

CHAPTER LVI.

THE sun had lowered toward its setting, and seemed to dissolve in the red of the evening. The spectacle was finished. Crowds were leaving the amphitheatre and pouring out to the city through the passages called vomitoria. Only Augustians delayed; they were waiting for the stream of people to pass. They had all left their seats and assembled at the podium, in which Cæsar appeared again to hear praises. Though the spectators had not spared plaudits at the end of the song, Nero was not satisfied; he had looked for enthusiasm touching on frenzy. In vain did hymns of praise sound in his ears; in vain did vestals kiss his "divine" hand, and while doing so Rubria bent till her reddish hair touched his breast. Nero was not satisfied, and could not hide the fact. He was astonished and also disturbed because Petronius was silent. Some flattering and pointed word from his mouth would have been a great consolation at that moment. Unable at last to restrain himself, Cæsar beckoned to the arbiter.

"Speak," said he, when Petronius entered the podium.

"I am silent," answered Petronius, coldly, "for I cannot find words. Thou hast surpassed thyself."

"So it seemed to me too; but still this people—"

"Canst thou expect mongrels to appreciate poetry?"

"But thou too hast noticed that they have not thanked me as I deserve."

"Because thou hast chosen a bad moment."

"How?"

"When men's brains are filled with the odor of blood, they cannot listen attentively."

"Ah, those Christians!" replied Nero, clenching his fists. "They burned Rome, and injure me now in addition. What new punishment shall I invent for them?"

Petronius saw that he had taken the wrong road, that his words had produced an effect the very opposite of what he intended; so, to turn Cæsar's mind in another direction, he bent toward him and whispered,—

"Thy song is marvellous, but I will make one remark: in the fourth line of the third strophe the metre leaves something to be desired."

Nero, blushing with shame, as if caught in a disgraceful deed, had fear in his look, and answered in a whisper also,—

"Thou seest everything. I know. I will re-write that. But no one else noticed it, I think. And do thou, for the love of the gods, mention it to no one,—if life is dear to thee."

To this Petronius answered, as if in an outburst of vexation and anger,—

"Condemn me to death, O divinity, if I deceive thee; but thou wilt not terrify me, for the gods know best of all if I fear death."

And while speaking he looked straight into Cæsar's eyes, who answered after a while,—

"Be not angry; thou knowest that I love thee."

"A bad sign!" thought Petronius.

"I wanted to invite thee to-day to a feast," continued Nero, "but I prefer to shut myself in and polish that cursed line in the third strophe. Besides thee Seneca may have noticed it, and perhaps Secundus Carinas did; but I will rid myself of them quickly."

Then he summoned Seneca, and declared that with Acratus and Secundus Carinas, he sent him to the Italian and all other provinces for money, which he commanded him to obtain from cities, villages, famous temples,—in a word, from every place where it was possible to find money, or from which they could force it. But Seneca, who saw that Cæsar was confiding to him a work of plunder, sacrilege, and robbery, refused straightway.

"I must go to the country, lord," said he, "and await death, for I am old and my nerves are sick."

Seneca's Iberian nerves were stronger than Chilo's; they were not sick, perhaps, but in general his health was bad, for he seemed like a shadow, and recently his hair had grown white altogether.

Nero, too, when he looked at him, thought that he would not have to wait long for the man's death, and answered,—

"I will not expose thee to a journey if thou art ill, but through affection I wish to keep thee near me. Instead of going to the country, then, thou wilt stay in thy own house, and not leave it."

Then he laughed, and said, "If I send Acratus and Carinas by themselves, it will be like sending wolves for sheep. Whom shall I set above them?"

"Me, lord," said Domitius Afer.

"No! I have no wish to draw on Rome the wrath of Mercury, whom ye would put to shame with your villany. I need some stoic like Seneca, or like my new friend, the philosopher Chilo."

Then he looked around, and asked,—

"But what has happened to Chilo?"

Chilo, who had recovered in the open air and returned to the amphitheatre for Cæsar's song, pushed up, and said,—

"I am here, O Radiant Offspring of the sun and moon. I was ill, but thy song has restored me."

"I will send thee to Achæa," said Nero. "Thou must know to a copper how much there is in each temple there."

"Do so, O Zeus, and the gods will give thee such tribute as they have never given any one."

"I would, but I do not like to prevent thee from seeing the games."

"Baal!" said Chilo.

