

Thames Williamson

THE GLADIATOR

A powerful novel of violence and redemption
by faith set in the times of Nero

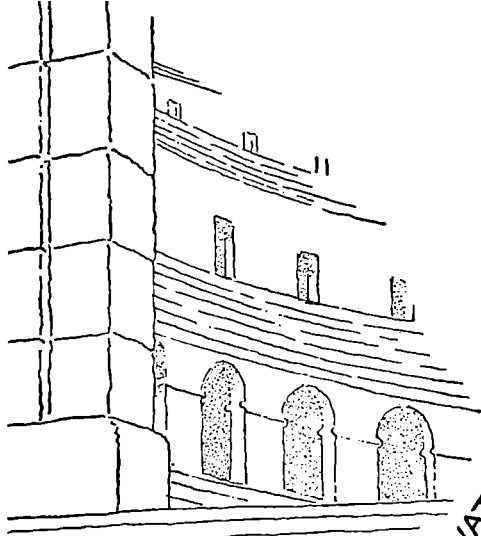


\$3.00

THE GLADIATOR

by Thames Williamson

Thames Williamson has had many successful novels to his credit and two Book-of-the-Month Club choices. In his new novel, *The Gladiator*, he writes a powerful and absorbing story of the days of Nero. It is about Faljan, a simple but physically mighty farmhand who is forced into the Roman Arena by Nero's gangsters. He soon becomes a famous gladiator. The story is concerned with his problems and the intrigues of the corrupt court, his conversion to Christianity, and his escape with Lydia, his wife to be, from burning Rome. The author makes wonderfully vivid the fight for power in the palace, the imperial orgies, the teeming life of the streets, the tavern brawls, and, not least, the day-by-day training of the gladiatorial school. This is a novel that once started is almost impossible to put down. It treats largely of a cruel and degenerate world, and it is alive, lusty, and continuously interesting.



VATICAN HILL

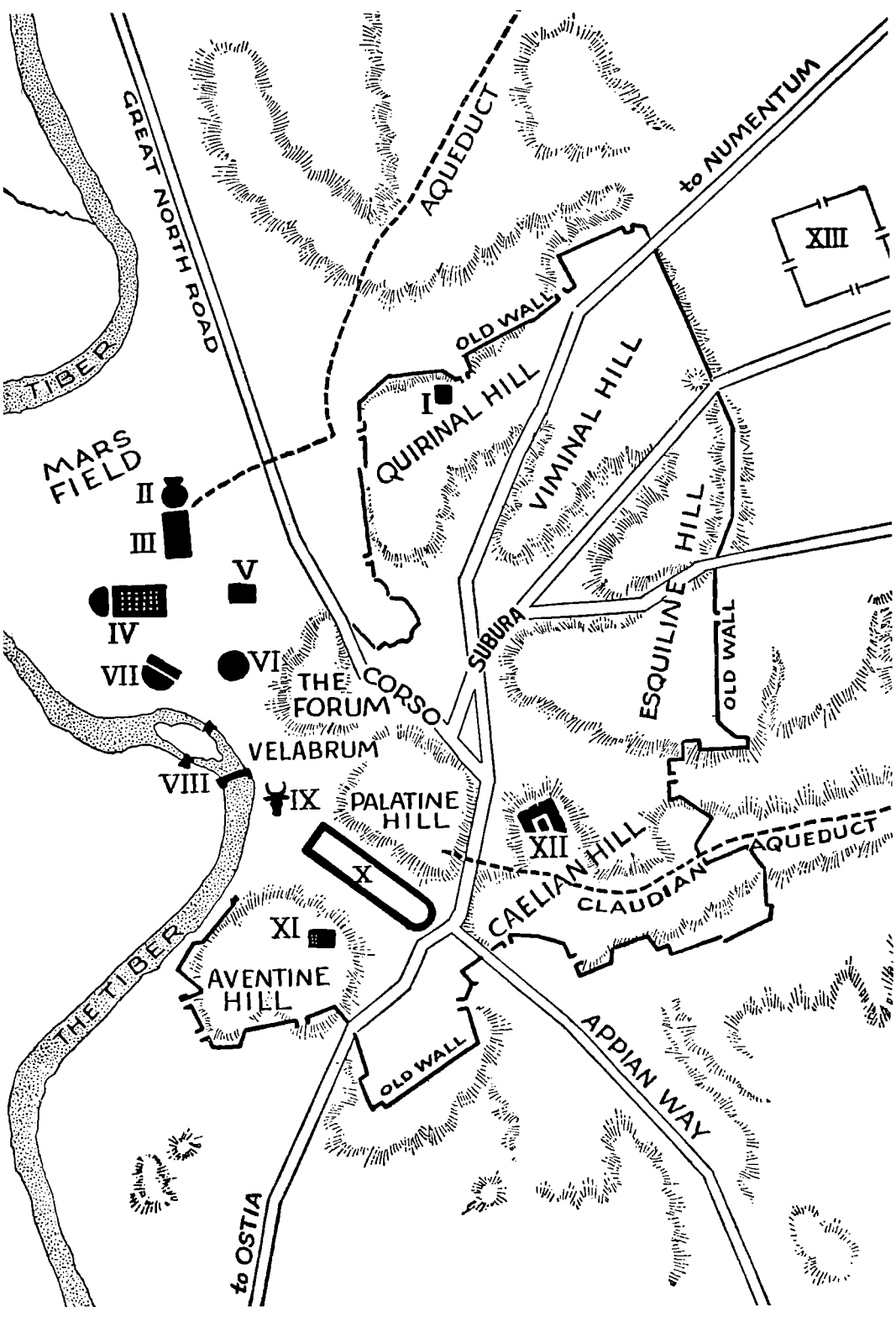


FALJAN'S ROME 62-64 A.D.

