

EMMA ORCZY

"UNTO
CAESAR"

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Baroness Emmuska Orczy

«Unto Caesar»

CHAPTER I

"Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion...."—Psalm xlviii. 2.

And it came to pass in Rome after the kalends of September, and when Caius Julius Cæsar Caligula ruled over Imperial Rome.

Arminius Quirinius, the censor, was dead. He had died by his own hand, and thus was a life of extortion and of fraud brought to an ignominious end through the force of public opinion, and by the decree of that same Cæsar who himself had largely benefited by the mal-practices of his minion.

Arminius Quirinius had committed every crime, sunk to every kind of degradation which an inordinate love of luxury and the insatiable desires of jaded senses had suggested as a means to satisfaction, until the treachery of his own accomplices had thrown the glaring light of publicity on a career of turpitude such as even these decadent times had seldom witnessed ere this.

Enough that the end had come at last. A denunciation from the rostrum, a discontented accomplice thirsting for revenge, an angry crowd eager to listen, and within an hour the mighty,

much-feared censor was forced to flee from Rome to escape the fury of a populace which would have torn him to pieces, and was ready even to massacre his family and his womenfolk, his clients and his slaves.

He escaped to his villa at Ostia. But the Emperor Caligula, having duly enjoyed the profits derived from his favourite's extortions, hurled anathema and the full weight of his displeasure on the man who had been not only fool enough to be found out, but who had compromised the popularity of the Cæsar in the eyes of the people and of the army. Twenty-four hours later the imperial decree went forth that the disgraced censor must end his days in any manner which he thought best—seeing that a patrician and member of the Senate could not be handed over to common justice—and also that the goods of Arminius Quirinius should be publicly sold for the benefit of the State and the profit of those whom the extortioner had wronged.

The latter phrase, though somewhat vague, pleased the people and soothed public irritation, and the ephemeral popularity of a half-crazy tyrant was momentarily restored. Be it said however, that less than a month later the Cæsar decided that he himself had been the person most wronged by Arminius, and that the bulk of the profits derived from the sale of the late censor's goods must therefore find its way into the imperial coffers.

The furniture of Arminius' house within the city and that of his villa at Ostia had fetched vast sums at a public auction which had lasted three days. Everything had been sold, from the bed

with the gilt legs on which the body of the censor had been laid after his death, to the last vase of murra that adorned his walls and the cups of crystal from which his guests had drunk. His pet monkeys were sold and his tame magpies, the pots of flowers out of the hothouses and the bunches of melons and winter grapes ripening under glass.

After that it was the turn of the slaves. There were, so I understand, over seven thousand of these: scribes and carpenters, litter-bearers and sculptors, cooks and musicians; there were a quantity of young children, and some half-witted dolts and misshapen dwarfs, kept for the amusement of guests during the intervals of supper.

The bulk of them had been sent to the markets of Delos and Phaselis, but the emperor had had the most valuable items amongst the human goods set aside for himself, and not a few choice pieces had found their way into the households of the aediles in charge of the sales: the State too had appropriated some hundreds of useful scribes, sculptors and mechanics, but there were still a thousand or so who—in compliance with the original imperial edict—would have to be sold by public auction in Rome for the benefit of the late censor's defrauded victims.

And thus, on this ninth day of September, a human load panting under the heat of this late summer's sun, huddled one against the other, pushed and jostled by the crowd, was exposed to the public gaze in the Forum over against the rostrum Augustini, so that all who had a mind, and a purse withal, might

suit their fancy and buy.

A bundle of humanity—not over-wretched, for the condition of the slaves in the household of Arminius Quirinius had not been an unhappy one—they all seemed astonished, some even highly pleased, at thus finding themselves the centre of attraction in the Forum, they who had spent their lives in getting humbly out of other people's way.

Fair and dark, ivory skin and ebony, male and female, or almost sexless in the excess of deformity, there were some to suit all tastes. Each wore a tablet hung round the neck by a green cord: on this were writ the chief merits of the wearer, and also a list of his or her defects, so that intending purchasers might know what to expect.

There were the Phrygians with fair curly hair and delicate hands skilled in the limner's art; the Numidians with skins of ebony and keen black eyes that shone like dusky rubies; they were agile at the chase, could capture a lion or trap the wild beasts that are so useful in gladiatorial games. There were Greeks here, pale of face and gentle of manner who could strike the chords of a lyre and sing to its accompaniment, and there were swarthy Spaniards who fashioned breast-plates of steel and fine chain mail to resist the assassin's dagger: there were Gauls with long lithe limbs and brown hair tied in a knot high above the forehead, and Allemanni from the Rhine with two-coloured hair heavy and crisp like a lion's mane. There was a musician from Memphis whose touch upon the sistrum would call a dying spirit back to the land of

the living, and a cook from Judæa who could stew a peacock's tongue so that it melted like nectar in the mouth: there was a white-skinned Iceni from Britain, versed in the art of healing, and a negress from Numidia who had killed a raging lion by one hit on the jaw from her powerful fist.

Then there were those freshly brought to Rome from overseas, whose merits or demerits had not yet been appraised—they wore no tablet round the neck, but their feet were whitened all over with chalk; and there were those whose heads were surmounted by an ugly felt hat in token that the State treasury tendered no guarantee for them. Their period of servitude had been so short that nothing was known about them, about their health, their skill, or their condition.

Above them towered the gigantic rostrum with tier upon tier of massive blocks of marble, and in the centre, up aloft, the bronze figure of the wolf—the foster-mother of the great city—with metal jaws distended and polished teeth that gleamed like emeralds in the sun.

And all around the stately temples of the Forum, with their rich carvings and colonnades and walls in tones of delicate creamy white, scarce less brilliant than the clouds which a gentle morning breeze was chasing westwards to the sea. And under the arcades of the temples cool shadows, dense and blue, trenchant against the white marble like an irregular mosaic of lapis lazuli, with figures gliding along between the tall columns, priests in white robes, furtive of gait, slaves of the pontificate, shoeless and

silent and as if detached from the noise and bustle of the Forum, like ghosts that haunt the precincts of graves.

Throughout all this the gorgeous colouring that a summer's mid-morning throws over imperial Rome. Above, that canopy of translucent blue, iridescent and scintillating with a thousand colours, flicks of emerald and crimson, of rose and of mauve that merge and dance together, divide and reunite before the retina, until the gaze loses consciousness of all colour save one all-pervading sense of gold.

In the distance the Capitol, temple-crowned, rearing its deified summit upwards to the dome of heaven above, holding on its triple shoulders a throng of metal gods, with Jupiter Victor right in the centre, a thunderbolt in his hand which throws back ten thousand reflections of dazzling light—another sun engendered by the sun. And to the west the Aventine wrapped in its mantle of dull brown, its smooth incline barren and scorched, and with tiny mud-huts dotted about like sleepy eyes that close beneath the glare.

And far away beyond the Aventine, beyond the temples and palaces, the blue ribbon of the Tiber flowing lazily to the sea: there where a rose-coloured haze hung in mid-air, hiding with filmy, transparent veil the vast Campania beyond, its fever-haunted marshes and its reed-covered fastnesses.

The whole, a magnificent medley of cream and gold and azure, and deep impenetrable shadows trenchant as a thunder cloud upon an horizon of gold, and the moving crowd below,

ivory and bronze and black, with here and there the brilliant note of a snow-white robe or of crimson head-band gleaming through dark locks.

Up and around the rostrum, noise that was almost deafening had prevailed from an early hour. On one of the gradients some ten or a dozen scribes were squatting on mats of twisted straw, making notes of the sales and entries of the proceeds on rolls of parchment which they had for the purpose, whilst a swarthy slave, belonging to the treasury, acted as auctioneer under direct orders from the praefect of Rome. He was perched high up aloft, immediately beneath the shadow of the yawning bronze wolf; he stood bare-headed under the glare of the sun, but a linen tunic covered his shoulders, and his black hair was held close to his head by a vivid crimson band.

He shouted almost incessantly in fluent Latin, but with the lisp peculiar to the African races.

A sun-tanned giant whose massive frame and fair hair, that gleamed ruddy in the sun, proclaimed some foreign ancestry was the praefectus in command of this tangled bundle of humanity.

He had arrived quite early in the day and his litter stood not far from the rostrum; its curtains of crimson silk, like vivid stains of blood upon the walls of cream and gold, fluttered restlessly in the breeze. Around the litter a crowd of his own slaves and attendants remained congregated, but he himself stood isolated on the lowest gradient of the central rostrum, leaning his powerful frame against the marble, with arms folded across

his mighty chest; his deep-set eyes were overshadowed by heavy brows and his square forehead cut across by the furrow of a perpetual frown which gave the whole face a strange expression of untamed will and of savage pride, in no way softened by the firm lines of the tightly closed lips or the contour of the massive jaws.

His lictors, at some little distance from him, kept his person well guarded, but it was he who, with word or nod, directed the progress of the sale, giving occasional directions to the lictors who—wielding heavy flails—had much ado to keep the herd of human cattle within the bounds of its pens. His voice was harsh and peremptory and he pronounced the Latin words with but the faintest semblance of foreign intonation.

Now and then at a word from a likely purchaser he would with a sign order a lictor to pick out one of his wares, to drag him forward out of a compact group and set him up on the catasta. A small crowd would then collect round the slave thus exposed, the tablet on his neck would be carefully perused and the chattel made to turn round and round, to walk backwards and forwards, to show his teeth and his muscle, whilst the African up on the rostrum would with loud voice and profuse gesture point out every line of beauty on a lithe body and expatiate on the full play of every powerful muscle.

The slave thus singled out for show seemed neither resentful nor distressed, ready enough most times to exhibit his merits, anxious only for the chance of a good master and the momentary

avoidance of the lictor's flail. At the praefect's bidding he cracked his knuckles or showed his teeth, strained the muscles of his arm to make them stand up like cords, turned a somersault, jumped, danced or stood on his head if ordered so to do.

The women were more timid and very frightened of blows, especially the older ones; the younger shoulders escaped a chastisement which would have marred their beauty, and the pretty maids from Corinth or Carthage, conscious of their own charms, displayed them with good-natured *naïveté*, deeming obedience the surest way to comfort.

Nor did the praefect perform his duty with any show of inhumanity or conscious cruelty. Himself a wealthy member of the patriciate, second only to the Cæsar, with a seat in the Senate and a household full of slaves, he had neither horror nor contempt for the state of slavery—a necessary one in the administration of the mightiest Empire in the world.

Many there were who averred that the praefect of Rome was himself the descendant of a freedman—a prisoner of war brought over by Cæsar from the North—who had amassed wealth and purchased his own freedom. Indeed his name proclaimed his foreign origin, for he was called Taurus Antinor Anglicanus, and surnamed Niger because of his dark eyes and sun-tanned skin. Certain it is that when the sale of Arminius' goods was ordered by imperial edict for the benefit of the State, no one complained that the praefect decided to preside over the sale himself.

He had discharged such duties before and none had occasion to complain of the manner in which he did it. In these days of unbridled excesses and merciless outbursts of rage, he remained throughout—on these occasions—temperate and even impassive.

He only ordered his lictor to use the flail when necessary, when the bundle of human goods was so huddled up that it ceased to look attractive, and likely purchasers seemed to fall away. Then, at his command, the heavy thongs would descend indiscriminately on the bronze shoulder of an Ethiopian or the fair skin of a barbarian from the North; but he gave the order without any show of cruelty or passion, just as he heard the responsive cry of pain without any outward sign of pity.

CHAPTER II

"To be laid in the balance, they are altogether lighter than vanity."—Psalm lxii. 9.

As the day wore on, trade became more brisk and the work of the lictors more arduous, for the crowd was dense and the bargain-hunters eager to push to the front.

Now a bronze-skinned artisan with slender limbs and narrow tapering hands was attracting attention. He was standing on the platform, passive and indifferent, apparently unconscious alike of the scorching sun which bit into his bare flesh, as of the murmurs of the dealers round him and the eloquence of the African up on the rostrum, who was shouting himself hoarse in praise of his wares.

"A leather worker from Hispania," he thundered with persuasive rhetoric, "his age but two dozen years, his skill unequalled on either bank of the Tiber ... A tunic worked by him is softer than the fleeciest wool, and the sheath of a dagger becomes in his hands as hard as steel.... Good health and strength, two thousand sesterces were a poor price to pay for the use of these skilled hands.... Two thousand sesterces.... His lordship's grace, the censor Arminius Quirinius paid four thousand for him...."

He paused a moment whilst a couple of Jews from Galilee, in

long dark robes and black caps covering their shaggy hair, turned critically round this paragon from Hispania, lifted his hands and gazed on each finger-tip as if trying to find traces on these of that much-vaunted skill.

"Two thousand sesterces, kind sirs, and you will have at your disposal the talent of a master in the noble art of leather working; pouches and coverings for your chairs, caskets and sword-hilts, nothing comes amiss to him.... Come! shall we say two thousand sesterces?"

The Jews were hesitating. With a rapid glance of their keen, deep-set eyes they consulted one with the other, whilst their long bony fingers wandered hesitatingly to the wallets at their belts.

"Two thousand sesterces!" urged the auctioneer, as he looked with marked severity on the waverers.

He himself received a percentage on the proceeds of the sale, a few sesterces mayhap that would go to swell the little hoard which ultimately would purchase freedom. The scribes stilet in hand waited in patient silence. The praefect, indifferent to the whole transaction, was staring straight in front of him, like one whose thoughts are strangers to his will.

"One thousand we'll give," said one of the Jews timidly.

"Nay! an you'll not give more, kind sirs," quoth the auctioneer airily, "this paragon among leather workers will bring fortune to your rival dealers...."

"One thousand," repeated one of the intending purchasers, "and no more."

The African tried persuasion, contempt, even lofty scorn; he threatened to withdraw the paragon from the sale altogether, for he knew of a dealer in leather goods over in Corinth who would give two fingers of his own hand for the exclusive use of those belonging to this Hispanian treasure.

But the Jews were obstinate. With the timid obstinacy peculiar to their race, they stuck to their point and refused to be enticed into purposeless extravagance.

In the end the wonderful worker in leather was sold to the Jew traders from Galilee for the sum of one thousand sesterces; his dark face had expressed nothing but stolid indifference whilst the colloquy between the purchasers and the auctioneer had been going on.

The next piece of goods however was in more pressing demand; a solid German, with massive thorax half-hidden beneath a shaggy goatskin held in at the waist by a belt; his hairy arms bare to the shoulder, his gigantic fists clenched as if ready to fell an ox.

A useful man with plough or harrow, he was said to be skilled in smith's work too. After a preliminary and minute examination of the man's muscles, of his teeth, of the calves of his legs, bidding became very brisk between an agriculturist from Sicilia and a freedman from the Campania, until the praefect himself intervened, desiring the slave for his own use on a farm which he had near Ostia.

Some waiting-maids from Judæa fetched goodly money; an

innkeeper of Etruria bought them, for they were well-looking and knew how to handle and carry wine jars without shaking up the costly liquor; and the negroes were sought after by the lanistae for training to gladiatorial combats.

Scribes were also in great demand for copying purposes. The disseminators of the news of the day were willing to pay high prices for quick shorthand writers who had learned their business in the house of Arminius the censor.