The Augustians, delighted that Cæsar had regained humor, fell to laughing, and exclaimed,—

"No, lord, deprive not this valiant Greek of a sight of the games."

"But preserve me, O lord, from the sight of these noisy geese of the Capitol, whose brains put together would not fill a nutshell," retorted Chilo. "O first-born of Apollo, I am writing a Greek hymn in thy honor, and I wish to spend a few days in the temple of the Muses to implore inspiration."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Nero. "It is thy wish to escape future games. Nothing will come of that!"

"I swear to thee, lord, that I am writing a hymn."

"Then thou wilt write it at night. Beg inspiration of Diana, who, by the way, is a sister of Apollo."

Chilo dropped his head and looked with malice on those present, who began to laugh again. Cæsar, turning to Senecio and Sullius Nerulinus, said,—

"Imagine, of the Christians appointed for to-day we have been able to finish hardly half!"

At this old Aquilus Regulus, who had great knowledge of everything touching the amphitheatre, thought a while, and said,—

"Spectacles in which people appear *sine armis et sine arte* last almost as long and are less entertaining."

"I will command to give them weapons," answered Nero.

But the superstitious Vestinius was roused from meditation at once, and asked in a mysterious voice,—

"Have ye noticed that when dying they see something? They look up, and die as it were without pain. I am sure that they see something."

He raised his eyes then to the opening of the amphitheatre, over which night had begun to extend its velarium dotted with stars. But others answered with laughter and jesting suppositions as to what the Christians could see at the moment of death. Meanwhile Cæsar gave a signal to the slave torch-bearers, and left the Circus; after him followed vestals, senators, dignitaries, and Augustians.

The night was clear and warm. Before the Circus were moving throngs of people, curious to witness the departure of Cæsar; but in some way they were gloomy and silent. Here and there applause was heard, but it ceased quickly. From the spoliarium creaking carts bore away the bloody remnants of Christians.

Petronius and Vinicius passed over their road in silence. Only when near his villa did Petronius inquire,—

"Hast thou thought of what I told thee?"

"I have," answered Vinicius.

"Dost believe that for me too this is a question of the highest importance? I must liberate her in spite of Cæsar and Tigellinus. This is a kind of battle in which I have undertaken to conquer, a kind of play in which I wish to win, even at the cost of my life. This day has confirmed me still more in my plan."

"May Christ reward thee."

"Thou wilt see."

Thus conversing, they stopped at the door of the villa and descended from the litter. At that moment a dark figure approached them, and asked,—

"Is the noble Vinicius here?"

"He is," answered the tribune. "What is thy wish?"

"I am Nazarius, the son of Miriam. I come from the prison, and bring tidings of Lygia."

Vinicius placed his hand on the young man's shoulder and looked into his eyes by the torchlight, without power to speak a word; but Nazarius divined the question which was dying on his lips, and replied,—

"She is living yet. Ursus sent me to say that she prays in her fever, and repeats thy name."

"Praise be to Christ, who has power to restore her to me," said Vinicius.

He conducted Nazarius to the library, and after a while Petronius came in to hear their conversation.

"Sickness saved her from shame, for executioners are timid," said the youth. "Ursus and Glaucus the physician watch over her night and day."

"Are the guards the same?"

"They are, and she is in their chamber. All the prisoners in the lower dungeon died of fever, or were stifled from foul air."

"Who art thou?" inquired Petronius.

"The noble Vinicius knows me. I am the son of that widow with whom Lygia lodged."

"And a Christian?"

The youth looked with inquiring glance at Vinicius, but, seeing him in prayer, he raised his head, and answered,—

"I am."

"How canst thou enter the prison freely?"

"I hired myself to carry out corpses; I did so to assist my brethren and bring them news from the city."

Petronius looked more attentively at the comely face of the youth, his blue eyes, and dark, abundant hair.

"From what country art thou, youth?" asked he.

"I am a Galilean, lord."

"Wouldst thou like to see Lygia free?"

The youth raised his eyes. "Yes, even had I to die afterwards."

Then Vinicius ceased to pray, and said,—

"Tell the guards to place her in a coffin as if she were dead. Thou wilt find assistants to bear her out in the night with thee. Near the 'Putrid Pits' will be people with a litter waiting for you; to them ye will give the coffin. Promise the guards from me as much gold as each can carry in his mantle."

While speaking, his face lost its usual torpor, and in him was roused the soldier to whom hope had restored his former energy.