- I FALJAN'S VILLA
- II THE PANTHEON
- III BATHS OF AGRIPPA
- IV THE THEATRE OF POMPEY
- V THE GLADIATORS' SCHOOL
- VI THE ARENA
- VII THEATRE OF BALBUS
- VIII TIBER BRIDGES
- IX CATTLE MARKET
- X CIRCUS MAXIMUS
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- XII TEMPLE OF CLAUDIUS
- XIII CAMP OF IMPERIAL GUARDS



HARTMAN



THE GLADIATOR

Other Novels by Thames Williamson

HUNKY

SAD INDIAN

STRIDE OF MAN

THE WOODS COLT

CHRISTINE ROUX

THE EARTH TOLD ME

Thames Williamson

THE
GLADIATOR

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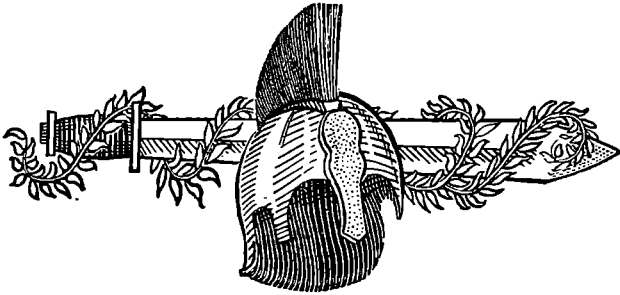
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TO MY SON THAMES

*Eager young gladiator now in training
for a fiercer arena than Rome
could ever have imagined.*

THE GLADIATOR



CHAPTER 1.

I.

HE HAD no idea, not even a faraway glimmer of a suspicion, that trouble lay waiting for him.

Why should he! It was a warm and sunny day, overhead the azure beneficent Italian sky, clouds dumpling white, a soft wind running free; on every hand, the Campagna rolling out gently onto an immense plain checked in villas and gardens and small farms. East, the Campagna faded at length up against the long blue line of the Sabine Hills; off to the west, and out of sight, the Tiber went elbowing down to the Mediterranean Sea; directly ahead of him sprawled the city of Rome, center of the civilized world as men knew civilization in the year 62 A.D.

He had been trudging north along the Appian Way, his feet now less than half a league from the capital city, and his head pleased. It had been a good journey. Far back behind him he had come upon a girl washing clothes in a stream, and without much preliminary he got her into the reeds and had deep satisfying pleasure with her. Later on, gathering his beasts from their grazing and urging them once more on toward Rome, he had further luck: at the steep Arician Hill, where by custom gangs of beggars lurked for travelers and set upon them with sharp tongues and sometimes tearing claws, he found them every last one eye-closed in noon siesta, and so slipped past without their knowing it until too late. Yes, a good journey, and now almost finished.

The traffic had begun to thicken: a noisy dry-axled cart inching along, caravans of donkeys with panniers stuffed to the seams, many men with packs on their backs or carrying nothing at all, occasionally a patrician's litter borne down to the highway from a villa in the hills. And at the tail of this straggling Romeward procession, trudging behind his cattle in dusty sandals, the man I have been telling you about—Faljan the drover.

They were not really his cattle. The nine tawny fat bullocks were the property of Curtius Criba, the farmer; Faljan was only his trusted servant.

Nevertheless that was much, and it was even important. Criba habitually sent him to market with produce, giving him no more than perfunctory directions as to price. Perfunctory, for the reason that Faljan had worked for his Criba since childhood, and as a consequence the farmer had learned to put confidence in him. Cattle or swine or sheep or goats, the drover alone conducted them to Rome, sold the brutes, spent a modest day seeing the sights, and then plodded four days back to his work among the pleasant bright hills of the farm he called home.

"Get along," said Faljan, and touched a lagging steer with his cudgel. "A-rup!"

He did not care too much for the Appian Way. True, it had great flat solid stones for surface, and was therefore easy to pass over; but it smelled of terror. Conquerors had a custom of clanking home over this highway, returning, such proud victorious Romans, with loot and bloody captives taken in foreign lands. Memory of human pain hovered in the soft languorous air of the Appian Way, and as more tangible memento of man's briefness here on earth there were, on either side of the road, an extending number of marble tombs and monuments, speaking bluntly of the ghosts of defeated men; for life is surely power, and he who is dead has lost it. Tombs and monuments, and into the bargain this afternoon an actual carcass, a poor dead wretch crucified on a wooden cross; probably a thief, but anyhow caught and nailed fast and left to perish with the aid of the huge black vultures that liked to begin by picking out your eyes. To crucify a rogue along the Appian Way was considered a neat method of reminding travelers to behave themselves and abide by Roman law.

