. Thus the Surrentine found himself, at once, in the midst of one of the busiest localities of the imperial city. Wharves lined the river, and warehouses extended along the banks. Here were the corn, the timber, the marble, the stone, the thousand species of merchandise from the ends of the earth landed and stored. And hither, to the markets, assembled the buyers and sellers thereof. The air was full of the noise and bustle on shore and ship. Waggons rumbled and clattered to and fro, and weather-beaten seamen abounded. Through the maze Silo guided Masthlion, whose provincial senses were oppressed and weighted by the unaccustomed roar and bustle into which he had been suddenly plunged, and the shipmaster, with amused glances at his wondering companion, hurried him along the river-side, nearly as far as the Trigeminan Gate. Here, not far from the spot where stood the altar of Evander, the oldest legendary monument of Rome, the sailor entered a tavern. It was an old building, with the unmistakable evidences of a substantial reputation; for it was well filled with customers, and was alive with all the bustle of a flourishing business. To the hard-faced, keen-eyed proprietor

of this establishment, who greeted Silo with familiarity, the shipmaster presented his friend, in need of comfortable lodgings for a time, and having seen him comfortably bestowed, returned to the business of his coaster and cargo.

After Masthlion was satisfied with a good meal, a young lad, the son of the landlord, was commissioned to guide him, on a stroll through the adjacent parts of the city, as far as the decreasing light of day would allow. On returning, he found his friend Silo released from his engagements, and together they passed the evening.

'Know you anything of the Pretorians?' asked Masthlion of the innkeeper, ere he retired to his bed.

'I know they are camped on the far side of the city, beyond the Viminal,' replied the lusty-tongued publican, 'I know that Caesar brought them there some years ago, and that Sejanus is their Prefect – who is, between ourselves, you know, a greater man in Rome than Caesar himself. All this I know, and what is left is, that they are a set of overpaid, underworked, overdressed, conceited, stuck-up, strutting puppies. That's about as much as I can tell you of them.'

'Ah!' said Masthlion, somewhat disheartened by these bluff, energetic words, which were delivered with a readiness and confidence, as if expressing a generally received opinion; 'then have you in Rome a poet by name Balbus?'

'A poet named Balbus!' repeated the host, with a comical look; 'faith, but poetry is a trade I never meddled with, and I

am on the wrong side of the Aventine, where sailors and traders swarm, and not poets. I doubt not, worthy Masthlion, that poets abound in Rome, for Rome is a very large place, I warrant you. But you must go and seek them elsewhere. What, gentlemen! does any one know of a poet named Balbus in Rome?' cried he abruptly, putting his head inside of a room tolerably well filled with drinkers.

A laugh arose at the question. 'North, south, east, or west?' cried one.

'Scarce as gladiators,' shouted another; 'the times have starved them.'

'Nothing can starve them – the poets, I mean,' answered a thin dry voice, which seemed to quell the merriment for a space, 'they are as thick as bees in the porticoes and baths of Agrippa. Your Balbus, not being there, landlord, enter the bookshops and you will find as many more, reading their own books, since nobody else will. You will find plenty of Balbi, be assured, but no poets – Horace was the last – '

Laughter drowned the remainder of his speech, and the landlord withdrew his head into the passage, where Masthlion was awaiting.

'Balbus the poet does not seem to be very well known,' he said to the potter. 'But what do these rough swinkers know of these things any more than myself? Nevertheless, he says true, and you might do worse than inquire at the bookshops, the baths and porticoes, where the men of the calamus and inkpot love

to air the wit they have scraped together by lamplight in their garrets at home.'

The potter, thereupon, retired with an uneasy feeling of helplessness and hopelessness filling his mind, at least as far as regarded Balbus.

Next morning he sallied forth soon after dawn, determined to make the utmost use of his time. He made an arrangement, by which he was again to have the services of his young guide of the previous evening, feeling that he would thus save himself much time and labour. In about three hours' time he had walked a long distance. He had passed along the principal streets in the centre of the city. He had gazed at the shops and buildings. He had mounted the Palatine and Capitoline Hills; had viewed many temples, porticoes and mansions, and from a lofty point had surveyed the city, spread below, with delight and admiration. Then, deeming it time to be about his business, he gave the order to proceed to the Pretorian camp.

CHAPTER VII

In a luxuriously fitted room, Aelius Sejanus, the Prefect, was alone, busily engaged with his thoughts and pen.

He had inherited his father's command; but, unlike his father, his absorbing lust of power scorned to be bounded by his office. His were the persuasions, by which the Emperor had been led to gather the cohorts of the Guards together into one united body. Scattered about in isolated garrisons, his subtle, aspiring spirit saw a great power broken and nerveless. Here he held them under his hand, while he showered largesses, rewards, promotions, and fair words upon them liberally. Popularity with these picked troops was the life and strength of his ambition. They were, at once, the ground-work and leverage of his onward steps, if ever in need of a bold stroke.

Far around lay the streets and barracks of his great camp, swarming with thousands, and, in the midst, this dark-thoughted, plotting mind was silently hewing its path toward the goal of its hopes. On the table lay a long sheet of paper, and on the paper a list of names was being laboriously compiled. His brows were closely knit, and he paced the apartment incessantly. As his reflections became matured he sat down to write, and then, springing up again, he resumed the monotony of his walk. Thus, at slow intervals, name after name was added to the list on the paper; and, every now and then, he would stop at the end of

his walk, and peer through a chink of the curtain across the entrance to the ante-chamber, where a Pretorian was on guard, in full panoply of helmet, cuirass, and buckler. There was that in the person and manner of the Prefect which had succeeded, at least to all outward appearance, in winning over such a profound, suspicious mind even as that of Tiberius, his master. Nature had endowed him with a very formidable combination of qualities to be fired with a burning ambition. With a handsome and imposing exterior, energy of mind, activity of body, a plausible tongue, and insinuating manners, this man was dangerous enough. But when the cold subtlety of his brain and the devouring fire of his heart were unhampered by scruple or remorse he became terrible. No tiger more murderous when stealth and craft had failed; for he hesitated not to strike at the life of the man in his path through the honour of the wife. He could glide to the crime of murder through the guilty excitement and pleasure of female conquest and debauchery, and there he bottomed the depths of infamy and horror.

