

THE GLADIATORS:

A Tale of Rome and Judea.

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EROS.

CHAPTER IV. (CONTINUED.)

Valeria liked to hear of proper men; she woke up a little out of her languor, and flung her hair back from her face. "Go on," said she, as Myrrhina hesitated, half eager and half loth to pursue the pleasing topic.

But the waiting-maid felt the chain round her neck, and acknowledged in her heart the equivalent it demanded.

"It was the Tribune, madam," said she, "who spoke about your hair—Julius Placidus, who values every curl you wear, more than a whole mine of gold. Ah! there's not a lord in Rome has such a taste in dress. Only to see him this morning, with his violet mantle and his jewels sparkling in the sun, with the handsomest chariot and the four whitest horses in the town. Well! if I was a lady, and wooed by such a man as that—"

"Man call you him?" interrupted her mistress, with a scornful smile. "Nay, when these curled, perfumed, close shaven things are called men, 'tis time for us women to bestir ourselves, lest strength and courage die out in Rome altogether. And you, too, Myrrhina, who know Licinius and Hippas, and saw with your own eyes two hundred gladiators in the Circus only yesterday, you ought to be a better judge. Man, forsooth! Why you will be calling smooth-faced Paris a man next!"

Here maid and mistress burst out laughing, for thereby hung a tale of which Valeria was not a little proud. This Paris, a young Egyptian, of beautiful but effeminate appearance, had lately come to Italy to figure with no small success on the Roman stage. His delicate features, his symmetrical shape, and the girlish graces of his pantomimic gestures, had made sad havoc in the hearts of the Roman ladies, at all times too susceptible to histrionic charms. He lost nothing, either, of public attention, by bearing the name of Nero's ill-fated favorite, and embarked at once, unhesitatingly, on the same brilliant and dangerous career. But although it was the fashion to be in love with Paris, Valeria alone never yielded to the mode, but treated him with all the placid indifference she felt for attractions that found no favor in her sight. Stung by such neglect, the petted actor paid devoted court to the woman who despised him, and succeeded, after much importunity, in prevailing on her to accord him an interview in her own house. Of this he had the bad taste to make no small boast in anticipation: and Myrrhina, who found out most things, lost no time in informing her mistress that her condescension was already as much misrepresented as it was misplaced. The two laid their plans accordingly; and when Paris, attired in the utmost splendor, arrived panting to the promised interview, he found himself seized by some half-dozen hideous old negresses, who smothered him with caresses, stripped him from head to foot, forced him into the bath, and persisted in treating him as if he were a delicate young lady, but with a quiet violence the while, that it was useless to resist. The same swarthy tirewomen then dressed him in female garments; and despite of threats, struggles, outcries, and entreaties, placed him in Valeria's litter, and so carried him home to his own door.

The ready wit of the play-actor put upon his metamorphosis the construction least favorable to the character of its originator, but he vowed a summary vengeance, we may be sure, nevertheless.

"I think Paris knows what you think of him only too well," resumed Myrrhina; "not but that he has a fair face of his own, and a lovely shape for dancing, though, to be sure, Placidus is a finer figure of a man. Oh! if you could have seen him this morning, madam, when he lay back so graceful in his chariot, and chid that pert lad of his for striking with his whip at the tall slave, who to be sure vanished like a flash of lightning, you would have said there wasn't such another patrician in the whole city of Rome!"

"Enough of Placidus!" interrupted her mistress, impatiently, "the subject wearies me. What of this tall slave, Myrrhina, who seems to have attracted your attention? Did he look like one of the barbarians my kinsman Licinius cries up so mightily? Is he handsome enough to stop with my Liburnians, think you, under the day-litter?"

The waiting-maid's eyes sparkled as she thought how pleasant it would be to have him in the same household as herself; and any little restraint she might have experienced in running over the personal advantages that had captivated her fancy disappeared before this agreeable prospect.

