

THE GLADIATORS:

A Tale of Rome and Judea.

BY G. J. WHYTE MELVILLE

EROS

CHAPTER I.—(CONTINUED)

The mist comes thicker still, driving over the plain in waves of vapour, that impart a ghostly air of motion to the stones that tower erect around the mystic circle. Grey, moss-grown, and unhewn, hand of man seems never to have desecrated those mighty blocks of granite, standing there, changeless and awful, like types of eternity. Dim and indistinct are they as the worship they guard. Hard and stern as the pitiless faith of sacrifice, vengeance, and oblation, inculcated at their base. A wild low chant comes waiving on the breeze, and through the gathering mist a long line of white-robed priests winds slowly into the circle. Stern and gloomy are they of aspect, lofty of stature, and large of limb, with long grey beards and tresses waving in the wind. Each wears a crown of oak-leaves round his head; each grasps a wand covered with ivy in his hand. The youth cannot resist an exclamation of surprise. There is desecration in his thought, there is profanity in his words. Louder and louder swells the chant. Closer and closer still contracts the circle. The white-robed priests are hemming him in to the very centre of the mystic ring, and see! the sacrificial knife is already bared and whetted, and flourished in air by a long brawny arm. The young warrior strives to fly. Horror! his feet refuse to stir, his hands cleave powerless to his sides. He seems turning to stone. A vague fear paralyses him that he too will become one of those granite masses to stand there motionless during eternity. His heart stops beating within him, and the transformation seems about to be completed, when lo! a warlike peal of trumpets breaks the spell, and he shakes his spear aloft and leaps gladly from the earth, exulting in the sense of life and motion once more.

Again the dream changes. Frenzied priest and Druidical stone have vanished like the mist that encircled them. It is a beautiful balmy night in June. The woods are black and silver in the moonlight. Not a breath of air stirs the topmost twigs of the lofty elm cut clear and distinct against the sky. Not a ripple blurs the surface of the lake, spread out and gleaming like a sheet of polished steel. The bitter calls at intervals from the adjacent marsh, and the nightingale carols in the copse. All is peaceful and beautiful, and suggestive of enjoyment or repose. Yet here, lying close amongst the foxglove and the fern, long lines of white-robed warriors are waiting but the signal for assault. And yonder, where the earth-work rises dark and level against the sky, paces to and fro a high-crested sentinel, watching over the safety of the Eagles, with the calm and ceaseless vigilance of that discipline which has made the legionaries masters of the world.

Once more the trumpets peal; the only sound to be heard in that array of tents, drawn up with such order and precision, behind the works, except the footfall of the Roman guard, firm and regular, as if it relieved the previous watch. In a short space that duty will be performed; and then, if ever, must the attack be made with any probability of success. Youth is impatient of delay—the young warrior's pulse beats audibly, and he feels the edge of his blade and the point of his short-handled javelin, with an intensity of longing that is absolutely painful. At length the word is passed from rank to rank. Like the crest of a sea-wave breaking into foam, rises that wavering line of white, rolling its length out in the moonlight, as man after man

springs erect at the touch of his comrade, and then a roar of voices, a rush of feet, and the wave dashes up and breaks against the steady solid resistance of the embankment.

But discipline is not to be caught thus napping. Ere the echo of their trumpets had died out among the distant hills, the legionaries stand to their arms throughout the camp. Already the rampart gleams and bristles with shield and helmet, javelin, sword and spear. Already the Eagle is awake and defiant, unruffled, indeed, in plumage, but with beak and talons bare and whetted for defence. The tall centurions marshal their men in line even and regular, as though about to defile by the throne of Cæsar, rather than to repel the attack of a wild barbarian foe. The tribunes, with their golden crests, take up their appointed posts in the four corners of the camp; while the Prætor himself gives his orders calm and unmoved from the centre.

Over the roar of the swarming Britons, sounds the clear trumpet note pealing out its directions, concise and intelligible as a loud voice, and heard by the combatants far and wide, inspiring courage and confidence, and order in the confusion.

Brandishing their long swords, the white clad-warriors of Britain rush tumultuously to the attack.