For what dread purpose was the steady lengthening of the list on the table? What dark scheme was developing behind that white forehead? The voice of the sentinel in the outer room broke upon his meditations, and he hastily slipped to the table and thrust the paper into a drawer. He had scarcely done so, when a voice in the ante-chamber called the name 'Titus Afer!'

'Enter, Afer!' replied Sejanus. 'I thought of you as breathing the pure air of Tibur.'

The knight accordingly entered the room. A large travelling-cloak enveloped his form, and a Phrygian cap covered his head. 'I am now on my way,' he answered; 'yesterday I was lazy, and remained at home. In the Baths of Faustus yesterday was Sabinus.'

'Ah!' said the Prefect.

'He grows no wiser, but indeed more rash and calumnious respecting you. I think it would be prudent to watch such a reckless fool; for even his spite and virulence might do mischief amongst some people. He loudly condemns you as being the bloodhound of the Germanici, and indeed is equally bold and noisy in accusing you of usurping the place of Caesar, and of misapplying your authority to your own ends. Such speeches have been heard before, but there are those whose ears are only too ready and willing to suck in such ravings.'

'You are quite right, Afer; Sabinus has about reached the end of his tether: he must be looked after,' said Sejanus, taking out his tablets and making a memorandum. 'I am right glad he has, at last, given vent to his ideas, so plainly in the presence of such an one as yourself, my friend. So you stayed your journey to tell me this? – it was kind.'

'Also to learn whether I can congratulate you on favourable news from Capreae.'

'Hush! not so loud, Afer!' replied the Prefect, raising his finger warningly; 'it will be time enough to speak freely of a matter when success is assured; then there is the better chance

of possible failure being buried in silence. I expect a courier any moment.'

'Indeed!'

'I have waited within doors until now for his arrival – what he will bring I cannot tell.'

'I could guess,' remarked Afer, with a courtly smile.

'Humph!' quoth the Prefect, shrugging his shoulders and smiling also.

At the same moment the sound of voices caught his ears, and he stepped to the curtain and looked into the ante-chamber. The courier he was so anxiously awaiting had just arrived, and the sentinel was advancing to announce the same.

'Ha!' exclaimed the Prefect, stepping into the ante-chamber, 'I expected you before this – your despatches!'

The courier unbuckled a stout leathern girdle which he wore underneath his tunic, and took out of a pouch, attached thereto, a packet, which he delivered into the eager hand of Sejanus.

'Wait!' said the latter briefly; and without returning to his chamber, he turned aside and broke the seals of the packet. With fingers trembling, and a heart eaten with excitement, he ran his eyes over the imperial missive. The next second his eyes flashed. With exultation written on every line of his handsome face he went back into the presence of Afer.

'Ah, – I knew it, – I was right!' remarked the latter, at the first glimpse of the Prefect's glowing visage. 'I give thee joy of thy noble Livia; and I congratulate myself that I am the first to do so.'

Sejanus grasped his client's hand, and fairly laughed out in the exuberance of his feelings.

'Enough, my Titus! This letter hath proved thee a good prophet. The daughter of Caesar is mine indeed, for Caesar himself declares it. Nay, more – I go to Capreae in a few days to claim her. So prepare, my friend, for thou must go along with me thither.'

'Willingly, and gladly, if you will tell me when.'

'Return within the week,' said the Prefect. He clapped his hands loudly, and a slave appeared.

'Bid the courier be ready to return to-morrow! Give him wine – and this!' he said, taking a small purse of money from the table and throwing it at the domestic's feet.

The slave picked it up, and said, 'There is a man without demands to see you, Prefect – a workman, by appearance.'

'What is his business?'

'He will not say – only that he has come from Surrentum to see you.'

'Admit him then, and the sentinel as well.'

The slave retired, and, in a few moments, the armed Pretorian made his appearance, ushering in our potter, whom we left on his way to the camp.

Sejanus gave him a hasty, but keen glance; and the potter, in his turn, surveyed the famous and dreaded Prefect with a fearless but respectful gaze. Bowing his square, sturdy frame, he waited to be addressed.

'Who and what are you, and what do you want with me?' asked Sejanus, skimming his glance furtively over the welcome letter which he had just received.

'My name is Masthlion, and I am a potter of Surrentum,' replied the other; 'and, as I venture to trouble you, noble sir, on a personal matter, concerning one of your officers, perhaps it would be prudent if this soldier did not hear it.'

Sejanus looked up in surprise, and regarded his visitor more curiously. With an amused look on his face, he nevertheless nodded to the sentinel, who silently retired from the room. The deep-set, expressive eyes of Masthlion then rested on Afer, who had picked up a book from the table, and was idly unrolling it.

'As your business is not of the State, perhaps my friend can remain?' said the Prefect sarcastically.

'No, Prefect, my business is not of the State,' replied the potter, 'but I have come seeking information respecting one of your Centurions, and you must judge whether it be right the noble knight hear it or not.'

'Know then, potter of Surrentum, that I do not enter into nor suffer the inquiries of any idle person with regard to my officers,' said Sejanus sternly.

'I will leave it to your generosity, when I tell you the circumstances which have brought me to make the request.'

'Let me hear!'

'I am only a poor man, earning my bread with the labour of my hands, yet the peace of my home, and the welfare of

those belonging to me, are as dear to me as to the noblest,' said Masthlion. 'I have a daughter, Prefect; all the more precious to me because she has no sister or brother – '

'Ah, I perceive,' uttered Sejanus, with the shadow of a smile curling his lips. 'Go on!'

'Ay – it is easily guessed!' replied Masthlion, 'and it needs few words. This Centurion of whom I speak, in passing through the town, saw my daughter. Since that time he has come more than once to visit her at my house. She has been called beautiful, Prefect, but she is not his equal. I bade her tell him so, and forbid him. On that he demanded her in marriage; but though she loves him, yet I will be satisfied that he is not one to deal lightly or carelessly by her, or I will not consent.'

'You have forgotten the name of the Centurion, which is indispensable,' said the Prefect; 'and yet I can only guess one.'

'His name is Martialis.'

'Even so! The Centurion may well not object to as many journeys as I can give him, and also prefer the land route to the sea – here is the explanation.'

Sejanus burst into a laugh, whilst Afer, who was seemingly immersed in his book, stroked his chin.

'Potter, you are right,' continued the Prefect. 'Men and women, to be prudent, should not marry out of their station. Your daughter must be a paragon of loveliness, or cleverness, or goodness, to have ensnared my Centurion.'

