

CHAPTER VII.

ONCE the highest heads in Rome inclined before Acte, the former favorite of Nero. But even at that period she showed no desire to interfere in public questions, and if on any occasion she used her influence over the young ruler, it was only to implore mercy for some one. Quiet and unassuming, she won the gratitude of many, and made no one her enemy. Even Octavia was unable to hate her. To those who envied her she seemed exceedingly harmless. It was known that she continued to love Nero with a sad and pained love, which lived not in hope, but only in memories of the time in which that Nero was not only younger and loving, but better. It was known that she could not tear her thoughts and soul from those memories, but expected nothing; since there was no real fear that Nero would return to her, she was looked upon as a person wholly inoffensive, and hence was left in peace. Poppæa considered her merely as a quiet servant, so harmless that she did not even try to drive her from the palace.

But since Cæsar had loved her once and dropped her without offence in a quiet and to some extent friendly manner, a certain respect was retained for her. Nero, when he had freed her, let her live in the palace, and gave her special apartments with a few servants. And as in their time Pallas and Narcissus, though freedmen of Claudius, not only sat at feasts with Claudius, but also held places of honor as powerful ministers, so she too was invited at times to Cæsar's table. This was done perhaps because her beautiful form was a real ornament to a feast. Cæsar for that matter had long since ceased to count with any appearances in his choice of company. At his table the most varied medley of people of every position and calling found places. Among them were senators, but mainly those who were content to be jesters as well. There were patricians, old and young, eager for luxury, excess, and enjoyment. There were women with great names, who did not hesitate to put on a yellow wig of an evening and seek adventures on dark streets for amusement's sake. There were also high

officials, and priests who at full goblets were willing to jeer at their own gods. At the side of these was a rabble of every sort: singers, mimes, musicians, dancers of both sexes; poets who, while declaiming, were thinking of the sesterces which might fall to them for praise of Cæsar's verses; hungry philosophers following the dishes with eager eyes; finally, noted charioteers, tricksters, miracle-wrights, tale-tellers, jesters, and the most varied adventurers brought through fashion or folly to a few days' notoriety. Among these were not lacking even men who covered with long hair their ears pierced in sign of slavery.

The most noted sat directly at the tables; the lesser served to amuse in time of eating, and waited for the moment in which the servants would permit them to rush at the remnants of food and drink. Guests of this sort were furnished by Tigellinus, Vatinius, and Vitellius; for these guests they were forced more than once to find clothing befitting the chambers of Cæsar, who, however, liked their society, through feeling most free in it. The luxury of the court gilded everything, and covered all things with glitter. High and low, the descendants of great families, and the needy from the pavements of the city, great artists, and vile scrapings of talent, thronged to the palace to sate their dazzled eyes with a splendor almost surpassing human estimate, and to approach the giver of every favor, wealth, and property, — whose single glance might abase, it is true, but might also exalt beyond measure.

That day Lygia too had to take part in such a feast. Fear, uncertainty, and a dazed feeling, not to be wondered at after the sudden change, were struggling in her with a wish to resist. She feared Nero; she feared the people and the palace whose uproar deprived her of presence of mind; she feared the feasts, of whose shamelessness she had heard from Aulus, Pomponia Græcina, and their friends. Though young, she was not without knowledge, for knowledge of evil in those times reached even children's ears early. She knew, therefore, that ruin was threatening her in the palace. Pomponia, moreover, had warned her of this at the moment of parting. But having a youthful spirit, unacquainted with corruption, and confessing a lofty faith, implanted in her by her foster mother, she had promised to defend herself against that ruin; she had promised her mother, herself, and also that Divine Teacher in whom she not only believed, but whom she had come to love with her half-childlike heart

for the sweetness of his doctrine, the bitterness of his death, and the glory of his resurrection.

She was confident too that now neither Aulus nor Pomponia would be answerable for her actions; she was thinking therefore whether it would not be better to resist and not go to the feast. On the one hand fear and alarm spoke audibly in her soul; on the other the wish rose in her to show courage in suffering, in exposure to torture and death. The Divine Teacher had commanded to act thus. He had given the example himself. Pomponia had told her that the most earnest among the adherents desire with all their souls such a test, and pray for it. And Lygia, when still in the house of Aulus, had been mastered at moments by a similar desire. She had seen herself as a martyr, with wounds on her feet and hands, white as snow, beautiful with a beauty not of earth, and borne by equally white angels into the azure sky; and her imagination admired such a vision. There was in it much childish brooding, but there was in it also something of delight in herself, which Pomponia had reprimanded. But now, when opposition to Cæsar's will might draw after it some terrible punishment, and the martyrdom scene of imagination become a reality, there was added to the beautiful visions and to the delight a kind of curiosity mingled with dread, as to how they would punish her, and what kind of torments they would provide. And her soul, half childish yet, was hesitating on two sides. But Acte, hearing of these hesitations, looked at her with astonishment as if the maiden were talking in a fever. To oppose Cæsar's will, expose oneself from the first moment to his anger? To act thus one would need to be a child that knows not what it says. From Lygia's own words it appears that she is, properly speaking, not really a hostage, but a maiden forgotten by her own people. No law of nations protects her; and even if it did, Cæsar is powerful enough to trample on it in a moment of anger. It has pleased Cæsar to take her, and he will dispose of her. Thenceforth she is at his will, above which there is not another on earth.

"So it is," continued Acte. "I too have read the letters of Paul of Tarsus, and I know that above the earth is God, and the Son of God, who rose from the dead; but on the earth there is only Cæsar. Think of this, Lygia. I know too that thy doctrine does not permit thee to be what I was, and that to you as to the Stoics, — of whom Epictetus has

told me, — when it comes to a choice between shame and death, it is permitted to choose only death. But canst thou say that death awaits thee and not shame too? Hast thou heard of the daughter of Sejanus, a young maiden, who at command of Tiberius had to pass through shame before her death, so as to respect a law which prohibits the punishment of virgins with death? Lygia, Lygia, do not irritate Cæsar. If the decisive moment comes when thou must choose between disgrace and death, thou wilt act as thy faith commands; but seek not destruction thyself, and do not irritate for a trivial cause an earthly and at the same time a cruel divinity."

