

CHAPTER III.

MARCHING into the courtyard of the prison, the party halted there, while the heavy gates were being unfastened to allow an exit. Outside was the street,—the city,—freedom!—and Barabbas, still staring ahead, uttered a hoarse cry and put his manacled hands to his throat as though he were choking.

"What ails thee?" demanded one of the men nearest him, giving him a dig in the ribs with the hilt of his weapon,—“Stand up, fool! Never tell me that a breath of air can knock thee down like a felled bullock!”

For Barabbas reeled and would have fallen prone on the ground insensible, had not the soldiers caught at his swaying figure and dragged him up, roughly enough, and with much coarse swearing. But his face had the pallor of death, and through his ragged beard his lips could be seen, livid and drawn apart over his clenched teeth like the lips of a corpse,—his breathing was scarcely perceptible.

The commander of the troop advanced and examined him.

"The man is starved,"—he said briefly, "Give him wine."

This order was promptly obeyed, and wine was held to the mouth of the swooning captive, but his teeth were fast set and he remained unconscious. Drop by drop however, the liquid was ungently forced down his throat, and after a couple of minutes, his chest heaved with the long laboured sighs of returning vitality, and his eyes flashed widely open.

"Air,—air!" he gasped, "The free air,—the light!"

He thrust out his chained hands gropingly, and then, with a sudden rush of strength induced by the warmth of the wine, he began to laugh wildly.

"Freedom!" he exclaimed, "Freedom! To live or die, what matter! Free! Free!"

"Hold thy peace, thou dog!" said the commanding officer sharply—"Who told thee thou wert free? Look at thy fettered wrists and be wise! Watch him closely, men! March!"

The prison-gates fell back on their groaning hinges and the measured tramp, tramp of the little troop awakened