'She is such as she is, Prefect, and ensnares no one,' returned

Masthlion, with a frown of his shaggy eyebrows.

'Whichever way it be, if they have fallen in love with each other you may as well leave them to it, for you will be hard put to rule them,' laughed the commander. 'When a woman is truly in love she parts with what little forethought she had, and leaves her senses to find themselves in cooler days. As for Martialis, I can only tell thee, potter, he is not the man to change his mind lightly, or take away his hand when he has once set his grip.'

'I am sore beset,' said Masthlion sadly; 'in Surrentum I could know nothing; here in Rome I thought I might learn something.'

'The performance of the Centurion's duties is what concerns me; beyond that lies not within my province,' replied Sejanus.

'And yet it would be hard not to know something more,' sighed the potter.

'To conclude, you may go back to Surrentum with an easy mind as far as I know to the contrary,' said the Prefect, with signs of impatience. 'This seems to be a piece of lovers' folly on the part of the Centurion. If he is fool enough to marry your daughter, she may think herself lucky in her elevation. Many a man in his position, of gentle blood, would have proceeded differently. 'Tis pity none of his family remains to dissuade him from grafting such a poor scion on to their ancient stem.'

'I care nothing for that – I seek my daughter's happiness, not her position,' replied the potter proudly.

'Good! Then I know nothing more. Is the Centurion an acquaintance of yours, Titus?' cried Sejanus, turning to the

knight.

'No, I have not the honour,' answered Afer.

'Then, potter, you may take that as a strong assurance in his favour,' added the Prefect satirically.

'You are in the best of spirits,' remarked Afer, showing his white teeth.

'Now, potter, you can go,' said Sejanus; 'you have all I can give you – stay, how is your daughter named?'

'Neæra!' replied Masthlion.

'Then your girl Neæra will probably have her own way in the end in despite of you. But deprive me not of my Centurion between ye, or you shall lose my favour, I promise you. He is worth more to me than all the maids, wives, widows, and hags in Campania, honest or not – wait!'

He clapped his hands, and the same slave attended as before – a dark-skinned Nubian.

'Lygdus, is there not an old family friend of the Centurion Martialis, whom he visits on the Aventine?'

'Mamercus – near the temple of Diana,' replied the slave laconically.

'Go thither, potter, – Mamercus will serve your turn better than I,' said the Prefect, waving his hand and turning his back.

Masthlion followed the Nubian out of the apartment with a brighter countenance, and was quickly on his way to the Aventine.

'Your Centurion has caught your own complaint,' said Afer to

his patron jestingly.

'The gods confound it!' replied the Prefect, 'a wife will not improve his Centurionship. The fool! to saddle himself with a wife now – a red-faced, brawny-armed brat of a clay-moulder, most likely. As if there were no other arrangement; I'll try my persuasion. And so for Capreae, my Titus!'

'Whenever you are ready, Prefect.'

'Be back within four days.'

'No longer; and till then farewell – I leave you happy.'

'Farewell! Remember our friends at Tibur!'

'I will.'

Afer bowed, and left the Pretorian commander to ruminate with delight on his good fortune, and to indulge his mind with dreams, more intoxicating and glowing than ever, on the strength of the success of his last, and, perhaps, most important move.

At the gate of the camp, a light two-wheeled vehicle for rapid travelling, and drawn by a couple of handsome, speedy mules, was waiting for the knight. The two slaves, who formed on this occasion the modest retinue of the traveller, had been despatched on before.

After proceeding about nine miles from Rome, the hired vehicle was dismissed back to the city. A couple of hours before dusk Afer arrived, in a second carriage, at the outskirts of the ancient town of Fidenae, which stood on the steep banks of the Tiber, on the Salarian road, which led nearly due north from Rome. He had thus completed two sides of a triangle, and, as the

first shades of evening began to gather, he began to traverse the third side in a third conveyance. The road entered the Colline Gate in the Agger of Servius; when he reached that point the dusk was thick enough to prevent recognition. Here the knight descended and paid the driver his fee; then he drew the hood of his cloak over his head, and bent his steps towards the Sublician Bridge beneath the Aventine. In less than half an hour's rapid walking he arrived at his destination. The bridge was the oldest in Rome, and had been built by Ancus Martius, to connect the fortifications on the Janiculum with the city. It bore a sacred character, and was under especial care. Being constructed of wood, however, the increased traffic and burthens of the growing city began to overweight it. A stone bridge was then built close by, and the old one preserved as a venerable and sacred relic. In the proximity of these Afer loitered. It was now dark, and the feeble glimmering of two oil lamps, suspended in the gloom, denoted to passengers the foot of the modern bridge; its ancient fellow being buried in darkness. Across the river the lights of the Transtibertine portion of the city glimmered, extending up towards the slopes of the Janiculum Hill. Behind the knight the Aventine Mount arose with its answering gleams. The day's toil was over, but the night was yet young, and there was sufficient stir in the city to pervade the air with a dim hum of life, broken by the tread and voices of passers-by, and the rumble of some belated waggon. Stealing silently along the pitchy stream glided the light of an occasional vessel, its hull shrouded and invisible.

No one but the importunate beggars, sturdy, halt, and blind, who haunted the bridge and pestered the passengers, as yet kept the impatient knight company. Suddenly the figure of a man strode under the feeble glimmer of the lamps and bestowed a few hearty curses on the tribe of mendicants. Afer went up to him and laid his hand on his shoulder.

'Oh, oh!' said the new-comer in the voice of Cestus; 'it is you, patron!'

'It is yet too early,' replied Afer.

'There are yet a few arrangements to complete, which will take up a little time,' replied the Suburan.

'Come, then, let us about it at once; the old man retires early,' said the knight, and they disappeared in the darkness toward the Aventine.

CHAPTER VIII

Pleasantly situated on the commanding height of the Janiculum was the villa of Fabricius. More delightful in the enjoyment of its cool breezes during the summer heats, yet in winter or summer, the old ex-senator was seldom away from it for a whole day together. At times, however, he would yield to a desire to make the journey to visit his estates; but this was not often. His suburban villa, and not his birthplace, was the scene of his happiest days of prosperous domesticity. But that was all changed. A few select friends of old times he yet preserved and cherished. With these, and the serene consolations of a well-stocked library, he passed his uneventful days, in calm resignation, under the haunting sense of his loneliness. As he sat and brooded in the seclusion of his silent house, he conjured up the ghosts of former days; he listened to the well-remembered voices – he stirred, and all was gone again. And then, what painful sighs arose from his breast. Alas! how many such had those walls listened to!

