

THE GLADIATORS:

A Tale of Rome and Judea.

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EROS.

CHAPTER VIII.—(CONTINUED.)

Licinius holds the British maiden to his breast, and they discourse of their own happiness and revel in the sunny hour, and plan schemes for the future—schemes in which each is to the other all in all, and dream not that when to-day is past for them there will be no to-morrow. The woman, indeed, heaves a gentle sigh at intervals, as though in the midst of her happiness some foreboding warned her of the brooding tempest; but the man is hopeful buoyant, and impetuous, playful in his tenderness, and joyous in his own triumphant love.

They parted that evening more reluctantly than usual. They lingered round the oak, they found excuse after excuse for another loving word, another fond caress. When at last they went their several ways, how often Licinius turned to look after the receding form that carried with it all his hope and all his happiness! Little did he think how, and when, and where, he would see Guenebra again.

Ten years went heavily by. The commander of a legion was the chief of an army now. Licinius had served Rome in Gaul, in Spain, in Syria. Men said he bore a charmed life; and, indeed, while his counsels showed the forethought, the caution, and the patience of a skillful officer, his personal conduct was remarkable for a reckless disregard of danger, which would have been esteemed foolhardy in the meanest soldier. It was observed, too, that a deep and abiding melancholy had taken possession of the once light-hearted patrician. He only seemed to brighten up into his former self under the pressure of imminent danger, in the confusion of a repulse, or the excitement of a charge. At other times he was silent, depressed, pre-occupied; never morose, for his kindly heart was open to the griefs of others, and the legionaries knew that their daring general was the friend of all who were in sorrow or distress. But the men talked him over, too, by their watch-fires; they marvelled, those honest old campaigners, how one who was so ready in the field could be so sparing in the wine-cup; how the leader who could stoop to fill his helmet from the running stream under a storm of javelins, and drink comely with a jest and a smile, should be so backward in the revel, should show such a disinclination to those material pleasures which they esteemed the keenest joys of life.

One old centurian, who had followed his fortunes from the Thames to the Euphrates, from the confines of Pannonia to the Pillars of Hercules, averred that he had never seen his chief discomfited but once, and that was on the day when he had been accorded a triumph for his services in the streets of Rome. The veteran used to swear he never could forget the dejected look upon those brows, encircled with the laurel garland, nor the weary listlessness of that figure, to which all eyes were directed in its gilded chariot; the object of admiration to the whole city, and for that day, scarcely second even to Cæsar himself. It was a goodly triumph, no doubt; the spoils were rich, the car was lofty, the people shouted, and the victims fell. But what was glory without Guenebra? and the hero's eye could not rest in peace on one of all those gazing thousands, for lack of the loving face framed in its rich brown hair.

On the very night Licinius and Guenebra parted, a long-meditated rising had broken out among the islanders—conquered, but not subdued. Nothing but the cool courage of its young commander, and the immovable discipline of the legionaries, saved the

Roman camp. Ere morning, Guenebra had been forced away by her tribe many miles from the scene of action; the Britons, too, retired into their strongholds, those natural fastnesses impregnable by regular troops. The whole country was once more in a state of open warfare. Prompt and decisive measures were taken; Publius Ostorius, the Roman general, in execution of a manœuvre by which he preserved his line of operation, despatched Licinius and his legion to a different part of the island, and with all his exertions and all his influence, the young officer could never obtain tidings of Guenebra again. It was after this event that the change came over Licinius which was so commented on by the soldiers under his command.