Already, they have filled the ditch and scaled the earthwork, but once and again they recoil from the steady front and rigid discipline of the invader, while the short stabbing sword of the Roman soldier, covered as he is by his ample shield, does fearful execution at close quarters. But still fresh assailants pour in, and the camp is carried and overrun. The young warrior rushes exulting to and fro, and the enemy falls in heaps before him. Such moments are worth whole years of peaceful life. He has reached the Prætorium. He is close beneath the Eagles, and he leaps wildly at them to bring them off in triumph as trophies of his victory. But a grim centurion strikes him to the earth. Wounded, faint, and bleeding, he is carried away by his comrades, the shaft of the Roman standard in his hand. They bear him to a war-chariot, they lash the wild galloping steed, the roll of the wheels thunders in his ears as they dash tumultuously across the plain, and then the gentle mission is fulfilled, the doves fly down again in Proserpine, and the young, joyous, triumphant warrior of Britain wakes up a Roman slave.

CHAPTER II.

THE MARBLE PORCH.

It was the sound of a chariot, truly enough, that roused the dreamer from his slumbers; but how different the scene on which his drowsy eyes unclosed, from that which fancy had conjured up in the shadowy realms of sleep!

A beautiful portico, supported on slender columns of smooth white marble, protected him from the rays of the morning sun, already pouring down with the intensity of Italian heat. Garlands of leaves and flowers, cool and fresh in their contrast with the snowy surface of these dainty pillars, were wreathed around their stems, and twined amongst the delicate carving of their Corinthian capitals. Large stone vases, urn-shaped and massive, stood in long array at stated intervals, bearing the orange tree, the myrtle, and other dark-green flowering shrubs, which formed a fair perspective of retirement and repose. Shapely statues filled the niches in the wall, or stood out more prominently in the vacant spaces of the colonnade. Here cowered a marble Venus, in the shame-faced consciousness of unequalled beauty; there stood a bright Apollo, exulting in the perfection of god-like symmetry and grace. Rome could not finger the chisel like her instructress Greece, the mother of the Arts, but the hand that firmly grasps the sword

need never want for anything skill produces, or genius creates, or gold can buy, so it is no marvel that the masterpieces and treasures of the nations she subdued found their way to the Imperial City, mistress of the world. Even where the sleeper lay reclined upon a couch of curiously carved wood from the forests that clothe Mount Hymettus, an owl so beautifully obdurate that its very breast plumage seemed to ruffle in the breeze, looked down upon him from a niche where it had been placed at a cost that might have bought a dozen such human chattels as himself; for it had been brought from Athens as the most successful effort of a sculptor; who had devoted it to the honour of Minerva in his zeal. Refinement, luxury, nay profusion, reigned paramount even here outside the sumptuous dwelling of a Roman lady; and the very ground in her porch over which she was borne, for she seldom touched it with her feet, was fresh swept and sanded as often as it had been disturbed by the tread of her litter-bearer or the wheels of her chariot.

Many a time was this ceremony performed in the twenty-four hours; for Valeria was a woman of noble rank, great possessions and the highest fashion. Not a vanity of her sex, not a folly was there of her class, in which she scrupled to indulge; and then, as now, ladies were prone to rush into extremes, and frivolity, when it took the garb of a female, assumed preposterous dimensions, and a thirst for amusement, incompatible with reason or self control.

There is always a certain hush, and, as it were, a pompous stillness, about the houses of the great, even long after inferior mortals are astir in pursuit of their pleasure or their business. To-day was Valeria's birthday, and as such was duly observed by the hanging of garlands on the pillars of her porch; but after the completion of this graceful ceremony, silence seemed to have sunk once more upon the household, and the slave whose dream we have recorded, coming into her gates with an offering from his lord, and finding no domestics in the way, had sat him down to wait in the graceful shade, and, overcome with heat, might have slept on till noon had he not been roused by the grinding chariot-wheels, which mingled so confusedly with his dream.