"Move on," Faljan told his cattle, with a trace of uneasiness; "it grows late in the day, and I want you safe in the market pens before sunset."

And then, not far without the Capenian Gate, his trouble came upon him. He heard a shout, an indefinite call which was part greeting and part insult; he glanced off and saw, alongside a tomb, a man waving at him. A ragged bold fellow, carrying what appeared to be a broken spear.

"What now?" Faljan called back, and soon found out.

Rapid quiet feet had slipped up behind him, and in another instant he had himself a blow on the head. Faljan sagged to his knees, but grasping his cudgel as he went, and almost immediately rising again; he was a strong man, young, and accustomed to the hurly-burly of fighting. Yet even as he rose up, he received a second blow—and with it a glimpse of two men with clubs, a third rascal hastily joining them from the tomb where he had stood and called to the unwary drover. A decoy, this third one had been, gaining Faljan's attention while his confederates ran up and attacked. Two blows and yet another, the drover struggling to get his cudgel into action, and failing. Against unexpected clubs from behind, even the brawniest of men can do little, and the blows of Faljan's enemies had been crushing heavy. He went down again, this time flat and quick into blackness.

II.

His brain cleared at last, slow and leisurely as a spring of water treaded into muddiness by mincing horses and then free of them and the dirt settling back out of sight. Someone was crouching beside him. The drover grasped his arm, and with such force that whoever it was cried out,

“’Twas not I that did it!”

Faljan sprang up, dizzy but furious. Still keeping his grip on the arm, he cast a wild glance about, seeking the nine tawny ones that Curtius Criba had given over into his care.

“My cattle!” he cried.

“Gone,” said the stranger, and twisted against Faljan's big clutching fist. “Unhand me, you clodhopper. If I were guilty, I should never have lingered here all this while!”

“Where are my cattle—where are they?”

The stranger pointed east along the high rugged wall of the city, an ancient rampart built up in the time of Servius. At a certain point this wall angled north, but there kept on to the general east a high-in-the-air work of masonry which, with its innumerable regular legs, could have been a gigantic insect descending to Rome from the hills, had it not been, instead, the Claudian aqueduct.

“Thieves took your bullocks,” said the stranger; “whacking them

with sticks along the wall to the turn, and then going northeast. By this time they are through the arches of the aqueduct and safe in the fastnesses of the brush yonder."

Faljan seized his cudgel and started in pursuit; but when he had taken only a step or two he halted and had to put his legs far apart to keep from falling. His head reeled, his mouth had gone dry with fear and the weakness knocked into him by the clubs of the three thieves.

"May Hades swallow them up!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"Curse and purge yourself," replied the stranger, in a tone of approval; "but do not expect to catch those who did this thing to you. Darkness will soon be falling like a stone, and you would get—from pursuing them—nothing but a handful of cattle tracks and a knife in your kidney."

"And who are you to know all this?" Faljan demanded.

The stranger smiled. He was somewhat past middle age, a small bony fellow who appeared to have had difficulty, during his early life, in getting enough to eat. A shabby tunic, thin crafty face with darting eyes and a mouth which had a habit of mocking. About his waist he had strapped a row of tiny earthenware vials, each with an identifying mark upon it.

"I am Ershutif the Syrian," he said; "or an Egyptian, if you prefer. At times I pass for a Parthian, a Greek, and so on, depending upon what seems advisable." He touched the vials each in turn, his fingers delicate and mysterious in what they implied. "I sell potions to travelers entering the city, this one for the fetching of love, my second to avoid prison, the third to ward off malaria, fourth against the evil eye, and the rest of them for otherwise securing good in place of evil fortune. Ershutif the Syrian, at your service."

Faljan could think of nothing save his cattle. He looked again at the hills, where they had disappeared like water into sandy ground.

"Woe is me," he muttered heavily.

"Sit a while and rest the crack in your skull," said Ershutif, indicating a bench near a tomb. "These benches were designed for mourning relatives and friends, but the dead flatter themselves—relatives and friends have something better to do than brood over ashes. Will you sit?"

In silence Faljan sank down upon a bench. The Syrian took place beside him, smooth and casual,

"A pity to lose your cattle. There are too many thieves in the world, far too many."

"You yourself could be one," grumbled Faljan, and wiped blood from his head. "How does it come you were here when it happened?"

"Ask the beggar yonder at the gate," shrugged Ershutif. "I was standing beside him, hawking my wares, when the robbers fell upon you—in kindness I ran out to give you succor."

"Or to empty my wallet!"

"It wrinkled so exceeding thin between my fingers," Ershutif chuckled, "that I decided upon succor."

"There can be succor only if I get the cattle back. What shall I tell my farmer!"

"The hen is not to blame for an addled egg—you can explain the matter to him."

"Explain to a man that you have let his beasts get stolen?"

"You are probably right," and the Syrian laughed. "He would answer that you sold them and spent the money on red wine and white women."

