

be beaten by you in vigor, valor or skill."

Chaerias rose, stared, frowned, and laughed. He marched up and down the room once or twice, and then exclaimed:

"Why, Thellus, what an infernal establishment the arena must be! Such men as you ought not to be sucked into that kind of vortex."

Thellus, though smiling, heaved a sigh. "Come, friends," cried Paulus moving to the centre of the large chamber, "enough of pastime. We have work to do. Sit round me here, in the middle of this room, while I tell you something. Walls, you know, have ears."

Forthwith his three companions brought cushions, and placed them near the settle which he had set down in the middle of the apartment, and, sitting before him, waited for his communication.

"Yonder beautiful grandchild of the uncanny-looking Jew's poor clerk or scrivener," said Paulus in a low tone, almost a whisper, after a moment or two of reflection, "not only made one or two singular disclosures in the remarks you all heard, but whispered to me a very serious fact."

Here Cassius Chaerias, whose curiosity had been already much spurred, appeared the very embodiment of attention. But all were keenly attentive. Paulus pursued:

"Learn, then, that in this queerly built or queerly arranged house, there is, at this moment, a crowd of men of dangerous and debauched appearance, and doubtless of desperate disposition; some of them, friend Thellus, men who have been in the arena. Nor is this all. They have comrades outside, watching our ten soldiers."

Longinus uttered that low-whispered whistle by which some men express the cool appreciation of a sudden calamity.

"Twelve millions of sesterces, my friends," continued Paulus, "are to many men hereabouts an object of great interest. I am certain that we are to be attacked on the road, and yonder chest is to be taken from us. While here, or in Rome, first the Jew's own safety is our hostage, and next, Lucius Piso's government of the city will be our safety. But once we are on the road, the Jew calculates on a part of the booty as a reward for betraying us, to be got out of the robbers themselves—while he looks to recover the whole money and interest for it all the same from the 'Aerarium Sanctum,' in the end."

"We have twelve good horses," said Longinus, "and might outstrip the villains."

"So will 'they' have horses," answered Paulus, "and no iron chest or wagon to clog their pace; the speed of a column is the speed of its slowest part; and then what can fourteen men do against seventy? You are aware that the army, except stationary Praetorians and an Urban Guard, of which Lucius Piso would not lend us a man beyond the walls, has gone north; and there is not another soldier to be found at our disposal in all Rome. What advice do you give?"

The conjuncture was obviously serious. They had "tried arms" in play; they were now to try wits in earnest.

Paulus's counsellors advised one course and another. 1. "To wait":—but the difficulty would wait also. 2. "To send to Germanicus for a larger escort":—but time pressed, and the treasure was wanted by Germanicus at once. 3. "To announce that they were to be met, twenty miles from Rome, by more soldiers"—or, "that they would start the day after the next at dawn, whereas they should start early the night before"; neither of these plans would avail, for they would be too closely watched.

These were the devices of ready and well-exercised, but ordinary soldiers. Paulus shook his head smiling, and then gave his orders, which his comrades soon felt were fraught with punice astu.

"After an hour or two of sleep," said he, "we will roll and carry this wheel-chest straight down to our stables. There we must lock ourselves in with old Philip. We will then and there unpack and empty the chest: the gold we must next repack, as best we can, in some corn-bags, to be placed under several of the many bundles and trusses of hay which we must carry for use of our horses on the road, cording the bags roughly, but strongly and securely. We must, when this is done, 'unpave a portion of the stable', and mixing the stones with rubbish to prevent them from rattling when shaken, we must repack the chest with that sort of treasure. To get stones

from anywhere else outside the stable, and convey them thither, would excite first attention, then curiosity, and finally a suspicion, if not a sure inference, of our whole design. After these measures we will set out, leaving Philip to keep possession of the stable, and to prevent any person whatever (who might notice the displacement of the paving-stones) from entering it for a couple of days; which time past, he can follow us. The chest is one, you perceive, which, without the key, would take iron crowbars many hours to break open, and steel saws as many to bite through—the lock being both cunning as a lock and the strongest part of the whole fabric. Our pursuers will not think of crowbars or of steel saws; and the key I will fling into the first water or wood we meet after starting. When we are overtaken—or, if we be—you must at first make a show of fighting, and leave the rest to me."

His three companions highly applauded this plan, and they and he lay down on cushions round the chest, one on each of its four sides, to take a short and very necessary slumber. They soon awoke, and began to execute, point by point, the scheme of young Paulus Lepidus Aemilius.

Chapter III.

"We have made more than fifty miles, and the pursuers do not appear," said Paulus.

Longinus was holding for his superior the bridle of the famous horse of which Tiberius Caesar had made a present to the breaker of him. Chaerias and Thellus were standing on each side of our youth, who had dismounted; and all three, shading their eyes with their hands from a dazzling Italian moon at full, were looking along the straight backward road. Two wagons were in front, or behind them, as they now stood watching; the soldiers had unharnessed the six horses of one of them—that in the rear—upon which the heavy iron chest was borne, and were letting them drink from a roadside spring; the other wagon, drawn also by six horses, and laden with corn-bags, and hay at the bottom, and various packages and soldiers' cumber above, was moving forward at a walk conducted by two soldiers, who rode the two horses in the middle.