Ten years of brilliant and successful services had elapsed when he returned to Britain. Nero had but lately succeeded to the purple, nor had he then degenerated into the monster of iniquity which he afterwards became. Until sapped by his ungovernable passions, the Emperor's administrative abilities were of no mean order; and he selected Licinius for the important post assigned to him, as being a consummate soldier, and experienced in the country with which he had to deal. The latter accepted the appointment with alacrity; through all change of time and fortune, he had never forgotten his British love. Under the burning skies of Syria, by the frozen shores of the Danube, at home or abroad, in peace or war, Guenebra's face was ever present to him, fond and trustful as when last they parted under the old oak-tree. He longed but to see it once more. And so he did. Thus:—

A partial insurrection had been quelled beyond the Trent. The Roman vanguard had surprised the Britons, and forced them to fly in great confusion, leaving their baggage, their valuables, in some cases even their arms, behind. When Licinius came up with the main body of his forces, he found, indeed, no prisoners taken, for everything animate had fled, but a goodly amount of spoil, over which Roman discipline had placed a strong guard. One of his tribunes approached him with a list of the captured articles; and when his general had perused it, the officer hesitated as though there was still some further report to make. At last he spoke out:

"There is a hut left standing within the lines of the enemy. I would not order it to be destroyed till I had provided for the burial of a dead body that lies beneath its shelter."

Licinius was counting the arms taken. "A dead body!" said he carelessly; "is it an officer of rank?"

"'Tis a woman's corpse," answered the tribune; "a fair and stately woman, apparently the wife of some prince or chieftain at the least."

For Guenebra's sake, every woman much more every British woman, was an object of respect and interest to Licinius.

"Lead on," said he. "I will give directions when I have seen it;" and the general followed his officer to the place already indicated.

It was but a rude hut made of a few planks and branches hastily thrown together. It seemed to have been erected at a moment's notice, probably to shelter an inmate in the last stages of dissolution. Through a wide rent in the roof the summer sun streamed in brilliantly, throwing a sheet of light on the dead face below.

The prostrate form was swathed in its white robe, the bridal garment of the destroyer. A band of white encircled the head and chin, and the brown hair was parted modestly on the smooth forehead calm and womanly as of old. It was Guenebra's face that lay there so strangely still. Guenebra's face, how like and yet how changed! As he stooped over it, and looked on the closed eyes beneath their aching brows, the fair and noble features

chilled by the hand of death—the sweet lips wreathed even now with a chastened loving smile—he could not but mark that there were lines of thought upon the forehead, streaks of silver in the hair, the result it might be of regrets, and memories, and sorrows, and care for *him*.

Then the warm tears gushed up into the soldier's eyes, the pressure on his heart and brain seemed to be relieved. As when the spear is drawn out of a wound and the red stream spouts freely forth, the previous agony was succeeded by a dull hopeless resignation, that in comparison seemed almost akin to peace.

He pressed his lips hard upon the cold dead forehead, and turned away—a man for whom from henceforth there was neither good to covet, nor evil to be feared.

And thus it was that here, on earth, Licinius looked once more upon his love.

Fresh victories crowned his arms in Britain—a fresh triumph awaited his return to Rome; but still as of old with Licinius, the glory seemed to count for nothing, the service seemed to be all-in-all. Only, now, the restless, eager look had left his face. He was always calm and unmoved, even in the uncertainty of conflict or the triumph of success. Still kindly in his actions, his outward demeanour was very stern and cold. He kept aloof from the intrigues, as from the pleasures of the court; but was ever ready to serve Rome with his sword, and on many occasions by his coolness and conduct redeemed the errors and incapacity of his colleagues or predecessors. Fortune smiled upon the man who was insensible to her frowns. Honours poured in on the soldier who seemed so careless of their attainment; and Caius Lucius Licinius was perhaps the object of more respect and less envy than any other person of his rank in Rome.

It fell out that shortly before the death of Nero, the general, in traversing the slave-market on the way from the Forum, felt his sleeve plucked by a notorious dealer in human wares, named Gargilianus, who begged him earnestly to come and examine a fresh importation of captives lately arrived from Britain. To mention their country was at once to excite the interest of Licinius, who readily acceded to the request, and spoke a few kind words in their native language to the unhappy barbarians as he passed through their ranks. His attention was, however, especially arrested by the appearance of one of the conquered, a fine young man of great strength and stature, who seemed to feel painfully the indignity of his position, and placed as he was on a huge stone block, whereon his own towering height rendered him a conspicuous object in the throng. He had been severely wounded, too, in several places, as was apparent from the scars scarce yet healed over. Indeed, had it not been so, he would never probably have been here.