Acte spoke with great compassion, and even with enthusiasm; and being a little short-sighted, she pushed her sweet face up to Lygia's as if wishing to see surely the effect of her words.

But Lygia threw her arms around Acte's neck with childish trustfulness and said, —

"Thou art kind, Acte."

Acte, pleased by the praise and confidence, pressed her to her heart; and then disengaging herself from the arms of the maiden, answered, —

"My happiness has passed and my joy is gone, but I am not wicked."

Then she began to walk with quick steps through the room and to speak to herself, as if in despair.

"No! And he was not wicked. He thought himself good at that time, and he wished to be good. I know that best. All his change came later, when he ceased to love. Others made him what he is — yes, others — and Poppæa."

Here her eyelids filled with tears. Lygia followed her for some time with her blue eyes, and asked at last, —

"Art thou sorry for him, Acte?"

"I am sorry for him!" answered the Grecian, with a low voice.

And again she began to walk, her hands clinched as if in pain, and her face without hope.

"Dost thou love him yet, Acte?" asked Lygia, timidly.

"I love him."

And after a while she added, —

"No one loves him but me."

Silence followed, during which Acte strove to recover her calmness, disturbed by memories; and when at length her face resumed its usual look of calm sorrow, she said, —

"Let us speak of thee, Lygia. Do not even think of opposing Cæsar; that would be madness. And be calm. I know this house well, and I judge that on Cæsar's part nothing threatens thee. If Nero had given command to take thee away for himself, he would not have brought thee to the Palatine. Here Poppæa rules; and Nero, since she bore him a daughter, is more than ever under her influence. No, Nero gave command, it is true, that thou shouldst be at the feast, but he has not seen thee yet; he has not inquired about thee, hence he does not care about thee. Maybe he took thee from Aulus and Pomponia only through anger at them. Petronius wrote me to have care of thee; and since Pomponia too wrote, as thou knowest, maybe they had an understanding. Maybe he did that at her request. If this be true, if he at the request of Pomponia will occupy himself with thee, nothing threatens thee; and who knows if Nero may not send thee back to Aulus at his persuasion? I know not whether Nero loves him over much, but I know that rarely has he the courage to be of an opinion opposite to his."

"Ah, Acte!" answered Lygia; "Petronius was with us before they took me, and my mother was convinced that Nero demanded my surrender at his instigation."

"That would be bad," said Acte. But she stopped for a while, and then said, —

"Perhaps Petronius only said, in Nero's presence at some supper, that he saw a hostage of the Lygians at Aulus's, and Nero, who is jealous of his own power, demanded thee only because hostages belong to Cæsar. But he does not like Aulus and Pomponia. No! it does not seem to me that if Petronius wished to take thee from Aulus he would use such a method. I do not know whether Petronius is better than others of Cæsar's court, but he is different. Maybe too thou wilt find some one else who would be willing to intercede for thee. Hast thou not seen at Aulus's some one who is near Cæsar?"

"I have seen Vespasian and Titus."

"Cæsar does not like them."

"And Seneca."

"If Seneca advised something, that would be enough to make Nero act otherwise."

The bright face of Lygia was covered with a blush.

"And Vinicius —"

"I do not know him."

"He is a relative of Petronius, and returned not long since from Armenia."

"Dost thou think that Nero likes him?"

"All like Vinicius."

"And would he intercede for thee?"

"He would."

Acte smiled tenderly, and said, "Then thou wilt see him surely at the feast. Thou must be there, first, because thou must, — only such a child as thou could think otherwise. Second, if thou wish to return to the house of Aulus, thou wilt find means of beseeching Petronius and Vinicius to gain for thee by their influence the right to return. If they were here, both would tell thee as I do, that it would be madness and ruin to try resistance. Cæsar might not notice thy absence, it is true; but if he noticed it and thought that thou hadst the daring to oppose his will, there would be no salvation for thee. Go, Lygia! Dost thou hear the noise in the palace? The sun is near setting; guests will begin to arrive soon."

"Thou art right," answered Lygia, "and I will follow thy advice."

How much desire to see Vinicius and Petronius there was in this resolve, how much of woman's curiosity there was to see such a feast once in life, and to see at it Cæsar, the court, the renowned Poppæa and other beauties, and all that unheard-of splendor, of which wonders were narrated in Rome, Lygia could not give account to herself of a certainty. But Acte was right, and Lygia felt this distinctly. There was need to go; therefore, when necessity and simple reason supported the hidden temptation, she ceased to hesitate.

Acte conducted her to her own unctorium to anoint and dress her; and though there was no lack of slave women in Cæsar's house, and Acte had enough of them for her personal service, still, through sympathy for the maiden whose beauty and innocence had caught her heart, she resolved to dress her herself. It became clear at once that in the young Grecian, in spite of her sadness and her perusal of the letters of Paul of Tarsus, there was yet much of the ancient Hellenic spirit, to which physical beauty spoke with more eloquence than aught else on earth. When she had undressed Lygia, she could not restrain an exclamation of wonder at sight of her form, at once slender and full, created, as it were, from pearl and roses; and stepping back a few

paces, she looked with delight on that matchless, spring-like form.

"Lygia," exclaimed she at last, "thou art a hundred times more beautiful than Poppæa!"

But, reared in the strict house of Pomponia, where modesty was observed, even when women were by themselves, the maiden, wonderful as a wonderful dream, harmonious as a work of Praxiteles or as a song, stood alarmed, blushing from modesty, with knees pressed together, with her hands on her bosom, and downcast eyes. At last, raising her arms with sudden movement, she removed the pins which held her hair, and in one moment, with one shake of her head, she covered herself with it as with a mantle.

Acte, approaching her and touching her dark tresses, said, —

"Oh, what hair thou hast! I will not sprinkle golden powder on it; it gleams of itself in one place and another with gold, where it waves. I will add, perhaps, barely a sprinkle here and there; but lightly, lightly, as if a sun ray had freshened it. Wonderful must thy Lygian country be where such maidens are born!"

"I do not remember it," answered Lygia; "but Ursus has told me that with us it is forests, forests, and forests."