In the meanwhile the throng in the Forum had become more and more dense. Already one or two gorgeously draped litters had been seen winding their way in from the Sacra Via or the precincts of the temples, their silken draperies making positive notes of brilliant colour against the iridescent whiteness of Phrygian marble walls.

The lictors now had at times to use their flails against the crowd. Room had to be made for the masters of Rome, the wealthy and the idle, who threw sesterces about for the gratification of their smallest whim, as a common man would shake the dust from his shoes.

Young Hortensius Martius, the rich patrician owner of five thousand slaves, had stepped out of his litter, and a way being made for him in the crowd by his men, he had strolled up to the rostrum, and mounting its first gradient he leaned with studied grace against the block of white marble, giving to the common herd below the pleasing spectacle of a young exquisite, rich and well-favoured—his handsome person carefully perfumed

and bedecked after the morning bath, his crisp fair hair daintily curled, his body clad in a tunic of soft white wool splendidly worked in purple stripes, the insignia of his high patrician state.

He passed a languid eye over the bundle of humanity spread out for sale at his feet and gave courteous greeting to the praefect.

"Thou art early abroad, Hortensius Martius," quoth Taurus Antinor in response; "'tis not often thou dost grace the Forum with thy presence at this hour."

"They told me it would be amusing," replied young Hortensius lazily, "but methinks that they lied."

He yawned, and with a tiny golden tool he began picking his teeth.

"What did they tell thee?" queried the other, "and who were they that told?"

"There was Caius Nepos and young Escanes, and several others at the bath. They were all talking about the sale."

"Are they coming hither?"

"They will be here anon; but some declared that much rubbish would have to be sold ere the choice bargains be put up. Escanes wants a cook who can fry a capon in a special way they wot of in Gaul. Stuffed with ortolans and covered with the juice of three melons—Escanes says it is mightily pleasing to the palate."

"There is no cook from Gaul on the list," interposed the praefect curtly.

"And Caius Nepos wants some well-favoured girls to wait on his guests at supper to-morrow. He gives a banquet, as thou

knowest. Wilt be there, Taurus Antinor?"

He had spoken these last words in a curious manner which suggested that some significance other than mere conviviality would be attached to the banquet given by Caius Nepos on the morrow. And now he drew nearer to the praefect and cast a quick glance around him as if to assure himself that the business of the sale was engrossing everyone's attention.

"Caius Nepos," he said, trying to speak with outward indifference, "asked me to tell thee that if thou wilt come to his banquet to-morrow thou wilt find it to thine advantage. Many of us are of one mind with regard to certain matters and could talk these over undisturbed. Wilt join us, Taurus Antinor?" he added eagerly.

"Join you," retorted the other with a grim smile, "join you in what? in this senseless folly of talking in whispers in public places? The Forum this day is swarming with spies, Hortensius Martius. Hast a wish to make a spectacle for the plebs on the morrow by being thrown to a pack of tigers for their midday meal?"

And with a nod of his head he pointed up to the rostrum where the dusky auctioneer had momentarily left off shouting and had thrown himself flat down upon the matting, ostensibly in order to speak with one of the scribes on the tier below, but who was in reality casting furtive glances in the direction where Hortensius Martius stood talking with the praefectus.

"These slaves," said Taurus Antinor curtly, "all belong to the

imperial treasury; their peculium is entirely made up of money gained through giving information—both false and true. Have a care, O Hortensius Martius!"

But the other shrugged his shoulders with well-studied indifference. It was not the mode at this epoch to seem anything but bored at all the circumstances of public and private life in Rome, at the simple occurrences of daily routine or at the dangers which threatened every man through the crazy whims of a demented despot.

It had even become the fashion to accept outwardly and without the slightest show of interest the wild extravagances and insane debaucheries of the ferocious tyrant who for the nonce wielded the sceptre of the Cæsars. The young patricians of the day looked on with apparent detachment at his excesses and the savage displays of unbridled power of which he was so inordinately fond, and they affected a lofty disregard for the horrible acts of injustice and of cruelty which this half-crazy Emperor had rendered familiar to the citizens of Rome.

Nothing in the daily routine of life amused these votaries of fashion—nothing roused them from their attitude of somnolent placidity, except perhaps some peculiarly bloody combat in the arena—one of those unfettered orgies of lust of blood which they loved to witness and which have for ever disgraced the glorious pages of Roman history.

Then horror would rouse them for a brief moment from their apathy, for they were not cruel, only satiated with every sight,

every excitement and luxury which their voluptuous city and the insane caprice of the emperor perpetually offered them; and they thirsted for horrors as a sane man thirsts for beauty, that it might cause a diversion in the even tenor of their lives, and mayhap raise a thrill in their dormant brains.

Therefore even now, when apparently he was toying with his life, Hortensius Martius did not depart outwardly from the attitude of supercilious indifference which fashion demanded. They were all actors, these men, always before an audience, and even among themselves they never really left off acting the part which they had made so completely their own.

But that the indifference was only on the surface was evidenced in this instance by the young exquisite's scarce perceptible change of position. He drew away slightly from the praefect and anon said in a loud tone of voice so that all around him might hear:

"Aye! as thou sayest, Taurus Antinor, I might find a dwarf or some kind of fool to suit me. Mine are getting old and dull. Ye gods, how they bore me at times!"

And it was in a whisper that he added:

"Caius Nepos specially desired thy presence at supper to-morrow, O Taurus Antinor! He feared that he might not get speech with thee anon, so hath asked me to make sure of thy presence. Thou'lt not fail us? There are over forty of us now, all prepared to give our lives for the good of the Empire."

The praefect made no reply this time; his attention was

evidently engrossed by some close bidding over a useful slave, but as Hortensius now finally turned away from him, his dark eyes under the shadow of that perpetual frown swept over the figure of the young exquisite, from the crown of the curled and perfumed head to the soles of the daintily shod feet, and a smile of contempt not altogether unkind played round the corners of his firm lips.

"For the good of the Empire?" he murmured under his breath as he shrugged his broad shoulders and once more turned his attention to his duties.

Hortensius in the meanwhile had spied some of his friends. Gorgeously embroidered tunics could now be seen all the time pushing their way through the more common crowd, and soon a compact group of rich patricians had congregated around the rostra.

They had come one by one—from the baths mostly—refreshed and perfumed, ready to gaze with fashionable lack of interest on the spectacle of this public auction. They had exchanged greetings with the praefect and with Hortensius Martius. They all knew one another, were all members of the same caste, the ruling caste of Rome. Young Escanes was now there, he who wanted a cook, and Caius Nepos—the praetorian praefect who was in search of pretty waiting-maids.

"Hast had speech with Anglicanus?" asked the latter in a whisper to Hortensius.

"Aye! a few words," replied the other, "but he warned me of

spies."

"Will he join us, thinkest thou?"

"I think that he will sup with thee, O Caius Nepos, but as to joining us in—"

"Hush!" admonished the praetorian praefect, "Taurus Antinor is right. There are spies all around here to-day. But if he comes to supper we'll persuade him, never fear."

And with a final significant nod the two men parted and once more mixed with the crowd.

More than one high-born lady now had ordered her bearers to set her litter down close to the rostrum whence she could watch the sale, and mayhap make a bid for a purchase on her own account; the rich Roman matrons with large private fortunes and households of their own, imperious and independent, were the object of grave deference and of obsequious courtesy—not altogether unmixed with irony, on the part of the young men around them.

They did not mix with the crowd but remained in their litters, reclining on silken cushions, their dark tunics and richly coloured stoles standing out in sombre notes against the more gaily-decked-out gilded youth of Rome, whilst their serious and oft-times stern manner, their measured and sober speech, seemed almost set in studied opposition to the idle chattering, the flippant tone, the bored affectation of the outwardly more robust sex.

And among them all Taurus Antinor, praefect of Rome, with his ruddy hair and bronzed skin, his massive frame clad in

gorgeously embroidered tunic, his whole appearance heavy and almost rough, in strange contrast alike to the young decadents of the day as to the rigid primness of the patrician matrons, just as his harsh, even voice seemed to dominate the lazy and mellow trebles of the votaries of fashion.

The auctioneer had in the meanwhile cast a quick comprehensive glance over his wares, throwing an admonition here, a command there.

"That yellow hair—let it hang, woman! do not touch it I say.... Slip that goatskin off thy loins, man ... By Jupiter 'tis the best of thee thou hidest.... Hold thy chin up girl, we'll have no doleful faces to-day."

Sometimes his admonition required more vigorous argument. The praefect was appealed to against the recalcitrant. Then the harsh unimpassioned voice with its curious intonation in the pronouncing of the Latin words, would give a brief order and the lictor's flail would whizz in the air and descend with a short sharp whistling sound on obstinately bowed shoulder or unwilling hand, and the auctioneer would continue his perorations.

"What will it please my lord's grace to buy this day? A skilled horseman from Dacia?... I have one.... A pearl.... He can mount an untamed steed and drive a chariot in treble harness through the narrowest streets of Rome.... He can ... What—no?—not a horseman to-day?... then mayhap a hunchback acrobat from Pannonia, bronzed as the tanned hide of an ox, with arms so long that his finger-nails will scrape the ground as he runs; he can turn

a back somersault, walk the tight-rope, or ... Here, Pipus the hunchback, show thine ugly face to my lord's grace, maybe thou'lt help to dissipate the frown between my Lord's eyes, maybe my lord's grace will e'en smile at thine antics.... Turn then, show thy hump, 'tis worth five hundred sesterces, my lord ... turn again ... see my lord, is he not like an ape?"

My lord was smiling, so the auctioneer prattled on, and the deformed creature upon the catasta wound his ill-shapen body into every kind of contortion, grinning from ear to ear, displaying the malformation of his spine, and the hideousness of his long hairy arms, whilst he uttered weird cries that were supposed to imitate those of wild animals in the forest.

These antics caused my lord to smile outright. He was willing to expend two thousand sesterces in order to have such a creature about his house, to have him ready to call when his guests seemed dull between the courses of a sumptuous meal. The deal was soon concluded and the hunchback transferred from the platform to the keeping of my lord's slaves, and thence to my lord's household.

CHAPTER III

"Fairer than the children of men."—Psalm xlv. 2.

"Hun Rhavas, dost mind thy promise made to Menecreta?" whispered a timid voice in the African's ear.

"Aye, aye!" he replied curtly, "I had not forgotten."

There was a lull in the trade whilst the scribes were making entries on their tablets.

The auctioneer had descended from the rostrum. Panting after his exertions, perspiring profusely under the heat of the noonday sun, he was wiping the moisture from his dripping forehead and incidentally refreshing his parched throat with copious drafts from out a leather bottle.

His swarthy skin streaming with perspiration shone in the glare of the noonday sun like the bronze statue of mother-wolf up aloft.

An elderly woman in rough linen tunic, her hair hidden beneath a simple cloth, had succeeded in engaging his attention.

"It had been better to put the child up for sale an hour ago, whilst these rich folk were still at the bath," she said with a tone of reproach in her gentle voice.

"It was not my fault," rejoined the African curtly, "she comes one of the last on the list. The praefect made out the lists. Thou shouldst have spoken to him."

"Oh I should never dare," she replied, her voice trembling at the mere suggestion of such boldness, "but I did promise thee five aurei if I succeeded in purchasing the child."

"I know that," quoth the African with a nod of satisfaction.

"My own child, Hun Rhavas," continued the pleading voice, "think on it, for thou too hast children of thine own."

"I purchased my son's freedom only last year," acquiesced the slave with a touch of pride. "Next year, an the gods will, it shall be my daughter's and after that mine own. In three years from now we shall all be free."

"Thou art a man; 'tis more easy for thee to make money. It took me six years to save up twenty-five aurei which should purchase my child: twenty for her price, five for thy reward, for thou alone canst help me, an thou wilt."

"Well, I've done all I could for thee, Menecreta," retorted Hun Rhavas somewhat impatiently. "I've taken the titulus from off her neck and set the hat over her head, and that was difficult enough for the praefect's eyes are very sharp. Ten aurei should be the highest bid for a maid without guarantees as to skill, health or condition. And as she is not over well-favoured—"

But this the mother would not admit. In weary and querulous tones she began expatiating on the merits of her daughter: her fair hair, her graceful neck—until the African, bored and impatient, turned on her roughly.

"Nay! an thy daughter hath so many perfections, thou'lt not purchase her for twenty aurei. Fifty and sixty will be bid for her,

and what can I do then to help thee?"

"Hun Rhavas," said Menecreta in a sudden spirit of conciliation, "thou must not heed a mother's fancies. To me the child is beautiful beyond compare. Are not thine own in thy sight beautiful as a midsummer's day?" she added with subtle hypocrisy, thinking of the ugly little Africans of whom Hun Rhavas was so proud.

Her motherly heart was prepared for every sacrifice, every humiliation, so long as she obtained what she wanted—possession of her child. Arminius Quirinius had given her her freedom some three years ago, but this seeming act of grace had been a cruel one since it had parted the mother from her child. The late censor had deemed Menecreta old, feeble, and therefore useless: she was but a worthless mouth to feed; but he kept the girl not because she was well-favoured or very useful in his house, but because he knew that Menecreta would work her fingers to the bone until she saved enough money to purchase her daughter's freedom.

Arminius Quirinius, ever grasping for money, ever ready for any act of cupidity or oppression, knew that from the mother he could extract a far higher sum than the girl could possibly fetch in the open market. He had fixed her price as fifty aurei, and Menecreta had saved just one half that amount when fate and the vengeance of the populace overtook the extortioner. All his slaves—save the most valuable—were thrown on the market, and the patient, hard-working mother saw the fulfilment of her hopes

well within sight.

It was but a question of gaining Hun Rhavas' ear and of tempting his greed. The girl, publicly offered under unfavourable conditions, and unbacked by the auctioneer's laudatory harangues, could easily be knocked down for twenty aurei or even less.

But Menecreta's heart was torn with anxiety the while she watched the progress of the sale. Every one of these indifferent spectators might become an enemy through taking a passing fancy to her child. These young patricians, these stern matrons, they had neither remorse nor pity where the gratification of a whim was at stake.

And was not the timid, fair-haired girl more beautiful in the mother's eyes than any other woman put up on the platform for the purpose of rousing a momentary caprice.

She gazed with jealous eyes on the young idlers and the high-born ladies, the possible foes who yet might part her from the child. And there was the praefect too, all-powerful in the matter.

If he saw through the machinations of Hun Rhavas nothing would save the girl from being put up like all the others as the law directed, with the proper tablet attached to her neck, describing her many charms. Taurus Antinor was not cruel but he was pitiless. The slaves of his household knew that, as did the criminals brought to his tribunal. He never inflicted unnecessary punishment but when it was deserved he was relentless in its execution.

What hope could a poor mother have against the weight of his authority.

Fortunately the morning was rapidly wearing on. The hour for the midday rest was close at hand. Menecreta could watch, with a glad thrill in her heart, one likely purchaser after another being borne in gorgeously draped litter away from this scene of a mother's cruel anxiety. Already the ladies had withdrawn. Now there was only a group of men left around the rostrum; Hortensius Martius still lounging aimlessly, young Escanes who had not yet found the paragon amongst cooks, and a few others who eyed the final proceedings with the fashionable expression of boredom.