Faljan groaned in despair, his companion rose and pulled his tunic about him,

"Let us go on into the city. The Appian Way is dangerous after sundown."

"And before sundown," retorted the cattle drover, but he nevertheless got to his feet.

They walked slowly toward the gate, a benumbing misery settling upon the Faljan who so lately had been content and lighthearted. It seemed to him that an olive press had encompassed him and was squeezing his bones to pulp.

The beggar stood gabbling ahead, a hand extended for alms and his shrill monotonous "give, give" reaching out to the two travelers. Taking a copper coin from his wallet, Faljan held it up by way of promise,

"Tell me—where was this Syrian whilst I was being robbed?"

"He was here within reach of my fingers," answered the beggar, and kept his eyes upon the copper piece. "You have no bigger coin, brother? Bread has gone up lately, you must remember."

Faljan returned the coin to his wallet and strode on, the beggar hurling curses after him. No matter. The drover had never intended to give him alms. Why should he do that! A man who is destitute does not throw money away. Unless he is a fool, and Faljan was no fool.

Nay, he was shrewd, careful, honest in his dealings with men and gods; and hence he could not understand the thing that had happened to him. The omens had been sought. Curtius Criba had dis-

patched him to Rome on the very day that the last yellowing leaf fell from the grapevine alongside the farmhouse; and before departing, both Faljan and his farmer had made the proper sacrifices to the proper gods. It was all a shocking riddle, beyond comprehension.

"You have a place to lodge?" asked the Syrian, as they passed through the high gloomy gate and into the city.

Ordinarily Faljan would have said yes to such a question. Did he but have his bullocks in front of him, he would presently be turning off to the left, driving them along between the Palatine Hill and the Circus Maximus where chariot races were held, and thence proceeding west to where the cattle market smelled familiarly of dung against the bank of the yellow Tiber. There, in that vicinity, Faljan knew many taverns and eating booths—except that now he must avoid them. For if it chanced that he did not recover the cattle, a few days would see Criba ravening upon his trail; and thus no one in Faljan's usual haunts must be able to bear witness that he had so much as gained the city.

"Nay, I have no lodging," he said, and kept on to the north with his Syrian acquaintance.

"I know a good tavern."

"Where?"

"In the Subura."

"I do not like the Subura district; with its ruffians and all, it is little better than a snake pit."

"Not with me to assist and advise you," said Ershutif pleasantly.

Faljan said nothing; but he was pondering the matter. They were swinging round the Palatine, the big flat slabs of the Appian Way now giving place to cobblestones, and the traffic densing up like porridge. To the left appeared the Forum, a jungle of columns and temples and government offices of a magnificence heretofore unheard of in the world. Shadow had begun to creep down upon it from the hill behind. The day was nearly done, this day of woe and great beginning for Faljan the cattle drover.

At the far edge of the Forum they came into the wide fine street known to Romans as the Corso. Hereabouts, on every hand, there were expensive and elaborate shops, selling jewels, rare Phoenician glass and Corinthian bronzes, caged Oriental birds and imported incredible fruits such as no poor man would ever get between his teeth. The traffic was momentarily heavier: chariots rumbling past with a flash of horse legs and the crack of patrician whips, slaves dashing about on errands for short-tempered masters at home, idlers and ped-

dlers and miscellaneous freedmen more numerous than feathers on a raven.

For the space of a moment, a fleeting instant, the black shadow of anxiety lifted from Faljan's heart. Ah, what a city, what an unequaled metropolis! And how like honey it drew its bees from the ends of the earth! Black Ethiopians and blacker Numidians, fair-haired Gauls, Saxons, Germans out of the north, Medes, Persians, and Scythians, people of Thrace, Greeks and Jews and swarthy Spaniards, Egyptians, Arabs, and many more that Faljan could never have named for origin. All nations, races, breeds, and tribes of men were represented here, humble or varyingly better parts of the fierce and exciting stew called Rome.

Wait! Look at this fellow plodding along the Corso. Notice him well, for he will figure in Faljan's life, learning a mark upon the drover's destiny never to be effaced. A big blond giant of a man, wearing an undressed wolfskin.

Ershutif got in the giant's way, stopping him and tapping the vials which he carried at his belt,

"A potion to escape bad luck, my friend?"

The blond barbarian threw him an odd frightened glance and hurried on without answer. Ershutif whispered in Faljan's ear,

"An escaped slave, I'll wager. Some surgeon or other has repaired the slit in his ear; yet because our barbarian did not pay enough, did not hire a good surgeon—such as I, for instance, could have recommended—the slit has healed poorly. He will be caught," and saying this, Ershutif laughed.

Faljan gave him a hard glance. The Syrian seemed to feed upon other people's troubles, the same as a maggot on dead sheep. And as for that, why was the villain traipsing back into Rome with Faljan, when the drover possessed only a few coppers and was therefore not worth robbing! Ershutif would bear watching.

Suddenly, as our two wayfarers were about to leave the fine wide Corso and plunge off to the right into a street which was little more than a dark alley, they heard a commotion and halted to see what it might be.