"But flowers bloom in those forests," said Acte, dipping her hand in a vase filled with verbena, and moistening Lygia's hair with it. When she had finished this work, Acte anointed her body lightly with odoriferous oils from Arabia, and then dressed her in a soft gold-colored tunic without sleeves, over which was to be put a snow-white peplus. But since she had to dress Lygia's hair first, she put on her meanwhile a kind of roomy dress called synthesis, and, seating her in an armchair, gave her for a time into the hands of slave women, so as to stand at a distance herself and follow the hair-dressing. Two other slave women put on Lygia's feet white sandals, embroidered with purple, fastening them to her alabaster ankles with golden lacings drawn crosswise. When at last the hair-dressing was finished, they put a peplus on her in very beautiful, light folds; then Acte fastened pearls to her neck, and touching her hair at the folds with gold dust, gave command to the women to dress her, following Lygia with delighted eyes meanwhile.

But she was ready soon; and when the first litters began to appear before the main gate, both entered the side por-

tico from which were visible the chief entrance, the interior galleries, and the courtyard surrounded by a colonnade of Numidian marble.

Gradually people passed in greater and greater numbers under the lofty arch of the entrance, over which the splendid quadrigæ of Lysias seemed to bear Apollo and Diana into space. Lygia's eyes were struck by that magnificence, of which the modest house of Aulus could not have given her the slightest idea. It was sunset; the last rays were falling on the yellow Numidian marble of the columns, which shone like gold in those gleams and changed into rose color also. Among the columns, at the side of white statues of the Danaïdes and others, representing gods or heroes, crowds of people flowed past, — men and women; resembling statues also, for they were draped in togas, pepluses, and robes, falling with grace and beauty toward the earth in soft folds, on which the rays of the setting sun were expiring. A gigantic Hercules, with head in the light yet, from the breast down sunk in shadow cast by the columns, looked from above on that throng. Acte showed Lygia senators in wide-bordered togas, in colored tunics, in sandals with crescents on them, and knights, and famed artists; she showed her Roman ladies, in Roman, in Grecian, in fantastic Oriental costume, with hair dressed in towers or pyramids, or dressed like that of the statues of goddesses, low on the head, and adorned with flowers. Many men and women did Acte call by name, adding to their names histories, brief and sometimes terrible, which pierced Lygia with fear, amazement, and wonder. For her this was a strange world, whose beauty intoxicated her eyes, but whose contrasts her girlish understanding could not grasp. In those twilights of the sky, in those rows of motionless columns vanishing in the distance, and in those statuesque people, there was a certain lofty repose. It seemed that in the midst of those marbles of simple lines demigods might live free of care, at peace and in happiness. Meanwhile the low voice of Acte disclosed, time after time, a new and dreadful secret of that palace and those people. See, there at a distance is the covered portico on whose columns and floor are still visible red stains from the blood with which Caligula sprinkled the white marble when he fell beneath the knife of Cassius Chærea; there his wife was slain; there his child was dashed against a stone; under that wing is the dungeon in which the younger Drusus gnawed his hands from hunger;

there the elder Drusus was poisoned; there Gemellus quivered in terror, and Claudius in convulsions; there Germanicus suffered, — everywhere those walls had heard the groans and death-rattle of the dying; and those people hurrying now to the feast in togas, in colored tunics, in flowers, and in jewels, may be the condemned of to-morrow; on more than one face, perhaps, a smile conceals terror, alarm, the uncertainty of the next day; perhaps feverishness, greed, envy are gnawing at this moment into the hearts of those crowned demigods, who in appearance are free of care. Lygia's frightened thoughts could not keep pace with Acte's words; and when that wonderful world attracted her eyes with increasing force, her heart contracted within her from fear, and in her soul she struggled with an immense, inexpressible yearning for the beloved Pomponia Græcina, and the calm house of Aulus, in which love, and not crime, was the ruling power.

Meanwhile new waves of guests were flowing in from the Vicus Apollinis. From beyond the gates came the uproar and shouts of clients, escorting their patrons. The courtyard and the colonnades were swarming with the multitude of Cæsar's slaves, of both sexes, small boys, and pretorian soldiers, who kept guard in the palace. Here and there among dark or swarthy visages was the black face of a Numidian, in a feathered helmet, and with large gold rings in his ears. Some were bearing lutes and citharas, hand lamps of gold, silver, and bronze, and bunches of flowers, reared artificially despite the late autumn season. Louder and louder the sound of conversation was mingled with the plashing of the fountain, the rosy streams of which fell from above on the marble and were broken, as if in sobs.

Acte had stopped her narration; but Lygia gazed at the throng, as if searching for some one. All at once her face was covered with a blush, and from among the columns came forth Vinicius with Petronius. They went to the great triclinium, beautiful, calm, like white gods, in their togas. It seemed to Lygia, when she saw those two known and friendly faces among strange people, and especially when she saw Vinicius, that a great weight had fallen from her heart. She felt less alone. That measureless yearning for Pomponia and the house of Aulus, which had broken out in her a little while before, ceased at once to be painful. The desire to see Vinicius and to talk with him drowned in her other voices. In vain did she remember all the evil

which she had heard of the house of Cæsar, the words of Acte, the warnings of Pomponia; in spite of those words and warnings, she felt all at once that not only must she be at that feast, but that she wished to be there. At the thought that soon she would hear that dear and pleasant voice, which had spoken of love to her and of happiness worthy of the gods, and which was sounding like a song in her ears yet, delight seized her straightway.

But the next moment she feared that delight. It seemed to her that she would be false to the pure teaching in which she had been reared, false to Pomponia, and false to herself. It is one thing to go by constraint, and another to delight in such a necessity. She felt guilty, unworthy, and ruined. Despair swept her away, and she wanted to weep. Had she been alone, she would have knelt down and beaten her breast, saying, "Mea culpa! mea culpa!" Acte, taking her hand at that moment, led her through the interior apartments to the grand triclinium, where the feast was to be. Darkness was in her eyes, and a roaring in her ears from internal emotion; the beating of her heart stopped her breath. As in a dream, she saw thousands of lamps gleaming on the tables and on the walls; as in a dream, she heard the shout with which the guests greeted Cæsar; as through a mist, she saw Cæsar himself. The shout deafened her, the glitter dazzled, the odors intoxicated; and, losing the remnant of her consciousness, she was barely able to recognize Acte, who seated her at the table and took a place at her side.

