

THE GLADIATORS.

A Tale of Rome and Judea.

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EROS.

CHAPTER III
HERMES.

It was customary with the more refined aristocracy of Rome, during the first century of the Empire, to pay great respect to Mercury, the god of invention and intrigue. Not that the qualities generally attributed to that power was calculated to inspire admiration or esteem, but simply because he had acquired a fortuitous popularity at a period when the graceful Pantheism of the nation was regulated by general opinion, and when a deity went in and out of fashion like a dress.

At Valeria's porch, in common with many other great houses, stood an exquisite statue of the god, representing him as a youth, of athletic and symmetrical proportions, poised on a winged foot in the act of running, with the broad-leaf hat on his head, and the snake-turned rod in his hand. The countenance of the statue was expressive of intellect and vivacity, while the form was wrought into the highest ideal of activity and strength. It was placed on a square pedestal of marble immediately opposite the door; and behind this pedestal, the slave retired in some confusion when a train of maidens appeared from within, to answer the summons of Julius Placidus in his chariot.

The Tribune did not think it necessary to alight, but producing from the bosom of his tunic a jewelled casket, leaned one hand on the shoulder of Automedon, while with the other he proffered his gift to a damsel who seemed the chief among her fellows, and whose manners partook largely of the flippancy of the waiting-maid.

"Commend me to your mistress," said Placidus, at the same time throwing a gold chain round her neck on her own account, and bending carelessly down to take a receipt for the same, in the shape of a caress; "bid her every good omen from the most faithful of her servants, and ask her at what hour I may hope to be received on this her birthday, which the trifle you carry to her from me will prove I have not forgotten."

The waiting-maid tried hard to raise a blush, but with all her efforts the rich Southern colour would not deepen on her cheek; so she thought better of it, and locked him full in the face with her bold black eyes, while she replied: "You have forgotten surely, my lord, that this is the feast of Isis, and no lady that is a lady, at least here in Rome, can have leisure to day for anything but the sacred mysteries of the goddess."

Placidus laughed outright; and it was strange how his laugh scared those who watched it. Automedon fairly turned pale, and even the waiting-maid seemed disconcerted for a moment.

"I have heard of Isis's mysteries," said he, "my pretty Myrrhina, and who has not! The Roman ladies kept them somewhat jealously to themselves: and by all accounts it is well for our sex that they do so. Nevertheless there are yet some hours of sunlight to pass before the chaste rites of Egypt can possibly begin. Will not Valeria see me in the interval?"

A very quick ear might have detected the least possible tremor in the Tribune's voice as he spoke the last sentence; it was not lost upon Myrrhina, for she showed all the white teeth in her large well-formed mouth, while she enumerated with immense volubility those different pursuits which filled up the day of a fashionable Roman lady.

"Impossible!" burst out the damsel. "She has not a moment to spare from

now till sunset. There's her dinner, and her fencing-lesson, and her bath, and her dressing, and the sculptor coming for her hand, and the painter for her face, and the new Greek sandals to be fitted to her feet. Then she has sent for Philogemon, the augur, to cast her horoscope, and for Galanthis, who is cleverer than ever Locusta was, and has twice the practice, to prepare a philtre. Maybe it is for you, my lord," added the girl roguishly. "I hear the ladies are all using them just now."

The evil smile crossed the Tribune's face once more; perhaps he too had been indebted to the potions of Galanthis, for purposes of love or hate, and he did not care to be reminded of them.

"Nay," said he meaningly, "there is no need for that. Valeria can do more with one glance of her bright eyes than all the potions and poisons of Galanthis put together. Say, Myrrhina—you are in my interest—does she look more favourably of late?"

"How can I tell, my lord?" answered the girl, with an arch expression of amusement and defiance in her face. "My mistress is but a woman after all, and they say women are more easily mastered by the strong hand, than lured by the honey lip. She is not to be won by the smooth tongue and beardless face, I know, for I heard her say so to Paris myself, in the very spot where we are now standing. Juno! but the player slunk away somewhat crestfallen, I can tell you, when she called him 'a mere girl in her brother's clothes' at the best. No; the man who wins my mistress will be a man all over, I'll answer for it! So far, she is like the rest of us for that matter."