There was something in his face, and the expression of his dark blue eyes, that roused a painful thrill in the Roman general's breast. He felt a strange and undefinable attraction towards the captive, for which he could not account, and, pausing in his walk, scanned him with a wistful searching gaze, which was not lost on the practised perceptions of the dealer.

"He should have been shown in private," whispered Gargilianus, with an important and mysterious air. "Indeed, my man was just taking him away, when I saw you coming, my honoured patron, and I called to him to stop. Ay! you may examine him all over—tall, young, and healthy. Sound, wind and limb, and stronger than any gladiator in the amphitheatre. They're men of iron, these barbarians, that's the truth, and he has only just come over. There! look for yourself,

noble general; you will see the chalk-marks on his feet."

"But he is badly wounded," observed Licinius, beginning to scan him, as the other instinctively felt, with the eye of a purchaser.

"That is nothing!" exclaimed Gargilianus. "Mere scratches, skin deep, and healed over now. You will not be able to run your nail against them in a week. Eycoros, I grant you, today, otherwise I would ask two thousand sesterces at least for him. These islanders are cheap at any price."

"I will give you a thousand," said Licinius, quietly.

"Impossible!" burst out the dealer, with a quiver of his finger, that expressed a most emphatic negative. "I should lose money by him, generous patron! What! A man must live. Cæsar would give more for him to die in the circus. Look at his muscles! He would stand up for a good five minutes against the tiger!" This last consideration was probably not without its influence. After a little more haggling, the British captive became the property of Licinius at the cost of fifteen hundred sesterces; and Licinius found the most indulgent and kindest-hearted master in Rome.

We must return to that master, pacing thoughtfully up and down the colonnade, in the cool and pleasant evening air.

It is, perhaps, one of the most consoling and merciful dispensations of Providence that the human mind is so constituted as to dwell on past pleasures, rather than past pain. The sorrow that is done with, returns indeed at intervals vividly and bitterly enough; but every fresh recurrence is less cruel than the last, and we can look back to our sufferings at length with a calm and chastened humility which is the first step towards resignation and eventual peace. But the memory of a great happiness seems so interwoven with the imperishable part of our being, that it loses none of its reality by the lapse of time, none of its brightness from the effect of distance. Anger, sorrow, hatred, contentions, fleet away like a dream; but the smile that gladdened us long ago, has passed into the very sunlight of noon-day; the whisper that softened our sternest moods, steals with the breeze of evening to our heart, gently and tenderly as of yore, and we know, we feel, that while crime, and misery, and remorse, are the temporary affliction of humanity, pardon, and hope, and love are its inheritance for evermore.

Licinius, pacing his long shadowy colonnade, dwells not on the anxieties, and the separation, and the sorrow of years; on the loss of his dearest treasure and its possession by another; not even on the calm dead face bound with its linen band. No; he is back in Britain once more with his living love, in the green glade where the bending ferns are whispering under the old oak-tree.

A step in the hall rouses him from his meditations, and a kind grave smile steals over the general's face at the approach of his favourite slave.

The Roman patrician looks what he is—a war-worn veteran, bronzed and hardened by the influence of many campaigns in many climates. He is not yet past the prime of his bodily vigour, and there is a severe beauty about his noble features, and beard and hair already touched with grey, that possesses considerable attraction still. Valeria, no mean judge, asserts that he is, and always will be, a handsome man, but that he does not know it. She respects him much, likes him a good deal, and he is the only person on earth for whose good opinion she has the slightest value. In truth, though she would not confess it even to herself, she is a little afraid of her good-hearted, brave and thoughtful kinsman.

A man who has reached mature age without forming family ties is always