On this evening Fabricius sat in his winter room, before a fire which burned brightly in a brazier on the ample hearth, for the October nights were chilly. His elbow rested on a small table, whereon were lying books and writing materials. But the old man's eyes were bent on the blazing logs, and his mind was far away in the past. The soft light of the silver lamp beside him

flooded over his face, and revealed every line and wrinkle, as sharply as the level rays of the setting sun display the seams and furrows on a mountain's breast. The native expression of courage and determination displayed by the high, bold curves of his features, was relaxed and overborne by an air of melancholy, so deep, that it seemed almost on the point of merging into actual tears had not the entrance of an old grizzled slave roused him from his reverie.

'What do you say, Natta?' he asked, not catching the domestic's announcement.

'There is a man awaiting in the porch, who wishes to see you.'

'What kind of a man?'

'A craftsman, I should say. He has something important to tell – so he says,' replied the old porter, with apparent sarcasm.

'Ay, ay, I know!' sighed Fabricius. 'No matter, bring him in.'

The slave retired, and reappeared with Cestus, washed, clean-shaved, and wearing coarse but clean garments, such as an artisan would reserve as his holiday attire. It was full two hours since Afer had tapped him on the shoulder at the bridge below. He entered with a deep obeisance and a well-feigned nervousness and awkwardness. Natta, the slave, thought proper to remain within the door, and keep a keen eye on the visitor.

The ex-senator's scrutiny did not, perhaps, beget the utmost confidence, to judge by the slight and almost imperceptible contraction of his eyebrows. There was that, evidently, in the broad Teutonic cast of face and small eyes of the burly Cestus

which soap and water and a razor could not remove.

The habitual current of a man's mind cannot, it is true, alter his features, but it charges them with an essence as readable as a printed page.

It was, therefore, the misfortune of the physiognomy of Cestus to leave no favourable impression, for he had not as yet opened his lips.

'You wish to see me,' said Fabricius.

'The noble Fabricius!' answered Cestus, with deep humility – perhaps too deep.

'I am he; your business?'

'So please you, noble sir, I am nothing but a poor labourer down at the river below there, and I would never have the boldness to trouble your worship, or to set my foot across the threshold of your palace, but that I come not of my own accord, but to befriend a mate of mine who is dying.' Cestus paused, and nervously fingered his belt.

'Well!' said Fabricius, 'go on! You have not come on your own account, but on that of a sick friend – what next?'

'It concerns you also, and I was told to tell it to you alone,' replied Cestus, with a glance at Natta. The shadow of a smile rested on the face of Fabricius as he signed to the slave to retire. Natta, however, feigned not to observe the motion, and did not move.

'You may go, Natta,' said his master, and the old porter had no alternative but to obey, which he did, with reluctant steps and

sour suspicious looks at the visitor.

'Now speak,' said Fabricius; 'I think I could guess at the nature of your message. Has it aught to do with a domestic matter of mine?'

'So please,' replied Cestus, 'I will tell you exactly what I was told to tell, for I know nothing more. Lupus – that is my friend – has been hurt to death by a block of marble which slipped upon him whilst it was being slung from the ship on to the quay. He sent for me to-night, and I did but clean myself and come straight to your palace. He said, "I did a deed some years ago which has lain heavy on my mind ever since – heavier even than that cursed block from Luna which fell upon me yesterday. I am going fast; there is no hope, and I must ease my mind. On the top of Janiculum there dwells a nobleman named Fabricius. Seek him, and bring him hither back with thee, that I may tell him what I did, for my mind torments me more than my crushed body. He had a granddaughter, a little child – a little goddess; I can tell him of that child – bid him come with haste! Fourteen years ago I stole her from his door and sold her. She yet lives – a slave!"'

In spite of himself; in spite of the numberless plausible tales and previous disappointments, Fabricius felt his heart beat violently, and a tremor seize his limbs. Cestus's small keen eyes noted the change of colour on his cheek.

'Fourteen years!' murmured Fabricius to himself; 'right almost to the very month; how could he know that if – alas, my little darling – my little Aurelia! shall I be fooled again?'

'I pray you, Fabricius, be speedy, out of pity for my poor comrade,' urged Cestus; 'he will soon be beyond reach. It was a sore sin against you, but your nobleness will pardon a dying man. And besides, you will forgive me, noble sir, for offering a suggestion of my own; if Lupus departs without seeing you, you may thus lose all chance of ever getting your lost grandchild again. Ah me, that one could do such a deed as rob a house of its sunshine for the sake of a few paltry sestertia!'

This was uttered in a sighing kind of *sotto voce*, and the old Senator, racked with doubt and eagerness, with hope and the fear of oft-repeated disappointment and disgust, passed his hand over his brow in poignant doubtfulness.

'Go to the Esquiline to my nephew – but no! I forgot; his Greek boy came hither t'other day to say he was going to Tibur for a space. Phœbus aid me! Where does this comrade of thine dwell?'

'Not far away, so please you,' answered Cestus; 'on the other side of the Aventine, nigh to the Ostian road.'

'It is late,' muttered Fabricius.

'It is,' observed the friend of Lupus, 'but Death is not particular as to time. In fact he seems to prefer the night-time. If Lupus live past midnight I shall wonder. Imagine, noble sir, a block of marble crushing poor flesh and bone – ugh, 'tis terrible!'

'You saw it?'

'I did – worse luck.'

'You are a labourer like him?'

'I am – see!'

The worthy labourer showed his hands. They had been specially rubbed and engrained with dirt before washing. So cleverly were they prepared, that they might have belonged to any hard-handed son of toil.

'Did your comrade never tell you of this theft before?'

'Never.'

'And what does he deserve, think you, if he have done as he says?' said Fabricius, speaking with agitation; 'taking away what to me was more precious than life itself. What harm had I ever done him? To sell the sweet child for a slave – oh!'