"I wonder we have not seen Dea Flavia this day," remarked Escanes to the praefect. "Dost think she'll come, Taurus Antinor?"

"Nay, I know not," he replied; "truly she cannot be in need of slaves. She has more than she can know what to do with."

"Oh!" rejoined the other, "of a truth she has slaves enough. But 'tis this new craze of hers! She seems to be in need of innumerable models for the works of art she hath on hand."

"Nay, 'tis no new craze," interposed Hortensius Martius, whose fresh young face had flushed very suddenly as if in anger. "Dea Flavia, as thou knowest full well, Escanes, hath fashioned exquisite figures both in marble and in clay even whilst thou didst waste thy boyhood in drunken revelries. She—"

"A truce on thine ill-temper," broke in Escanes with a good-

humoured laugh. "I had no thought of disparagement for Dea Flavia's genius. The gods forbid!" he added with mock fervour.

"Then dost deserve that I force thee down to thy knees," retorted Hortensius, not yet mollified, "to make public acknowledgment of Dea Flavia's beauty, her talents and her virtues, and public confession of thine own unworthiness in allowing her hallowed name to pass thy wine-sodden lips."

Escanes uttered a cry of rage; in a moment these two—friends and boon companions—appeared as bitter enemies. Hortensius Martius, the perfumed exquisite, was now like an angry cockbird on the defence, whilst Escanes, taller and stronger than he, was clenching his fists, trying to keep up that outward semblance of patrician decorum which the dignity of his caste demanded in the presence of the plebs.

Who knows how long this same semblance would have been kept up on this occasion? for Hortensius Martius, obviously a slave to Dea Flavia's beauty, was ready to do battle for the glorification of his idol, whilst Escanes, smarting under the clumsy insult, had much ado to keep his rage within bounds.

"If you cut one another's throats now," interposed the praefect curtly, "'twill be in the presence of Dea Flavia herself."

Even whilst he spoke a litter gorgeously carved and gilded, draped in rose pink and gold, was seen slowly winding its way from the rear of the basilica and along the Vicus Tuscus, towards the Forum. In a moment all eyes were turned in its direction; the two young men either forgot their quarrel or were ashamed to

prolong it in the presence of its cause.

Now the litter turned into the open. It was borne by eight gigantic Ethiopians whose mighty shoulders were bare to the sun, and all round and behind it a crowd of slaves, of clients, of sycophants followed in its trail, men running beside the litter, women shouting, children waving sprays of flowers and fans of feathers and palm leaves, whilst the air was filled with cries from innumerable throats:

"Augusta! Augusta! Room for Dea Flavia Augusta."

The retinue of Dea Flavia of the imperial house of the Cæsars was the most numerous in Rome.

At word of command no doubt the bearers put the litter down quite close to the rostrum even whilst four young girls stepped forward and drew the silken curtains aside.

Dea Flavia was resting against the cushions; her tiny feet in shoes of gilded leather were stretched out on a coverlet of purple silk richly wrought with gold and silver threads. Her elbow was buried in the fleecy down of the cushions; her head rested against her hand.

Dea Flavia, imperial daughter of Rome, what tongue of poet could describe thy beauty? what hand of artist paint its elusiveness?

Have not the writers of the time told us all there was to tell? and exhausted language in their panegyrics: the fair hair like rippling gold, the eyes now blue, now green, always grey and mysterious, the delicate hands, the voluptuous throat, those tiny

ears ever filled with flattery?

But methinks that the carping critic was right when he deemed that the beauty of her face was marred by the scornful glance of the eyes and the ever rigid lines of the mouth. There was those who had dared aver that Dea Flavia's snow-white neck had been more beautiful if it had known how to bend, and that the glory of her eyes would be enhanced a thousandfold when once they learned how to weep.

This, however, was only the opinion of very few, of those in fact who never had received the slightest favour from Dea Flavia; those on whom she smiled—with that proud, cold smile of hers—fell an over-ready victim to her charm. And she had smiled more than once on Hortensius Martius, and he, poor fool! had quickly lost his head.

Now that she was present he soon forgot his quarrel; neither Escanes nor the rest of the world existed since Dea Flavia was nigh. He pushed his way through her crowd of courtiers and was the first to reach her litter even as she put her dainty feet to the ground.

Escanes too and Caius Nepos, and Philippus Decius and the other young men there, forgot the excitement of the aborted quarrel and pressed forward to pay their respects to Dea Flavia.

The aspect of her court was changed in a moment. Her lictors chased the importunate crowd away, making room for the masters of Rome who desired speech with their mistress. The rough and sombre garments of the slaves showed in the

background now, and all round the litter tunics and mantles of fleecy wool gorgeously embroidered in crimson and gold, or stripes of purple, crowded in eager medley.

All at once too the immediate neighbourhood of the rostrum was deserted, the human chattels forgotten in the anxious desire to catch sight of the great lady whom the Cæsar himself had styled Augusta—thus exalting her above all women in Rome. Her boundless wealth and lavish expenditure, as well as her beauty and acknowledged virtue, had been the talk of the city ever since the death of her father, Octavius Claudius of the House of Augusta Cæsar, had placed her under the immediate tutelage of the Cæsar and left her—young and beautiful as she was—in possession of one of the largest fortunes in the Empire. No wonder then that whenever her rose-draped litter was perceived in the streets of Rome a crowd of idlers and of sycophants pressed around it, curious to see the queen of society and anxious to catch her ear.

This same instant of momentary excitement became that of renewed hope for an anxious mother's heart. Menecreta, with the keenness of her ardent desire, had at once grasped her opportunity. Hun Rhavas fortunately glanced down in her direction. He too no doubt saw the possibilities of this moment of general confusion. The five aurei promised him by Menecreta sharpened his resourceful wits. He signalled to one of the lictors below—an accomplice too, I imagine, in this transaction—and whilst a chorus of obsequious greetings round Dea Flavia's litter

filled the noonday air like the hum of bees, a pale-faced, delicate-looking girl was quickly pushed up on to the platform.

Hun Rhavas very perfunctorily declaimed her age and status.

"Of no known skill," he said, mumbling his words and talking very rapidly, "since my lord's grace the late censor had made no use of her. Shall we say ten aurei for the girl? she might be made to learn a trade."

As the auctioneer started on his peroration those among the crowd who were here for business, and not for idle gaping, turned back towards the catasta. But the little maid who stood there so still, her hair entirely hidden by the ungainly hat, her head bent and her eyes downcast, did not seem very attractive; the lack of guarantee as to her skill and merits represented by the hat and the absence of the tablet round her neck caused the buyers to stand aloof.

As if conscious of this, a deep blush suffused the girl's cheeks. Not that she was ashamed of her position or of her exposure before the public gaze, for to this ordeal her whole upbringing had tended. Born in slavery, she had always envisaged this possibility, and her present position caused her in itself neither pain nor humiliation.

She knew that her mother was there in the crowd, ready for this opportunity; that the present state of discomfort, the past life of wretchedness would now inevitably be followed by a brighter future: reunion with her mother, a life of freedom, mayhap of happiness, marriage right out of the state of bondage, children

born free!

No! it was not the gaping crowd that mattered, the exposure on the public platform, the many pairs of indifferent eyes fixed none too kindly upon her: it was that hat upon her head which brought forth in her such a sense of shame that the hot blood rushed to her cheeks; that, and the absence of the tablet round her neck, and Hun Rhavas' disparaging words about her person.

Others there had been earlier in the day—her former companions in Arminius' household—on whom the auctioneer had lavished torrents of eloquent praise, whom for the first bidding he had appraised at forty or even fifty aurei, the public being over willing to pay higher sums than those.

Whilst here she stood shamed before them all, with no guarantee as to her skill and talents, though she knew something about the art of healing by rubbing unguents into the skin, could ply her needle and dress a lady's hair. Nor was a word said about her beauty, though her eyes were blue and her neck slender and white; and her hair, which was of a pretty shade of gold, could not even be seen under that hideous, unbecoming hat.

"Ten aurei shall we say?" said Hun Rhavas with remarkable want of enthusiasm; "kind sirs, is there no one ready to say fifteen? The girl might be taught to sew or to trim a lady's nails. She may be unskilled now but she might learn—providing that her health be good," he added with studied indifference.

The latter phrase proved a cunning one. The few likely buyers who had been attracted to the catasta by the youthful appearance

of the girl—hoping to find willingness, even if skill were wanting—now quickly drew away.

Of a truth there was no guarantee as to her health and a sick slave was a burden and a nuisance.

"Ten aurei then," said Hun Rhavas raising the hammer, whilst with hungry eyes the mother watched his every movement.

A few more seconds of this agonising suspense! Oh! ye gods, how this waiting hurts! She pressed her hands against her side where a terrible pain turned her nearly giddy.

Only a second or two whilst the hammer was poised in mid air and Hun Rhavas' furtive glance darted on the praefect to see if he were still indifferent! Menecreta prayed with all her humble might to the proud gods enthroned upon the hill! she prayed that this cycle of agony might end at last for she could not endure it longer. She prayed that that cruel hammer might descend and her child be delivered over to her at last.

CHAPTER IV

*"Hope deferred maketh the heart sick."—Proverbs
xiii. 12.*

Alas, the Roman gods are the gods of the patricians! They take so little heed of the sorrows and the trials of poor freedmen and slaves!

"Who ordered the hat to be put on this girl's head?" suddenly interposed the harsh voice of the praefect.

He had not moved away from the rostrum all the while that the throng of obsequious sycophants and idle lovesick youths had crowded round Dea Flavia. Now he spoke over his shoulder at Hun Rhavas, who had no thought, whilst his comfortable little plot was succeeding so well, that the praefect was paying heed.

"She hath no guarantee, as my lord's grace himself hath knowledge," said the African with anxious humility.

"Nay! thou liest as to my knowledge of it," said Taurus Antinor. "Where is the list of goods compiled by the censor?"

Three pairs of willing hands were ready with the parchment rolls which the praefect had commanded; one was lucky enough to place them in his hands.

"What is the girl's name?" he asked as his deep-set eyes, under their perpetual frown, ran down the minute writing on the parchment roll.

"Nola, the daughter of Menecreta, my lord," said one of the scribes.

"I do not see the name of Nola, daughter of Menecreta, amongst those whom the State doth not guarantee for skill, health or condition," rejoined the praefect quietly, and his rough voice, scarcely raised above its ordinary pitch, seemed to ring a death-knell in poor Menecreta's heart.

"Nola, the daughter of Menecreta," he continued, once more referring to the parchment in his hand, "is here described as sixteen years of age, of sound health and robust constitution, despite the spareness of her body. The censor who compiled this list states that she has a fair knowledge of the use of unguents and of herbs, that she can use a needle and plait a lady's hair. Thou didst know all this, Hun Rhavas, for the duplicate list is before thee even now."

"My lord's grace," murmured Hun Rhavas, his voice quivering now, his limbs shaking with the fear in him, "I did not know—I—"

"Thou didst endeavour to defraud the State for purposes of thine own," interposed the praefect calmly. "Here! thou!" he added, beckoning to one of his lictors, "take this man to the Regia and hand him over to the chief warder."

"My lord's grace—" cried Hun Rhavas.

"Silence! To-morrow thou'lt appear before me in the basilica. Bring thy witnesses then if thou hast any to speak in thy defence. To-morrow thou canst plead before me any circumstance which might mitigate thy fault and stay my lips from condemning

thee to that severe chastisement which crimes against the State deserve. In the meanwhile hold thy peace. I'll not hear another word."

But it was not in the negro's blood to submit to immediate punishment now and certain chastisement in the future without vigorous protestations and the generous use of his powerful lungs. The praefect's sentences in the tribunal where he administered justice were not characterised by leniency; the galleys, the stone-quarries, aye! even the cross were all within the bounds of possibility, whilst the scourge was an absolute certainty.

Hun Rhavas set up a succession of howls which echoed from temple to temple, from one end of the Forum to the other.

The frown on the praefect's forehead became even more marked than before. He had seen the young idlers—who, but a moment ago, were fawning round Dea Flavia's litter—turning eagerly back towards the rostrum, where Hun Rhavas' cries and moans had suggested the likelihood of one of those spectacles of wanton and purposeless cruelty in which their perverted senses found such constant delight.

But this spectacle Taurus Antinor was not like to give them. All he wanted was the quick restoration of peace and order. The fraudulent auctioneer was naught in his sight but a breaker of the law. As such he was deserving of such punishment as the law decreed and no more. But his howls just now were the means of rousing in the hearts of the crowd that most despicable of all

passions to which the Roman—the master of civilisation—was a prey—the love of seeing some creature, man or beast, in pain, a passion which brought the Roman citizen down to the level of the brute: therefore Taurus Antinor wished above all to silence Hun Rhavas.

"One more sound from thy throat and I'll have thee scourged now and branded ere thy trial," he said.

The threat was sufficient. The negro, feeling that in submission lay his chief hope of mercy on the morrow, allowed himself to be led away quietly whilst the young patricians—cheated of an anticipated pleasure—protested audibly.

"And thou, Cheiron," continued the praefect, addressing a fair-skinned slave up on the rostrum who had been assistant hitherto in the auction, "do thou take the place vacated by Hun Rhavas."

He gave a few quick words of command to the lictors.

"Take the hat from off that girl's head," he said, "and put the inscribed tablet round her neck. Then she can be set up for sale as the State hath decreed."

As if moved by clockwork one of the lictors approached the girl and removed the unbecoming hat from her head, releasing a living stream of gold which, as it rippled over the girl's shoulders, roused a quick cry of admiration in the crowd.

In a moment Menecreta realised that her last hope must yield to the inevitable now. Even whilst her accomplice, Hun Rhavas, received the full brunt of the praefect's wrath she had scarcely

dared to breathe, scarcely felt that she lived in this agony of fear. Her child still stood there on the platform, disfigured by the ugly headgear, obviously most unattractive to the crowd; nor did the awful possibility at first present itself to her mind that all her schemes for obtaining possession of her daughter could come to naught. It was so awful, so impossible of conception that the child should here, to-day, pass out of the mother's life for ever and without hope of redemption; that she should become the property of a total stranger who might for ever refuse to part from her again—an agriculturist, mayhap, who lived far off in Ethuria or Macedon—and that she, the mother, could never, never, hope to see her daughter again—that was a thought which was so horrible that its very horror seemed to render its realisation impossible.

But now the praefect, with that harsh, pitiless voice of his, was actually ordering the girl to be sold in the usual way, with all her merits exhibited to the likely purchaser: her golden hair—a perfect glory—to tempt the artistic eye, her skill recounted in fulsomeness, her cleverness with the needle, her knowledge of healing herbs.

The mother suddenly felt that every one in that cruel gaping crowd must be pining to possess such a treasure, that the combined wealth of every citizen of Rome would be lavished in this endeavour to obtain the great prize. The praefect himself, mayhap, would bid for her, or the imperator's agents!—alas! everything seemed possible to the anxious, the ridiculous, the sublime heart of the doting mother, and when that living mass

of golden ripples glimmered in the noonday sun, Menecreta—forgetting her timidity, her fears, her weakness—pushed her way through the crowd with all the strength of her despair, and with a cry of agonised entreaty, threw herself at the feet of the praefect of Rome.