"Handsome enough, madam!" she exclaimed, removing the comb from her mouth, dropping her lady's hair, and flourishing her hands with true Italian emphasis and rapidity—"handsome enough! why he would make the Liburnians look like bald-headed vultures beside a golden eagle! Barbarian, like enough, he may be, Cimbrian, Frisian, Ansbarian, or what not, for I caught the foreign accent tripping on his tongue, and we have few men in Rome of stature equal to his. A neck like a tower of marble; arms and shoulders like the statue of Hercules yonder in the vestibule; a face, ay twice as beautiful as Pericles on your medallion, with golden curls clustering round a forehead as white as milk; and eyes—"

Here Myrrhina stopped, a little at a loss for a simile, and a good deal out of breath besides.

"Go on," said Valeria, who had been listening in an attitude of languid attention, her eyes half closed, her lips parted, and the colour deepening on her cheek. "What were his eyes like, Myrrhina?"

"Well, they were like the blue sky of Campania in the vintage; they were like the stones round the boss of your state mantle; they were like the sea at noon day from the long walls of Ostia. And yet they flashed into sparks of fire when he looked at poor little Automedon. I wonder the boy wasn't frightened! I am sure I should have been; only nothing frightens those impudent young charioteers."

"Was he my kinsman's slave; are you sure, Myrrhina?" said her mistress, in an accent of studied unconcern, and never moving a finger from her listless and comfortable attitude.

"No doubt of it, madam," replied the waiting-maid; and would probably have continued to enlarge on the congenial subject, had she not been interrupted by the entrance of one of the damsels who had been summoned from the apartment, and returned to announce that Hippas, the retired gladiator, was in waiting—"Would Valeria take her fencing-lesson?"

But Valeria declined at once, and sat on before her mirror, without even raising her eyes to the tempting picture it displayed. Whatever was the subject of her thoughts, it must have been very engrossing, she seemed so loth to be disturbed.

CHAPTER V.
"ROME."

Meanwhile the British slave, unconscious that he was already the object of Valeria's interest and Myrrhina's admiration, was threading his way through the crowded streets that adjoined the Forum, enjoying that vague sense of amusement with which a man surveys a scene of bustle and confusion

that does not affect his immediate concerns.

Thanks to the favour of his master, his time was nearly at his own disposal, and he had ample leisure to observe the busiest scene in the known world, and to compare it, perhaps, with the peace and simplicity of those early days, which seemed now like the memories of a dream, so completely had they passed away.

The business of the Forum was over; the markets were disgorging their mingled stream of parveyors, purchasers, and idle lookers-on. The whole population of Rome was hurrying home to dinner, and a motley crowd it was. The citizens themselves, the Plebeians, properly so called, scarcely formed one half of the swarming assemblage. Slaves innumerable hurried to and fro, to speed the business or the pleasure of their lords; slaves of every colour and of every nation, from the Scandinavian giant, with blue eyes and waving yellow locks, to the sturdy Ethiopian, thick-lipped, and woolly-haired, the swarthy child of Africa, whose inheritance has been servitude from the earliest ages until now. Many a Roman born was there, too, amongst the servile crowd, aping the appearance and manner of a citizen, but who shrank from a master's frown at home, and who, despite the acquirement of wealth, and even the attainment of power, must die a bondsman as he had lived.

Not the least characteristic feature of the state of society under the Empire was the troop of freedmen that everywhere accompanied the person, and swelled the retinue of each powerful patrician. These manumitted slaves were usually bound by the ties of interest as much as gratitude to the former master, who had now become their patron. Dependent on him in many cases for their daily food, doled out to them in rations at his door, they were necessarily little emancipated from his authority by their lately acquired freedom. While the relation of patron and client was productive of crying evils in the Imperial City, while the former threw the shield of his powerful protection over the crimes of the latter, and the client in return became the willing pander to his patron's vices, it was the freedman who, more than all others, rendered himself a willing tool to his patrician employer, who yielded unhesitatingly time, affections, probity, and honour itself, to the caprices of the lord. They swarmed about the Forum now, running hither and thither with the obsequious haste of the parasite, bent on errands which in too many cases would scarce have borne the light of day.