Nazarius was flushed with delight, and, raising his hands, he exclaimed,—

"May Christ give her health, for she will be free."

"Dost thou think that the guards will consent?" inquired Petronius.

"They, lord? Yes, if they know that punishment and torture will not touch them."

"The guards would consent to her flight; all the more will they let us bear her out as a corpse," said Vinicius.

"There is a man, it is true," said Nazarius, "who burns with red-hot iron to see if the bodies which we carry out are dead. But he will take even a few sesteria not to touch the face of the dead with iron. For one aureus he will touch the coffin, not the body."

"Tell him that he will get a cap full of aurei," said Petronius. "But canst thou find reliable assistants?"

"I can find men who would sell their own wives and children for money."

"Where wilt thou find them?"

"In the prison itself or in the city. Once the guards are paid, they will admit whomever I like."

"In that case take me as a hired servant," said Vinicius.

But Petronius opposed this most earnestly. "The pretorians might recognize thee even in disguise, and all would be lost. Go neither to the prison nor the 'Putrid Pits.' All, including Cæsar and Tigellinus, should be convinced that she died; otherwise they will order immediate pursuit. We can lull suspicion only in this way: When she is taken to the Alban Hills or farther, to Sicily, we shall be in Rome. A week or two later thou wilt fall ill, and summon Nero's physician; he will tell thee to go to the mountains. Thou and she will meet, and afterward—"

Here he thought a while; then, waving his hand, he said,—

"Other times may come."

"May Christ have mercy on her," said Vinicius. "Thou art speaking of Sicily, while she is sick and may die."

"Let us keep her nearer Rome at first. The air alone will restore her, if only we snatch her from the dungeon. Hast thou no manager in the mountains whom thou canst trust?"

"I have," replied Vinicius, hurriedly. "Near Corioli is a reliable man who carried me in his arms when I was a child, and who loves me yet."

"Write to him to come to-morrow," said Petronius, handing Vinicius tablets. "I will send a courier at once."

He called the chief of the atrium then, and gave the needful orders. A few minutes later, a mounted slave was coursing in the night toward Corioli.

"It would please me were Ursus to accompany her," said Vinicius. "I should be more at rest."

"Lord," said Nazarius, "that is a man of superhuman strength; he can break gratings and follow her. There is

one window above a steep, high rock where no guard is placed. I will take Ursus a rope; the rest he will do himself."

"By Hercules!" said Petronius, "let him tear himself out as he pleases, but not at the same time with her, and not two or three days later, for they would follow him and discover her hiding-place. By Hercules! do ye wish to destroy yourselves and her? I forbid you to name Corioli to him, or I wash my hands."

Both recognized the justice of these words, and were silent. Nazarius took leave, promising to come the next morning at daybreak.

He hoped to finish that night with the guards, but wished first to run in to see his mother, who in that uncertain and dreadful time had no rest for a moment thinking of her son. After some thought he had determined not to seek an assistant in the city, but to find and bribe one from among his fellow corpse-bearers. When going, he stopped, and, taking Vinicius aside, whispered, —

"I will not mention our plan to any one, not even to my mother, but the Apostle Peter promised to come from the amphitheatre to our house; I will tell him everything."

"Here thou canst speak openly," replied Vinicius. "The Apostle was in the amphitheatre with the people of Petronius. But I will go with you myself."

He gave command to bring him a slave's mantle, and they passed out. Petronius sighed deeply.

"I wished her to die of that fever," thought he, "since that would have been less terrible for Vinicius. But now I am ready to offer a golden tripod to Esculapius for her health. Ah! Ahenobarbus, thou hast the wish to turn a lover's pain into a spectacle; thou, Augusta, wert jealous of the maiden's beauty, and wouldst devour her alive because thy Rufius has perished. Thou, Tigellinus, wouldst destroy her to spite me! We shall see. I tell you that your eyes will not behold her on the arena, for she will either die her own death, or I shall wrest her from you as from the jaws of dogs, and wrest her in such fashion that ye shall not know it; and as often afterward as I look at you I shall think, These are the fools whom Caius Petronius outwitted."

And, self-satisfied, he passed to the triclinium, where he sat down to supper with Eunice. During the meal a lector read to them the Idyls of Theocritus. Out of doors the

wind brought clouds from the direction of Soracte, and a sudden storm broke the silence of the calm summer night. From time to time thunder reverberated on the seven hills, while they, reclining near each other at the table, listened to the bucolic poet, who in the singing Doric dialect celebrated the loves of shepherds. Later on, with minds at rest, they prepared for sweet slumber.