It was a woman.

III.

She resembled a being from another and more glorious world, a goddess serene in a golden chair set upon a litter and the litter borne on poles in the grasp of eight black slaves, intensely midnight fellows with huge earrings and scarlet livery. Ahead of the litter walked still more slaves, these armed with spears, in case the Corso's jam of pedestrians and laden donkeys did not see in time, and as a result needed to be forced out of their mistress' way.

As for the woman herself, she rode indifferent to the traffic swarming about her. It parted when her black men thrust with their spears, and that sufficed. Once a tiny dog yapped from her lap, and at this she smiled and lifted it up, a peevish monstrous little creature that Faljan could not have believed alive and real, had he not heard its shrill squeak of a voice.

The litter came nearer. It was inlaid with ivory and ebony, and across the top of its four upright posts stretched an awning of cerulean blue, in order that sun might be kept from the lady. She carried in addition a silken parasol; and when now and then a presumptuous fly settled near her, a female slave reached up from alongside the litter and flicked it away with a long fan made of heron plumes.

Faljan stood and gaped his fill. Not at the rich litter or the liveried slaves, the tiny impossible dog; but at the woman. He had never beheld such a creature. She was a young woman, even very young, although it was difficult to tell about that. The lower half of her face was covered over, above its veil appearing little more than a pair of brown eyes, soft and limpid, shaped delightfully like almonds. Above the eyes lifted a mass of high-piled hair, amber in color.

"She has hair beyond belief," murmured Faljan in amazement.

"Most of it is false," Ershutif said. "Yet they do say that her breasts are tipped with genuine gold, and I have no way of disproving it."

"Why gold?"

"In order to give golden milk, if the occasion should arise. She is Poppaea Sabina, the most dangerous woman in all Rome."

"Certainly the most beautiful. Her skin is pure as new snow. It does not look like the skin of a human being."

"Because it is part jackass," grinned the Syrian. "Of course! See behind her litter that drove of asses? Five hundred of them, and each a she with foal. Poppaea uses their milk for her daily bath."

Faljan transferred his gaze to the asses,

"They are shod with gold!"

"Why not, my friend, why not! Otho is rich. That is her husband; although she has ambitions to be, not Otho's wife, but the wife of the Emperor."

"You jest," said Faljan shortly. "Nero already has a wife."

"Granted—but when Poppaea desires something, she gets it—sooner or later. She has a good figure, eh! How would you like to find her in your bed some cold winter night?"

Faljan smiled briefly. She was passing now. He gazed after her, observing her slender neck, the proud-held head, the envy with which everyone made way for her.

"Where is she going?" he murmured.

"To her town house, I suppose. She has been at one of her villas in the country, and returns because this evening Nero sings at the theater and Poppaea must be there to flatter him. Caesar loves to be flattered, and she loves to flatter him—it is a nice arrangement. However, let us be on our way."

They turned off into an alley, from here on obliged to watch their ribs against the prod of an increasingly numerous throng of people. The Subura lay like a crease between two hills, their higher green slopes given over to the spacious and uncrowded villas of the rich, the ravine itself a rookery for the poor. On either side of the narrow ascending way there rose high buildings, rickety tenements housing too many people, and quite successfully shutting out the sun even in broad day. Shops stood elbow to elbow along the way, and more often than not booths had been pushed out into the street itself, so that it became practically no street at all. Pedestrians swarmed back and forth and up and down like ants, shouting, jostling, or merely pursuing their way in grim silence. A woman trundled a charcoal brazier in Faljan's direction; she had food for sale, the odor of her garlic and sausages and warm bread rising pungent to his nostrils.

"I am hungry," he said, and halted.

"These people are shameless robbers," said Ershutif quickly. "We can eat at the Heel of Achilles."

"The tavern you were telling me about?"

"Yes," said Ershutif, as the drover came along; "and a good name for a Greek tavern, eh! The heel is Rome, and the arrow piercing it

is the corrupt proprietor. You must remember to count your fingers after you have shaken hands with him—that is always wise with Greeks. Ah, but I forgot—you are with me, and so need have no fear.”

All at once Faljan was drenched with a vile-smelling liquid. He shook it off his head and looked up angrily. A woman on a balcony had emptied a chamber pot onto him, and people were halting to laugh. Ershutif said in a rapid eager tone,

“That is against the law. You could sue her and recover damages. I would be your witness—I saw it all. What do you say, shall we sue?”

Faljan had pried up a loose cobblestone, and now he hurled it at the woman on the balcony, missing her but giving her a great fright as the stone rolled about in the apartment behind her, after the manner of a beast seeking prey. Then she got her voice back,

“Oh, you country lout, to do such a thing! May your mother be defiled!”

“She is already defiled,” retorted Faljan; “bearing a son who grew up to be polluted by what you ought to be drinking instead of throwing into the street.”

The woman screamed in rage, Ershutif laughingly plucked the drover’s sleeve and they went on. A little distance farther up the street they came to a door, and here the Syrian stopped. There was a bush painted on the door, above it a poor representation of the hero Achilles; especially poor his heel, which was painted in undue size, with a bleeding arrow transfixing it.