But after a while a low and known voice was heard at the other side, —

"A greeting, most beautiful of maidens on earth and of stars in heaven. A greeting to thee, divine Callina!"

Lygia, having recovered somewhat, looked up; at her side was Vinicius.

He was without a toga, for convenience and custom had enjoined to cast aside the toga at feasts. His body was covered with only a sleeveless scarlet tunic embroidered in silver palms. His bare arms were ornamented in Eastern fashion with two broad golden bands fastened above the elbow; below they were carefully stripped of hair. They were smooth, but too muscular, — real arms of a soldier, they were made for the sword and the shield. On his head was a garland of roses. With brows joining above the nose, with splendid eyes and a dark complexion, he was

the impersonation of youth and strength, as it were. To Lygia he seemed so beautiful that though her first amazement had passed, she was barely able to answer, —

“A greeting, Marcus.”

“Happy,” said he, “are my eyes, which see thee; happy my ears, which hear thy voice, dearer to me than the sound of lutes or citharas. Were it commanded me to choose who was to rest here by my side at this feast, thou, Lygia, or Venus, I would choose thee, divine one!”

And he looked at the maiden as if he wished to sate himself with the sight of her, to burn her eyes with his eyes. His glance slipped from her face to her neck and bare arms, fondled her shapely outlines, admired her, embraced her, devoured her; but besides desire, there was gleaming in him happiness, admiration, and ecstasy beyond limit.

“I knew that I should see thee in Cæsar’s house,” continued he; “but still, when I saw thee, such delight shook my whole soul, as if a happiness entirely unexpected had met me.”

Lygia, having recovered herself and feeling that in that throng and in that house he was the only being who was near to her, began to converse with him, and ask about everything which she did not understand and which filled her with fear. Whence did he know that he would find her in Cæsar’s house? Why is she there? Why did Cæsar take her from Pomponia? She is full of fear where she is, and wishes to return to Pomponia. She would die from alarm and grief were it not for the hope that Petronius and he will intercede for her before Cæsar.

Vinicius explained that he learned from Aulus himself that she had been taken. Why she is there, he knows not. Cæsar gives account to no one of his orders and commands. But let her not fear. He, Vinicius, is near her and will stay near her. He would rather lose his eyes than not see her; he would rather lose his life than desert her. She is his soul, and hence he will guard her as his soul. In his house he will build to her, as to a divinity, an altar on which he will offer myrrh and aloes, and in spring saffron and apple-blossoms; and since she has a dread of Cæsar’s house, he promises that she shall not stay in it.

And though he spoke evasively and at times invented, truth was to be felt in his voice, because his feelings were real. Genuine pity possessed him, too, and her words went to his soul so thoroughly that when she began to thank him

and assure him that Pomponia would love him for his goodness, and that she herself would be grateful to him all her life, he could not master his emotion, and it seemed to him that he would never be able in life to resist her prayer. The heart began to melt in him. Her beauty intoxicated his senses, and he desired her; but at the same time he felt that she was very dear to him, and that in truth he might do homage to her, as to a divinity; he felt also irresistible need of speaking of her beauty and of his own homage. As the noise at the feast increased, he drew nearer to her, whispered kind, sweet words flowing from the depth of his soul, words as resonant as music and intoxicating as wine.

And he intoxicated her. Amid those strange people he seemed to her ever nearer, ever dearer, altogether true, and devoted with his whole soul. He pacified her; he promised to rescue her from the house of Cæsar; he promised not to desert her, and said that he would serve her. Besides, he had spoken before at Aulus’s only in general about love and the happiness which it can give; but now he said directly that he loved her, and that she was dear and most precious to him. Lygia heard such words from a man’s lips for the first time; and as she heard them it seemed to her that something was wakening in her as from a sleep, that some species of happiness was embracing her in which immense delight was mingled with immense alarm. Her cheeks began to burn, her heart to beat, her mouth opened as if in wonder. She was seized with fear because she was listening to such things, still she did not wish for any cause on earth to lose one word. At moments she dropped her eyes; then again she raised her clear glance to Vinicius, timid and also inquiring, as if she wished to say to him, “Speak on!” The sound of the music, the odor of flowers and of Arabian perfumes, began to daze her. In Rome it was the custom to recline at banquets, but at home Lygia occupied a place between Pomponia and little Aulus. Now Vinicius was reclining near her, youthful, immense, in love, burning; and she, feeling the heat that issued from him, felt both delight and shame. A kind of sweet weakness, a kind of faintness and forgetfulness seized her; it was as if drowsiness tortured her.

But her nearness to him began to act on Vinicius also. His nostrils dilated, like those of an Eastern steed. The beating of his heart with unusual throb was evident under his scarlet tunic; his breathing grew short, and the expres-

sions that fell from his lips were broken. For the first time, too, he was so near her. His thoughts grew disturbed; he felt a flame in his veins which he tried in vain to quench with wine. Not wine, but her marvellous face, her bare arms, her maiden breast heaving under the golden tunic, and her form hidden in the white folds of the peplus, intoxicated him more and more. Finally, he seized her arm above the wrist, as he had done once at Aulus's, and drawing her toward him whispered, with trembling lips, —

"I love thee, Callina, — divine one."

"Let me go, Marcus," said Lygia.

But he continued, his eyes mist-covered, "Love me, my goddess!"

But at that moment was heard the voice of Acte, who was reclining on the other side of Lygia.

"Cæsar is looking at you both."

Vinicius was carried away by sudden anger at Cæsar and at Acte. Her words had broken the charm of his intoxication. To the young man even a friendly voice would have seemed repulsive at such a moment; but he judged that Acte wished purposely to interrupt his conversation with Lygia. So, raising his head and looking over the shoulder of Lygia at the young freedwoman, he said with malice:

"The hour has passed, Acte, when thou didst recline near Cæsar's side at banquets, and they say that blindness is threatening thee; how then canst thou see him?"

But she answered as if in sadness: "Still I see him. He, too, has short sight, and is looking at thee through an emerald."

Everything that Nero did roused attention, even in those nearest him; hence Vinicius was alarmed. He regained self-control, and began imperceptibly to look toward Cæsar. Lygia, who, embarrassed at the beginning of the banquet, had seen Nero as in a mist, and afterward, occupied by the presence and conversation of Vinicius, had not looked at him at all, turned to him eyes at once curious and terrified.

