

and jostled each other in the streets of Rome at that stormy period, none was better known, none more courted, flattered, honoured, hated, and mistrusted, than the occupant of the gilded chariot. It was no time for men to wear their hearts in their hands—it was no time to make an additional enemy, or to lose a possible friend. Since the death of Tiberius, emperor had succeeded emperor with alarming rapidity. Nero had indeed died by his own hand, to avoid the just retribution of unexampled vices and crimes; but the poisoned mushroom had carried off his predecessor, and the old man who succeeded him fell by the weapons of the very guards he had enlisted to protect his grey head from violence. Since then another suicide had induced Vitellius with the purple; but the throne of the Caesars was fast becoming synonymous with a scaffold, and the sword of Damocles quivered more menacingly, and on a slenderer hair than ever, over the diadem.

When great political convulsions agitate a State, already seething with general vice and luxury, the moral scum seems, by a law of nature, to float invariably to the surface—the characters most destitute of principle, the readiest to obey the instincts of self-aggrandisement and expediency, achieve a kind of spurious fame, a doubtful and temporary success. Under the rule of Nero, perhaps, there was but one path to Court favour, and that lay in the disgraceful attempt to vie with this Emperor's brutalities and crimes. The palace of Caesar was then indeed a sink of foul iniquity and utter degradation. The sycophant who could most readily reduce himself to the level of a beast in gross sensuality, while he boasted a demon's refinement of cruelty, and morbid depravity of heart, became the first favourite for the time with his Imperial master. To be fat, slothful, weak, gluttonous, and effeminate, while the brow was crowned with roses, and the brain was drenched with wine, and the hands were steeped in blood—this it was to be a friend and counsellor of Caesar. Men waited and wondered in stupefied awe when they marked the monster reeling from a debauch to some fresh feast of horrors, some ingenious exhibition of the complicated tortures that may be inflicted on a human being, some devilish experiment of all the body can bear, ere the soul takes wing from its ghastly, mutilated tenement, and this not on one, but a thousand victims. They waited and wondered what the gods were about, that Divine vengeance should slumber through such provocations as these.

But retribution overtook him at last. The heart which a slaughtered mother's spectre could not soften, which remorse for a pregnant wife's fate, kicked to death by her brutal lord, failed to wring, quailed at the approach of a few exasperated soldiers; and the tyrant who had so often smiled to see blood flow like water in the amphitheatre, died by his own hand—died as he had lived, a coward and a murderer to the last.

Since then, the Court was a sphere in which any bold unscrupulous man might be pretty sure of attaining success. The present emperor was a good-humoured glutton, one whose faculties, originally vigorous, had been warped and deadened by excess, just as his body had become bloated, his eye dimmed, his strength palsied, and his courage destroyed by the same course. The scheming statesman, the pliant courtier, the successful soldier had but one passion now, one only object for the exercise of his energies, both of mind and body—to eat enormously, to drink to excess, to study every art by which fresh appetite could be stimulated when gorged to repletion—and then—to eat and drink again.

With such a patron, any man who united to a tendency for the pleasures of the table, a strong brain, a cold head, and an aptitude for business, might be

sure of considerable influence. The Emperor thoroughly appreciated one who would take trouble off his hands, while at the same time he encouraged his master, by precept and example, in his swinish propensities. It was no slight service to Vitellius, to rise from a debauch and give those necessary orders in an unforeseen emergency which Caesar's sodden brain was powerless to originate or to understand.

Ere Placidus had been a month about the Court, he had insinuated himself thoroughly into the good graces of the Emperor.

This man's had been a strange and stirring history. Born of patrician rank, he had used his family influence to advance him in the military service, and already, whilst still in the flower of youth, had attained the grade of Tribune in Vespasian's army, then occupying Judæa under that distinguished general. Although no man yielded so willingly, or gave himself up so entirely to the indolent enjoyments of Asiatic life, Placidus possessed many of the qualities which are esteemed essential to the character of a soldier. Personal bravery, or we should rather say, insensibility to danger, was one of his peculiar advantages. Perhaps this is a quality inseparable from such an organisation as his, in which, while the system seems to contain a wealth of energy and vitality, the nerves are extremely callous to irritation, and completely under control. The Tribune never came out in more favorable colors than when every one about him was in a state of alarm and confusion. On one occasion, at the siege of Jotapata, where the Jews were defending themselves with the desperate energy of their race, Placidus won golden opinions from Vespasian by the cool dexterity with which he saved from destruction a whole company of soldiers and their centurion, under the very eye of his general.