"Twas a crime indeed, and no fate too hard for him,' observed Cestus. 'But haste, I beseech you! The poor devil is dying; have pity on him, and serve yourself as well; for, as like as not, you may get your maid again. 'Tis all plain to me now. When I first knew Lupus, some twenty years ago, he was as blithe a fellow as ever stepped; and then he began to change. Ay, ay! It is plain enough to see now what weighed upon him.'

'Humph; do you say so?'

'That is easily vouched for by others than myself. Will you not come? or must I go back and tell him – '

'Faith, I am distraught. I know not – '

"Tis scarcely likely he would die with a lie on his lips, noble sir.'

'I will go with you,' said Fabricius, with a sudden determination. 'Go to the porch and wait! Natta, haste! Bid Pannicus, Cyrrha, and Crotus take their staves and go forth with

me to the Aventine. Fetch me my cloak and cap!'

'What, now – to-night?' demanded the astonished slave, who ran in at his master's call.

'Yes, now, this minute – haste!'

Now that his mind was made up the old man was burning with eagerness, and, ere long, he and his slaves were ready to depart.

In the meantime Cestus went to the porch and stood on the outer step. The moon was rising behind some heavy cloud-banks, and her effulgence shone dimly through the rifts. The great city lay stretched below, with its gleams peeping through the hazy gloom. In the uncertain light a form crept noiselessly up to the pillars of the porch, and whispered to the Suburan standing there.

'Well, is he coming?'

'Yes – take care; he is here!' replied Cestus, and the figure glided back into obscurity.

Fabricius, followed by the three slaves bearing lanterns, came forth.

'It is moonlight, Fabricius – the lanterns will be rather a hindrance than otherwise,' observed Cestus.

'It is moonlight truly, but not much as yet,' answered Fabricius; 'so until it mends we will carry our own light with us. Lead on, good fellow, with Pannicus, and we three will follow.'

Cestus did as he was told, cursing the lanterns in his heart. Pannicus walked by his side. Far enough behind to escape observation, the cloaked form, which had spoken to Cestus, dogged their steps like a stealthy tiger. They passed down the

hill and through the Transtibertine district to the river. After crossing the Sublician Bridge they proceeded to the gate of the Servian rampart called Trigemina, and then ascended the Aventine Mount by the Publician Road.

In the earlier times of the city this hill had been regarded as ill-omened. It had been occupied chiefly by plebeian families, but now was becoming more fashionable, following, as already said, the inevitable rule of the wealthy classes seizing upon the most elevated and pleasant situations, as the city waxed great. At the head of the upward road Fabricius and his party passed the temple of Juno Regina, which Camillus had built after his conquest of Veii. The three lanterns of the slaves were undesirable accompaniments, in the estimation of Cestus, so he rapidly hit upon a plan which might lead to their extinguishment. Fortune favoured him as they passed the temple of the famous conqueror. The moon glanced out with her silver-bright disc from behind the sharp edge of a black cloud, and bathed the columns of the temple, as well as every object around, in a flood of splendour. The obnoxious lanterns, with their smoky, yellow glare, were useless, and a contrast to the pure brightness around. The moment was opportune. Pannicus the slave, walking on the left of Cestus, carried his lantern hanging down at the full length of his right arm. As the moonbeams fell to the earth, Cestus purposely slipped with his left foot, and falling across his companion's path, dashed the lantern out of his hand to the ground, where it instantly became dark.

‘My ankle seemed to turn on some cursed stone,’ said Cestus, as he gathered himself up, rubbing his elbows and knees.

Fabricius inquired if he was hurt.

‘No, not much – nothing that I can feel yet, save a bit of a shake.’

Pannicus took his lantern to his fellow-slaves to have it relit.

‘Never mind the lantern, man! Who wants candles with such a light as this Diana gives us?’ cried Cestus, with a parting rub at his dusty clothes, – ‘come, we can see better without.’

‘I think so,’ remarked Fabricius quietly, and the remaining two lanterns were extinguished.

The road began to descend again toward the valley. In some places it was cut through the rock, more or less deeply, and at one particular spot it passed through a grove of trees. The chiselled rock, which walled the upper side of the road, was scarcely breast-high, and fringed to the very edge with ancient trees, as though the process of cutting the path had been limited by veneration for the spot and the bare requirements of the work. This was a barrier on one hand which required considerable agility to surmount. On the opposite side the face of the hill continued to slope downward from the edge of the path into the dark depths of the grove, which the moonlight was unable to penetrate. It was one of those silent, secluded, mysterious spots, rich in tradition, which were fast disappearing before the relentless march of the spreading city.

A few paces within it stood a large square altar, dedicated

to the deity of the grove. Its sculptured figures were indistinct, and worn by centuries of elementary strife. The hoary trees surrounded and spread their branching arms far above it. The silvery rays of Diana slipped through upon it, and it stood, barred with light and shadow, in its sylvan loneliness – ghostly, mysterious, and, as one might fancy, meditating on the memories of generations.

It was to this spot the party led by Cestus now approached. The hour was growing late according to the habits of people then. The road, never very busy at any time, was deserted, and the dwellings had ceased before they reached the sacred grove.

They walked on until they arrived within eighty or ninety yards of the ancient altar. Fabricius was busy balancing his hopes against the logic of his experiences, and his slaves were, no doubt, cursing the whim of their master, in bringing them out on such a nocturnal expedition. Suddenly Cestus, who had beguiled the way by an intermittent conversation with his companion Pannicus, picked up a stone, and flung it vigorously, as far as he could, among the branches of the trees, in the direction of the altar, which they were approaching. The pebble rattled among the twigs, and fell, with a thud, on the turfy sod beneath.

'What now, good fellow?' cried Fabricius from behind, 'has your day's labour not given you sufficient exercise?'

'Dost not see it?' said Cestus, pointing to the tops of the trees, – 'an owl! shu!' And he made a loud noise and flung another stone.

'Hush, man – you will stir the goddess of the grove – leave the owls in peace!' said Fabricius.

Cestus accordingly desisted, having done as much as he required. In a few strides they were opposite the altar. The Suburan stopped, and wheeled round so suddenly, that the old Senator and his two slaves well-nigh ran against him.

'What now, man – what possesses you?' said Fabricius sharply.

'One minute, so please you, to pray to the goddess for my poor comrade?' asked Cestus.

'Go, then!' replied Fabricius in a gentle tone, and the pretended workman stepped aside to the altar, where he appeared to engage himself in devotion. He prayed, as follows, in whispered tones:

'Are you all there, and ready?'