"My lord's grace, have mercy! have pity! I entreat thee! In the name of the gods, of thy mother, of thy child if thou hast one, have pity on me! have pity! have pity!"

The lictors had sprung forward in a moment and tried to seize the woman who had dared to push her way to the praefect's closely guarded presence, and was crouching there, her arms encircling his thighs, her face pressed close against his knees. One of the men raised his flail and brought it down with cruel strength on her thinly covered shoulders, but she did not heed the blow, mayhap she never felt it.

"Who ordered thee to strike?" said Taurus Antinor sternly to the lictor who already had the flail raised for the second time.

"The woman doth molest my lord's grace," protested the man.

"Have I said so?"

"No, my lord—but I thought to do my duty—"

"That thought will cost thee ten such lashes with the rods as thou didst deal this woman. By Jupiter!" he added roughly, whilst for the first time a look of ferocity as that of an angry beast lit up the impassiveness of his deep-set eyes, "if this turmoil continues I'll have every slave here flogged till he bleed. Is the business of the State to be hindered by the howlings of this miserable

rabble? Get thee gone, woman," he cried finally, looking down on prostrate Menecreta, "get thee gone ere my lictors do thee further harm."

But she, with the obstinacy of a great sorrow, clung to his knees and would not move.

"My lord's grace, have pity—'tis my child; an thou takest her from me thou'lt part those whom the gods themselves have united—'tis my child, my lord! hast no children of thine own?"

"What dost prate about?" he asked, still speaking roughly for he was wroth with her and hated to see the gaping crowd of young, empty-headed fools congregating round him and this persistent suppliant hanging round his shins. "Thy child? who's thy child? And what hath thy child to do with me?"

"She is but a babe, my lord," said Menecreta with timid, tender voice; "her age only sixteen. A hand-maiden she was to Arminius Quirinius, who gave the miserable mother her freedom but kept the daughter so that he might win good money by and by through the selling of the child. My lord's grace, I have toiled for six years that in the end I might buy my daughter's freedom. Fifty aurei did Arminius Quirinius demand as her price and I worked my fingers to the bone so that in time I might save that money. But Arminius Quirinius is dead and I have only twenty aurei. With the hat of disgrace on her head the child could have been knocked down to me—but now! now! look at her, my lord, how beautiful she is! and I have only twenty aurei!"

Taurus Antinor had listened quite patiently to Menecreta's

tale. His sun-tanned face clearly showed how hard he was trying to gather up the tangled threads of her scrappy narrative. Nor did the lictors this time try to interfere with the woman. The praefect apparently was in no easy temper to-day, and when ill-humour seized him rods and flails were kept busy.

"And why didst not petition me before?" he asked, after a while, when Menecreta paused in order to draw breath.

And his face looked so fierce, his voice sounded so rough, no wonder the poor woman trembled as she whispered through her tears:

"I did not dare, my lord—I did not dare."

"Yet thou didst dare openly to outrage the law!"

"I wanted my child."

"And how many aurei didst promise to Hun Rhavas for helping thee to defraud the State?"

"Only five, my lord," she murmured.

"Then," he said sternly, "not only didst thou conspire to cheat the State for whose benefit the sale of the late censor's goods was ordered by imperial decree, but thou didst bribe another—a slave of the treasury—to aid and abet thee in this fraud."

Menecreta's grasp round the praefect's knees did not relax and he made no movement to free himself, but her head fell sideways against her shoulder whilst her lips murmured in tones of utter despair:

"I wanted my child."

"For thy delinquencies," resumed the praefect, seemingly

not heeding the pathetic appeal, "thou shalt appear before my tribunal on the morrow like unto Hun Rhavas thine accomplice, and thou shalt then be punished no less than thou deservest. But this is no place for the delivery of my judgment upon thee, and the sale must proceed as the law directs; thy daughter must stand upon the catasta, thou canst renew thy bid of twenty aurei for her, and," he added with unmistakable significance, as throwing his head back his imperious glance swept over the assembled crowd, "as there will be no higher bid for Nola, daughter of Menecreta, she will become thy property as by law decreed."

The true meaning of this last sentence was quite unmistakable. The crowd who had gathered round the rostrum to watch, gaping, the moving incident, looked on the praefect and understood no one was to bid for Nola, the daughter of Menecreta. Taurus Antinor, surnamed Anglicanus, had spoken and it would not be to anyone's advantage to quarrel with his arbitrary pronouncement for the sake of any slave girl, however desirable she might be. It was not pleasant to encounter the wrath of the praefect of Rome nor safe to rouse his enmity.

So the crowd acquiesced silently, not only because it feared the praefect, but also because Menecreta's sorrow, the call of the despairing mother, the sad tragedy of this little domestic episode had not left untouched the hearts of these Roman citizens. In matters of sentiment they were not cruel and they held family ties in great esteem; both these factors went far towards causing any would-be purchaser to obey Taurus Antinor's commands and to

retire at once from the bidding.

As for Menecreta, it seemed to her as if the heavens had opened before her delighted gaze. From the depths of despair she had suddenly been dragged forth into the blinding daylight of hope. She could scarcely believe that her ears had heard rightly the words of the praefect.

Still clinging to his knees she raised her head to him; her eyes still dimmed with tears looked strangely wondering up at his face whilst her lips murmured faintly:

"Art thou a god, that thou shouldst act like this?"

But obviously the small stock of patience possessed by the praefect was now exhausted, for he pushed the woman roughly away from him.

"A truce on thy ravings now, woman. The midday hour is almost on us. I have no further time to waste on thine affairs. Put the girl up on the catasta," he added, speaking in his usual harsh, curt way, "and take this woman's arms from round my shins."

And it was characteristic of him that this time he did not interfere with his lictors when they handled the woman with their accustomed roughness.

CHAPTER V

"Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days."—Ecclesiastes xi. 1.

The fair-skinned Cheiron up on the rostrum now took over the duties of the disgraced Hun Rhavas.

The interlude had caused the crowd to linger on despite the approach of noonday, an hour always devoted, almost sacred, to rest. But now that decorum was once more restored and the work of the sale could be proceeded with in the methodical manner approved by the praefect, interest began to flag.

The crowd seemed inclined to wait just a brief while longer in order to see Nola put up on the catasta and to hear the bid of twenty aurei made for her by her mother—a bid which, at the praefect's commands, was to be final and undisputed. Just to see the hammer come clashing down as an epilogue to the palpitating drama was perhaps worth waiting for. The human goods still left for sale after that would have to be held over for a more favourable opportunity.

The praefect was preparing to leave.

Up on the platform Nola, the daughter of Menecreta, smiled at the world through a few lingering tears. She was very happy now that her golden hair was allowed to stream down her shoulders, and that it was only because the praefect had so ordered it that

the low price of twenty aurei would be accepted for her.

"Nola, daughter of Menecreta," shouted Cheiron, the new auctioneer, "aged sixteen years, skilled in the art of healing, and the knowledge of unguents and herbs. Her health is good, her teeth perfect, and her eyes keen for threading the finest needle. Shall we say fifteen aurei for the girl?"

He recited his peroration quickly and perfunctorily, like one repeating a lesson, learned from the praefect.

"I'll give twenty," rang out Menecreta's voice, clearly and loudly. She, too, had learned her lesson, and learned it well, whilst gratitude and an infinity of joy gave her strength to overcome her natural timidity.

"Twenty aurei! twenty aurei! will no one bid more for Nola, the daughter of Menecreta," shouted the auctioneer, hammer in hand, ready to bring it down since no more bidding would be allowed for this piece of goods. "Twenty aurei! no one bids more—no one—no—"

"I'll give thirty aurei!"

It was a pure, young voice that spoke, the voice of a young girl, mellow and soft-toned as those of a pigeon when it coos to its mate; but firm withal, direct and clear, the voice of one accustomed to command and even more accustomed to be obeyed.

The sound rang from temple to temple right across the Forum, and was followed by silence—the dead silence which falls upon a multitude when every heart stops beating and every breath is

indrawn.

Cheiron paused, hammer in hand, his lips parted for the very words which he was about to utter, his round open eyes wandering irresolutely from the praefect's face to that of the speaker with the melodious voice.

And on the hot noonday air there trembled a long sigh of pain, like the breaking of a human heart.

But the same voice, soft and low, was heard again:

"The girl pleases me! What say you, my lord Escanes, is not that hair worthy to be immortalised by a painter's hand?"

And preceded by her lictors, who made a way for her through the crowd, Dea Flavia advanced even to the foot of the catasta. And as she advanced, those who were near retreated to a respectful distance, making a circle round her and leaving her isolated, with her tall Ethiopian slaves behind her holding broad leaves of palm above her head to shield her from the sun. Thus was the gold of her hair left in shadow, and the white skin of her face appeared soft and cool, but the sun played with the shimmering folds of her white silk tunic and glinted against the gems on her fingers.

Tall, imperious and majestic, Dea Flavia—unconscious alike of the deference of the crowd and the timorous astonishment of the slaves—looked up at Cheiron, the auctioneer, and resumed with a touch of impatience in her rich young voice:

"I said that I would bid thirty aurei for this girl!"

Less than a minute had elapsed since Dea Flavia's sudden

appearance on the scene. Taurus Antinor had as yet made no movement or given any sign to Cheiron as to what he should do; but those who watched him with anxious interest could see the dark frown on his brow grow darker still and darker, until his whole face seemed almost distorted with an expression of passionate wrath.

Menecreta, paralysed by this sudden and final shattering of her every hope, uttered moan after moan of pain, and as the pitiful sounds reached the praefect's ears, a smothered oath escaped his tightly clenched teeth. Like some gigantic beast roused from noonday sleep, he straightened his massive frame and seemed suddenly to shake himself free from that state of torpor into which Dea Flavia's unexpected appearance had at first thrown him. He too, advanced to the foot of the catasta and there faced the imperious beauty, whom the whole city had, for the past two years, tacitly agreed to obey in all things.

"The State," he said, speaking at least as haughtily as Dea Flavia herself, "hath agreed to accept the sum of twenty aurei for this slave. 'Tis too late now to make further bids for her."

But a pair of large blue eyes, cold as the waters of the Tiber and like unto them mysterious and elusive, were turned fully on the speaker.

"Too late didst thou say, oh Taurus Antinor?" said Dea Flavia raising her pencilled eyebrows with a slight expression of scorn, "nay! I had not seen the hammer descend! The girl until then is not sold, and open to the highest bidder. Or am I wrong, O

praefect, in thus interpreting the laws of Rome?"

"This is an exceptional case, Augusta," he retorted curtly.

"Then wilt thou expound to me that law which deals with such exceptional cases?" she rejoined with the same ill-concealed tone of gentle irony. "I had never heard of it; so I pray thee enlighten mine ignorance. Of a truth thou must know the law, since thou didst swear before the altar of the gods to uphold it with all thy might."

"Tis not a case of law, Augusta, but one of pity."

The praefect, feeling no doubt the weakness of any argument which aimed at coercing this daughter of the Cæsars, prompted too by his innate respect of the law which he administered, thought it best to retreat from his position of haughty arrogance and to make an appeal, since obviously he could not command. Dea Flavia was quick to note this change of attitude, and her delicate lips parted in a contemptuous smile.

"Dost administer pity as well as law, O Taurus Antinor?" she asked coldly.

Then, as if further argument from him were of no interest to her, she once more turned to the auctioneer, and said with marked impatience:

"I have bid thirty aurei for this girl; art set there slave, to gape at the praefect, or to do thy duty to the State that employs thee? Is there a higher bid for the maid? She pleaseth me, and I'll give sixty or an hundred for her. This is a public auction as by law directed. I appeal to thee, oh Taurus Antinor, to give orders to

thy slaves, ere I appeal to my kinsman, the Emperor, for the restoration of a due administration of the law."

Those who had cause to know and to fear the praefect's varying moods, were ready to shrink away now from the threatening darkness of his glance. He seemed indeed like some tawny wild beast, chained and scorned, whom a child was teasing from a point of vantage just beyond the reach of his powerful jaws.

She was so well within her rights and he so absolutely in the wrong as far as the law was concerned, that he knew at once that he must inevitably give way. If Dea Flavia chose to desire a slave she could satisfy the caprice, since no man's fortune could hold out against her own. This too did the praefect know. He himself was passing rich and would gladly have paid a large sum now, that he might prove the victor in this unequal contest but Dea Flavia had the law and boundless wealth on her side. Taurus Antinor had only his personal authority which had coerced the crowd, but was of no avail against this beautiful woman who defied him openly before the plebs and before his slaves.

"Have no fear, O Dea Flavia," he said, trying to speak calmly, but his voice trembling with the mighty effort at control, "justice hath never yet suffered at my hands. I told thee that 'tis not a case of law here but one of mercy. This girl's mother has toiled for years to save enough money with which to buy the freedom of her child. She hath twenty aurei to command, and the girl is not worth much more than that. The State would have been

satisfied, for my own purse would have made up the deficiency. I had bought the girl myself and given her to the mother, but the poor wretch was so proud and happy to buy her child's freedom herself, that I allowed her to make the bid. That is this slave-girl's story, Augusta! Thou seest that the law will not suffer, neither shall the State be defrauded. What thou art prepared to give for the girl that will I make good in the coffers of the State. Art satisfied, I hope! Thou art a woman, and canst mayhap better understand than I did at first when Menecreta threw herself at my knees."

His rugged voice softened considerably whilst he spoke, and those who were watching him so anxiously saw the ugly dark frown gradually lighten on his brow. No wonder! since he was just a man face to face with an exceptionally beautiful woman, to whose pity he was endeavouring to make appeal. At all times an easy and a pleasant task, it must have been doubly so now when the object of mercy was so deserving. Taurus Antinor looked straight into the lovely face before him, marvelling when those exquisite blue eyes would soften with their first look of pity. But they remained serene and mysterious, neither avoiding his gaze nor responding to its appeal. The delicately chiselled lips retained their slight curve of scorn.

He gave a sign to Menecreta, and she approached, tottering like one who is drunken with wine, or who has received a heavy blow on the head. She stood before Dea Flavia, with head trembling like poplar leaves and great hollow eyes fixed in

meaningless vacancy upon the great patrician lady.

"This is Menecreta, O Dea Flavia," concluded the praefect; "wilt allow her to plead her own cause?"

Without replying directly to him, Dea Flavia turned for the first time to the slave-girl on the platform.

"Is this thy mother?" she asked.

"Yes!" murmured the girl.

"Hast a wish that she should buy thy freedom?"

"Yes."

"That thou shouldst go with her to the hovel which is her home, the only home that thou wouldst ever know? Hast a wish to become the slave of that old woman, whose mind hath already gone wandering among the shadows, and whose body will very shortly go in search of her mind? Hast a wish to spend the rest of thy days scrubbing floors and stewing onions in an iron pot? Or is thy wish to dwell in the marble halls of Dea Flavia's house, where the air is filled with the perfume of roses and violets and tame songbirds make their nests in the oleander bushes? Wouldst like to recline on soft downy cushions, allowing thy golden hair to fall over thy shoulders the while I, mallet or chisel in hand, would make thy face immortal by carving it in marble? The praefect saith thine is a case for pity, then do I have pity upon thee, and give thee the choice of what thy life shall be. Squalor and misery as thy mother's slave, or joy, music, and flowers as mine."