A maniple, or, in the military language of to-day, a wing of the cohort led by Placidus was advancing to the attack, and the first centurion, with the company under his command, was already beneath the wall, bristling as it was with defenders, who hurled down on their assailants darts, javelins, huge stones, every description of weapon or missile, including molten lead and boiling oil. Under cover of a moveable pent-house, which protected them, the head of the column had advanced their battering-ram to the very wall, and were swinging the huge engine back, by the ropes and pulleys which governed it, for an increased impulse of destruction, when the Jews, who had been watching their opportunity, succeeded in balancing an enormous mass of granite immediately above the pent-house and the materials of offence, animate and inanimate, which it contained. A Jewish warrior clad in shining armour had taken a lever in his hand, and was in the act of applying that instrument to the impending tottering mass; in another instant it must have crashed down upon their heads, and buried the whole band beneath its weight. At his appointed station by the Eagle, the Tribune was watching the movements of his men with his usual air of sleepy, indolent approval. And even in this critical moment his eye never brightened, his color never deepened a shade. The voice was calm, low, and perfectly modulated in which he bade the trumpeter at his right hand sound the recall, nor, though its business-like rapidity could scarce have been exceeded by the most practised archer, was the movement the least hurried with which he snatched the bow from a dead Parthian auxiliary at his feet and fitted an arrow to its string. In the twinkling of an eye, while the granite vibrated on the very parapet, the arrow was quivering between the joints of the warrior's harness who held the lever, and he had fallen with his head over the wall in the throes of death. Before

another of the defenders could take his place the assaulting party had retired, bringing along with them, in their cool and rigid discipline, the battering-ram and wooden covering which protected it, while the Tribune quietly observed, as he replaced the bow into the fallen Parthian's hand, 'A company saved is a hundred men gained. A dead barbarian is exactly worth my tallest centurion, and the smartest troop I have in the maniple!'

Vespasian was not the man to forget such an instance of cool promptitude, and Julius Placidus was marked out for promotion from that day forth.

But with its courage, the Tribune possessed the cunning of the tiger, not without something also of that fierce animal's outward beauty, and much of its watchful, pitiless, and untiring nature. A brave soldier should have considered it a degradation, under any circumstances, to play a double part; but with Placidus every step was esteemed honorable so long as it was on the ascent. The successful winner had no scruple in deceiving all about him at Rome, by the eagerness with which he assumed the character of a mere man of pleasure, while he lost no opportunity the while of ingratiating himself with the many desperate spirits who were to be found in the imperial city, ready and willing to assist in any enterprise which should tend to anarchy and confusion. While he rushed into every extravagance and pleasure of that luxurious Court—while he vied with Caesar himself in his profusion, and surpassed him in his orgies—he suffered no symptoms to escape him of a higher ambition than that of excellence in trifling—of deeper projects than those which affected the wine-cup, the pageant, and the passing follies of the hour. Yet all the while, within that dainty reveller's brain, schemes were forming and thoughts burning that should have withered the very roses on his brow.

It might have been the strain of Greek blood which filtered through his veins, that tempered his Roman courage and endurance with the pliancy essential to conspiracy and intrigue—a strain that was apparent in his sculptured regularity of feature, and general symmetry of form. His character has always been compared to the tiger's, and his movements had all the phant ease and stealthy freedom of that graceful animal. His stature was little above the average of his countrymen, but his frame was cast in that mould of exact proportion which promises the extreme of strength combined with agility and endurance. Had he been caught like Milo, he would have writhed himself out of the trap, with the sinuous persistency of a snake. There was something snake like, too, in his small glittering eye, and the clear smoothness of his skin. With all its brightness no woman worthy of the name but would have winced with womanly instincts of aversion and repugnance before his glance. With all its beauty no child would have looked up frankly and confidingly in his face. Men turned, indeed, to scan him approvingly as he passed; but the brave owned no sympathy with that smooth set trow, that crafty and malicious smile, while the timid or the superstitious shuddered and shrank away, averting their own gaze from what they felt to be the influence of the evil eye.

And yet, in his snowy tunic bleached to dazzling white, in his collar of linked gold, his jewelled belt, his embroidered sandals, and the ample folds of his deep violet mantle, nearly approaching purple, Julius Placidus was no unworthy representative of his time and his order, no mean specimen of the wealth, and foppery, and extravagance of Rome.

Such was the man who now stood up in his gilded chariot at Valeria's door, masking with his usual expression of careless indolence, the real impatience he felt for tidings of its mistress.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

A Gentleman

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