Acte spoke truly. Cæsar had bent over the table, half-closed one eye, and holding before the other a round polished emerald, which he used, was looking at them. For a moment his glance met Lygia's eyes, and the heart of the maiden was straitened with terror. When still a child on Aulus's Sicilian estate, an old Egyptian slave had told her of dragons which occupied dens in the mountains, and it seemed to her now that all at once the greenish eye of such

a monster was gazing at her. She caught at Vinicius's hand as a frightened child would, and disconnected, quick impressions pressed into her head; Was not that he, the terrible, the all-powerful? She had not seen him hitherto, and she thought that he looked differently. She had imagined some kind of ghastly face, with malignity petrified in its features; now she saw a great head, fixed on a thick neck, terrible, it is true, but almost ridiculous, for from a distance it resembled the head of a child. A tunic of amethyst color, forbidden to ordinary mortals, cast a bluish tinge on his broad and short face. He had dark hair, dressed, in the fashion introduced by Otho, in four curls. He had no beard, because he had sacrificed it recently to Jove, — for which all Rome gave him thanks, though people whispered to each other that he had sacrificed it because his beard, like that of his whole family, was red. In his forehead, projecting strongly above his brows, there remained something Olympian. In his contracted brows the consciousness of supreme power was evident; but under that forehead of a demigod was the face of a monkey, a drunkard, and a comedian, — vain, full of changing desires, swollen with fat, notwithstanding his youth; besides, it was sickly and foul. To Lygia he seemed ominous, but above all repulsive.

After a while he laid down the emerald and ceased to look at her. Then she saw his prominent blue eyes, blinking before the excess of light, glassy, without thought, resembling the eyes of the dead.

"Is that the hostage with whom Vinicius is in love?" asked he, turning to Petronius.

"That is she," answered Petronius.

"What are her people called?"

"The Lygians."

"Does Vinicius think her beautiful?"

"Array a rotten olive trunk in the peplus of a woman, and Vinicius will declare it beautiful. But on thy countenance, incomparable judge, I read her sentence already. Thou hast no need to pronounce it! The sentence is true: she is too dry, thin, a mere blossom on a slender stalk; and thou, O divine æsthete, esteemest the stalk in a woman. Thrice and four times art thou right! The face alone does not signify. I have learned much in thy company, but even now I have not a perfect cast of the eye. But I am ready to lay a wager with Tullius Senecio concerning his mistress, that, although at a feast, when all are reclining, it is difficult

to judge the whole form, thou hast said in thy mind already, 'Too narrow in the hips.'

"Too narrow in the hips," answered Nero, blinking.

On Petronius's lips appeared a scarcely perceptible smile; but Tullius Senecio, who till that moment was occupied in conversing with Vestinius, or rather in reviling dreams, while Vestinius believed in them, turned to Petronius, and though he had not the least idea touching that of which they were talking, he said, —

"Thou art mistaken! I hold with Cæsar."

"Very well," answered Petronius. "I have just maintained that thou hast a glimmer of understanding, but Cæsar insists that thou art an ass pure and simple."

"*Habet!*" said Cæsar, laughing, and turning down the thumb, as was done in the circus, in sign that the gladiator had received a blow and was to be finished.

But Vestinius, thinking that the question was of dreams, exclaimed, —

"But I believe in dreams, and Seneca told me on a time that he believes too."

"Last night I dreamt that I had become a vestal virgin," said Calvia Crispinilla, bending over the table.

At this Nero clapped his hands, others followed, and in a moment clapping of hands was heard all around, — for Crispinilla had been divorced a number of times, and was known throughout Rome for her fabulous debauchery.

But she, not disconcerted in the least, said, —

"Well! They are all old and ugly. Rubria alone has a human semblance, and so there would be two of us, though Rubria gets freckles in summer."

"But admit, purest Calvia," said Petronius, "that thou couldst become a vestal only in dreams."

"But if Cæsar commanded?"

"I should believe that even the most impossible dreams might come true."

"But they do come true," said Vestinius. "I understand those who do not believe in the gods, but how is it possible not to believe in dreams?"

"But predictions?" inquired Nero. "It was predicted once to me, that Rome would cease to exist, and that I should rule the whole Orient."

"Predictions and dreams are connected," said Vestinius. "Once a certain proconsul, a great disbeliever, sent a slave to the temple of Mopsus with a sealed letter which he would

not let any one open; he did this to try if the god could answer the question contained in the letter. The slave slept a night in the temple to have a prophetic dream; he returned then and said: 'I saw a youth in my dreams; he was as bright as the sun, and spoke only one word, "Black."' The proconsul, when he heard this, grew pale, and turning to his guests, disbelievers like himself, said: 'Do ye know what was in the letter?'" Here Vestinius stopped, and, raising his goblet with wine, began to drink.

"What was in the letter?" asked Senecio.

"In the letter was the question: 'What is the color of the bull which I am to sacrifice: white or black?'"

But the interest roused by the narrative was interrupted by Vitellius, who, drunk when he came to the feast, burst forth on a sudden and without cause in senseless laughter.

"What is that keg of tallow laughing at?" asked Nero.

"Laughter distinguishes men from animals," said Petronius, "and he has no other proof that he is not a wild boar."

Vitellius stopped half-way in his laughter, and smacking his lips, shining from fat and sauces, looked at those present with as much astonishment as if he had never seen them before; then he raised his two hands, which were like cushions, and said in a hoarse voice, —

"The ring of a knight has fallen from my finger, and it was inherited from my father."

"Who was a tailor," added Nero.

But Vitellius burst forth again in unexpected laughter, and began to search for his ring in the peplus of Calvia Crispinilla.

Hereupon Vestinius fell to imitating the cries of a frightened woman. Nigidia, a friend of Calvia, — a young widow with the face of a child and the eyes of a wanton, — said aloud, —

"He is seeking what he has not lost."

"And which will be useless to him if he finds it," finished the poet Lucan.

The feast grew more animated. Crowds of slaves bore around successive courses; from great vases filled with snow and garlanded with ivy, smaller vessels with various kinds of wine were brought forth unceasingly. All drank freely. On the guests, roses fell from the ceiling at intervals.