But before this Vinicius returned. Petronius heard of his coming, and went to meet him.

"Well? Have ye fixed anything new?" inquired he. "Has Nazarius gone to the prison?"

"He has," answered the young man, arranging his hair, wet from the rain. "Nazarius went to arrange with the guards, and I have seen Peter, who commanded me to pray and believe."

"That is well. If all goes favorably, we can bear her away to-morrow night."

"My manager must be here at daybreak with men."

"The road is a short one. Now go to rest."

But Vinicius knelt in his cubiculum and prayed.

At sunrise Niger, the manager, arrived from Corioli, bringing with him, at the order of Vinicius, mules, a litter, and four trusty men selected among slaves from Britain, whom, to save appearances, he had left at an inn in the Subura. Vinicius, who had watched all night, went to meet him. Niger, moved at sight of his youthful master, kissed his hands and eyes, saying, —

"My dear, thou art ill, or else suffering has sucked the blood from thy face, for hardly did I know thee at first."

Vinicius took him to the interior colonnade, and there admitted him to the secret. Niger listened with fixed attention, and on his dry, sunburnt face great emotion was evident; this he did not even try to master.

"Then she is a Christian?" exclaimed Niger; and he looked inquiringly into the face of Vinicius, who divined evidently what the gaze of the countryman was asking, since he answered, —

"I too am a Christian."

Tears glistened in Niger's eyes that moment. He was silent for a while; then, raising his hands, he said, —

"I thank Thee, O Christ, for having taken the beam from eyes which are the dearest on earth to me."

Then he embraced the head of Vinicius, and, weeping

from happiness, fell to kissing his forehead. A moment later, Petronius appeared, bringing Nazarius.

"Good news!" cried he, while still at a distance.

Indeed, the news was good. First, Glaucus the physician guaranteed Lygia's life, though she had the same prison fever of which, in the Tullianum and other dungeons, hundreds of people were dying daily. As to the guards and the man who tried corpses with red-hot iron, there was not the least difficulty. Attys, the assistant, was satisfied also.

"We made openings in the coffin to let the sick woman breathe," said Nazarius. "The only danger is that she may groan or speak as we pass the pretorians. But she is very weak, and is lying with closed eyes since early morning. Besides, Glaucus will give her a sleeping draught prepared by himself from drugs brought by me purposely from the city. The cover will not be nailed to the coffin; ye will raise it easily and take the patient to the litter. We will place in the coffin a long bag of sand, which ye will provide."

Vinicius, while hearing these words, was as pale as linen; but he listened with such attention that he seemed to divine at a glance what Nazarius had to say.

"Will they carry out other bodies from the prison?" inquired Petronius.

"About twenty died last night, and before evening more will be dead," said the youth. "We must go with a whole company, but we will delay and drop into the rear. At the first corner my comrade will get lame purposely. In that way we shall remain behind the others considerably. Ye will wait for us at the small temple of Libitina. May God give a night as dark as possible!"

"He will," said Niger. "Last evening was bright, and then a sudden storm came. To-day the sky is clear, but since morning it is sultry. Every night now there will be wind and rain."

"Will ye go without torches?" inquired Vinicius.

"The torches are carried only in advance. In every event, be near the temple of Libitina at dark, though usually we carry out the corpses only just before midnight."

They stopped. Nothing was to be heard save the hurried breathing of Vinicius. Petronius turned to him, —

"I said yesterday that it would be best were we both to stay at home, but now I see that I could not stay. Were it a question of flight, there would be need of the greatest caution; but since she will be borne out as a corpse, it

seems that not the least suspicion will enter the head of any one."

"True, true!" answered Vinicius. "I must be there. I will take her from the coffin myself."

"Once she is in my house at Corioli, I answer for her," said Niger.

Conversation stopped here. Niger returned to his men at the inn. Nazarius took a purse of gold under his tunic and went to the prison. For Vinicius began a day filled with alarm, excitement, disquiet, and hope.

"The undertaking ought to succeed, for it is well planned," said Petronius. "It was impossible to plan better. Thou must feign suffering, and wear a dark toga. Do not desert the amphitheatre. Let people see thee. All is so fixed that there cannot be failure. But — art thou perfectly sure of thy manager?"

"He is a Christian," replied Vinicius.