A murmur and a voice rose from the thick shadow of the stones, 'Ready, ay, and sick of waiting – are they yonder?'

'Three dogs of slaves who will run at a shout, and the old man himself. I have come, on leave, for a minute to pray for a sick comrade to get better who died five years ago. When we move on I shall whistle, and then come you on our backs like four thunderbolts.'

Having said this Cestus turned to go back, when a sibilant 'sh!' detained him.

'Wait, Cestus, I think I hear horses' feet, and the game will be spoiled – hark!'

But Cestus was either not so keen of hearing, or else was too

impatient to make a speedy end of the business, so that, after listening for a brief second or two, he snarled in reply, 'What horses, you fool; there are no horses out this time of the night, on this road – just as likely the goddess herself – be ready for the whistle!'

With that he rejoined the party, who were resting unconscious of such a dangerous trap. They had scarcely taken half a dozen steps onward, when Cestus gave his signal, shrill and sudden. Four forms leaped like tigers from the shadow of the altar and fell on the affrighted slaves. Cestus himself bounded on Fabricius. At the same time the figure, which had dogged their steps from the Janiculum, leaped down from the rock-wall of the road and stood apart to watch. Two of the slaves had fallen in the sudden onslaught, but the third had managed to escape at the top of his speed. Fabricius, who, in despite of his age, retained yet a large use of his keen senses and bodily activity, had taken sufficient warning to raise his staff, and meet the charge of Cestus with a vigorous blow. The ruffian staggered, and the moonbeams flashed upon the polished blade of a weapon, which was dashed from his hand by the lucky stroke.

'Wretch!' the old man shouted, when a blow from behind felled him senseless. Cestus, furious with rage and pain, belched forth a frightful imprecation. His right arm was benumbed or broken, and he stooped for his knife with his other hand.

Not far away was a sharp turn in the road. The tramp of horses and the jingle of accoutrements smote on their ears.

'Bungling fool!' hissed the mysterious figure, springing forward to complete the work in which, so far, the Suburan had been foiled. But he was met, and rudely thrust back by the powerful arm of the confederate who had knocked the Senator down from behind.

'Take your time, my lad,' bellowed that individual hoarsely, 'he's more mine than yours.'

The slash of a poniard was the answer, and they closed in a struggle, when the others suddenly raised a cry of '*Cave!*' and fled in all directions into the recesses of the wood. A body of horsemen had rounded the bend in the road and was almost upon them. They were in military attire, and the moon glittered on their polished helmets and the trappings of the horses. The foremost trooper immediately sprang to the ground and rushed forward, followed by two or three more. The struggling men parted and darted into the grove after their companions, whilst the foremost of the new-comers, singling out Cestus, followed him at the top of his speed. He was in a few moments hard upon the heels of the Suburan, who strained every nerve in fear of his pursuer, who possessed a far fleeter foot than himself. Fortune favoured him just at the critical moment, when, in terror, he seemed to feel a hand upon his collar. The outgrowing, straggling roots of a tree tripped the foot of the trooper, and he flew, with a dire crash, to the ground. The fall was so violent that he lay for a few seconds stunned. When he picked himself up, the whole of the flying vagabonds had disappeared among the

gloomy boles, like water through a sieve, leaving neither trace nor sound behind. He shook himself with a laugh, and gathering up his brazen helmet, walked back to the road. Some others of the troop were here dismounted, using their best efforts to revive the unconscious Fabricius. Flasks were produced; wine and water were poured into his mouth and rubbed on his temples. The two inanimate slaves were laid side by side until a helmet full of water could be brought from a neighbouring fountain to be dashed upon them.

The soldier we have particularised knelt down beside the prostrate Fabricius. 'Is he badly hurt?' he asked.

'It is hard to say, Centurion; but, dead or not, it is a man of the Senate,' replied the comrade, who was bathing the old man's forehead.

'Humph!' said the Centurion, 'is, or was, rather – he wears only the narrow band. However, he is worth the trouble of a few minutes. Do your best. Do you object to wait for a brief time, Drusus?'

This question was addressed to one who sat motionless on his horse close by. Leading reins were attached to his charger's bridle and held by a mounted soldier on each side.

'No!' replied this person, 'I hold this delay as kind and fortunate, for the pleasant moonlight and the sweet air of heaven will soon know me no more.'

Fabricius soon showed symptoms of life, and then his recovery was rapid. He sat up and glanced around. 'Where am

I? What is all this? Ah, I know,' he ejaculated. 'I remember! – but you?'

'Why, simply in this way,' responded the officer; 'we saw you on the ground, and a couple of night-hawks squabbling over you. A few moments later, and probably you would never have spoken again on earth.'

'Most surely – robbed of what little money I have about me, and deprived of my life as well. I have been decoyed into a trap,' said Fabricius, rising to his feet, with the help of the Centurion's arm. 'Thanks! My name is Quintus Fabricius, and I dwell on the Janiculum. I owe my life to you this night, and I will prove my gratitude, if my means and exertions are able to do so.'

'There needs no thought, but thankfulness, that we chanced to arrive so opportunely. The rest was easy – they ran off when they caught sight of us – we came, saw, and conquered!' said the officer, laughing.

'Be that for me to determine,' rejoined Fabricius; 'I will ask but two things of you.'

'Name them.'

'The first is the name of one I have cause to remember.'

'We are a good score of fellows – would you wish for them all?'

'Thine only. Through you I shall know the rest.'

'For their sakes, then, we are Pretorians.'

'So I see,' observed Fabricius, with gentle impatience.

'Well, then, I am Centurion thereof, and my name Martialis. But what of that? We all have done, one as much as another, and

the whole amounts to nothing, – come, sir, and I will send two or three to guard you home.'

The old man, still somewhat confused and trembling, murmured once or twice the name he had heard, as if it bore some familiar sound.

'Your name seems to ring in my ears as if I had heard it of old,' he said; 'but that in good time. Having given me your name, you will not, therefore, refuse me the honour of your friendship. Give me your word, you will visit me, and speedily. In the Transtibertine I am to be found by the simple asking.'

'Willingly! I accept your kindness with pleasure,' answered Martialis, with growing impatience to go onward.

'Come with me now! Your men could return without you,' urged the old man.

'What – entice me from my duty! Nay, you would not,' cried Martialis, shaking his head and laughing.