Petronius entreated Nero to dignify the feast with his song before the guests drank too deeply. A chorus of voices

supported his words, but Nero refused at first. It was not a question of courage alone, he said, though that failed him always. The gods knew what efforts every success cost him. He did not avoid them, however, for it was needful to do something for art; and besides, if Apollo had gifted him with a certain voice, it was not proper to let divine gifts be wasted. He understood, even, that it was his duty to the State not to let them be wasted. But that day he was really hoarse. In the night he had placed leaden weights on his chest, but that had not helped in any way. He was thinking even to go to Antium, to breathe the sea air.

Lucan implored him in the name of art and humanity. All knew that the divine poet and singer had composed a new hymn to Venus, compared with which Lucretius's hymn was as the howl of a yearling wolf. Let that feast be a genuine feast. So kind a ruler should not cause such tortures to his subjects. "Be not cruel, O Cæsar!"

"Be not cruel!" repeated all who were sitting near.

Nero spread his hands in sign that he had to yield. All faces assumed then an expression of gratitude, and all eyes were turned to him; but he gave command first to announce to Poppæa that he would sing; he informed those present that she had not come to the feast, because she did not feel in good health; but since no medicine gave her such relief as his singing, he would be sorry to deprive her of this opportunity.

In fact, Poppæa came soon. Hitherto she had ruled Nero as if he had been her subject, but she knew that when his vanity as a singer, a charioteer, or a poet was involved, there was danger in provoking it. She came in therefore, beautiful as a divinity, arrayed, like Nero, in robes of amethyst color, and wearing a necklace of immense pearls, stolen on a time from Massinissa; she was golden-haired, sweet, and though divorced from two husbands she had the face and the look of a virgin.

She was greeted with shouts, and the appellation "Divine Augusta." Lygia had never seen any one so beautiful, and she could not believe her own eyes, for she knew that Poppæa Sabina was one of the vilest women on earth. She knew from Pomponia that she had brought Cæsar to murder his mother and his wife; she knew her from accounts given by Aulus's guests and the servants; she had heard that statues to her had been thrown down at night in the city; she had heard of inscriptions, the writers of which had been

condemned to severest punishment, but which still appeared on the city walls every morning. Yet at sight of the notorious Poppæa, considered by the confessors of Christ as crime and evil incarnate, it seemed to her that angels or spirits of heaven might look like her. She was unable simply to take her eyes from Poppæa; and from her lips was wrested involuntarily the question, —

"Ah, Marcus, can it be possible?"

But he, roused by wine, and as it were impatient that so many things had scattered her attention, and taken her from him and his words, said, —

"Yes, she is beautiful, but thou art a hundred times more beautiful. Thou dost not know thyself, or thou wouldst be in love with thyself, as Narcissus was; she bathes in asses' milk, but Venus bathed thee in her own milk. Thou dost not know thyself, Ocelle mi! Look not at her. Turn thy eyes to me, Ocelle mi! Touch this goblet of wine with thy lips, and I will put mine on the same place."

And he pushed up nearer and nearer, and she began to withdraw toward Acte. But at that moment silence was enjoined because Cæsar had risen. The singer Diodorus had given him a lute of the kind called delta; another singer named Terpnos, who had to accompany him in playing, approached with an instrument called the nablium. Nero, resting the delta on the table, raised his eyes; and for a moment silence reigned in the triclinium, broken only by a rustle, as roses fell from the ceiling.

Then he began to chant, or rather to declaim, singingly and rhythmically, to the accompaniment of the two lutes, his own hymn to Venus. Neither the voice, though somewhat injured, nor the verses were bad, so that reproaches of conscience took possession of Lygia again; for the hymn, though glorifying the impure pagan Venus, seemed to her more than beautiful, and Cæsar himself, with a laurel crown on his head and uplifted eyes, nobler, much less terrible, and less repulsive than at the beginning of the feast.

The guests answered with a thunder of applause. Cries of, "Oh, heavenly voice!" were heard round about; some of the women raised their hands, and held them thus, as a sign of delight, even after the end of the hymn; others wiped their tearful eyes; the whole hall was seething as in a beehive. Poppæa, bending her golden-haired head, raised Nero's hand to her lips, and held it long in silence. Pythagoras, a young Greek of marvellous beauty, — the same to

whom later the half-insane Nero commanded the flamens to marry him, with the observance of all rites, — knelt now at his feet.

But Nero looked carefully at Petronius, whose praises were desired by him always before every other, and who said, —

“If it is a question of music, Orpheus must at this moment be as yellow from envy as Lucan, who is here present; and as to the verses, I am sorry that they are not worse; if they were I might find proper words to praise them.”

Lucan did not take the mention of envy evil of him; on the contrary, he looked at Petronius with gratitude, and, affecting ill-humor, began to murmur, —

“Cursed fate, which commanded me to live contemporary with such a poet. One might have a place in the memory of man, and on Parnassus; but now one will quench, as a candle in sunlight.”

Petronius, who had an amazing memory, began to repeat extracts from the hymn and cite single verses, exalt, and analyze the more beautiful expressions. Lucan, forgetting as it were his envy before the charm of the poetry, joined his ecstacy to Petronius's words. On Nero's face were reflected delight and fathomless vanity, not only nearing stupidity, but reaching it perfectly. He indicated to them verses which he considered the most beautiful; and finally he began to comfort Lucan, and tell him not to lose heart, for though whatever a man is born that he is, the honor which people give Jove does not exclude respect for other divinities.

Then he rose to conduct Poppæa, who, being really in ill health, wished to withdraw. But he commanded the guests who remained to occupy their places anew, and promised to return. In fact, he returned a little later, to stupefy himself with the smoke of incense, and gaze at further spectacles which he himself, Petronius, or Tigellinus had prepared for the feast.