Petronius looked at him with amazement, then shrugged his shoulders, and said, as if in soliloquy, —

"By Pollux! how it spreads, and commands people's souls. Under such terror as the present, men would renounce straightway all the gods of Rome, Greece, and Egypt. Still, this is wonderful! By Pollux! if I believed that anything depended on our gods, I would sacrifice six white bullocks to each of them, and twelve to Capitoline Jove. Spare no promises to thy Christ."

"I have given Him my soul," said Vinicius.

And they parted. Petronius returned to his cubiculum; but Vinicius went to look from a distance at the prison, and thence betook himself to the slope of the Vatican hill, — to that hut of the quarryman where he had received baptism from the hands of the Apostle. It seemed to him that Christ would hear him more readily there than in any other place; so when he found it, he threw himself on the ground and exerted all the strength of his suffering soul in prayer for mercy, and so forgot himself that he remembered not where he was or what he was doing. In the afternoon he was roused by the sound of trumpets which came from the direction of Nero's Circus. He went out of the hut, and gazed around with eyes which were as if just opened from sleep.

It was hot; the stillness was broken at intervals by the sound of brass and continually by the ceaseless noise of grasshoppers. The air had become sultry, the sky was still

clear over the city, but near the Sabine Hills dark clouds were gathering at the edge of the horizon.

Vinicius went home. Petronius was waiting for him in the atrium.

"I have been on the Palatine," said he. "I showed myself there purposely, and even sat down at dice. There is a feast at the house of Anicius this evening; I promised to go, but only after midnight, saying that I must sleep before that hour. In fact I shall be there, and it would be well wert thou to go also."

"Are there no tidings from Niger or Nazarius?" inquired Vinicius.

"No; we shall see them only at midnight. Hast noticed that a storm is threatening?"

"Yes."

"To-morrow there is to be an exhibition of crucified Christians, but perhaps rain will prevent it."

Then he drew nearer and said, touching his nephew's shoulder, —

"But thou wilt not see her on the cross; thou wilt see her only in Corioli. By Castor! I would not give the moment in which we free her for all the gems in Rome. The evening is near."

In truth the evening was near, and darkness began to encircle the city earlier than usual because clouds covered the whole horizon. With the coming of night heavy rain fell, which turned into steam on the stones warmed by the heat of the day, and filled the streets of the city with mist. After that came a lull, then brief violent showers.

"Let us hurry!" said Vinicius at last; "they may carry bodies from the prison earlier because of the storm."

"It is time!" said Petronius.

And taking Gallic mantles with hoods, they passed through the garden door to the street. Petronius had armed himself with a short Roman knife called *sicca*, which he took always during night trips.

The city was empty because of the storm. From time to time lightning rent the clouds, illuminating with its glare the fresh walls of houses newly built or in process of building and the wet flag-stones with which the streets were paved. At last a flash came, when they saw, after a rather long road, the mound on which stood the small temple of Libitina, and at the foot of the mound a group of mules and horses.

"Niger!" called Vinicius, in a low voice.

"I am here, lord," said a voice in the rain.

"Is everything ready?"

"It is. We were here at dark. But hide yourselves under the rampart, or ye will be drenched. What a storm! Hail will fall, I think."

In fact Niger's fear was justified, for soon hail began to fall, at first fine, then larger and more frequent. The air grew cold at once. While standing under the rampart, sheltered from the wind and icy missiles, they conversed in low voices.

"Even should some one see us," said Niger, "there will be no suspicion; we look like people waiting for the storm to pass. But I fear that they may not bring the bodies out till morning."

"The hail-storm will not last," said Petronius. "We must wait even till daybreak."

They waited, listening to hear the sound of the procession. The hail-storm passed, but immediately after a shower began to roar. At times the wind rose, and brought from the "Putrid Pits" a dreadful odor of decaying bodies, buried near the surface and carelessly.

"I see a light through the mist," said Niger, — "one, two, three, — those are torches. See that the mules do not snort," said he, turning to the men.

"They are coming!" said Petronius.

The lights were growing more and more distinct. After a time it was possible to see torches under the quivering flames.

Niger made the sign of the cross, and began to pray. Meanwhile the gloomy procession drew nearer, and halted at last in front of the temple of Libitina. Petronius, Vinicius, and Niger pressed up to the rampart in silence, not knowing why the halt was made. But the men had stopped only to cover their mouths and faces with cloths to ward off the stifling stench which at the edge of the "Putrid Pits" was simply unendurable; then they raised the biers with coffins and moved on. Only one coffin stopped before the temple. Vinicius sprang toward it, and after him Petronius, Niger, and two British slaves with the litter.

