

THE GLADIATORS:

A Tale of Rome and Judea.

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EROS.

CHAPTER XI.
STOLEN WATERS.

The broken column of one of the buildings destroyed in the great fire of Rome, and not yet restored, was glowing crimson in the setting sun. Beneath its base, the Tiber was gliding gently on towards the sea. There was a subdued hum even in the streets of the imperial city that denoted how the burden and heat of the day were now past; and the languor of the hour seemed to pervade even those who were compelled to toil on in the struggle for bread, and who could only in imagination abandon themselves to repose. On a fragment of the ruin sat Esca, gazing intently on the water as it stole by. To all appearance his listless and dreamy mood was unconscious of surrounding objects, yet his attitude was that of one prepared to start into action at a moment's notice, and though his arms were folded and his head bent down, his ear was watching eagerly to catch the faintest sound.

It is a patience-wearing process, that same waiting for a woman; and under the most favourable circumstances is productive of much irritation, disappointment, and disgust. In the first place a man is invariably too soon, and this knowingly and as it were with *malice prepense*. Taking time thus by the forelock, delays his flight considerably, and indeed reduces his pace to the slowest possible crawl, so that when the appointed moment does arrive, it seems to the watcher that it has been past a considerable period, and that his vigil should be already over, when in reality it is only just begun. Then, as the minutes steal on, come the different misgivings and suspicions which only arise on such occasions, and which in his right senses the self-torturer would be incapable of harbouring. Circumstances which, when the appointment was made, seemed expressly adapted to further his designs, now change to insurmountable difficulties, or take their place as links in a chain of deception which hopes to persuade himself have been forged with unheard-of duplicity, expressly for his discomfiture. He thinks badly of every one, worst of all of her, whose unpardonable fault is that she is now some fifty seconds late. Then comes a revulsion of feeling, and his heart leaps to his mouth, for yonder, emerging on the long perspective, is a female figure obviously advancing this way. The expected object is tall, slim, pliant, and walks with the firm free step of a deer on the heather. The advancing shape is short, fat, awkward, and waddles in its gait; nevertheless, it is not till it has reached within arm's length that he will allow himself to be convinced of his disappointment. If its ears are pretty quick, the unoffending figure may well be shocked at the deep and startling execration which its presence calls forth. Then begins another phase of despondency, humiliation, and bitter self-contempt, through all which pleasant changes of feeling the old feverish longing remains as strong as ever. At last she comes round the corner in good earnest, with the well-known smile in her eyes, the well-known greeting on her lips, and he forgets in an instant, as if they had never been, his anxiety, his anger, his reproaches, all but the presence that brings light to his life and gladness to his heart once more.

Esca rose impatiently at intervals, walked a few paces to and fro, sat down again, and threw small fragments of the ruin into the water.

Presently a figure, draped in black and closely veiled, moved down to the river's side near where the Briton sat,

and began filling a pitcher from the stream. It could hardly have passed the column without seeing him, yet did it seem unconscious of his presence; and who could tell how the heart might be beating within the bosom, or the cheek blushing behind the veil?

That veil was lifted, however, with an exclamation of surprise, when Esca stooped over her to take the pitcher from her hand, and Mariamne's cheek turned paler now than it had been even on the memorable night when he rescued her from the grasp of Spado and his fellow-bacchanals.

He, too, murmured some vague words of astonishment at finding her here. If they were honest, for whom could he have been waiting so impatiently? and it is possible, besides, Mariamne might have been a little disappointed had she been allowed to fill her pitcher from the Tiber for herself.

The Jewess had been thinking about him a good deal more than she intended, a good deal more than she knew, for the last two days. It is strange how very insensibly such thoughts gain growth and strength without care or culture. There are plants we prune and water every day which never reach more than a sickly and stunted vitality after all, and there are others that we trample down, cut over, tear up by the very roots, which nevertheless attain such vigor and luxuriance that our walls are covered by their tendrils, and our dwellings pervaded by their fragrance.

Mariamne was no bigoted daughter of Judah, for whom the stranger was an outcast because a heathen. Her constant intercourse with Calchas had taught her nobler truths than she had derived from the traditions of her fathers. And with all her pride of race and national predilections, she had imbibed those principles of charity and toleration which formed the groundwork of a new religion, destined to shed its light upon all the nations of the earth.

It was not precisely as a brother, though, that Mariamne had yet brought herself to regard the handsome British slave.

They were soon conversing happily together. The embarrassment of meeting had disappeared with the first affection of surprise. It was not long before he told her how tired he had been of watching by the broken column at the river side.

"How could you know I should come here?" asked the girl with a look of infinite simplicity and candour, though she must have remembered all the time, that she had not scrupled to hint at the daily practice in course of conversation with Calchas, on the night when Esca brought her safely home.

"I hoped it," he replied with a smile. "I have been a hunter you know, and have learned that the shyest and wildest of animals seek the water-side at sunset. I was here yesterday, and waited two long hours in vain."

She glanced quickly at him, but withdrew her eyes immediately, while the blood mounted to her pale face.

"Did you expect to see me?" she asked in a trembling voice; "and I never left the house the whole of yesterday! Oh, how I wish I had known it!" Then she stopped in painful embarrassment, as having said too much.

He appeared not to notice her confusion. He seemed to have some confession to make on his own part—something he hardly dared to tell her, yet which his honest nature could not consent should be withheld. At last he said it with an effort:

"You know what I am! My time is not my own, my very limbs belong to another. It matters not that the master is kind, good, and considerate. Mariamne, I am a slave!"

"I know it," she answered, very gently, with a loving pity beaming in her dark eyes. "My kinsman Calchas told me as much after you went away."

He drew a long breath as if relieved. "And yet you wished to see me again?" he asked, while a gleam of happiness brightened his face.