High banks on each hand lined at that point the Roman road, which led to the north-east of Italy, and these banks were densely clothed with copse-wood, which in certain places thickened into an impenetrable jungle.

"Do any of you see anything?" inquired Paulus, when he found no one disposed to answer his remark.

A few moments of silent watching followed, when Longinus, the decurion, said: "I 'see' nothing, centurion; but I 'hear' something—the distant beat of hoofs upon this hard and echoing road."

Paulus at once cried to the men conducting the hay-wagon in front (that is, behind them, as they then were facing round) to drive forward steadily, but to take care not to blow the horses until followed by the rearward wagon, when they were to rush forward at the top of their speed, and to continue at that pace. He next ordered the two soldiers who were giving water to the horses of the other wagon in the rear, in which was the chest, to re-harness them quickly, and as soon as a body of mounted men should appear on the road behind, and should have them plainly in sight—but not sooner—to push their horses into a gallop, yet to make sure of not gaining upon the wagon in front, but, beginning as late as possible, to continue their gallop only about a thousand paces, and then to walk. Lastly, he turned to the six remaining soldiers, and bade them draw their short swords, loosen their shields, and prepare for action. Upon which he clapped his hand upon the emerald hilt of his own very differently-shaped weapon, whipped it out of the scabbard, and, springing into the ephippia upon the back of Sejanus (or, more properly, of the Sejan steed), he said:

"Thellus, stand upon my right hand, a little further, so as to give me room; my weapon is made for cutting as well as thrusting. Chaerias and Longinus, stay on my left hand. Let us see whether we can keep this narrow road awhile against all who may come."

By this time the clatter from the south-west of galloping hoofs upon the hard road had become audible to all.

"Legionaries of the fourth cen-

turia!" cried Paulus, turning round, "away from the road into the brush-wood on either hand, three each side. Get before us, as we face now, a few yards."

The Roman legionaries vanished silently to execute this order, and crept through the copse on either hand of the highway. Meantime the hay-wagon trotted steadily forward, and the other remained stationary, ready for an "apparently" panic-stricken gallop.

Presently came forward, with rattle of hoofs and clang of metal, and with the play of the moonlight upon armor, a column of mounted men, every one of whom had on his face a linen mask—not the mask used in comedies. The column filled the width of the road. Fronting them like a statue, in the middle of the way, stood the colossal chestnut horse, and like a statue sat young Paulus on his back.

The riders pulled hard and stopped a few yards from him, when their leader called out:

"Young centurion, no affectation or hypocrisy is required. Eleazar has—perish my tongue! I was going to say that I know you to be a youth of precocious prudence. It is best to speak out what we mean and what we want. You are conveying a large treasure to the army in Venetia; we must have every sesterce of it."

Paulus looked, and saw that the wagon laden with the iron chest had just departed in well-acted terror at a gallop.

"Take it, then," said he. "We have been careful and sparing of the horses, and it is only now we have pushed them into a gallop; and I entertain a hope that we shall hold you at bay so long upon this road that the chest will have reached Germanicus Caesar before you—I am wrong; I mean to leave 'you' here upon the ground—before your followers, I say, can accomplish two-thirds of the distance."

"Demented youth!" replied the other, "why resist without the hope of success? We are ten to one. We can, besides, send men into the copse on each side of the road, and in a moment they will be in your rear."

"You fifty men on the right," cried Paulus, "and you fifty on the left, select three of your best javelin throwers each side, and, after I have ridden back from the midst of yonder gang, give them a sample of what you can do."

He made his horse bound as he faced the column between Thellus, on the one hand, and Chaerias and Ponginus, on the other.

"Now," said he, shaking his long rapier aloft, "I have a great mind to ride through the whole of you and back again for the mere sport of it. Your horses are like cats compared to mine; you are only fourteen deep, and the beast that bears me, even if mortally wounded, would trample down fifty of you in file before he dropped."

The leader of the pursuing band was a shrewd man. After a moment's consultation with the persons on either side of him, he said:

"It is a bold idea, young centurion. If it deceived us, you could march away unattacked. But we counted you leaving Rome; we know for certain that you were only fourteen men, all told; we have a post of two men more than forty miles ahead of you, who would have returned and joined us if any reinforcement had met or was coming to meet you. We seriously mean to have yonder treasure, therefore listen to good sense. You might kill and wound a few of us, but not a man of your own party would survive, and we should get the chest afterward all the same. You will lose your life, yet not save the treasure. That will not be disinterestedness, but madness."

"In answer to that," said Paulus, who had no objection to prolong the parley, "I must remind you of your own singular disinterestedness. You will lose your own life in order that those behind you may enjoy the money. You must love them more than you love yourself; for I swear to you that, if it comes to violence, not a sesterce in the chest will 'you,' at least, receive. The dead divide no booty. If you have authority, then, over your followers, order them back, and begone yourself."

(To be Continued.)

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