'He would be bold, indeed, who would try to seduce an officer of our Prefect,' interposed the quietly bitter voice of him who sat on the led horse, 'especially when that zealous and frank-minded Prefect sends his officer to lead a son of Germanicus, like a felon, to Rome.'

'What! – of Germanicus!' exclaimed Fabricius, in astonishment, and ere he could be stopped he pushed up to the speaker and seized his hand.

'Drusus – of that same unhappy family. Evil fate spares us not.'

'Your pardon, Prince, but this is against my orders,' interposed

Martialis, quickly and firmly; 'you will not compel me to enforce them?'

'Enough! Lead on!' responded the ill-fated prince, in a mournful voice. 'Farewell, friend, whoever thou art.'

'March!' commanded the Centurion, and the band proceeded. He himself walked on foot at its head, in order to lend the old Senator the support of his arm. The slaves Pannicus and Cyrrha, with no worse effects of their adventures than a confused singing in their heads, brought up the rear. In this wise they continued, until they had crossed the mount and descended to the level ground near the Trigeminan Gate. Here Fabricius took leave of his preserver, with a few warm heartfelt words of thanks, and Martialis detached two of his men to escort him home. Continuing on his way the Centurion led his troop in double file. The clang of the horses' hoofs, with the jingle of accoutrements, awoke the echoes of the silent, empty streets. Ascending the Palatine they halted before the Imperial palace, and were received by an official and a few slaves. The prisoner was desired to dismount, and he was led into the palace. The lights of the interior showed him to be a young man of not more than one or two-and-twenty, and he maintained the sullen expression of one who has suddenly been made the victim of deceit.

'Is this my journey's end?' he asked of Martialis.

'Here I must quit you, noble Drusus; I have no further instructions than to leave you in charge of the keeper of the

palace.'

'Take me to my room then,' said the prince, haughtily, to the keeper, 'where I may eat, and drink, and sleep, and forget what I am.'

The keeper obeyed and led the way through the halls of Caesar, until they arrived at a narrow passage, which terminated in a descending flight of stone steps.

'Whither are you taking me?' demanded the prisoner sternly, as he came to a sudden halt.

'To the vaults of the palace,' answered the official laconically.

'Know you who I am?'

'Perfectly well. But I am ordered to place you in the vaults, and I have no alternative but to obey.'

The young prince looked fiercely around, but seeing how useless any resistance would be, he dropped his chin on his breast with a silent stoical resignation which touched Martialis to the heart. Torches were lit and the party descended the steps, and went along an underground passage. The keeper of the palace halted before a narrow, heavily-barred door, and unlocked it. It needed a strong pressure to cause it to move on its hinges, and, as it did so, a heavy, damp, noisome atmosphere puffed forth, which caused the torches to flicker and splutter. They went in. The interior was hewn out of the rock; spacious enough, but humid, chill, and horrible – a perfect tomb. The trickling moisture, which bedewed the walls, glistened icily through the gloom in the light of the torches, and the floor was damp and

sticky, and traced with the slimy tracks of creeping things. There was a pallet and a stool, and the slaves placed some eatables thereon. Martialis felt sick at heart and shuddered.

'You are sure you are right in bringing him to this fearful place – a place unfit for a beast to rest in?' he whispered to the gaoler.

'It is the best of all the vaults,' was the brief reply.

The unhappy prince looked round, in a stupefied way, and shivered. The change was frightful, from the sunny skies and balmy air of the lovely sea-girt Capreae. Martialis stepped up to him. 'I must leave you, Drusus,' he said; 'I am sorely grieved to quit you in such a lodging – it must be by error, and if so, I will not fail to do my best to have it rectified at once.'

'Thanks, friend,' said the unfortunate, looking with fixed eyes; 'bid them send their murderers speedily!'

Without another word he went to the pallet and sat down, and buried his face in his hands in mute despair.

One of the torches was fixed into an iron socket on the wall, and the order was given to withdraw. Full of distress, Martialis took a second light from the hand of its bearer, and extinguishing it, he laid it on the little stool, so that it might succeed the other when needed. Then taking his large military cloak from his shoulders, he gently dropped it over the unhappy prisoner's form and turned away. The dungeon was then vacated and locked, and the Centurion rushed, as hastily as he was able, with a heart full of painful feelings, up into the fresh pure air and sweet moonlight outside.

When he reached the camp with his troop, he was summoned to the Prefect to deliver his report, which was received by the commander with every sign of satisfaction. Proceeding, on his own impulse, to describe the dreadful circumstances of the prisoner, he was coldly interrupted and dismissed. He turned to go, inwardly burning with disgust and indignation.

'Stay, Centurion!' cried Sejanus; 'you have been inquired for here to-day – it is right I should inform you.'

'Indeed! In what manner, and by whom, may I ask?' said Martialis coldly.

'By a workman – a potter from Surrentum! Ha! You change colour!'

"Tis not from shame at least,' returned the other haughtily.

'No, no – from conscious folly rather. You would wed a potter's girl. You are blind to your own interests. Amuse yourself with her, if you wish, but think twice ere you bind a clog about your neck.'

'And even such clogs are as easily got rid off as assumed at the present time,' retorted the Centurion cuttingly.

Sejanus bit his lip, and his brows met darkly. The retort cut home, for he had put away his wife Apicata, to further more freely his guilty intrigue with Livia, the Emperor's daughter-in-law.

However, he replied sarcastically, 'That is true; but not in the case of such eminently virtuous men as yourself, Martialis. But just as you think proper – it is your own matter. As long as it

affects not your Centurionship I care not – not I.'

'Rather than suffer that to happen, Prefect, I would relinquish my duties entirely – you need have no fear,' answered Martialis coldly, and, saluting, he left the room.