But before they had reached it in the darkness, the voice of Nazarius was heard, full of pain, —

"Lord, they took her with Ursus to the Esquiline prison. We are carrying another body! They removed her before midnight."

Petronius, when he had returned home, was gloomy as a storm, and did not even try to console Vinicius. He understood that to free Lygia from the Esquiline dungeons was not to be dreamed of. He divined that very likely she had been taken from the Tullianum so as not to die of fever and escape the amphitheatre assigned to her. But for this very reason she was watched and guarded more carefully than others. From the bottom of his soul Petronius was sorry for her and Vinicius, but he was wounded also by the thought that for the first time in life he had not succeeded, and for the first time was beaten in a struggle.

"Fortune seems to desert me," said he to himself, "but the gods are mistaken if they think that I will accept such a life as his, for example."

Here he turned toward Vinicius, who looked at him with staring eyes.

"What is the matter? Thou hast a fever," said Petronius.

But Vinicius answered with a certain strange, broken, halting voice, like that of a sick child, —

"But I believe that He — can restore her to me."

Above the city the last thunders of the storm had ceased.

CHAPTER LVII.

THREE days' rain, an exceptional phenomenon in Rome during summer, and hail falling in opposition to the natural order, not only in the day, but even at night, interrupted the spectacles. People were growing alarmed. A failure of grapes was predicted, and when on a certain afternoon a thunderbolt melted the bronze statue of Ceres on the Capitol, sacrifices were ordered in the temple of Jupiter Salvator. The priests of Ceres spread a report that the anger of the gods was turned on the city because of the too hasty punishment of Christians; hence crowds began to insist that the spectacles be given without reference to weather. Delight seized all Rome when the announcement was made at last that the ludus would begin again after three days' interval.

Meanwhile beautiful weather returned. The amphitheatre was filled at daybreak with thousands of people. Cæsar came early with the vestals and the court. The spectacle was to begin with a battle among the Christians, who to this end were arrayed as gladiators and furnished with all kinds of weapons which served gladiators by profession in offensive and defensive struggles. But here came disappointment. The Christians threw nets, darts, tridents, and swords on the arena, embraced and encouraged one another to endurance in view of torture and death. At this deep indignation and resentment seized the hearts of the multitude. Some reproached the Christians with cowardice and pusillanimity; others asserted that they refused to fight through hatred of the people, so as to deprive them of that pleasure which the sight of bravery produces. Finally, at command of Cæsar, real gladiators were let out, who despatched in one twinkling the kneeling and defenceless victims.

When these bodies were removed, the spectacle was a series of mythologic pictures, — Cæsar's own idea. The audience saw Hercules blazing in living fire on Mount Oeta. Vinicius had trembled at the thought that the rôle of Hercules might be intended for Ursus; but evidently the turn of Lygia's faithful servant had not come, for on the pile some other Christian was burning, — a man quite unknown to

Vinicius. In the next picture Chilo, whom Cæsar would not excuse from attendance, saw acquaintances. The death of Dædalus was represented, and also that of Icarus. In the rôle of Dædalus appeared Euricius, that old man who had given Chilo the sign of the fish; the rôle of Icarus was taken by his son, Quartus. Both were raised aloft with cunning machinery, and then hurled suddenly from an immense height to the arena. Young Quartus fell so near Cæsar's podium that he spattered with blood not only the external ornaments but the purple covering spread over the front of the podium. Chilo did not see the fall, for he closed his eyes; but he heard the dull thump of the body, and when after a time he saw blood there close to him, he came near fainting a second time.

The pictures changed quickly. The shameful torments of maidens violated before death by gladiators dressed as wild beasts, delighted the hearts of the rabble. They saw priestesses of Cybele and Ceres, they saw the Danaïdes, they saw Dirce and Pasiphaë; finally they saw young girls, not mature yet, torn asunder by wild horses. Every moment the crowd applauded new ideas of Nero, who, proud of them, and made happy by plaudits, did not take the emerald from his eye for one instant while looking at white bodies torn with iron, and the convulsive quivering of victims.