Besides these, a vast number of foreigners, wearing the costumes of their different countries, hindered the course of traffic as they stood gaping, stupefied by the confusing scene on which they gazed. The Gaul, with his short, close-fitting garment; the Parthian, with his conical sheep-skin cap; the Mede, with his loose silken trousers; the Jew, barefoot and robed in black; the stately Spaniard, the fawning Egyptian, and amongst them all, winding his way wherever the crowd was closest, with perfect ease and self-possession, the smooth and supple Greek. When some great man passed through the midst, borne aloft in his litter, or leaning on the shoulder of a favourite slave, and freedmen and clients made a passage for him with threat, and push, and blow, the latter would invariably miss the Greek to light on the pate of a humble mechanic, or the shoulders of a sturdy barbarian, while the descendant of Leonidas or Alcibiades would reply in whining sing-song tones to the verbal abuse, with some biting retort, which was sure to turn the laughter of the crowd on the aggressor.

If Rome had once overrun and conquered the dominions of her elder

sister in civilisation, the invasion seemed now to be all the other way. With the turn of the tide had come such an overflow of Greek manners, Greek customs, Greek morals, and Greek artifice, that the Imperial City was already losing its natural characteristics; and the very language was so interlarded with the vocabulary of the conquered, that it was fast becoming less Latin than Greek. The Roman ladies, especially, delighted in those euphonian syllables, which clothed Athenian eloquence in such melodious rhythm; and their choicest terms of endearment in the language of love, were invariably whispered in Greek.

That supple nation, too, adapting itself to the degradation of slavery and the indulgence of ease, as it had risen in noble times to the exigencies of liberty and the efforts demanded by war, had usurped the greater portion of art, science, and even power, in Rome. The most talented painters and sculptors were Greeks. The most enterprising contractors and engineers were Greeks. Rhetoric and elocution could only be learned in a Greek school, and mathematics, unless studied with Greek letters, must be esteemed confused and useless; the fashionable invalid who objected to consult a Greek physician deserved to die; and there was but one astrologer in Rome who could cast a patrician horoscope. Of course he was a Greek. In the lower walks of criminal industry; in the many iniquitous professions called into existence by the luxury of a great city, the Greeks drove a thriving and almost an exclusive trade. Whoever was in most repute, as an evil counsellor, a low buffoon, a money-lender, pimp, pander, or parasite, whatever might be his other qualifications, was sure to be a Greek.

And many a scrutinising glance was cast by professors of this successful nation at the Briton's manly form as he strode through the crowd, making his way quietly but surely from sheer weight and strength. They followed him with covetous eyes, as they speculated on the various purposes to which so much good manhood might be applied. They appraised him, so to speak, and took an inventory of his thews and sinews, his limbs, his stature, and his good looks; but they refrained from accosting him with importunate questions or insolent proposals, for there was a bold, confident air about him, that bespoke the stout heart and the ready hand. The stamp of freedom had not yet faded from his brow, and he looked like one who was accustomed to take his own part in a crowd.

Suddenly a stoppage in the traffic arrested the moving stream, which swelled in continually to a struggling, eager, vociferating mass. A dray, containing huge blocks of marble, and drawn by several files of oxen, had become entangled with the chariot of a passing patrician, and another great man's litter being checked by the obstruction, much confusion and bad language was the result. Amused with the turmoil, and in no hurry to get home, the British slave stood looking over the heads of the populace at the irritated and gesticulating antagonists, when a smart blow on the shoulder caused him to wheel suddenly round, prepared to return the injury with interest. At the same instant a powerful hand dragged him back by the tunic, and a grasp was laid on him, from which he could not shake himself free, while a rough good-humored voice whispered in his ear:

"Softly, lad, softly! Keep hands off Caesar's lictors an' thou be'st not mad in good earnest. These gentry give more than they take, I can promise thee!"

The speaker was a broad powerful man of middle size, with the chest of a Hercules, he held the Briton firmly pinioned in his arms while he spoke, and it was well that he did so, for the lictors were indeed forcing a passage