

reviled! Down with him! down with him, comrades, and keep him down!"

There is little doubt that had Esca's head once touched the ground it had never risen again, for the priests were crowding about him with wild yells and savage eyes, and the fierce rovelry of a white ago was fast warning into a thirst for blood. Valeria thrust her way into the circle, though she never feared for the Briton—not for an instant.

It was getting dangerous, though, to remain any longer amongst this frantic crew. Esca wound one arm round the girl's waist and opposed the other shoulder to the throng. Spado, encouraged by his comrades, struck wildly at the Briton, and made a furious effort to recover his prey.

Esca drew himself together like a panther about to spring, then his long sinowy arm flew out with the force and impulse of a catapult, and the eunuch, reeling backwards, fell heavily to the ground, with a gasp upon his cheek like the wound inflicted by a sword.

"Eugo!" exclaimed Valeria, in a thrill of admiration and delight. "Well struck, by Hercules! Ah! these barbarians have at least the free use of their limbs. Why the priest went down like a white ox at the Mucian Gate. Is he much hurt, think ye? Will he rise again?"

The last sentence was addressed to the throng who now crowded round the prostrate Spado, and was but the result of that pity which is never quite dormant in a woman's breast. The fallen eunuch seemed indeed in no hurry to get upon his legs again. He rolled about in hideous discomfiture, and gave vent to his feelings in loud and pitiful moans and lamentations.

After such an example of the Briton's prowess, none of her other votaries seemed to think it incumbent on them to vindicate the majesty of the goddess by further interference with the maiden and her protector. Supporting and almost carrying her drooping form, Esca hurried her away with swift firm strides, pausing and looking back at intervals, as though loth to leave his work half finished, and by no means unwilling to renew the contest. The last Valeria saw of him was the turr. of his noble head bending down with a courteous and protecting gesture, to console and reassure his frightened charge.

All her womanly instincts revolted at that moment from the odious throng with whom she was involved. She could have found it in her heart to envy that obscure and unknown girl hurrying away yonder through the darkening streets on the arm of her powerful protector—could have wished herself a peasant or a slave, with some one being in the world to look up to, and to love. Valeria's life had been that of a spoiled child from the day she left her cradle—that gilded cradle over which the nurses had repeated their customary Roman blessing with an emphasis that in her case seemed to be prophetic:

May monarchs woo thee, darling! to their bed,
And roses blossom where thy footsteps tread!

The metaphorical flowers of wealth, prosperity, and admiration, did indeed seem to spring up beneath her feet, and her stately beauty would have done no discredit to an imperial bride; but it must have been something nobler than the purple and the diadem—that could have won its way to Valeria's heart.

She was habituated to the beautiful, the costly, the refined, till she had learned to consider such qualities as the mere essentials of life. It seemed to her a simple matter of course that houses should be noble, and chariots luxurious, and horses swift, and men brave. The *nil admirari* was the maxim of the class in which she lived; and whilst their standard was thus placed at the superlative, that which came up to it received no credit for excellence, that which fell short was treated with disapproval and contempt. Valeria's life had been one constant

round of pleasure and amusement; yet she was not happy, not even contented. Day by day she felt the want of some fresh interest, some fresh excitement; and it was this craving probably, more than innate depravity, which drove her, in common with many of her companions, into such disgraceful scenes as were enacted at the worship of Juno, Isis, and the other gods and goddesses of mythology.