Pictures were given also from the history of the city. After the maidens they saw Mucius Scævola, whose hand fastened over a fire to a tripod filled the amphitheatre with the odor of burnt flesh; but this man, like the real Scævola, remained without a groan, his eyes raised and the murmur of prayer on his blackening lips. When he had expired and his body was dragged to the spoliarium, the usual midday interlude followed. Cæsar with the vestals and the Augustians left the amphitheatre, and withdrew to an immense scarlet tent erected purposely; in this was prepared for him and the guests a magnificent prandium. The spectators for the greater part followed his example, and, streaming out, disposed themselves in picturesque groups around the tent, to rest their limbs wearied from long sitting, and enjoy the food which, through Cæsar's favor, was served by slaves to them. Only the most curious descended to the arena itself, and, touching with their fingers lumps of sand held together by blood, conversed, as specialists and amateurs, of that which had happened and of that which was to follow. Soon even these went away, lest they might be late for the feast;

only those few were left who stayed not through curiosity, but sympathy for the coming victims. Those concealed themselves behind seats or in the lower places.

Meanwhile the arena was levelled, and slaves began to dig holes one near the other in rows throughout the whole circuit from side to side, so that the last row was but a few paces distant from Cæsar's podium. From outside came the murmur of people, shouts and plaudits, while within they were preparing in hot haste for new tortures. The cunicula were opened simultaneously, and in all passages leading to the arena were urged forward crowds of Christians naked and carrying crosses on their shoulders. The whole arena was filled with them. Old men, bending under the weight of wooden beams, ran forward; at the side of these went men in the prime of life, women with loosened hair behind which they strove to hide their nakedness, small boys, and little children. The crosses, for the greater part, as well as the victims, were wreathed with flowers. The servants of the amphitheatre beat the unfortunates with clubs, forcing them to lay down their crosses near the holes prepared, and stand themselves there in rows. Thus were to perish those whom executioners had had no chance to drive out as food for dogs and wild beasts the first day of the games. Black slaves seized the victims, laid them face upward on the wood, and fell to nailing their hands hurriedly and quickly to the arms of the crosses, so that people returning after the interlude might find all the crosses standing. The whole amphitheatre resounded with the noise of hammers which echoed through all the rows, went out to the space surrounding the amphitheatre, and into the tent where Cæsar was entertaining his suite and the vestals. There he drank wine, bantered with Chilo, and whispered strange words in the ears of the priestesses of Vesta; but on the arena the work was seething, — nails were going into the hands and feet of the Christians; shovels moved quickly, filling the holes in which the crosses had been planted.

Among the new victims whose turn was to come soon was Crispus. The lions had not had time to rend him; hence he was appointed to the cross. He, ready at all times for death, was delighted with the thought that his hour was approaching. He seemed another man, for his emaciated body was wholly naked, — only a girdle of ivy encircled his hips, on his head was a garland of roses. But in his eyes gleamed always that same exhaustless energy; that same fanatical

stern face gazed from beneath the crown of roses. Neither had his heart changed; for, as once in the cuniculum he had threatened with the wrath of God his brethren sewed up in the skins of wild beasts, so to-day he thundered in place of consoling them.

"Thank the Redeemer," said Crispus, "that He permits you to die the same death that He Himself died. Maybe a part of your sins will be remitted for this cause; but tremble, since justice must be satisfied, and there cannot be one reward for the just and the wicked."

His words were accompanied by the sound of the hammers nailing the hands and feet of victims. Every moment more crosses were raised on the arena; but he, turning to the crowd standing each man by his own cross, continued, —

"I see heaven open, but I see also the yawning abyss. I know not what account of my life to give the Lord, though I have believed, and hated evil. I fear, not death, but resurrection; I fear, not torture, but judgment, for the day of wrath is at hand."

At that moment was heard from between the nearest rows some voice, calm and solemn, —

"Not the day of wrath, but of mercy, the day of salvation and happiness; for I say that Christ will gather you in, will comfort you and seat you at His right hand. Be confident, for heaven is opening before you."

At these words all eyes were turned to the benches; even those who were hanging on the crosses raised their pale, tortured faces, and looked toward the man who was speaking.

But he went to the barrier surrounding the arena, and blessed them with the sign of the cross.

Crispus stretched out his arm as if to thunder at him; but when he saw the man's face, he dropped his arm, the knees bent under him, and his lips whispered, "Paul the Apostle!"