"Why not?" she replied with a kind smile. "Though that hand is a slave's, it struck my enemy down with the force of a hundred warriors; though that arm is a slave's, it bore me home with the care and tenderness of a woman. Ah! tell me not of slavery when the limbs are strong, and the heart is brave and pure. Though the body be chained with iron fetters, what matter so long as the spirit is free? Esca, you do not believe I think the worse of you because you are a heathen and a slave!"

Her voice was very soft and low while she spoke his name. No voice had ever sounded so sweetly in his ears before. A new, strange sense of happiness seemed to pervade his whole being yet he had never felt his situation so galling and unendurable as now.

"I would not have you think the worse of me," he answered, eagerly, "upon any account. Listen, Mariamne. I was taken captive in war and brought here with a hundred others to Rome. We were set up like cattle in the slave-market. Like cattle also we were purchased, one by one by those who esteemed themselves practised judges of human wares. I was bought by Caius Lucius Licinius at the price of a yoke of oxen, or a couple of chariot-horses. Bought and sold like a beast of the field, and driven home to my new master!"

He spoke with a scorn all the more bitter from having been repressed so long. Yet he kept back and smothered the indignation rising within him. This was the first ear that had ever been open to his wrongs, and the temptation was strong to pour them freely forth to so interested and partial a listener. To do him justice, he refrained from the indulgence. He had been taught from childhood that it was weak and womanish to complain; and the man had not forgotten the lessons of the boy.

Her gentle voice again interposed in soothing and consoling accents.

"But he is kind," she said, "kind and considerate—you told me so yourself, I could not bear to think him otherwise. Indeed, Esca, it would make me very unhappy to know that you—"

Here she broke off suddenly, and snatched up the pitcher he had been filling for her with such haste as to spill half its contents over his dress and her own. "There is some one watching us! Farewell!" she whispered in a breathless, frightened voice, and hurried away, turning her head once, however to cast a glance over her shoulder, and then hastened home faster than before.

Esca looked after her while she continued in sight, either unconscious of their vicinity, or at all events not noticing a pair of bold black eyes that were fixed upon him with an expression of arch and ludicrous surprise. He turned angrily, however, upon the intruder, when the black eyes had gazed their fill, and their owner burst out into a loud, merry, and mocking laugh.

CHAPTER XII.

MYRRHINA.

Myrrhina's voice was at all times pitched in a high key; her accents were very distinct and shrill, admirably adapted for the expression of decision or the conveyance of sarcastic remarks.

"So I have run you into a corner at last," she said, "and a pretty hunt you have given me! 'Tis to draw water, of course, that you come down to the Tiber side just at sunset; and you met her quite by accident, I dare say, that slip of a girl in her wisp of black clothes, who flitted away just now like a ghost going back again to Persephone. Ah! you gape like a calf when they put the garland on him for sacrifice, and the poor thing munches the very

flower-buds that deck him for destruction. Well, you at least are reserved for a nobler altar, and a worthier fate than to give your last gasp to a sorceress in the suburbs. Jupiter! how you stare, and how handsome you look, you great, strong barbarian, when you are thoroughly surprised!"

She put her face so close up to his, to laugh at him, that the gesture almost amounted to a caress. Myrrhina had no slight inclination to make love to the stalwart Briton on her own account, pending the conclusion of certain negotiations she felt bound to carry out on her mistress's. These were the result of a conversation held that morning while the maid was as usual combing out her lady's long and beautiful hair.

Valeria's sleep had been broken and restless. She tossed and turned upon her pillow, and put back the hair from her fevered cheeks and throbbing temples in vain. It was weary work to lie gazing with eyes wide open at the flickering shadows cast by the night lamp on the opposite wall. It was still less productive of sleep to shut them tight and abandon herself to the vision thus created, which stood out in life-like colours and refused to be dispelled. Do what she would to forget him, and conjure up some other object, there was the young barbarian, towering like a demigod over the mean effeminate throng; there were the waving linen garments, and the reeling symbols, and the tossing hands, and the scowling faces of the priests of Isis; there was the dark-clad girl with her graceful pliant form; and there, yes, always there, in his maddening beauty, was the tall brave figure, gathering itself in act to strike. She could not analyze her feelings; she believed herself bewitched. Valeria had not reached the prime of her womanhood, without having sounded, as she thought, every chord of feeling, tasted of every cup that promised gratification or excitement. She had been flattered by brave, courted by handsome, and admired by clever men. Some she fancied, some she liked, some she laughed at, and some she told herself she loved. But this was a new sensation altogether. This intense and passionate longing she had never felt before. But for its novelty it would have been absolutely painful. A timid girl might have been frightened at it; but Valeria was no timid girl. She was a woman, on the contrary, who, with all the eagerness and impetuosity of her sex, possessed the tenacity of purpose and the resolution of a man.

Obviously, as she could not conquer the sentiment, it was her nature to indulge it.

"I have a message to Licinius," said she, turning at the same time from the mirror, and suffering her long brown hair to fall over her face like a veil; "a message that I do not care to write, lest it should be seen by other eyes. Tell me, Myrrhina, how can I best convey it to my kinsman?"

The waiting-maid was far too astute to suggest the obvious arrangement of a private interview, than which nothing could have been easier, or to offer her own services, as an emissary who had already proved herself trustworthy in many a well-conducted intrigue; for Myrrhina knew her business too well to hesitate in playing into the hands of her mistress. So she assumed a look of perplexity and deep reflection while, finger on forehead, as the result of profound thought, she made the following reply:

"It would be safest, madam, would it not, to trust the matter to some confidential slave?"

Valeria's heart was beating fast, and the fair cheek was pale again now, while she answered, with studied carelessness.

"Perhaps it would, if I could think of one. You know his household,