Her voice, ever low and musical, had taken on notes of tenderness and of languor. The tears of pity which the praefect

had vainly tried to conjure up gathered now in her eyes as her whole mood seemed to melt in the fire of her own eloquence.

Nola hung her head, overwhelmed with shame. She was very young and the great lady very kind and gentle. Her own simple heart, still filled with the selfish desires of extreme youth, cried out for that same life of ease and luxury which the beautiful lady depicted in such tempting colours before her, whilst it shrank instinctively from the poverty, the hard floors, the stewing-pots which awaited her in that squalid hut on the Aventine where her mother dwelt.

She hung her head and made no reply, whilst from the group of the young and idle sycophants who had hung on Dea Flavia's honeyed words just as they had done round her litter a while ago, came murmurs of extravagant adulation and well-chosen words in praise of her exquisite diction, her marvellous pity, her every talent and virtue thus freely displayed.

Even the crowd stared open-mouthed and agape at this wonderful spectacle of so great a lady stooping to parley with a slave.

The praefect alone remained seemingly unmoved; but the expression of hidden wrath had once more crept into his eyes, making them look dark and fierce and glowing with savage impotence; and his gaze had remained fixed on the radiantly beautiful woman who stood there before him in all the glory of her high descent, her patrician bearing, the exquisite charm of her personality, seductive in its haughty aloofness, voluptuous

even in its disdainful calm.

Neither did Menecreta fall a victim to Dea Flavia's melodious voice. She had listened from a respectful distance, and with the humble deference born of years of bondage, to the honeyed words with which the great lady deigned to cajole a girl-slave. but when Dea Flavia had finished speaking and the chorus of admiration had died down around her, the freedwoman, with steps which she vainly tried to render firm, approached to the foot of the catasta and stood between the great lady and her own child.

She placed one trembling, toil-worn hand on Nola's shoulder and said gently:

"Nola, thou hast heard what my lady's grace hath deigned to speak. A humble life but yet a free one awaits thee in thy mother's home on the Aventine; a life of luxurious slavery doth my lady's grace offer thee. She deigns to say that thou alone shalt choose thy way in life. Thou wast born a slave, Nola, and shouldst know how to obey. Obey my lady then. Choose thy future, Nola. The humble and free one which I, thy mother, have earned for thee, or the golden cage in which this proud lady would deign to keep her latest whim in bondage!"

Her voice, which at first had been almost steady, died down at the end in a pitiful quiver. It was the last agony of her hopes, the real parting from her child, for even whilst Menecreta's throat was choked with sobs, Nola hung her head and great heavy tears dropped from her eyes upon her clasped hands. The child was

crying and the mother understood.

She no longer moaned with pain now. The pain was gone; only dull despair remained. Her heart had hungered for the one glad cry of joy: "Mother, I'll come to thee!" It was left starving even through her daughter's tears.

But those who watched this unwonted scene could not guess what Dea Flavia felt, for her eyes were veiled by her long lashes, and the mouth expressed neither triumph nor pity. Menecreta now once more tried to steady her quivering voice; she straightened her weary back and said quite calmly:

"My lady's grace has spoken, and the great lords here assembled have uttered words of praise for an exquisite act of pity. My lady's grace hath spoken and hath told the poor slave, Nola, to choose her own life. But I, the humble freedwoman, will speak in my turn to thee, O Dea Flavia of the imperial house of immortal Cæsar, and looking into thine eyes I tell thee that thy pity is but falsehood and thine eloquence naught but cruelty. By thy words thou didst take my child from me as effectually as if thou already hadst bought and paid for her. Look at the child now! She hangs her head and dares not look on me, her mother. Oh! thou didst well choose thy words, oh daughter of imperial Cæsar, for thy honeyed words were like the nectar which hid the poison that hath filtrated into my daughter's heart. Thou hast said it right—her life with me had been one of toil and mayhap of misery, but she would have been content, for she had never dreamed of another life. But now she has heard thee speak of

marble halls, of music and of flowers, of a life of ease and of vanity, and never again would that child be happy in her mother's arms. Be content, O Augusta! the girl is thine since thy caprice hath willed it so. Even though she chose her mother now, I would not have her, for I know that she would be unhappy in that lonely hut on the Aventine; and though I have seen much sorrow and endured much misery, there is none greater to bear than the sight of a child's sorrow. Take her, Dea Flavia! thine eloquence has triumphed over a mother's broken heart."

Strangely enough, and to the astonishment of all those present, Dea Flavia had listened patiently and silently whilst the woman spoke, and now she said quite gently:

"Nay! thou dost wrong thine own child, Menecreta; see how lovingly she turns to thee!"

"Only because in her shallow little heart there has come the first twinge of remorse," replied the woman sadly. "Soon, in the lap of that luxury which thou dost offer her, she will have forgotten the mother's arms in which she weeps to-day."

"That's enough," suddenly interposed the praefect harshly. "Menecreta, take thy child; take her, I say. Dea Flavia hath relinquished her to thee. Be not a fool and take the child away!"

But with a gesture of savage pride the freedwoman tore herself away from Nola.

"No!" she said firmly, "I'll not take her. That proud lady here hath stolen the soul of my child; her body, inert and sad, I'll not have the while her heart longs to be away from me. I'll not have

her, I say! let the daughter of Cæsar account to the gods above for her tempting words, her honeyed speech and her lies."

"Silence, woman!" ordered Dea Flavia sternly.

"Lies, I tell thee, lies," continued the woman who had lost all sense of fear in the depth of her misery; "the life of luxury thou dost promise this child—how long will it last? thy caprice for her—when will it tire? Silence? nay! I'll not be silent," she continued wildly in defiant answer to angry murmurs from the crowd. "Thou daughter of a house of tyrants, tyrant thyself! a slave to thy paltry whims, crushing beneath thy sandalled feet the hearts of the poor and the cries of the oppressed! Shame on thee! shame on thee, I say!"

"By the great Mother," said Dea Flavia coldly, "will no one here rid me of this screaming vixen?"

But even before she had spoken, the angry murmurs around had swollen to loud protestations. Before the praefect's lictors could intervene the crowd had pushed forward; the men rushed and surrounded the impious creature who had dared to raise her voice against one of the divinities of Rome: Augusta the goddess.

One of Dea Flavia's gigantic Ethiopians had seized Menecreta by the shoulder, another pulled her head back by the hair and struck her roughly on the mouth, but she, with the strength of the vanquished, brought down to her knees, frenzied with despair, continued her agonised cry:

"A curse upon thee, Dea Flavia, a curse spoken by the dying lips of the mother whom thou hast scorned!"

How she contrived momentarily to free herself from the angry crowd of lictors and of slaves it were impossible to say; perhaps at this moment something in Menecreta's wild ravings had awed their spirit and paralysed their hands. Certain it is that for one moment the freedwoman managed to struggle to her feet and to drag herself along on her knees until her hands clutched convulsively the embroidered tunic of Dea Flavia.

"And this is the curse which I pronounce on thee," she murmured in a hoarse whisper, which, rising and rising to higher tones, finally ended in shrieks which reached to the outermost precincts of the Forum. "Dea Flavia, daughter of Octavius Claudius thou art accursed. May thine every deed of mercy be turned to sorrow and to humiliation, thine every act of pity prove a curse to him who receives it, until thou on thy knees, art left to sue for pity to a heart that knoweth it not and findest a deaf ear turned to thy cry. Hear me, ye gods—hear me!... Magna Mater, hear me!... Mother of the stars—hear me!"

Superstition, deeply rooted in every Roman heart, held the crowd enthralled even whilst Menecreta's trembling voice echoed against the marble walls of the temples of the gods whom she invoked. No one attempted to stop her. Dea Flavia's slaves dared not lay a hand on her. It seemed as if Magna Mater herself, the great Mother, had thrown an invisible mantle over the humble freedwoman, shielding her with god-like power.

"Menecreta, raise thyself and come away," said a harsh voice in tones of command. The praefect had at last with the vigorous

help of his lictors managed to push his way through the crowd. It was he now who attempted to raise the woman from her knees. He sharply bade his own men to silence the woman and to take her away.

Dea Flavia had remained silent and still. She had not attempted to interrupt the frenzied woman who called this awful curse upon her; only once, when Menecreta invoked the gods, did a shudder pass through the delicate body, and her heavy lids fell over her blue eyes, as if they were trying to shut out some awful vision which the woman's ravings had conjured up.

Then in a sudden her mood seemed to change, her serenity returned, and when the praefect interposed she put out a restraining hand, warning the lictors not to approach.

She bent to Menecreta and called her by name, her mellow voice vibrating with tender tones like the chords of the harp that are touched by a master hand, and her blue eyes, veiled with tears, looked down with infinite tenderness on the prostrate figure at her feet.

"Menecreta," she said gently, "thy sorrow hath made thee harsh. The gods, believe me, still hold much happiness in store for thee and for thy daughter. See how they refuse to register thy curse which had been impious were it not the dictate of thy poor frenzied mind. See, Menecreta, how thou didst misjudge me; what I did, I did because I wished to test thy love for thy child. I wished to test its true selflessness. But now I am satisfied and Nola need no longer choose, for she shall have the luxury for

which her young heart doth pine, but she shall never by me be deprived of her mother's love."

Even while she spoke, Menecreta struggled to her knees. Her wide-open eyes, over which a mysterious veil seemed to be slowly descending, were fixed on the radiant vision above her. But comprehension had not yet reached her mind. Her spirit had not yet been dragged from the hell of despair to this glorious sight of heaven.

"Menecreta," continued the gentle voice, "thou shalt come to my house. A free woman, thou shalt be my friend and thy daughter shall be thy happy bondswoman. I'll give thee a little home in which thou shalt dwell with her and draw thy last breath in her arms; there shall be a garden there which she will plant with roses. Thy days and hers will be one continuous joy. Come to me now, Menecreta! Take thy daughter by the hand and come and dwell with her in the little house which my slaves shall prepare for thee."

Her face now was almost on a level with that of Menecreta, whose hollow eyes gazed upwards with a look of ecstatic wonder.

"Who art thou?" murmured the freedwoman; "there is a film over my eyes—I cannot see—art thou a goddess?"

"Nay!" replied Dea Flavia gently, "only a lonely maiden who has no friends e'en in the midst of all her riches. A lonely maid whom thou didst try to curse, asking the gods that her every act of mercy be turned to bitter sorrow. See, she takes thee to her heart and gives thee back thy daughter, a home and happiness."

"My daughter?" murmured Menecreta.

"She shall dwell with thee in the house which shall be thine."

"A home?" and the trembling voice grew weaker, the hollow eyes more dim.

"Aye! in the midst of a garden, with roses and violets all around."

"And happiness?" sighed Menecreta.

And her head fell back against Dea Flavia's arm; her eyes, now veiled by the film of death gazed, sightless, up at the dome of blue.

"Menecreta!" cried Dea Flavia, horror-stricken as she felt the feeble body stiffening against her with the approaching rigidity of death.

"Mother!" echoed Nola, striving to smother her terror as she threw herself on her knees.

"The woman is dead," said the praefect quietly.

CHAPTER VI

"I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last."—Revelations xxii. 13.

And after that silence and peace.

Silence save for the moanings of the child Nola, who in a passionate outburst of grief had thrown herself on the body of her mother.

Dea Flavia stood there still and calm, her young face scarcely less white than the clinging folds of her tunic, her unfathomable eyes fixed upon the pathetic group at her feet: the weeping girl and the dead woman.

She seemed almost dazed—like one who does not understand and a quaint puzzled frown appeared upon the whiteness of her brow.

Once she raised her eyes to the praefect and encountered his gaze—strangely contemptuous and wrathful—fixed upon her own, and anon she shuddered when a pitiable moan from Nola echoed from end to end along the marble walls around.

And the crowd of idlers began slowly to disperse. In groups of twos and threes they went, their sandalled feet making a soft rustling noise against the flagstones of the Forum, and their cloaks of thin woollen stuff floating out behind them as they walked.

The young patricians were the first to go. The scene had ceased to be amusing and Dea Flavia was not like to bestow another smile. They thought it best to retire to their luxurious homes, for they vaguely resented the majesty of death which clung round the dead freedwoman and the young living slave. They hoped to forget in the course of the noonday sleep, and the subsequent delights of the table, the painful events which had so unpleasantly stirred their shallow hearts.

Dea Flavia paid no heed to them as they murmured words of leave-taking in her ear. 'Tis doubtful if she saw one of them or cared if they went or stayed.

At an order from the praefect the auction sale was abruptly suspended. The lictors drove the herds of human cattle together preparatory to taking them to their quarters on the slopes of the Aventine where they would remain until the morrow; whilst the scribes and auctioneers made haste to scramble down from the heights of the rostrum, the heat of the day having rendered that elevated position well-nigh unbearable. Only Dea Flavia's retinue lingered in the Forum. Standing at a respectful distance they surrounded the gorgeously draped litter, waiting, silently and timorous, the further pleasure of their mistress; and behind Dea Flavia her two Ethiopian slaves, stolidly holding the palm leaves to shield her head against the blazing sun which so mercilessly seared their own naked shoulders.

"Grant me leave to escort thee to thy litter, Augusta!" murmured a timid voice.

It was young Hortensius Martius who spoke. He had approached the catasta and now stood timid, and a suppliant, beside Dea Flavia, with his curly head bare to the scorching sun and his back bent in slave-like deference. But the young girl seemed not to hear him and even after he had twice repeated his request she turned to him with uncomprehending eyes.

"I would not leave thee, Dea," he said, "until I saw thee safely among thy slaves and thy clients."

Then at last did she speak. But her voice sounded toneless and dull, as of one who speaks in a dream.

"I thank thee, good Hortensius," she said, "but my slaves are close at hand and I would prefer to be left alone."

To insist further would have been churlish. Hortensius Martius, well versed in every phase of decorum, bowed his head in obedience and retired to his litter. But he told his slaves not to bear him away from the Forum altogether but to place the litter down under the arcades of the tabernae, and then to stand round it so that it could not be seen, whilst he himself could still keep watch over the movements of Dea Flavia.

But she in the meanwhile remained in the same inert position, standing listlessly beside the body of Menecreta, her face expressing puzzlement rather than horror, as if within her soul she was trying to reconcile the events of the last few moments with her previous conceptions of what the tenor of her life should be.

The curse of Menecreta had found sudden and awful

fulfilment, and Dea Flavia remained vaguely wondering whether the gods had been asleep on this hot late summer's day and forgotten to shield their favoured daughter against the buffetings of fate. A freedwoman had roused superstitious fear in the heart of a daughter of the Cæsars! Surely there must be something very wrong in the administration of the affairs of this world. Nay, more! for the freedwoman, unconscious of her own impiety, had triumphed in the end; her death—majestic and sublime in its suddenness—had set the seal upon her malediction.