Lovers, it is needless to say, Valeria had won in plenty. Each new face possessed for her but the attraction of its novelty. The favourite of the hour had small cause to pique himself on his position. For the first week he interested her curiosity, for the second he pleased her fancy, after which, if he was wise, he took his leave gracefully, ere he was bidden to do so with a frankness that admitted of no misconception. Perhaps the only person in the world whom she respected, was her kinsu an Licinius; and this, none the less, that she possessed no kind of influence over his feelings or his opinions; that she well knew he viewed her proceedings often with disapprobation, and entertained for her character a kindly pity not far removed from contempt. Even Julius Placidus, who was the most persevering, as he was the craftiest of her admirers, had made no impression on her heart. She appreciated his intellect, she was amused with his conversation, she approved of his deep schemes, his lavish extravagance, his unprincipled recklessness; but she never thought of him for an instant after he was out of her sight, and there was something in the cold-blooded ferocity of his character from which, even in his presence, she unconsciously recoiled. Perhaps she admired the person of Hippias, her fencing master, a retired gladiator, who combined handsome regularity of features with a certain worn and warlike air, not without its charm, more than that of any man whom she had yet seen, and with all her pride and her cold exterior, Valeria was a woman to be captivated by the eye; but Hippias, from his professional reputation, was the darling of half the matrons in Rome, and it may be that she only followed the example of her friends, with whom, at this period of the Empire, it was considered a proof of the highest fashion, and the best taste, to be in love with a gladiator.

Strong in her passions, as in her physical organisation, the former were only bridled by an unbending pride, and an intensity of will more than masculine in its resolution. As under that smooth skin the muscles of the round white arm were firm and hard like marble, so beneath that fair and tranquil bosom there beat a heart that for good or evil could dare, endure, and defy the worst. Valeria was a woman whom none but a very bold or very ignorant suitor would have taken to his breast; yet it may be that the right man could have tamed, and made her gentle and patient as the dove.

And now something seemed to tell her that the void in her heart was filled at last. Esca's manly beauty had made a strong impression on her senses; the anomaly of his position had captivated her imagination; there was something very attractive in the mystery that surrounded him; there was even a wild thrill of pleasure in the shame of loving a slave. Then, when he stood forth, the champion of that poor helpless girl, brave, handsome, and victorious, the charm was complete; and Valeria's eyes followed him as he disappeared with a longing loving look, that had never glistened in them in her life before.

The Briton hurried away with his arm round the drooping figure of his companion, and for a time forbore to speak a word even of encouragement or consolation. At first the reaction of her feelings turned her sick and faint, then a burst of weeping came to her relief; ere long the tears were

flowing silently; and the girl, who indeed showed no lack of courage, had recovered herself sufficiently to look up in her protector's face, and pour out her thanks with a quiet earnestness that showed they came direct from the heart.

"I can trust you," she said, in a voice of peculiar sweetness, though her Latin, like his own, was touched with a slightly foreign accent. "I can read a brave man's face—none better. We have not far to go now. You will take me safe home!"

"I will guard you to your very door," said he, in tones of the deepest respect. "But you need fear nothing now; the drunken priests and their mysterious deity are far enough off by this time. 'Tis a noble worship, truly, for such a city as this—the mistress of the world!"

"False gods! false gods!" replied the girl, very earnestly. "Oh, how can men be so blind, so degraded!" Here she stopped suddenly, and clung closer to her companion's arm, drawing her veil tighter round her face the while. Her quick ear had caught the sound of hurrying footsteps, and she dreaded pursuit.

"'Tis nothing," said Esca, encouraging her; "the most we have to dread now is some drunken freedman or client reeling home from his patron's supper-table. They are a weakly race, these Roman citizens," he added, good humouredly; "I think I can promise to stave them off if they come not more than a dozen at a time."

The cheerful tone reassured her no less than the strong arm to which she clung. It was delightful to feel so safe after the fright she had undergone. The footsteps were indeed those of a few dissolute idlers loitering home after a debauch. They had hastened forward on spying a female figure; but there was something in the air of her protector that forbade a near approach, and they shrank to the other side of the way rather than come in contact with so powerful an opponent. The girl felt proud of her escort, and safer every minute.

By this time she had guided him into a dark and narrow street, at the end of which the Tiber might be seen gleaming under the starlit sky. She stopped at a mean-looking door, let into a dead-wall, and applying her hand to a secret spring, it opened noiselessly to her touch. Then she turned to face her companion, and said, frankly, "I have not thanked you half enough. Will you not enter our poor dwelling, and share with us a morsel of food and a cup of wine, ere you depart upon your way?"

Esca was neither hungry nor thirsty, yet he bowed his head, and followed her into the house.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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