“This is the place,” said Ershutif; “may you find comfort and pleasure within.”

CHAPTER 2.

I.

THE interior of the tavern was larger than it promised from the street, but wretchedly lit. Smudgy little lamps hung indifferently about, burning a bad quality of olive oil and giving out more smoke than illumination. In so dark and unfamiliar a den, Faljan was glad to have the Syrian for guide.

"Keep with me," said Ershutif, and led him off to one side, where there was a low platform and a man seated on it on a bench, like a crop watcher at grain-ripening time.

He was an enormously fat man, with the jowls of a marketable hog, and small eyes hiding in folds of greasy flesh; the eyes gazed at you, but kept you from seeing them in return: to look upon such a man was equivalent to staring at a closed shutter. There was a little table in front of him, on it a goblet of wine, seasoned—if Faljan could trust his nose—with resin, this being the Greek custom.

"Hail, O Greek!" exclaimed Ershutif heartily. "I bring you a friend of mine, having the name of—" Here the Syrian bogged down, yet when he turned inquiringly to Faljan, there was no trace of embarrassment in him. "By the whiskers of Alexander, I have forgotten it."

"My name is Faljan—and how could you forget it when I never told it to you!"

The Greek put forward a huge arm, on the end of it a tiny moist baby's hand. Faljan grasped it.

"You are strong," murmured the Greek, getting his hand back where it could be safe.

"These countrymen are very powerful in the body," explained Ershutif blandly. "In the mind weak, to be sure—but then, not even Caesar can have everything."

The Greek smiled broadly, and it struck Faljan that the two of them, Ershutif and the proprietor of the inn, were exchanging a

secret sign. As if agreeing that here, in the person of the cattle drover, there was a lump that might serve a useful purpose—if the matter were handled cleverly.

“You are my guest,” the Greek was murmuring. “Seek out a bench, and be welcome.”

“Our thanks,” nodded Ershutif, and abruptly his eyes glistened. “Where is Lydia?”

“What do you care!” the Greek retorted, with a hunch of the shoulders. “You use nothing but your eyes upon her, you skinflint.”

Ershutif laughed and took Faljan to the center of the tavern. There was an irregular scattering of tables and benches, men sitting at them with goblets and clasp knives, hard at work on their evening meal. Faljan and his companion found place, the Syrian balled his fist and fell to pounding the table.

“Service!” he cried. “In the name of sweet Bacchus, a little service!”

A child came hurrying out from the kitchen. Faljan saw her as small and painfully thin, a pair of scratched dirty legs still lacking the agreeable fullness of a woman. She was clad in a scant tunic, the garment badly worn and patched, and not even bound about the middle by a belt. A child? Her eyes were hawk sharp, the mouth bitter and disillusioned; life was apparently no mystery to this starved rapacious creature. She was perhaps ten years of age.

“Fetch us wine,” said the Syrian, with the air of a patrician. “Quick, my girl!”

“What grade of wine?”

“You have only one grade, and that the vilest. Fetch it, little scum.”

“At once,” said the girl, and having cast an exploring glance at Faljan, she skipped away.

“Is that Lydia?” Faljan asked curiously.

“No.”

The cattle drover gazed about the tavern, his eyes by this time well used to the smoky light. In a corner near the street door, somewhat back out of the way, stood the carved figure of a male divinity perhaps three feet in height. Faljan rose and went toward it, on his way picking up a crumb of bread from a table. In the Campagna, such carved figures were to be seen in every human habitation, representing, as they did, the special god watching over the house and everyone in it, from master to guest to lowest slave. The drover meant to do what he always did upon entering Curtius Criba’s house; he

was going to sacrifice to the household god; in this instance, the god of the tavern.

Except that when he had drawn near with his morsel of bread, he saw that it was not a god but only the caricature of one, being a ribald thing with a big detachable phallus so contrived that it could be unhooked from the rest of the body. Uncertainly Faljan put down his bread and muttered a supplication, shortening it when a gust of laughter went up behind him. The tipplers of the inn were ridiculing him; what in the country was worship was here a joke.

He shrugged and returned to the table. The girl appeared with earthenware goblets containing wine, and likewise she had fetched a bowl of water.

"Pay now," she said.

"Be off!" cried Ershutif, and began to water his wine with a careful hand.

The child pointed to a sign painted on the wall. It showed a farm-yard cock, this legend inscribed beneath it: "When the cock crows, you shall have credit; until then, pay when served."

Ershutif dug out his purse,

"You could at least wait until we had wet our gullets."

Faljan himself was producing copper; and seeing this, the Syrian exclaimed,

"Shall we match for the wine?"

"If you like—but with my coin."

"You are suspicious," said Ershutif. "Very well, toss."

"I choose heads."

"In which event I am obliged to accept tails."

It came up heads. Ershutif took the coin and examined it to make sure there was not a head on both sides. He paid finally, the girl clutching the money and smiling upon Faljan,

"Have I served you well?"

"Well enough."

"Then give Mikrella a small copper for her service."

"I have none to spare."