And Dea Flavia marvelled that the dead woman remained so calm, her eyes so still, when—if indeed Jupiter had been aroused by the monstrous sacrilege—she must now be facing the terrors of his judgments.

And Taurus Antinor watched her in silence whilst she stood thus, unconscious of his gaze, a perfect picture of exquisite womanhood set in a frame of marble temples and colonnades, a dome of turquoise above her head, the palm leaves above her throwing a dense blue shadow on her golden hair and the white tunic on her shoulders.

He had heard much of Dea Flavia—the daughter of Claudius Octavius and now the ward of the Emperor Caligula—since his return from Syria a year ago, and he had oft seen her gilded and rose-draped litter gliding along the Sacra Via or the Via Appia, surrounded with its numberless retinue: but he had never seen her so close as this, nor had he heard her speak.

She was a mere child and still under the tutelage of

her despotic father when he—Taurus Antinor—tired of the enervating influences of decadent Rome, had obtained leave from the Emperor Tiberius to go to Syria as its governor. The emperor was glad enough to let him go. Taurus Antinor, named Anglicanus, was more popular with the army and the plebs than any autocratic ruler could wish.

He went to Syria and remained there half a dozen years. The jealousy of one emperor had sent him thither and 'twas the jealousy of another that called him back to Rome. Syria had liked its governor over well, and Caius Julius Cæsar Caligula would not brook rivalry in the allegiance owed to himself alone by his subjects—even by those who dwelt in the remotest provinces of the Empire.

But on his return to Rome the powerful personality of Taurus Antinor soon imposed itself upon the fierce and maniacal despot. Caligula—though he must in reality have hated the Anglicanus as much and more than he hated all men—gave grudging admiration to his independence of spirit and to his fearless tongue. In the midst of an entourage composed of lying sycophants and of treacherous minions, the Cæsar seemed to feel in the presence of the stranger a sense of security and of trust. Some writers have averred that Caligula looked on Taurus Antinor as a kind of personal fetish who kept the wrath of the gods averted from his imperial head. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that tyrant exerted his utmost power to keep Taurus near his person, showering upon him those honours and titles

of which he would have been equally ready to deprive him had the stranger at any time run counter to his will. Anon, when the Cæsar thought it incumbent upon his dignity to start on a military expedition, he forced Antinor to accept the praefecture of the city in order to keep him permanently settled in Rome.

The Anglicanus accepted the power—which was almost supreme in the absence of the Cæsar. He even gave the oath demanded of him by the Emperor that he would remain at his post until the termination of the proposed military expedition, but it was easy to see that the dignities for which others would have fought and striven to their uttermost were not really to the liking of Taurus Antinor.

Avowedly wilful of temper, he had since his return from Syria become even more silent, more self-centred than before. Many called him morose and voted him either treacherous or secretly ambitious; others averred that he was either very arrogant or frankly dull. Certain it is that he held himself very much aloof from the society of his kind and persistently refused to mix with the young elegants of the day either in their circles or their baths, their private parties or public entertainments.

Thus it was that the praefect found himself to-day for the first time in the near presence of Dea Flavia, the acknowledged queen of that same society which he declined to frequent, and as he grudgingly admitted to himself that she was beautiful beyond what men had said of her, he remembered all the tales which he had heard of her callous pride, her cold dignity, and of that cruel

disdain with which she rejected all homage and broke the hearts of those whom her beauty had brought to her feet.

For the moment, however, she struck him as more pathetic than fearsome; she looked lonely just now like a stately lily blooming alone in a deserted garden. He was wroth with her for what she had done to Menecreta and for her childish caprice and opposition to his will, but at the same time he who so seldom felt pity for those whom a just punishment had overtaken, was sorry for this young girl, for in her case retribution had been severe and out of all proportion to her fault.

Therefore he approached her almost with deference and forced his rough voice to gentleness, as he said to her:

"The hour is late, O Dea Flavia. I myself must leave the Forum now. I would wish to see thee safe amongst thy women."

She turned her blue eyes upon him. His voice had roused her from her meditations and recalled her to that sense of proud dignity with which she loved to surround herself as with invisible walls. She must have seen the pity in his eyes for he did not try to hide it, but it seemed to anger her as coming from this man who—to her mind—was the primary cause of her present trouble. She looked for a moment or two on him as if trying to recollect his very existence, and no importunate slave could ever encounter such complete disdain as fell on the praefect at this moment from Dea Flavia's glance.

"I will return to my palace at the hour which pleaseth me most, O praefectus," she said coldly, "and when the child Nola, being

more composed, is ready to accompany me."

"Nay!" he rejoined in his accustomed rough way, "the slave Nola is naught to thee now. She will be looked after as the State directs."

"The slave is mine," she retorted curtly. "She shall come with me."

And even as she spoke she drew herself up to her full height, more like, he thought, than ever to a stately lily now. The crown of gold upon her head caught a glint from the noonday sun, and the folds of her white tunic fell straight and rigid from her shoulders down to her feet.

It seemed strange to him that one so young, so exquisitely pure, should thus be left all alone to face the hard moments of life; her very disdain for him, her wilfulness, seemed to him pathetic, for they showed her simple ignorance of the many cruelties which life must of necessity have in store for her.

As for yielding to her present mood, he had no thought of it. It was caprice originally which had caused her to defy his will and to break old Menecreta's heart. She had invoked strict adherence to the law for the sole purpose of indulging this caprice. Now he was tempted also to stand upon the law and to defy her tyrannical will, even at the cost of his own inclinations in the matter.

He would not trust her with the child Nola now. He had other plans for the orphan girl, rendered lonely and desolate through a great lady's whim, and he would have felt degradation in the thought that Dea Flavia should impose her will on him in this.

He knew her power of course. She was a near kinswoman of the Emperor, and the child of his adoption; she was all-powerful with the Cæsar as with all men through the might of his personality as much as through that of her wealth.

But he had no thought of yielding nor any thought of fear. It seemed as if in the heat-laden atmosphere two mighty wills had suddenly clashed one against the other, brandishing ghostly steels. His will against hers! The might of manhood and of strength against the word of a beautiful woman. Nor was the contest unequal. If he could crush her with a touch of his hand, she could destroy him with one word in the Cæsar's ear. She had as her ally the full unbridled might of the House of Cæsar, while against her there was only this stranger, a descendant of a freedwoman from a strange land. For the nonce his influence was great over the mind of the quasi-madman who sat on the Empire's throne, but any moment, any event, the whisper of an enemy, the word of a woman, might put an end to his power.

All this Dea Flavia knew, and knowing it found pleasure in toying with his wrath. Armed with the triple weapon of her beauty, her purity and her power, she taunted him with his impotence and smiled with scornful pity upon the weakness of his manhood.

Even now she turned to Nola and said with gentle firmness: "Get up, girl, and come with me."

But at her words the last vestige of deference fled from the praefect's manner; pity now would have been weak folly. Had he

yielded he would have despised himself even as this proud girl now affected to scorn him.

He interposed his massive figure between Dea Flavia and the slave and said loudly:

"By thy leave, Nola, the daughter of Menecreta, is the property of the State and 'tis I will decide whither she goeth now."

"Until to-morrow only, Taurus Antinor," she rejoined coldly, "for to-morrow she must be in the slave market again, when my agents will bid for and buy her according to my will."

"Nay! she shall not be put up for sale to-morrow."

"By whose authority, O praeffectus?"

"By mine. The State hath given me leave to purchase privately a number of slaves from the late censor's household. 'Tis my intention to purchase Nola thus."

"Thou hast no right," she said, still speaking with outward calm, though her whole soul rebelled against the arrogance of this man who dared to thwart her will, to gainsay her word, and set up his dictates against hers, "thou hast no right thus to take the law in thine own hands."

"Nay! as to that," he replied with equal calm, "I'll answer for mine own actions. But the slave Nola shall not pass into thy hands, Augusta! Thou hast wrought quite enough mischief as it is; be content and go thy way. Leave the child in peace."

In these days of unbridled passions and unfettered tyranny, a man who spoke thus to a daughter of the Cæsars spoke at peril

of his life. Both Dea Flavia and Taurus Antinor knew this when they faced one another eye to eye, their very souls in rebellion one against the other—his own turbulent and fierce, with the hot blood from a remote land coursing in his veins, blinding him to his own advantage, to his own future, to everything save to his feeling of independence at all cost from the oppression of this family of tyrants; her own almost serene in its consciousness of limitless power.

For the moment her sense of dignity prevailed. Whatever she might do in the future, she was comparatively helpless now. The praefect in the discharge of his functions—second only to the Cæsar—was all-powerful where he stood.

Taurus Antinor was still the praefect of Rome, still a member of the Senate and favourite of Caligula. He had her at a disadvantage now, just as she had held him a while ago when she forced on the public sale of the girl Nola. Therefore, though with a look she would have crushed the insolent, and her delicate hands were clenched into fists that would have chastised him then and there if they had the strength, she returned his look of fierce defiance with her usual one of calm.

"Thou hast spoken, Taurus Antinor," she said coldly, "and in deference to the law which thou dost represent I bow to thy commands. Art thou content?" she added, seeing that he made no reply.

"Content?" he asked, puzzled at her meaning.

"Aye!" she said; "I asked thee if thou wert content. Thou hast

humiliated a daughter of Cæsar, a humiliation which she is not like to forget."

"I crave thy pardon if I have transgressed beyond the limits of my duty."

"Thy duty? Nay, Taurus Antinor, a man's duties are as varied as a woman's moods, and he is wisest who knows how to adapt the one to the other. 'Tis not good, remember, to run counter to Dea Flavia's will. 'Tis much that thou must have forgotten, O praefect, ere thou didst set thy so-called duty above the fulfilment of my wish."

"Nay, gracious lady," he said simply, "I had forgotten nothing. Not even that Archelaus Menas, the sculptor, died for having angered thee; nor that Julius Campanius perished in exile and young Decretas in fetters, because of thine enmity. Thou seest that—though somewhat of a stranger in Rome—I know much of its secret history, and though mine eyes had until now never beheld thy loveliness, yet had mine ears heard much of thy power."

"Yet at its first encounter thou didst defy it."

"I have no mother to mourn o'er my death like young Decretas," he said curtly, "nor yet a wife to make into a sorrowing widow like the sculptor Menas."

If it was his desire to break through the barrier of well-nigh insolent calm which she seemed to have set round her dainty person, then he succeeded over well, for she winced at his words like one who has received a blow and her eyes, dark with anger,

narrowed until they became mere slits fringed by her golden lashes.

"But thou hast a life, Taurus Antinor," she said, "and life is a precious possession."

He shrugged his massive shoulders, and a curious smile played round his lips.

"And thou canst order that precious possession to be taken from me," he said lightly. "Is that what thou wouldst say?"

"That and more, for thou hast other precious treasures more precious, mayhap, than life; so guard them well, O Taurus Antinor!"

"Nay, gracious lady," he rejoined, still smiling, "I have but one soul as I have one life, and that too is in the hands of God."

"Of which god?" she asked quaintly.

He did not reply but pointed upwards at the vivid dome of blue against which the white of Phrygian marbles glittered in the sun.

"Of Him Whose Empire is mightier than that of Rome."

She looked on him in astonishment. Apparently she did not understand him, nor did he try to explain, but it seemed to her as if his whole appearance had changed suddenly, and her thoughts flew back to that which she had witnessed a year ago when she was in Ostia and she had seen a raging tempest become suddenly stilled. "There is no mightier empire than that of Rome," she said proudly, "and methinks thou art a traitor, oh Taurus Antinor, else thou wouldst not speak of any emperor save of Cæsar, my kinsman."

"I spoke not of an emperor, gracious lady," he said simply.

"But thy thoughts were of one whose empire was mightier than that of Rome."

"My thoughts," he said, "were of a Man Whom I saw whilst travelling through Judæa a few years ago. He was poor and dwelt among the fishermen of Galilee. They stood around Him and listened whilst He talked; when He walked they followed Him, for a halo of glory was upon Him and the words which He spoke were such that once heard they could never be forgotten."

"Didst thou too hear those marvellous words, O Taurus Antinor?" she asked.

"Only twice," he replied, "did I hear the words which He spoke. I mingled with the crowd, and once when His eyes fell upon me, it seemed to me as if all the secrets of life and death were suddenly revealed to me. His eyes fell upon me.... I was one of a multitude ... but from that moment I knew that life on this earth would never be precious to me again—since the most precious gift man hath is his immortality."

"Thou speakest of strange matters, O praefect," she rejoined, "and meseems there's treason in what thou sayest. Who is this man, whose very look hath made a slave of thee?"

"A slave to His will thou sayest truly, O daughter of Cæsar! Could I hear His command I would follow Him through life and to death. At times even now meseems that I can hear His voice and see His eyes ... thou hast never seen such eyes, Augusta—fixed upon my very soul. I saw them just now, right across the

Forum, when the wretched freedwoman clung shrieking round my shins. They looked at me and *asked* me to be merciful; they did not command, they begged ... *asking* for the pity that lay dormant in my soul. And now I know that if those same eyes looked at me again and asked for every drop of my blood, if they asked me to bear death, torture, or even shame, I would become as thou truly sayest—a slave."

Once or twice whilst he spoke she had tried to interrupt him, but every time the words she would have spoken had died upon her lips. He looked so strange—this praelect of Rome—whose judgments everyone feared, whose strict adherence to duty the young elegants of the day were ever fond of deriding. He looked very strange now and spoke such strange words—words that she resented bitterly, for they sounded like treason to the House of Cæsar of which she was so coldly proud.

To her Cæsar was as a god, and she as his kinswoman had been brought up to worship in him not the man—that might be vile—but the supreme power in the Empire which he represented. She did not pause to think if he were base, tyrannical, a half-crazy despot without mind or heart or sensibilities. She knew what was said about him, she had even seen at times things from which she recoiled in unspeakable horror; but her soul, still pure and still proud, was able to dissociate the abstract idea of the holy and mighty Cæsar from its present hideous embodiment. And this same holy reverence for Cæsar she looked for in all those who she deemed were worthy to stand—not as his equals, for

only the gods were that—but nigh to his holy person—his own kinsmen first, then his Senate, his magistrates, and his patricians, and above all this man—almost a stranger—whom the Cæsar had deigned to honour with his confidence.

And yet this same stranger spoke calmly of another, of a man whom he would obey as a slave in all things, whom he would follow even to death; a man whose might he proclaimed above that of Cæsar himself.

"But who is this man?" she exclaimed at last, almost involuntarily.

"A poor Man from Galilee," he replied.

"What is he called?"

"Out there they called Him Jesus of Nazareth."

"And where is he now?"

"He died upon the cross, in Jerusalem, seven years ago."

"Upon the cross?" she exclaimed; "what had he done?"

"He had dwelt among the poor and brought them contentment and peace; He had lived amongst men and taught them love and charity. So the Roman proconsul ordered Him to be crucified, and those whom He had rendered happy rejoiced over His death."

"Methinks that I did hear something of this. I was a child then but already I took much interest in the affairs of State, and my father spoke oft freely in my presence. I remember his talking of a demagogue over in Judæa who claimed to be the King of the Jews and who was punished for treason and sedition. But I also heard that he did but little mischief, since only a troop of

ignorant fisher-folk followed and listened to him."