It was no plebeian vehicle that now rolled into the colonnade, driven at a furious pace, and stopping so abruptly as to create considerable confusion and insubordination amongst the noble animals that drew it. The car, mounted on two wheels, was constructed of a highly polished wood, cut from the wild fig-tree, elaborately inlaid with ivory and gold, the very spokes and fellos of the wheels were carved in patterns of vine-leaves and flowers, whilst the extremities of the pole, the axle, and the yoke, were wrought into exquisite representations of the wolf's head, an animal, from historical reasons, ever dear to the fancy of the Roman. There was but one person beside the driver in the carriage, and so light a draught might indeed command any rate of speed, which whirled along by four such horses as now plunged and reared and bit each other's crests in the portico of Valeria's mansion. These were of a milky white, with dark muzzles, and a bluish tinge under the coat, denoting its soft texture, and the Eastern origin of the animals. Somewhat thick of neck and shoulders, with semicircular jowl, it was the broad and tapering head, the small quivering ear, the wide red nostril, that demonstrated the purity of their blood, and argued extraordinary powers of speed and endurance; while their short, round backs, prominent muscles, flat legs, and dainty feet, promised an amount of strength and activity only to be attained by the production of perfect symmetry.

These beautiful animals were harnessed four abreast—the inner pair somewhat in the fashion of our modern curricles, being yoked to the pole, of which the very fastening pins were steel overlaid with gold, whilst the outer horses, drawing only from a trace attached respectively on the inner side of each to the axle of the chariot, were free to wheel their quarters outwards in every direction, and kick to their heart's content—a liberty of which, in the present instance, they seemed well disposed to avail themselves.

The slave started to his feet as the nearest horse winced and swerved aside from his unexpected figure, snorting the while in mingled wantonness and fear. The axle grazed his tunic, while it passed, and the driver, irritated at his horses' unsteadiness, or perhaps in the mere insolence of a great man's favourite, struck at him heavily with his whip as he went by. The Briton's blood boiled at the indignity; but his sinewy arm was up like lightning to parry the blow, and as the lash curled round his wrist he drew the weapon quickly from the driver's hand, and would have returned the insult with interest, had he not been deterred from his purpose by the youthful effeminate appearance of the aggressor.

"I cannot strike a girl" exclaimed the slave, contemptuously, throwing the whip at the same time into the floor of the chariot, where it lit at the feet of the other occupant, a sumptuously-dressed nobleman, who enjoyed the discomfiture of his charioteer, with the loud frank glee of a master jeering a dependant.

"Well said, my hero!" laughed the patrician, adding in good humoured, though haughty tones, "Not that I would give much for the chance of man or woman in a grasp like yours. By Jupiter! you've got the arms and shoulders of Antæus! Who owns you, my good fellow? and what do you here?"

"Nay, I would strike him again to some purpose if I were on the ground with him," interrupted the charioteer, a handsome, petulant youth of some sixteen summers, whose long flowing curls and rich scarlet mantle denoted a pampered and favourite slave. "Gently, Scipio! So-ho, Jugurtha! The horses will fret for an hour now they have been scared by his ugly face."

"Better let him alone, Automedon!" observed his master, again shaking his sides at the obvious discomfiture portrayed on the flushed face of his favourite. "Through your life keep clear of a man when he shuts his mouth like that, as you would of an ox with a wisp of hay on his horns. You silly boy! why he would swallow such a slender frame as yours at a gulp; and nobody but a fool ever strikes at a man unless he knows he can reach him, ay, and punish him too, without hurting his own knuckles in return! But what do you here, good fellow?" he repeated, addressing himself once more to the slave, who stood erect, scanning his questioner with a fearless, though respectful eye.

"My master is your friend," was the outspoken answer. "You supped with him only the night before last. But a man need not be in the household of Licinius, nor have spent his best years at Rome, to know the face of Julius Placidus, the Tribune."

A smile of gratified vanity stole over the patrician's countenance while he listened; a smile that had the effect of imparting to its lineaments an expression at once mocking, crafty, and malicious. In repose, and such was its usual condition, the face was almost handsome, perfect in its regularity, and of a fixed, sedate composure which bordered on vacuity, but when disturbed, as it sometimes, though rarely, was, by a passing emotion, the smile that passed over it like a lurid gleam, became truly diabolical.

The slave was right. Amongst all the notorious personages who crowded