And Myrrhina sighed, thinking, it may be, of some sunburnt youth the while, whose rough but not unwelcome wooing had assailed her in her early girlhood, ere she came to Rome; far away yonder amongst the blushing vines, in the bright Campanian hills.

"Say you so?" observed the Tribune, obviously flattered by the implied compliment; for he was proud in his secret heart of his bodily strength. "Nay, there was a fellow standing here when I drove up, who would make an easy conquest of you, if, like your Sabine grandams, you must be borne off to be wed, on your lover's shoulders. By the body of Hercules! he would tuck you up under his arm as easily as you carry that casket, which you seem so afraid to let out of your hand. Ay, there he is! lurking behind Hermes. Stand forth, my good fellow! What! you are not afraid of Automedon, are you, and the crack of that young reprobate's whip?"

While he spoke, the slave stepped forward from his lurking place behind the statue, where the quick eye of Placidus had detected him, and presented to Myrrhina with a respectful gesture the offering of his lord to her mistress—a filigree basket of frosted silver, filled with a few choice fruits and flowers—

"From Caius Licinius, greeting," said he, "in honour of Valeria's natal day. The flowers are scarce yet dry from the spray that brawling Anio flings upon its banks; the fruits were glowing in yesterday's sun, on the brightest slopes of Tibur. My master offers the freshest and fairest of his fruits and flowers to his kinswoman, who is fresher and fairer than them all."

He delivered his message, which he had obviously learned by rote, in sufficiently pure and simple Latin, scarcely tinged with the accent of a barbarian, and bowing low as he placed the basket in Myrrhina's hand, drew himself up to his noble height, and looked proudly, almost defiantly, at the Tribune.

The girl started and turned pale—it seemed as if the statue of Hermes had descended from its pedestal to do her

homage. He stood there, that glorious specimen of humanity, in his majestic strength and symmetry, in the glow of his youth, and health, and beauty, like an impersonation of the god. Myrrhina, in common with many of her sex, was easily fascinated by external advantages, and she leaped nervously, while she accepted with shaking hands the handsome slave's offering to his master's kinswoman. "Will you not enter?" said she, the colour mantling once more, and this time without an effort, in her burning cheeks. "It is not the custom to depart from Valeria's house without breaking bread and drinking wine."

But the slave excused himself, abruptly, almost rudely, losing, be sure, by his refusal, none of the ground he had already gained in Myrrhina's good graces. It chafed him to remain even at the porch. The atmosphere of luxury that pervaded it, seemed to weigh upon his senses, and oppress his breath. Moreover, the insult he had sustained from Automedon, yet rankled in his heart. How he wished the boy-charioteer was nearer his match in size and strength! He would have hurled him from the chariot where he stood, turning his curls so insolently round his dainty fingers—hurled him to earth beyond his horses' head, and taught him the strength of a Briton's arm and the squeeze of a Briton's gripe. "Ay! and his master after him!" thought the slave, for already he experienced towards Placidus that unaccountable instinct of aversion which seems to warn men of a future foe, and which, to give him his due, the Tribune was not unused to awaken in a brave and honest breast.

Placidus, however, scanned him once more, as he strode away, with the critical gaze of a judge of human animals. It was this man's peculiarity to look on all he met as possible tools, that might come into use for various purposes at a future and indefinite time. If he observed more than usual courage in a soldier, superior acuteness in a freedman, nay, even uncommon beauty in a woman, he bethought himself that although he might have no immediate use for these qualities, occasions often arise on which he could turn them to his profit, and he noted, and made sure of, their amount accordingly. In the present instance, although somewhat surprised that he had never before remarked the slave's stalwart proportions in the household of Licinius, whose affection for the Briton had excused him from all menial offices, and consequent contact with visitors, he determined not to lose sight of one so formed by nature to excel in the gymnasium or the amphitheatre, while there crept into his heart a cruel cold-blooded feeling of satisfaction at the possibility of witnessing so muscular and shapely a figure in the contortions of a mortal struggle, to the throes of a painful death.

