

most stern in their repose; and then such womanly softness in the masses of rich nut-brown hair that showered down neck and shoulders, to form a framework for this lovely, dangerous, and too alluring picture. Even the little negro, wearing as he was, peeped at intervals from the back of the mirror he upheld, fawning like a dog for some sign of approval from his haughty, careless mistress. At length she bade him keep still, with a half-scornful smile at his antics; and the sharp white teeth gleamed from ear to ear of the dusky little face, as it grinned with pleasure, while the boy settled himself once more in an attitude of patience and steady submission.

Nor was Valeria's apartment unworthy of the noble beauty who devoted it to the mysterious rites of dress and decoration. Everything that luxury could imagine for bodily ease, everything that science had as yet discovered for the preservation or the production of feminine attractions, was there to be found in its handsomest and costliest form. In one recess, shrouded by transparent curtains of the softest pink, was the bath that could be heated at will to any temperature, and the marble steps of which that shapey form was accustomed to descend twice and thrice a day. In another stood the ivory couch with its quilted crimson silks and ornamented pillars of dried gold, in which Valeria slept, and dreamed such dreams as hover round the rest of those whose life is luxury, and whose business is a ceaseless career of pleasure. On a table of cedar-wood, fashioned on a palm-leaf opening out from a pedestal that terminated in a single claw of grotesque shape, stood her silver night-lamp, exhaling odours of perfumed oil, and near it lay the waxen tablets, on which she made her memorandums, or composed her love-letters, and from which, as from an unfinished task, the sharp-pointed steel pencil had rolled away upon the shining floor. Through the whole court—for court it might be called, its many entrances and recesses, its cool and shady nooks, its lofty ceiling and its tessellated pavement—choice vases, jewelled cups, burnished chalices, and exquisite little statues, were scattered in systematic irregularity and graceful profusion. Even the very water in the bath flowed through the mouth of a marble Cupid; and two more winged arches wrought in bronze, supported a stand on which was set a formidable array of perfumes, essences, cosmetics and such material for offensive and defensive warfare.

The walls, too, of this seductive arsenal, were delicately tinted of a light rose-colour, that should throw the most becoming shade over its inmates, relieved at intervals by oval wreaths wrought out in bas-relief, enclosing diverse mythological subjects, in which the figure of Venus, goddess of love and laughter, predominated. Round the cornices stretched a frieze representing, also in relief, the fabulous contests of the Amazons with every description of monster, amongst which the most conspicuous was the well-known griffin, or griffin, an abnormal quadruped, with the head and neck of a bird of prey.

It was curious to trace in the female warriors thus delineated, something of the imperious beauty, the vigorous symmetry, and the dauntless bearing that distinguished Valeria herself, though their energetic and spirited attitudes afforded, at the same time, a marked contrast to the pleasing languor that seemed to pervade every movement of that luxurious lady reclining before her mirror, and submitting indolently to the attentions of her maid-servants.

These were five in number, and constituted the principal slaves of her household; the most important among them seemed to be a tall matronly woman, considerably older than her comrades, who filled the responsible

office of housekeeper in the establishment—a dignity which did not, however, exempt her from insult, and even blows, when she failed to satisfy the caprices of a somewhat exacting mistress; the others, comely laughing girls, with sparkling eyes and white teeth of their countrywomen, seemed principally occupied with the various matters that constituted their lady's toilet—a daily penance, in which, notwithstanding the rigour of its discipline, and the severities that were sure to follow the most trifling act of negligence, they took an inexplicable and essentially feminine delight.

Of these it was obvious that Myrrha was the first in place as in Myrrha. She it was who brought her mistress the warm towels for her bath; who was ready with her slippers when she emerged; who handed every article of clothing as it was required; whose taste was invariably consulted, and whose decision was considered final, on such important points as the position of a jewel, the studied negligence of a curl, or the exact adjustment of a fold.

The girl possessed, with an Italian exterior, the pliant cunning and plausible fluency of the Greek. Born a slave on one of Valeria's estates in the country, she had been reared a mere peasant, on a simple country diet, and amidst healthful country occupations, till a freak of her mistress brought her to Rome. With a woman's versatility—with a woman's quickness in adapting herself to a strange phase of life and a total change of circumstances—the country girl had not been a year in her new situation, ere she became the acutest and cleverest waiting-maid in the capital, with what benefit to her own morals and character, it is needless to inquire. Who so quick as Myrrha to prepare the unguents, the perfumes, or the cosmetics that repaired the injuries of climate, and effaced the marks of dissipation? Who so delicate a sempstress; who had such taste in colours; who could convey a note or a message with half such precision, simplicity, and tact? In short, who was ever so ready, in an emergency, with brush, crimping-iron, needle, hand, eye, or tongue? Intrigue was her native element. To lie on her mistress's behalf, seemed as natural as on her own. He who would advance in Valeria's good-will, must begin by bribing her maid; and many a Roman gallant had ere this discovered that even that royal road to success was as tedious as it was costly, and might lead eventually to discomfort and disgrace.

As she took the pounce-box from one of the girls, and proceeded to sprinkle gold dust in Valeria's hair, Myrrha's eye was caught by the gift of Placidus, lying neglected at her feet, the casket open, the jewels scattered on the floor. Such as it was, the waiting-maid owned a conscience. It warned her that she had not as yet worked out the value of the costly chain thrown round her neck by the Tribune.

Showering the gold-dust liberally about her lady's head, Myrrha felt her way cautiously to the delicate theme.

'There's a new fashion coming in for headgear when the weather gets cooler,' said she. 'It's truth I tell you, madam, for I heard it direct from Selina, who was told by the Empress's first tirewoman, though even Cesar himself cannot think Galeria looks well, with that yellow mop stuck all over her head. But it's to be the fashion, nevertheless, and right sorry I am to hear it; nor am I the only one for that matter.'

'Why?' asked Valeria, languidly; 'is it more troublesome than the present?'

Myrrha had done with the gold-dust now, and, holding the comb in her mouth, was throwing a rich brown curl across her wrist, while she laid a plat carefully beneath it. Notwithstanding the impediment between her lips, however, she was able to reply with great volubility.

'The trouble counts for nothing, madam, when a lady has got such hair as yours. It's a pleasure to run your hands through it, let alone dressing and crimping it, and plaiting it up into a crown that's fit for a queen. But this new fashion will make us all alike, whether we're as bald as old Lyco, or wear our curls down to our ankles, like Nara. Still, to hide such hair as yours,—as my lord said, only this morning—'

'What lord? this morning?' interrupted Valeria, a dawn of interest waking on her handsome features; 'not Licinius, my noble kinsman? His approval is indeed worth having.'

'Better worth than his gifts,' answered Myrrha, pertly; pointing to the filigree basket which occupied a place of honour on the toilet-table. 'Such a birthday present I never saw! A few late roses and a bunch or two of figs to the richest lady in Rome! To be sure, he sent a messenger with them, who might have come direct from Jove, and the properest man I ever set eyes on.' And Myrrha moved to one side, that her lady might not observe the blush that rose, even to her shameless brow, as she recalled the impression made on her by the handsome slave.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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