Again verses were read or dialogues listened to in which extravagance took the place of wit. After that Paris, the celebrated mime, represented the adventures of Io, the daughter of Inachus. To the guests, and especially to Lygia, unaccustomed to such scenes, it seemed that they were gazing at miracles and enchantment. Paris, with motions of his hands and body, was able to express things apparently impossible in a dance. His hands dimmed the

air, creating a cloud, bright, living, quivering, voluptuous, surrounding the half-fainting form of a maiden shaken by a spasm of delight. That was a picture, not a dance; an expressive picture, disclosing the secrets of love, bewitching and shameless; and when at the end of it Corybantes rushed in and began a bacchic dance with girls of Syria to the sounds of cithara, lutes, drums, and cymbals, — a dance filled with wild shouts and still wilder license, — it seemed to Lygia that living fire was burning her, and that a thunderbolt ought to strike that house, or the ceiling fall on the heads of those feasting there.

But from the golden net fastened to the ceiling only roses fell, and the now half-drunken Vinicius said to her, —

“I saw thee in the house of Aulus, at the fountain. It was daylight, and thou didst think that no one saw thee; but I saw thee. And I see thee thus yet, though that peplus hides thee. Cast aside the peplus, like Crispinilla. See, gods and men seek love. There is nothing in the world but love. Lay thy head on my breast and close thy eyes.”

The pulse beat oppressively in Lygia's hands and temples. A feeling seized her that she was flying into some abyss, and that Vinicius, who before had seemed so near and so trustworthy, instead of saving was drawing her toward it. And she felt sorry for him. She began again to dread the feast and him and herself. Some voice, like that of Popponia, was calling yet in her soul, “O Lygia, save thyself!” But something told her also that it was too late; that the one whom such a flame had embraced as that which had embraced her, the one who had seen what was done at that feast and whose heart had beaten as hers had on hearing the words of Vinicius, the one through whom such a shiver had passed as had passed through her when he approached, was lost beyond recovery. She grew weak. It seemed at moments to her that she would faint, and then something terrible would happen. She knew that, under penalty of Cæsar's anger, it was not permitted any one to rise till Cæsar rose; but even were that not the case, she had not strength now to rise.

Meanwhile it was far to the end of the feast yet. Slaves brought new courses, and filled the goblets unceasingly with wine; before the table, on a platform open at one side, appeared two athletes to give the guests a spectacle of wrestling.

They began the struggle at once, and the powerful bodies, shining from olive oil, formed one mass; bones cracked in their iron arms, and from their set jaws came an ominous gritting of teeth. At moments was heard the quick, dull thump of their feet on the platform strewn with saffron; again they were motionless, silent, and it seemed to the spectators that they had before them a group chiselled out of stone. Roman eyes followed with delight the movement of tremendously exerted backs, thighs, and arms. But the struggle was not too prolonged; for Croton, a master, and the founder of a school of gladiators, did not pass in vain for the strongest man in the empire. His opponent began to breathe more and more quickly: next a rattle was heard in his throat; then his face grew blue; finally he threw blood from his mouth and fell.

A thunder of applause greeted the end of the struggle, and Croton, resting his foot on the breast of his opponent, crossed his gigantic arms on his breast, and cast the eyes of a victor around the hall.

Next appeared men who mimicked beasts and their voices, ball-players and buffoons. Only a few persons looked at them, however, since wine had darkened the eyes of the audience. The feast passed by degrees into a drunken revel and a dissolute orgy. The Syrian damsels, who appeared at first in the bacchic dance, mingled now with the guests. The music changed into a disordered and wild outburst of citharas, lutes, Armenian cymbals, Egyptian sistra, trumpets, and horns. As some of the guests wished to talk, they shouted at the musicians to disappear. The air, filled with the odor of flowers and the perfume of oils with which beautiful boys had sprinkled the feet of the guests during the feast, permeated with saffron and the exhalations of people, became stifling; lamps burned with a dim flame; the wreaths dropped sidewise on the heads of guests; faces grew pale and were covered with sweat. Vitellius rolled under the table. Nigidia, stripping herself to the waist, dropped her drunken childlike head on the breast of Lucan, who, drunk in like degree, fell to blowing the golden powder from her hair, and raising his eyes with immense delight. Vestinius, with the stubbornness of intoxication, repeated for the tenth time the answer of Mopsus to the sealed letter of the proconsul. Tullius, who reviled the gods, said, with a drawling voice broken by hiccoughs, —

“If the spheroid of Xenophanes is round, then consider,

such a god might be pushed along before one with the foot, like a barrel.”

But Domitius Afer, a hardened criminal and informer, was indignant at the discourse, and through indignation spilled Falernian over his whole tunic. He had always believed in the gods. People say that Rome will perish, and there are some even who contend that it is perishing already. And surely! But if that should come, it is because the youth are without faith, and without faith there can be no virtue. People have abandoned also the strict habits of former days, and it never occurs to them that Epicureans will not stand against barbarians. As for him, he — As for him, he was sorry that he had lived to such times, and that he must seek in pleasures a refuge against griefs which, if not met, would soon kill him.

When he had said this, he drew toward him a Syrian dancer, and kissed her neck and shoulders with his toothless mouth. Seeing this, the consul Memmius Regulus laughed, and, raising his bald head with wreath awry, exclaimed, —

“Who says that Rome is perishing? What folly! I, a consul, know better. *Videant consules!* Thirty legions are guarding our *pax romana!*”

Here he put his fists to his temples and shouted, in a voice heard throughout the triclinium, —

“Thirty legions! thirty legions! from Britain to the Parthian boundaries!”

But he stopped on a sudden, and, putting a finger to his forehead, said, —

“As I live, I think there are thirty-two.”

He rolled under the table, and began soon to send forth flamingo tongues, roast and chilled mushrooms, locusts in honey, fish, meat, and everything which he had eaten or drunk.

But the number of the legions guarding Roman peace did not pacify Domitius.

No, no! Rome must perish; for faith in the gods was lost, and so were strict habits! Rome must perish; and it was a pity, for still life was pleasant there. Cæsar was gracious, wine was good! Oh, what a pity!

And hiding his head on the arm of a Syrian bacchanal, he burst into tears.

“What is a future life! Achilles was right, — better be a slave in the world beneath the sun than a king in Cimmerian

regions. And still the question whether there are any gods — since it is unbelief — is destroying the youth.”

Lucan meanwhile had blown all the gold powder from Nigidia's hair, and she being drunk had fallen asleep. Next he took wreaths of ivy from the vase before him, put them on the sleeping woman, and when he had finished looked at those present with a delighted and inquiring glance. He arrayed himself in ivy too, repeating, in a voice of deep conviction, “I am not a man at all, but a faun.”