Besides, there was envy, too, at the bottom—envy in the proud patrician's breast, leaning so negligently on the cushions of his gilded chariot, with all his advantages of rank, reputation, wealth and influence—envy of the noble bearing, the personal comeliness, and the free manly step of the slave.

"Had he struck thee, Automedon," said his master, unable to resist taunting the petted youth who held the reins "had he but laid a finger on thee, thou has never spoken again, and I had been rid of the noisiest and most useless of my household. Gently with that outside horse; dost see how he chafes upon the rein? Gently, boy, I say! and drive me back into the Forum."

As he settled himself among the cushions and rolled swiftly away, Myrrhina, came forth into the porch once more. She seemed, however, scarcely to notice the departing chariot, but looked dreamily about her, and then

re-entered the house with a shake of the head, a smile, and something that was almost a sigh.

CHAPTER IV.
APHRODITE.

A negro boy, the ugliest of his kind, and probably all the more prized for that reason, was shifting uneasily from knee to knee, in an attitude of constraint that showed how long and tiresome he felt his office, and how wearied he was of Valeria's own apartment. Such a child, for the urobin seemed of the tenderest age, might be initiated without impropriety into the mysteries of a lady's toilet; and, indeed, the office it was his duty to undertake, formed the most indispensable part of the whole performance. With a skill and steadiness beyond his years, though with a rueful face, he was propping up an enormous mirror, in which his mistress might contemplate the whole galaxy of her charms—a mirror formed of one broad plate of silver, burnished to the brightness and lucidity of glass, set in an oval frame of richly chased gold, wrought into fantastic patterns and studded with emeralds, rubies, and other precious stones. Not a speck was to be discerned on the polish of its dazzling surface; and, indeed, the time of one maiden was devoted to the task alone of preserving it from the lightest breath that might dim its brightness, and cloud the reflection of the stately form that now sat before it, undergoing, at the hands of her attendant, the pleasing tortures of an elaborate toilet.

The reflection was that of a large handsome woman in the very prime and noon-tide of her beauty—a woman whose every movement and gesture bespoke physical organisation of a vigorous nature and perfect health. While the strong white neck gave grace and dignity to her carriage—while the deep bosom and somewhat massive shoulders partook more of Juno's majestic frame than Hebe's pliant youth—while the full sweep and outline of her figure denoted maturity and completeness in every part—the long round limbs, the shapely hands and feet, might have belonged to Diana, so perfect was their symmetry; the warm flush that tinted them, the voluptuous ease of her attitude, the gentle languor of her whole bearing, would have done no discredit to the goddess, hanging over the mountain-tops in the golden summer nights to look down upon Eadyunion, and bathe her sleeping favourite in floods of light and love.

Too fastidious a critic might have objected to Valeria's form that it expressed more of physical strength than is compatible with perfect womanly beauty, that the muscles were developed overmuch, and the whole frame, despite its flowing outlines, partook somewhat of a man's organisation, and a man's redundant strength. The same fault might have been found in a less degree with her countenance. There was a little too much resolution in the small aquiline nose, something of manly audacity and energy in the large well-formed mouth, with its broad white teeth that the fullest and reddest of lips could not conceal—a shade of masculine sternness on the low wide brow, smooth and white, but somewhat prominent, and scarcely softened by the arch of the marked eyebrow, or the dark sweep of the lashes that fringed the long laughing eyes.

And yet it was a face that a man, and still more a boy, could hardly have looked on without misgivings that he might too soon learn to long for its glances, its smiles, its approval, and its love. There was such a glow of health on the soft transparent skin, such a freshness and vitality in the colour of those blooming cheeks, such a sparkle in the gray eyes, that flashed so meaningfully when she smiled, that gleamed so clear and bright and cold when the features resumed their natural expression, grave, scornful, al-