CHAPTER IX

Cestus, straining every nerve as he fled from the scene of his failure, expected each moment to feel the fingers of his rapidly gaining pursuer hooked into his collar. Doubling this way and that through the gloom, in imminent peril of smashing his skull, and experiencing all the terrors of a hunted hare, he gave a gasp of joy when he heard the crash of the trooper's fall at his heels. A few more leaps took him out of sight and hearing; and then he doubled on his track. When he gained the edge of the grove, he dropped down at full length in a convenient shelter, with his heart throbbing well-nigh to bursting, and his eyes swimming. His slothful, indulgent habits rendered him totally unequal to such a terrible trial of exertion, and his horrible gasping for breath was so severe as to render him incapable of perceiving whether there were any signs of further pursuit. Burying his face in the grass, he smothered, as well as he could, his grievous pantings, until he recovered breath sufficiently to sit up and listen with more attention. All was as still as death, however, and, in another quarter of an hour, he felt emboldened to make the best of his way to the safe haunts of his native Subura. Going cautiously he quitted the Aventine and gained the Ostian road which ran to the heart of the city. As he progressed along the deserted streets he began to curse his ill-luck and speculate on the consequences. The promised reward, though further from his grasp than before,

yet shed its glamour over his mind, and whetted it to ponder over renewed plans, on a less delicate and ingenious style, more peculiarly his own.

The vast exterior of the Circus Maximus towered on his left. Walking swiftly along its moonlit, porticoed base, full of caves of ill-repute, another figure appeared, so as to converge on to the track of Cestus.

Traversing that mighty circuit of masonry, the Suburan overlooked the approaching object, as one might have overlooked a small animal specked on the side of a mountain, until he found himself in close proximity, and then he quickened his pace. The result of this was that the stranger did the same, and the mind of Cestus began to wax uneasy. He finally started off at a smart trot, whereupon he was hailed by an angry voice.

'Stop, you fool!'

Cestus recognised the tones of his patron and waited in as much dread as surprise.

'I did not recognise you, patron,' he said, as the knight came up.

'So you have got away clear,' said Afer sharply.

'More by good luck than anything else – there was a swifter foot than mine behind me had it not slipped,' replied Cestus, humbled and abashed by his failure. 'You were too bold to be nigh – had you been caught, it had been fifty times worse.'

'Rest yourself easy on that score – I am not such a bungler as yourself.'

'Well, patron, the plan failed, but you can hardly blame me,' began Cestus.

'Whom then? if not you. It is the climax of your bragging worthlessness – idiot!' said the knight wrathfully.

'Well, but, patron – the soldiers! Who could be at both ends of the road at once? Another minute and I had done my work to perfection – I had finished it even now, but for that meddling fool, who chose to put in his word. Be reasonable, patron; I carried out your plans to the very letter and minute, but you made no provision for a troop of legionaries to interfere.'

'Silence, blockhead! could I not see?' fumed Afer. 'Why, the old dotard, if they had left you to it, would have cracked your skull, thick as it is.'

'No, never – if he outlived Saturn!' retorted the Suburan, with rising voice, as well as choler, 'nor fifty dotards from fifty Janiculums. Let me do the job in my own way, without the useless tomfoolery of a whining tale and a moonlight walk, and a cohort of asses lurking on one's steps – leave it to me alone and you shall see.'

'Yes, I should see you with thy neck in a noose and myself proclaimed,' sneered Afer. 'Leave it to you, indeed! If you cannot do better than this, with four stout fellows to back you, what would you do alone? Fool!'

'I am no fool!' returned Cestus fiercely; for the cutting contempt and epithets of his patron were more than he could bear.

'A double fool – a swaggering, bragging, drunken fool, thick of sense and slow of hand – faugh!'

'I tell thee, Afer, I am no fool!' bawled Cestus; 'it is thyself!'

'I was, to trust your workmanship. Fabricius eats his postponed supper, and you are off to your foxholes, like a cur, with its tail between its legs. Begone and trouble me no more!' thundered Afer, in uncontrollable passion.

'You shall know that – clever as you think yourself, you are under my thumb. One word from me – '

'Silence, you dog, when I bid you!' hissed the knight, striding up to him and clutching his collar.

'Not I, by Hercules!' cried Cestus, thoroughly roused and reckless as he shook off the grasp. 'You, a chicken-hearted, double-faced pauper, to be my master – '

'*Accipe – !* Let that silence thee for ever!'

The knight threw up his arm as he spoke, and the Suburan, giving a sharp cry, fell heavily, stabbed in the breast.

Afer hastily wiped his poniard and replaced it in the folds of his cloak.

'There is no bungling in this,' he muttered; 'dead men tell no tales.'

Only delaying to drag the fallen man by the heels more into the shadow of a wall, he hurried swiftly on; and, before morning dawned, he entered the yet sleeping town of Tibur, disappointed in mind, and yet not altogether without a feeling of satisfaction and relief at the course circumstances had taken.

CHAPTER X

Not far from the shadow of the Capitoline, and nigh the Forum of Caesar, Plautia dwelt in a small, but handsome mansion. Her wealth, although not as great as that squandered by her spendthrift brother, was yet ample, and in her hands better controlled. Her entertainments were not very frequent, but, nevertheless, were famous amongst a certain set for their enjoyableness, which was due, not alone to the exquisite fare provided, but more to the tact of the hostess in selecting her guests. We have already attempted to describe the attractions of her brilliant, though voluptuous, style of beauty. Of lovers she had no lack. Her manners with all of them were perfectly free and familiar. So misleading, that more than one, ere now, encouraged and inflamed thereby to presumption, became sorrowfully aware of the claws which lay sheathed in velvet.

She was a mystery, therefore, and a tantalising one. Whispers and rumours were perennial; but yet absolute proof was wanting to substantiate the fame which people awarded her. She, herself, was indifferent, and could return as haughty and unembarrassed a stare as any which the proudest patrician matron bent upon her. Even those individuals, proverbial for the possession of the most secret information – namely, her handmaids and domestics – were at fault; so secret, variable, and contrary were her actions and humours.

One morning, two or three days later in our story, she was going forth to take the air, and she came to the porch of her house, where her litter, borne by four powerful slaves, stood awaiting her. This litter was roofed in, and of sufficient size to admit of the occupant lying at full length if necessary. It was also furnished with curtains, which could be drawn so as to secure perfect immunity from observation. This contrivance for conveyance, so common in ancient Rome, was standing on the ground, and Plautia stepped therein, before the admiring gaze of the pedestrians who thronged the causeway. Lydia, a young female, who was half lady's-maid, half companion, was about to follow, but her mistress waved her hand and said she wished to be alone that day. With that she drew the curtains partially to hide her face and yet not to interrupt her view. The maid withdrew into the house abashed; it was the third consecutive morning she had been so treated; such behaviour was unwonted, and being filled with fears and doubts of all kinds, she forthwith began to weep heartily.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.