To the great astonishment of the servants of the Circus, all of those who were not nailed to the crosses yet knelt down. Paul turned to Crispus and said, —

"Threaten them not, Crispus, for this day they will be with thee in paradise. It is thy thought that they may be condemned. But who will condemn? Will God, who gave His Son for them? Will Christ, who died for their salvation, condemn when they die for His name? And how is it

possible that He who loves can condemn? Who will accuse the chosen of God? Who will say of this blood, 'It is cursed'?"

"I have hated evil," said the old priest.

"Christ's command to love men was higher than that to hate evil, for His religion is not hatred, but love."

"I have sinned in the hour of death," answered Crispus, beating his breast.

The manager of the seats approached the Apostle, and inquired, —

"Who art thou, speaking to the condemned?"

"A Roman citizen," answered Paul, calmly. Then, turning to Crispus, he said: "Be confident, for to-day is a day of grace; die in peace, O servant of God."

The black men approached Crispus at that moment to place him on the cross; but he looked around once again, and cried, —

"My brethren, pray for me!"

His face had lost its usual sternness; his stony features had taken an expression of peace and sweetness. He stretched his arms himself along the arms of the cross, to make the work easier, and, looking directly into heaven, began to pray earnestly. He seemed to feel nothing; for when the nails entered his hands, not the least quiver shook his body, nor on his face did there appear any wrinkle of pain. He prayed when they raised the cross and trampled the earth around it. Only when crowds began to fill the amphitheatre with shouts and laughter did his brows frown somewhat, as if in anger that a pagan people were disturbing the calm and peace of a sweet death.

But all the crosses had been raised, so that in the arena there stood as it were a forest, with people hanging on the trees. On the arms of the crosses and on the heads of the martyrs fell the gleam of the sun; but on the arena was a deep shadow, forming a kind of black involved grating through which glittered the golden sand. That was a spectacle in which the whole delight of the audience consisted in looking at a lingering death. Never before had men seen such a density of crosses. The arena was packed so closely that the servants squeezed between them only with effort. On the edges were women especially; but Crispus, as a leader, was raised almost in front of Cæsar's podium, on an immense cross, wreathed below with honeysuckle. None of the victims had died yet, but some of those fastened earlier

had fainted. No one groaned; no one called for mercy. Some were hanging with head inclined on one arm, or dropped on the breast, as if seized by sleep; some were as if in meditation; some, looking toward heaven, were moving their lips quietly. In this terrible forest of crosses, among those crucified bodies, in that silence of victims there was something ominous. The people who, filled by the feast and gladsome, had returned to the Circus with shouts, became silent, not knowing on which body to rest their eyes, or what to think of the spectacle. The nakedness of strained female forms roused no feeling. They did not make the usual bets as to who would die first, — a thing done generally when there was even the smallest number of criminals on the arena. It seemed that Cæsar himself was bored, for he turned lazily and with drowsy expression to arrange his necklace.

At that moment Crispus, who was hanging opposite, and who, like a man in a faint or dying, had kept his eyes closed, opened them and looked at Cæsar. His face assumed an expression so pitiless, and his eyes flashed with such fire, that the Augustians whispered to one another, pointing at him with their fingers, and at last Cæsar himself turned to that cross, and placed the emerald to his eye sluggishly.

Perfect silence followed. The eyes of the spectators were fixed on Crispus, who strove to move his right hand, as if to tear it from the tree.

After a while his breast rose, his ribs were visible, and he cried: "Matricide! woe to thee!"

The Augustians, hearing this mortal insult flung at the lord of the world in presence of thousands, did not dare to breathe. Chilo was half dead. Cæsar trembled, and dropped the emerald from his fingers. The people, too, held the breath in their breasts. The voice of Crispus was heard, as it rose in power, throughout the amphitheatre, —

"Woe to thee, murderer of wife and brother! woe to thee, Antichrist. The abyss is opening beneath thee, death is stretching its hands to thee, the grave is waiting for thee. Woe, living corpse, for in terror shalt thou die and be damned to eternity!"

Unable to tear his hand from the cross, Crispus strained awfully. He was terrible, — a living skeleton; unbending as predestination, he shook his white beard over Nero's podium, scattering, as he nodded, rose leaves from the garland on his head.

"Woe to thee, murderer! Thy measure is surpassed, and thy hour is at hand!"

Here he made one more effort. It seemed for a moment that he would free his hand from the cross and hold it in menace above Cæsar; but all at once his emaciated arms extended still more, his body settled down, his head fell on his breast, and he died.

In that forest of crosses the weakest began also the sleep of eternity.