"Ignorant fisher-folk thou saidst it truly, O Dea Flavia, yet I have it in my mind that anon the knee of every patrician—aye! of every Cæsar—shall bend before the mighty throne of that Man from Galilee."

"And thus didst learn thy lesson of treason, O præfect," she retorted; "demagogues and traitors from Judæa have sown the seeds of treachery in thy mind, and whilst thou dost receive with both hands the gifts of the Cæsar my kinsman, thou dost set up another above him and dost homage to him in thy heart."

"Aye! in my heart, gracious lady; for I am even more ignorant than those fishermen from Galilee who heard every word spoken by Jesus of Nazareth. I heard Him but twice in my life and once only did His eyes rest upon me, and they enchained my heart to His service, though I know but little yet of what He would have me do."

"No doubt he would have thee turn traitor to thine Emperor and to acclaim him—the demagogue—as imperator before the Senate and the army. He—"

"I told thee that He was dead," he interposed simply.

"And that his words had made thee rebellious to Cæsar and insolent to me."

"Thine humble servant, O Augusta," he rejoined, smiling in spite of himself, for now she was just like an angry child. "Wilt but command and see how I will obey."

"The girl Nola!" she said haughtily.

"In that alone I must deny thee."

"Then tie my shoe, it hath come undone."

The tone with which she said this was so arrogant and so harsh that even her slaves behind her turned frightened eyes on the praefect who was known to be so proud, and on whom the curt command must have had the effect of a sudden whip-lash on the face.

She had spoken as if to the humblest of her menials, finding pleasure in putting this insult on the man who had dared to thwart and irritate her; but she had not spoken deliberately; it had been an impulse, an irresistible desire to see him down on his knees, in a position only fit for slaves.

Directly the words had left her mouth, she already regretted them, for his refusal now would have been doubly humiliating for herself, and her good sense had told her already that no patrician—least of all Taurus Antinor—would submit quietly to public insult and ridicule even from her.

The quick, more gentle word was already on her lips, the look of mute apology was struggling to her eyes, when to her astonishment the praefect, without a word, was down on his knees before her.

"Nay!" she said, "I did but jest."

"The honour," he said quietly, "is too great, O daughter of Cæsar, that I should forego it now."

His powerful shoulders were bent almost to the level of the ground, and she looked down on him, more puzzled than ever

at this stranger whose every action seemed different from those of his fellow-men. She put her little foot slightly forward, and as he tied the string of her shoe she saw how slender was his hand, firm yet tapering down to the elegant finger-tips; the hand of a patrician even though he hailed from the barbaric North.

Suddenly she smiled. But this he did not see for he was still intent upon the shoe, but she felt that those slender hands of his were singularly clumsy. And she smiled because she had recollected how like his fellowmen he really was, how he evidently forgot his wrath and sank his pride for the pleasure of kneeling at her feet.

To this homage she was well accustomed. Many there were in Rome who at this moment would gladly have changed places with the praefect. More than one great patrician had craved the honour of tying her shoe, more than one patrician hand had trembled whilst performing this service.

And Dea Flavia smiled because already she guessed—or thought that she guessed—what would follow the tying of her shoe—a humble kiss upon her foot, the natural homage of a man to her beauty and to her power.

The daughter of Cæsar smiled because the spirit of child-like waywardness was in her, and she thought that she would like the slave-like homage from this man whom her wrath and threats had left impassive but whom her beauty had at last brought down to his knees; and thus smiling she waited patiently, content that he should be clumsy, glad that in the distance, under the arcade

of the tabernae, she had spied Hortensius Martius watching with wrathful eyes every movement of the praefect. She wondered if the young exquisite had heard the wordy warfare between herself and the proud man who now knelt quite awkwardly at her feet, and she guessed that what Hortensius had seen and heard, that he would retail at full length to his friends in the course of the banquet given by Caius Nepos to-morrow night.

For the moment she felt almost sorry for the giant brought down to his knees; the kiss which she so confidently anticipated would of a truth complete his surrender, since she had resolved to make him kiss the dust by suddenly withdrawing her foot from under his lips, and then to laugh at him, and to allow her slaves to laugh and jeer at him as he lay sprawling in the dust, his huge arms lying crosswise on the flagstones before her.

The spirit of mischief was in her, the love to tease a helpless giant; so for the nonce anger almost died out within her and her eyes looked clear and blue as triumph and joy danced within their depths.

But now Taurus Antinor had finished tying her shoe. He did not stoop further nor did he embrace the dust; but he straightened his broad shoulders and raised himself from his knees without rendering that homage which was expected of him.

"Hast further commands for thy servant, O daughter of Cæsar?" he asked calmly.

"None," she replied curtly.

And calling her slaves to her she entered her litter, and drew

its curtains closely round her so that she should no longer be offended by his sight.

CHAPTER VII

*"The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God."—
Psalm xiv. 1.*

And late that day when Dea Flavia was preparing for rest she dismissed her tire-women, keeping only her young slaves around her, and then ordered Licinia to attend on her this night.

Licinia was highly privileged in the house of Dea Flavia. She had nursed the daughter of proud Claudius Octavius at her breast, and between the wizened old woman and the fresh young girl there existed perfect friendship and the confidence born of years. Dea's first tooth was in Licinia's keeping and so was the first lock of hair cut from Dea's head. Licinia had been the confidante of Dea's first childish sorrow and was the first to hear the tales of the young girl's social triumphs.

No one but Licinia was allowed to handle Dea's hair. It was her shrivelled fingers that plaited every night the living stream of gold into innumerable little plaits, so that the ripple in it might continue to live again on the morrow. It was Licinia who rubbed Dea's exquisite limbs with unguents after the bath, and she who trimmed the rose-tinted nails into their perfect, pointed shape.

To-night Dea Flavia was lying on a couch covered with crimson silk. Her elbows were buried in a cushion stuffed with eiderdown, her chin rested in her two hands and her eyes were

fixed on a mirror of polished bronze held up by one of her younger slaves.

Licina, stooping over the reclining body of her mistress, was gently rubbing the white shoulders and spine with sweet-scented oil.

"And didst see it all, Licinia?" asked Dea Flavia, as with a lazy stretch of her graceful arms she suddenly swung herself round on to her back and looked straight up at the wrinkled old face bending tenderly over her.

"Aye, my precious," replied Licinia eagerly, "everything did I see; for thou didst draw the curtains of thy litter together so quickly, I had no time to take my place by thy side. I meant to follow immediately, and was only waiting there for a moment or two until the crowd of thy retinue had dispersed along the various streets. Then it was that I spied my lord Hortensius, and something in the expression of his face made me pause then and there to see if there was aught amiss."

"And was aught amiss with my lord Hortensius?" asked Dea Flavia with studied indifference.

"He looked wrathful as a tiger in the arena when the guards come and snatch his prey from him. There was a frown on his face darker than that which usually sits on Taurus Antinor's brow."

"He was angered?"

"Aye! at the praefect," rejoined Licinia. "He strode forward from under the arcades directly after the crowd of thy slaves had disappeared, and the Forum was all deserted save for Taurus

Antinor standing there as if he had been carved in marble and in bronze and rooted there to the spot. My lord Hortensius came close up to the praefect and greeted him curtly. I dared no longer move away lest I should be seen, so I hid in the deep shadow behind the rostrum, and I heard Taurus Antinor's response to my lord Hortensius."

"Yes! yes!" said Dea Flavia impatiently, "of course they greeted one another ere they came to blows. But 'tis of the blows I would like to hear, and what my lord Hortensius said to the praefect."

"He spoke to him of thee, my child, and taunted him with having angered thee," said Licinia. "The praefect is so proud and so impatient, I marvelled then he did not hit my lord Hortensius in the face at once. He looked so huge, I bethought me of a giant, and his head looked dark like the bronze head of Jupiter, for his face had flushed a deep and angry crimson, whilst his mighty fists were clenched as if ready to strike."

"What caused him to strike, then?"

"My lord Hortensius called him a stranger, and this the praefect did not seem to resent. 'There are other lands than Rome,' he said, 'and one of these gave my ancestors birth. Proud am I of my distant land, and proud now to be a patrician of Rome.' Then did my lord Hortensius break into loud laughter, which to mine ears sounded mirthless and forced. He raised his hand and pointed a finger at the praefect and shouted, still laughing: 'Thou a patrician of Rome? thou a tyrant's minion!

slave and son of slave! Nay! if the patriciate of Rome had its will with thee, it would have thee publicly whipped and branded like the arrogant menial that thou art!" This and more did my lord Hortensius say," continued Licinia, whose voice now had sunk to an awed whisper at the recollection of the sacrilege, "I hardly dared to breathe for I could see the praefect's face, and could think of naught save the wrath of Jupiter, when on a sultry evening the thunder clouds are gathering in the wake of the setting sun."

But Dea Flavia's interest in the narrative seemed suddenly to have flagged. She stretched her arms, yawned ostentatiously, and with the movement of a fretful child she threw herself once more flat upon the couch, with her elbows in the cushions and her face buried in her hands.

With some impatience she snatched the mirror from the young slave's hand, and then she put it on the pillow and looked straight down into it, whilst her hair fell like golden curtains down each side of her face.

"Go on, Licinia," she said with curt indifference.

"There is but little more to tell," said the old woman, who with stolid placidness had resumed her former occupation, and once more rubbed the white shoulders with the sweet-smelling unguent; "nor could I tell thee how it all happened. A sort of tempestuous whirlwind seemed to sweep before my eyes, and the next thing that I saw clearly was an enormous figure clad in a gorgeous tunic, and standing high, high above me on the very top

of the marble rostrum beside the bronze figure of the god. It was the praefect. From where I stood, palsied with fear, I could see his face, dark now as the very thunders of Jupiter, his hair around his head gleamed like copper in the sun; but what caused my very blood to freeze and the marrow to stiffen in my bones, was to see his two mighty arms high above his head holding the body of my lord Hortensius. He looked up there like some god-like giant about to hurl an enemy down from the mountains of Olympus. The rostrum stands a terrific height above the pavement of the Forum; the marble balustrades, the outstanding gradients, the carvings along its sides, all stood between that inert body held up aloft by those gigantic arms and the flagstones below where Death, hideous and yawning, seemed to be waiting for its prey. And still the praefect did not move, and I could see the muscles of his arms swollen like cords and the sinews of his hands almost cracking beneath the weight of my lord Hortensius' body."

Licinia paused and passed a wrinkled hand over her moist forehead. She was trembling even now at the recollection of what she had seen. The beautiful figure lying stretched out upon the couch had not moved in a single one of its graceful lines. The tiny head beneath its crown of gold was bent down upon the mirror.

"Couldst see my lord Hortensius' face?" came in the same cold tones of indifference from behind the veil of wavy hair.

"No!" said Licinia. "I thank the gods that I could not. One cry for mercy did he utter, one cry of horror when first he felt himself uplifted and looked down into the awful face of Death

which awaited him below. Then mayhap he lost consciousness for I heard not a sound, and the whole city lay still in the hush of the noonday sleep. Less than one minute had intervened since first I saw that avenging figure outlined against the blue curtain of the sky: less than one minute even whilst my heart had ceased to beat. And then did a cry of horror escape my lips, and the praefect looked down into my face. Nor did he move as yet, but slowly meseemed as if the ruddy glow died from out his cheeks and brow, and after a while the tension on the mighty arms relaxed, and slowly were they lowered from above his head. He no longer was looking at me now, for his eyes were fixed upon the distant sky, as if they saw there something that called with irresistible power. And upon the heat-laden air there trembled a long sigh as of infinite longing. Then the praefect gathered my lord Hortensius' inanimate body in his arms as a mother would her own child, and with slow and steady steps he descended the gradients of the rostrum. At its foot he caught sight of me, and called me to him: 'My lord hath only fainted,' he said to me; 'do thou chafe his hands and soothe his forehead, whilst I send his slaves to him.' He laid the precious burden down in the cool shadow, taking off his own cloak and making of it a pillow for my lord Hortensius' head. Then he went from me, and as he went I could hear him murmur: 'In Thy service, oh Man of Galilee.'"

Even as these last words still trembled on Licinia's lips there came a sharp cry of rage, followed by one of terror, as with quick and almost savage movement Dea Flavia picked up the heavy

mirror of bronze and hurled it across the chamber. It fell with a loud crash against the delicate mosaic of the floor, but as it swung through the air its sharp metal edge hit a young slave girl on the shoulder; a few drops of blood trickled down her breast and she began to whimper in her fright.

It had all happened so suddenly that no one—least of all Licinia—could guess what it was that had so angered my lady. Dea Flavia had raised herself to a sitting posture, and thrown her hair back, away from her face which looked flushed and wrathful, whilst two sharp furrows appeared between her brows.

The women were silent, feeling awed and not a little frightened; the girl, whose shoulder was now bleeding profusely, continued her whimpering.

"Get up, girl," said Licinia roughly, "and staunch thy scratch elsewhere, away from my lady's sight. Hark at the baggage! One would think she is really hurt. Get thee gone, I say, ere I give thee better cause for whining."

But in a moment Dea Flavia was on her feet. With a quick cry of pity she ran to her slave, kneeled beside her and with a fine white cloth herself tried to staunch the wound.

"Art hurt?" she said gently, "art hurt, child? I did not wish to hurt thee. Stop thy weeping—and I'll give thee that amber locket which thou dost covet so. Stop thy weeping, I say! Is it my white rabbit thou dost hanker after—thou shalt have it for thine own—or—or—the woollen tunic with the embroidered bands—or—or—Stop whining, girl," she added impatiently, seeing that the

girl, more frightened than hurt, was sobbing louder than before. "Licina, make her stop—she angers me with all this whining—stop, I tell thee. Oh, Licinia, where is thy whip? I vow I'll have the girl whipped if she do not stop."

But Licinia, accustomed to her mistress's quick changing moods, had in her turn knelt beside the girl and was busy now with deft hands in staunching the blood and tying up the wound. This done she dragged the child up roughly, though not unkindly, from the ground.

"Get thee gone and lie down on thy bed," she said; "shame on thee for making such a to-do. My lady had no wish to hurt thee, and thou hast upset her with all this senseless weeping. Get thee gone now ere I do give thee that whipping which thou dost well deserve."

She contrived to push the girl out of the chamber and ordered two others to follow and look after her; then once more she turned to her mistress, ready to tender fond apologies since what she had said had so angered her beloved.

Dea Flavia had thrown herself on the couch on her back; her arms were folded behind her head, her fair hair lay in heavy masses on the embroidered coverlet. She was staring straight up at the ceiling, her blue eyes wide open, and a puzzled frown across her brow.

"My precious one," murmured Licinia.

But Dea Flavia apparently did not hear. It seemed as if she were grappling in her mind with some worrying puzzle, the

solution of which lay hidden up there behind that brilliant bit of blue sky which glimmered through the square opening in the roof.

"My precious one," reiterated the old woman appealingly, "tell me, Dea—was it aught that I said which angered thee?"

Dea Flavia turned large wondering eyes to her old nurse.

"Licinia," she said slowly.

"Yes, my goddess."

"If a man saith that there is one greater, mightier than Cæsar ... he is a traitor, is he not?"