He got the water bowl and set to thinning his wine, absorbed in the task until he became aware of a hand sneaking toward his wallet. It was Mikrella, quiet as a snake in a milk house. Faljan seized her wrist and she cried out in pain, but when he let her go she cursed him,

"May holes rot in your belly, O friend of Ershutif!"

Faljan took a swallow of wine, then presently another and larger

swallow. He felt better. Wine was a good thing; it was male and female in one, trickling down inside you to breed warm courage. Nine tawny cattle lost, yet were they really lost! Tomorrow he would go to the market and if he saw them there, which was likely, he could claim the beasts. Criba's earmark was upon them; there would be no disguising that. Also, there was such a thing as Roman law; it would intervene, Faljan getting back his bullocks and the thieves punished. Then he could—

"Think not on your cattle," said Ershutif. "They are even now being butchered in the hills, only the hideless meat to be fetched into the city for sale."

The drover sent a fierce scowl across the table,

"Are you a magician, to tell me what my own head is thinking!"

"Perhaps."

Gloom stole back upon Faljan; he felt himself abandoned and weak, needing comfort beyond the wine in his belly. He called Mikrella and ordered a dish of lentil soup; and after he had eaten this, he asked for fresh curds and bread.

"You are spending all your money," observed the Syrian.

"No use clinging to what little I have left," Faljan answered. "If a demon catches your bird, why not give him the cage as well!"

The girl brought the curds and bread, bared her teeth at Faljan,

"I fetched the hardest bread, hoping that it might break your teeth."

"Hope is marrow without a bone to stiffen it," the drover retorted, and fell to eating.

The Greek shouted at Mikrella; she began to light more lamps, the customers straightened up. Everybody glanced toward a curtained door at the rear of the inn, waiting impatiently and whispering to one another. Then abruptly an excited murmur ran about.

"Lydia! Lydia is coming!"

II.

She came gliding out from behind the curtain on such noiseless swift feet as to seem more apparition than solid flesh. Whirling as she advanced, body straight as a spindle, and her armless robe swishing up around her legs until it was plain to all beholders that she

wore nothing under it, the dancer paused and rose to her toes, her uplifted hands making little clacking sounds with bits of woods which she held in her fingers. The patrons of the inn thumped on the tables by way of greeting.

The woman paid no attention to them. Very slowly and deliberately, she fell to weaving her steps, muscles gliding and playing to a subtle complicated rhythm, bare feet swishing faster, the clacking of the little wooden things more and more urgent. Faljan observed that she was young and tall and slender, and yet luxuriously rounded; an extremely compelling woman, except for the eyes, which remained blank as the eyes of a dead creature. It was not the eyes that were alive, but the swaying body, whirling and undulating like a willow tree, until with a convulsive shudder she swept her glance around the circle of watching men in invitation, her nostrils twitching, a crooning sigh throbbing out of her mouth, her hands clutching her breasts—they were firm breasts, the cattle drover noted, beautiful as quince fruit.

The tavern customers shifted on their benches, Ershutif whispered to Faljan,

“There is more to come, and you must see it well. Sit here in my place, so that you will not have to twist your neck off.”

Absently Faljan shifted places with him, Ershutif and the Greek proprietor exchanged faint nods of satisfaction. Faljan did not notice. The dancer had relaxed for a moment, and was now preparing for a second climax. Her posturings grew more violent than before, a fine dew of perspiration shone on her brow, she panted as if desperately pursued; nevertheless the men surrounding her were so many harp strings, to be seized and plucked as she willed, twanged and released with insidious tantalizing promise. The tempo quickened, the dancer sped faster, on and on in a crescendo of simulated desire—then suddenly she gasped, halted, staggered blindly, and with a spent face dragged herself off in the direction of her room, while the Greek’s customers beat their tables so strongly in applause that the earthenware jumped and rattled.

“Did you enjoy it?” Ershutif grinned.

“Yes,” said Faljan; and he added, “I suppose she is to be had?”

“What else! See those men lining up?”

Faljan saw them. Half a dozen, perhaps ten men were shuffling up to pay the Greek, after which they were free to go in to Lydia, each in his turn.

“How much does it cost?” said Faljan.

"More than you possess," replied the Syrian; "and anyhow, it is a waste of money. She wears herself out on the dance floor, keeps nothing back for private use."

There was a small commotion at this point. The Greek had uttered a cry and was rushing with surprising speed to the household god near the door, unhooking the big phallus and belaboring a certain man with it.

"You cheat!" he cried. "This time I have caught you to rights!"

The patrons roared with laughter, the Greek chased the culprit out of doors and calmly hung the phallus back in place. Ershutif was explaining,

"That one tried to get to Lydia without paying, but the Greek is shrewder than he looks."

Mikrella sauntered up with her hands on her poor bony hips. She indicated the line of men with scorn,

"And what about *me*?"

"You are a child," said Ershutif. "Come back in three years."

"I am *not* a child!" she retorted. "I am nearly a woman!"

"Ha ha!" said Ershutif, in great mirth.

"Yes," she continued fiercely, "and in three years I shall be so much sought after that rogues like you, Ershutif, will not find enough money to buy my pleasure."