Petronius was not drunk; but Nero, who drank little at first, out of regard for his “heavenly” voice, emptied goblet after goblet toward the end, and was drunk. He wanted even to sing more of his verses, — this time in Greek, — but he had forgotten them, and by mistake sang an ode of Anacreon. Pythagoras, Diodorus, and Terpnos accompanied him; but failing to keep time, they stopped. Nero as a judge and an æsthete was enchanted with the beauty of Pythagoras, and fell to kissing his hands in ecstasy. “Such beautiful hands I have seen only once, and whose were they?” Then placing his palm on his moist forehead, he tried to remember. After a while terror was reflected on his face.

Ah! His mother's — Agrippina's!

And a gloomy vision seized him forthwith.

“They say,” said he, “that she wanders by moonlight on the sea around Baiæ and Bauli. She merely walks, — walks as if seeking for something. When she comes near a boat, she looks at it and goes away; but the fisherman on whom she has fixed her eye dies.”

“Not a bad theme,” said Petronius.

But Vestinius, stretching his neck like a stork, whispered mysteriously, —

“I do not believe in the gods; but I believe in spirits — Oi!”

Nero paid no attention to their words, and continued, —

“I celebrated the Lemuria, and have no wish to see her. This is the fifth year — I had to condemn her, for she sent assassins against me; and, had I not been quicker than she, ye would not be listening to-night to my song.”

“Thanks be to Cæsar, in the name of the city and the world!” cried Domitius Afer.

“Wine! and let them strike the tympani!”

The uproar began anew. Lucan, all in ivy, wishing to outshout him, rose and cried, —

“I am not a man, but a faun; and I dwell in the forest. Eho-o-o-oo!”

Cæsar drank himself drunk at last; men were drunk, and women were drunk. Vinicius was not less drunk than others; and in addition there was roused in him, besides desire, a wish to quarrel, which happened always when he passed the measure. His dark face became paler, and his tongue stuttered when he spoke, in a voice now loud and commanding, —

“Give me thy lips! To-day, to-morrow, it is all one! Enough of this! Cæsar took thee from Aulus to give thee to me, dost understand? To-morrow, about dusk, I will send for thee, dost understand? Cæsar promised thee to me before he took thee. Thou must be mine! Give me thy lips! I will not wait for to-morrow, — give thy lips quickly.”

And he moved to embrace her; but Acte began to defend her, and she defended herself with the remnant of her strength, for she felt that she was perishing. But in vain did she struggle with both hands to remove his hairless arm; in vain, with a voice in which terror and grief were quivering, did she implore him not to be what he was, and to have pity on her. Sated with wine, his breath blew around her nearer and nearer, and his face was there near her face. He was no longer the former kind Vinicius, almost dear to her soul; he was a drunken, wicked satyr, who filled her with repulsion and terror. But her strength deserted her more and more. In vain did she bend and turn away her face to escape his kisses. He rose to his feet, caught her in both arms, and drawing her head to his breast, began, panting, to press her pale lips with his.

But at this instant a tremendous power removed his arms from her neck with as much ease as if they had been the arms of a child, and pushed him aside, like a dried limb or a withered leaf. What had happened? Vinicius rubbed his astonished eyes, and saw before him the gigantic figure of the Lygian, called Ursus, whom he had seen at the house of Aulus.

Ursus stood calmly, but looked at Vinicius so strangely with his blue eyes that the blood stiffened in the veins of the young man; then the giant took his queen on his arm, and walked out of the triclinium with an even, quiet step.

Acte in that moment went after him.

Vinicius sat for the twinkle of an eye as if petrified; then he sprang up and ran toward the entrance crying, —

"Lygia! Lygia!"

But desire, astonishment, rage, and wine cut the legs from under him. He staggered once and a second time, seized the naked arm of one of the bacchanals, and began to inquire, with blinking eyes, what had happened. She, taking a goblet of wine, gave it to him with a smile in her mist-covered eyes.

"Drink!" said she.

Vinicius drank, and fell to the floor.

The greater number of the guests were lying under the table; others were walking with tottering tread through the triclinium, while others were sleeping on couches at the table, snoring, or giving forth the excess of wine. Meanwhile, from the golden network, roses were dropping and dropping on those drunken consuls and senators, on those drunken knights, philosophers, and poets, on those drunken dancing damsels and Patrician ladies, on that society all dominant as yet but with the soul gone from it, on that society garlanded and ungirdled but perishing.

Dawn had begun out of doors.

CHAPTER VIII.

No one stopped Ursus, no one inquired even what he was doing. Those guests who were not under the table had not kept their own places; hence the servants, seeing a giant carrying a guest on his arm, thought him some slave bearing out his intoxicated mistress. Moreover, Acte was with them, and her presence removed all suspicion.

In this way they went from the triclinium to the adjoining chamber, and thence to the gallery leading to Acte's apartments. To such a degree had her strength deserted Lygia, that she hung as if dead on the arm of Ursus. But when the cool, pure breeze of morning beat around her, she opened her eyes. It was growing clearer and clearer in the open air. After they had passed along the colonnade awhile, they turned to a side portico, coming out, not in the courtyard, but the palace gardens, where the tops of the pines and cypresses were growing ruddy from the light of morning. That part of the building was empty, so that echoes of music and sounds of the feast came with decreasing distinctness. It seemed to Lygia that she had been rescued from hell, and borne into God's bright world outside. There was something, then, besides that disgusting triclinium. There was the sky, the dawn, light, and peace. Sudden weeping seized the maiden, and, taking shelter on the arm of the giant, she repeated, with sobbing, —

"Let us go home, Ursus! home, to the house of Aulus."

"Let us go!" answered Ursus.

They found themselves now in the small atrium of Acte's apartments. Ursus placed Lygia on a marble bench at a distance from the fountain. Acte strove to pacify her; she urged her to sleep, and declared that for the moment there was no danger, — after the feast the drunken guests would sleep till evening. For a long time Lygia could not calm herself, and, pressing her temples with both hands, she repeated like a child, —

"Let us go home, to the house of Aulus!"

Ursus was ready. At the gates stood pretorians, it is true, but he would pass them. The soldiers would not stop