"A black and villainous traitor, Augusta," said Licinia, whose voice at the mere suggestion had become hoarse with awe.

"And what in Rome is the punishment for such traitors, Licinia?" asked the young girl, still speaking slowly and measuredly.

"Death, my child," replied the old woman.

"Only death?" insisted Dea, whilst the puzzled look in her eyes became more marked, and the frown between her brows more deep.

"I do not understand thee, my precious one," said Licinia whose turn it was now to be deeply puzzled; "what greater punishment could there be for a traitor than that of death?"

"They torture slaves for lesser offences than that."

"Aye! and for sedition there is always the cross."

"The cross!" she murmured.

"Yes! Dost remember seven years ago in Judæa? There was

a man who raised sedition among the Jews, and called himself their king—setting himself above Cæsar and above the might of Cæsar.... They crucified him. Dost remember?"

"I have heard of him," she said curtly. "What was his name?"

"Nay! I have forgot. Methinks that he came from Galilee. They did crucify him because of sedition, and because he set himself to be above Cæsar."

"And above the House of Cæsar?"

"Aye! above the House of Cæsar too."

"And they crucified him?"

"Aye! like a common thief. 'Twas right and just since he rebelled against Cæsar."

"And yet, Licinia, there are those in Rome who do him service even now."

"The gods forbid!" exclaimed Licinia in horror. "And how could that be?" she added with a shrug of the shoulders, "seeing that he died such a shameful death."

"I marvel on that also," said the young girl, whose wide-open blue eyes once more assumed their strangely puzzled expression.

"Nay! I'll not believe it," rejoined the old woman hotly. "Do that man service? A common traitor who died upon the cross. Who did stuff thine ears, my goddess, with such foolish tales?"

"No one told me foolish tales, Licinia. But this I do know, that there are some in Rome who set that Galilean above the majesty of Cæsar, and in his name do defy Cæsar's might."

"They are madmen then," said the slave curtly.

"Or traitors," added Dea Flavia.

"Thou sayest it; they are traitors and rebels, and never fear, they'll be punished ... sooner or later, they will be punished.... Defy the might of Cæsar?... Great gods above! the impious wretches! thou wert right, my princess! Death alone were too merciful for them.... The scourge first ... and then the cross ... that will teach them the might of thy house, oh daughter of Cæsar.... I would have no mercy with them.... Throw them to the beasts, say I!... brand them ... scourge them ... wring their heart's blood until they cry for death...!"

The old pagan looked evil and cruel in her fury of loyalty to that house which begat her beloved Dea. Her eyes glistened as those of a cat waiting to fall upon its prey; her wrinkled hands looked like claws that were ready to tear the very flesh and sinew from the traitor's breast. Her voice, always hoarse and trembling, had risen to a savage shriek which died away as in a passionate outburst of love she threw herself down on the floor beside the couch, and taking Dea's tiny feet between her hands, she covered them with kisses and with tears.

But Dea Flavia once more lay back on the coverlet of crimson silk and her blue eyes once more were fixed upwards to the sky. Above her the glint of blue was now suffused with tones of pink merging into mauve; somewhere out west the sun was slowly sinking into rest. Tiny golden clouds flitted swiftly across that patch of sky on which Dea Flavia gazed so intently.

"Come kiss me, Licinia," she said slowly after a while. "I'll to

rest now. To-morrow I shall see my kinsman the Cæsar again, after a year's absence from him. I desire to be very beautiful to-morrow, Licinia, for mayhap I'll to the games with him. That new tunic worked with purple and gold. I'll wear that and my new shoes of antelope skin. In my hair the circlet of turquoise and pearls ... dost think it'll become me, Licinia?"

"Thou wilt be more beautiful, my precious one, than man's eyes can conveniently endure," said Licinia, whose whole face became radiant with the joy of her perfect love for the girl.

"Ah! thou hast soothed my heart and mind, Licinia. I feel that I shall sleep well to-night."

She allowed the old woman to lead her gently to her bedchamber, where within the narrow alcove she lay all that night tossing upon the silken mattress that was stuffed with eiderdown. Sleep would not come to her, and hour after hour she lay there, her eyes fixed into the darkness on which, at times, her fevered fancy traced a glowing cross.

CHAPTER VIII

"The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord."—Proverbs xvi. 33.

And even thus did the mighty Empire hurry headlong to its fall; with shouts of joy and cries of exultation, with triumphal processions, with music, with games and with flowers.

The Cæsar had returned from Germany and Gaul having played his part of mountebank upon the arena of the world. Eaten up with senseless and cynical vanity, Caius Julius Cæsar Caligula desired to be the Cæsar of his army as he was princeps and imperator, high pontiff and supreme dictator of the Empire. But as there was no war to conduct, no rebellion to subdue, he had invented a war and harassed some barbarians who had no thought save that of peace.

He stage-managed conspiracies and midnight attacks, drilling his own soldiers into acting the parts of malcontents, of escaped prisoners, of bloodthirsty barbarians, the while he himself—as chief actor in the play—vanquished the mock foes and took from them mock spoils of war.

Then he upbraided Rome for her inertia whilst he, the Emperor, confronted dangers and endured hardships for her sake. His letters, full of glowing accounts of his supposed prowess, of the ferocity of the enemy, of the fruits of victory

snatched at the cost of innumerable sacrifices were solemnly read to the assembled senators in the temple of Mars, and to a vast concourse of people gathered in the Forum.

They listened to these letters with awe and reverence proud of the valour of their Cæsar, rejoicing in the continued glory of the mightiest Empire of the world—their own Empire which they, the masters of the earth and of the sea, had made under the guidance of rulers such as he who even now was returning laurel-laden and victory-crowned from Germany.

And the triumphal procession was begun. First came the galley in which Caligula was said to have crossed the ocean for the purpose of subduing some rebel British princes, but in which he in verity had spent some pleasant days fishing in the bay. It was brought back to Rome in solemn state by land, right across the country of the Allemanni and carried the whole of the way by sixteen stalwart barbarians—supposed prisoners of war.

The galley was received with imperial honours as if it had been a human creature—the very person of the Cæsar. In the presence of a huge and enthusiastic crowd it was taken to the temple of Mars, where the pontiffs, attired in their festal robes, dedicated it with solemn ritual to the god of war and finally deposited it in a specially constructed cradle fashioned of citrus wood with elaborate carvings and touches of gilding thereon; the whole resting upon a pedestal of African marble.

Upon the next day a procession of Gauls entered the city carrying helmets which were filled with sea-shells. The men

wore their hair long and unkempt, they were naked save for a goatskin tied across the torso with a hempen rope and their shins were encircled with leather bands. The helmets were said to have belonged to those of Cæsar's soldiers who had lost their lives in the expedition against the Germans, and the sea-shells were a special tribute from the ocean to the gods of the Capitol. By the Cæsar's orders the helmets were to be the objects of semi-divine honours in memory of the illustrious dead.

Thus the tragi-comedy went on day after day. The plebs enjoying the pageants because they did not know that they were being fooled, and the patricians looking on because they did not care.

And now the imperial mountebank was coming home himself, having ordered his triumph as he had stage-managed his deeds of valour. Triumphal arches and street decorations, flowers and processions, he had ordained everything just as he wished it to be. From the statue of every god in the temples of the Capitol and of the Forum the bronze head had been knocked off by his orders, and a likeness of his own head placed in substitution. His intention was to receive divine homage, and this the plebs—who had been promised a succession of holidays, with races, games, and combats—was over-ready to grant him.

The vestibule connecting his palace with the temple of Castor had been completed in his absence, and he wished to pass surreptitiously from his own apartments to the very niche of the idol which was in full view of the Forum and there to show

himself to the people, even whilst a sacrifice was offered to him as to a god.

To all this senseless display of egregious vanity the obsequiousness of the senators and the careless frivolity of the plebs easily lent itself; nor did anyone demur at the decree which came from the absent hero, that he should in future be styled: "The Father of the Armies! the Greatest and best of Cæsars."

All thought of dignity was dead in these descendants of the great people who had made the Empire; they had long ago sold their birthright of valour and of honour for the pottage of luxury and the favours of a tyrannical madman. What cared they if after they had feasted and shouted themselves hoarse in praise of a deified brute, the ruins of Rome came crashing down over their graves? What cared they if in far-off barbaric lands the Goths and Huns were already whetting their steel.

Only a few among the more dignified senators, a few among the more sober praetorian tribunes, revolted in their heart at this insane exhibition of egoism, these perpetual outrages on common sense and dignity; but they were few and their influence small, and they were really too indolent, too comfortable in their luxurious homes to do aught but accept what they deemed inevitable.

The only men in Rome who cared were the ambitious and the self-seekers, and they cared not because of Rome, not because of the glory of the Empire, or the welfare of the land, but because they saw in the very excess of the tyrant's misrule the best chance

for their own supremacy and power.

Foremost amongst these was Caius Nepos, the praetorian praefect, all-powerful in the absence of the Cæsar, well liked by the army, so 'twas said. Some influential friends clung around him and also some malcontents, those who are ever on the spot when destruction is to be accomplished, ever ready to overthrow any government which does not happen to further their ambitions.

Most of these men were assembled this night beneath the gilded roof of Caius Nepos' house. He had gathered all his friends round him, had feasted them with good viands and costly wines, with roasted peacocks from Gaul and mullets come straight from the sea; he had amused them with oriental dancers and Egyptian acrobats, and when they had eaten and drunk their fill he bade them good night and sent them home, laden with gifts. But his intimates remained behind; pretending to leave with the others, they lingered on in the atrium, chatting of indifferent topics amongst themselves, until all had gone whose presence would not be wanted in the conclave that was to take place.

There were now some forty of them in number, rich patricians all of them, their ages ranging from that of young Escanes who was just twenty years old to that of Marcus Ancyrys, the elder, who had turned sixty. Their combined wealth mayhap would have purchased every inhabited house in the entire civilised world or every slave who was ever put up in the market. Marcus Ancyrys, they say, could have pulled down every temple in

the Forum and rebuilt it at his own cost, and Philippus Decius who was there had recently spent the sum of fifty million sesterces upon the building and equipment of his new villa at Herculaneum.

Young Hortensius Martius was there, too, he who was said to own more slaves than anyone else in Rome, and Augustus Philario of the household of Cæsar, who had once declared that he would give one hundred thousand aurei for a secret poison that would defy detection.

"Why is not Taurus Antinor here this evening?" asked Marcus Ancyrus when this little group of privileged guests once more turned back toward the triclinium.

"I think that he will be here anon," replied the host. "I have sent him word that I desired speech with him on business of the State and that I craved the honour of his company."

They all assembled at the head of the now deserted tables. The few slaves who had remained at the bidding of their master had re-draped the couches and re-set the crystal goblets of wine and the gold dishes with fresh fruit. The long narrow hall looked strangely mournful now that the noisy guests had departed, and the sweet-scented oil in the lamps had begun to burn low.

The table, laden with empty jars, with broken goblets, and remnants of fruits and cakes, looked uninviting and even weird in its aspect of departed cheer. The couches beneath their tumbled draperies of richly dyed silk looked bedraggled and forlorn, whilst the stains of wine upon the fine white cloths looked like

widening streams of blood. Under the shadows of elaborate carvings in the marble of the walls ghost-like shadows flickered and danced as the smoke from the oil lamp wound its spiral curves upwards to the gilded ceiling above. And in the great vases of priceless murra roses and lilies and white tuberoses, the spoils of costly glasshouses, were slowly drooping in the heavy atmosphere. The whole room, despite its rich hangings and gilded pillars, wore a curious air of desolation and of gloom; mayhap Caius Nepos himself was conscious of this, for as he followed his guests from out the atrium he gave three loud claps with his hands, and a troupe of young girls came in carrying bunches of fresh flowers and some newly filled lamps.

These they placed at the head of the table, there, where the couches surrounding it were draped with crimson silk, and soft downy cushions, well shaken up, once more called to rest and good cheer.

"I pray you all take your places," said the host pleasantly, "and let us resume our supper."

He gave a sign to a swarthy-looking slave, who, clad all in white, was presiding at a gorgeous buffet carved of solid citrus-wood which—despite the fact that supper had just been served to two hundred guests—was once more groaning under the weight of mammoth dishes filled with the most complicated products of culinary art.

The slave, at his master's sign, touched a silver gong, and half a dozen henchmen in linen tunics brought in the steaming dishes

fresh from the kitchens. The carver set to and attacked with long sharp knife the gigantic capons which one of the bearers had placed before him. He carved with quickness and dexterity, placing well-chosen morsels on the plates of massive gold which young waiting-maids then carried to the guests.

"Wilt dismiss thy slaves before we talk?" asked Marcus Ancyus, the veteran in this small crowd. He himself had been silent for the past ten minutes, doing full justice to this second relay of Caius Nepos' hospitality.

The waiting-maids were going the round now with gilt basins and cloths of fine white linen for the cleansing and drying of fingers between the courses; others, in the meanwhile, filled the crystal goblets with red or white wine as the guests desired.

"We can talk now," said the host; "these slaves will not heed us. They," he added, nodding in the direction of the carver and his half-dozen henchmen, "are all deaf as well as mute, so we need have no fear of them."

"What treasures," ejaculated young Escanes with wondering eyes fixed upon his lucky host; "where didst get them, Caius Nepos? By the gods, I would I could get an army of deaf-mute slaves."

"They are not easy to get," rejoined the other, "but I was mightily lucky in my find. I was at Cirta in Numidia at a time when the dusky chief there—one named Hazim Rhan—had made a haul of six malcontents who I understood had conspired against his authority. It seems that these rebels had a leader

who had succeeded in escaping to his desert fastness, and whom Hazim Rhan greatly desired to capture. To gain this object he commanded the six prisoners to betray their leader; this they refused to do, whereupon the dusky prince ordered their ears to be cut off and threatened them that unless they spoke on the morrow, their tongues would be cut off the next day. And if after that they still remained obdurate, their heads would go the way of their tongues and ears."

Exclamations of horror greeted this gruesome tale, the relevancy of which no one had as yet perceived. But Caius Nepos, having pledged his friends in a draught of Sicilian wine, resumed:

"I, as an idle traveller from Rome had been received by the dusky chieftain with marked deference, and I was greatly interested in the fate of the six men who proved so loyal to their leader. So I waited three days, and when their tongues and ears had been cut off and their heads were finally threatened, I offered to buy them for a sum sufficiently large to tempt the cupidity of Hazim Rhan. And thus I had in my possession six men whose sense of loyalty had been splendidly proved and whose discretion henceforth would necessarily be absolute."

This time a chorus of praise greeted the conclusion of the tale. The cynical calm with which it had been told and the ferocious selfishness which it revealed seemed in no way repellent to Caius Nepos' guests. A few pairs of indifferent eyes were levelled at the slaves and that was all. And then Philippus Decius remarked coolly:

"So much for thy carvers and henchmen, O Caius Nepos, but thy waiting-maids?—are they deaf and dumb too?"

"No," replied the host, "but they come from foreign lands and do not understand our tongue."

"Then you all think that the next few days will be propitious for our schemes?" here broke in young Escanes who seemed the most eager amongst them all.

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