"What pleasure are you talking about?" mocked the Syrian, and he got up long enough to give her a kick that sent her tumbling back among the tables.

"How much to visit the mother?" Faljan asked stubbornly.

"Put her away from you," said Ershutif, in a sharp tone. "She will be here another day, another evening. Let us speak, not of tavern dancers who are all promise and no performance, but of important matters."

Faljan looked at him steadily. Now it was coming. The purpose behind all this shell of friendship.

III.

"What is to be done?" said Ershutif, and sighed as if it were his own problem, instead of Faljan's. "You cannot return home without your cattle; and as for recovering the beasts, you have no more chance of that than of snaring last winter's fog."

"I will go back to Curtius Criba one day," muttered the drover.

"As the oak goes back to the acorn, my friend. He would have you beaten and chained like a dog, wretched in debt to the end of your sorry days. Nay, face it—your present destiny lies, not in your erstwhile farmer, but in Rome."

"That is not true," said Faljan, without conviction.

"You are become a Roman pawn, but how eat?" continued Ershutif briskly. "Impossible to go on the dole and get free grain, because that requires an established residence in the city; and before you could prove such residence, you would be dead of hunger."

Faljan waited, alert and careful behind the face which the Syrian no doubt took for stupid.

"Of course, you might take a little basket and stand at the door of some patrician of a morning," murmured Ershutif reflectively. "There are many who do that. You wait and look humble, say loud flattering things about the master of the house; then when he is good and ready the steward comes out and gives you scraps of food."

"Leave off," grumbled Faljan. "I am not a beggar."

Ershutif was well pleased with this answer,

"In which event you will insist upon earning your food. Good—I know the very place. It is close by the tavern here, actually on the next street back. There is a big corn mill, and a miller needing strong men."

"So?"

"A man known as Synistor—have you heard the name?"

"Not that I recall. Why should I?"

"It is of no moment. Synistor is the miller, and there come to him people with grain dealt out to them by the civic authorities—the dole, you understand. In the beginning, these free receivers took their grain to the mill and there helped grind it; but of late years they have grown weary of such routine, and nowadays they merely sell it for what they can get. Thus it happens that there is always much grain to be ground, and few to grind it. I imagine that Synistor would be glad of your help in this matter."

Faljan considered it,

"How is the grinding done?"

"Well, there are huge stones, turning the one upon the other—as you no doubt know. And fastened to the apparatus—the stones, grain hopper, meal container—there is a long wooden beam, which the workmen push round and round."

"Which is work for donkeys," said Faljan, with a flush. "As a

matter of truth, in the country we use donkeys for that very purpose.”

“And here also,” said the Syrian.

“Eh?”

“You are a wondrously husky fellow, I mean to say—sound and young blooded—the beam will be just the place for you.”

Faljan stared at him in the beginnings of suspicion, the Syrian smiled slowly back—then without notice, the floor gave way under the cattle drover and he plunged crashing down out of sight.

IV.

He struck hard ground with a thud, sprang to his feet. Too late. With a creak of iron hinges, the floor above his head was already closing to, taking the light with it. Laughter came down to him, muffled and derisive. Because of the trick that Ershutif had played on him. Change places with me and see Lydia the dancer without twisting your neck off! Faljan had done so, sitting this time over a drop door, and then at a signal—no doubt from the Greek, or some other confederate—the trap had been sprung.

Faljan reached up with his hands, but the floor of the tavern was too high overhead. When he jumped he could touch it, and no more; there was nothing he could seize and hold to, pull himself up by. He began to feel his way about the cellar, falling over the bench which had tumbled down in here with him—and cursing the rascal who had befriended him, when even a countryman ought to have known that a Syrian will steal his mother's eyes and sell them to the street urchins for marbles.

In his circuit of the cellar he came to a runway cut in earth and proceeding horizontally back under the tavern. At the end of the runway appeared a faint light. He entered this corridor, the light becoming stronger as he felt his way along. There was a torch, thrust into a socket just beyond a barred iron gate. A big man stood near the torch, and beside him two who by their manner must be slaves. The slaves had clubs, the big man had no weapon that Faljan could see.

They heard the cattle drover stumbling toward them, whereupon, in the most matter-of-fact way imaginable, the big man unlocked the gate. It was as if he got recruits for the mill every night like this,

as perhaps he did. The big one would be the Synistor that Ershutif had mentioned; the miller.

The two slaves held their clubs ready, but Faljan said, as he approached,

“Let us have peace—I know when I am beaten.”

“H’m,” rumbled the big man, as he swung back the gate; “this one has sense.”

The slaves dropped their clubs and seized Faljan by the arms. They escorted him out of the runway, the drover permitting them. Synistor peered at him, gratified to observe that his catch was a powerful fellow, still in his twenties; a man like Faljan would be able to grind a deal of grain, especially if the whips were put to him.

“All right,” said the miller, “bring him along.”

Synistor took the torch from its socket and began to walk toward the mill, Faljan following in the grip of the two slaves. Then all at once he flung them aside and sprang upon Synistor, giving him a blow in the back that sent him sprawling. The torch flew from the miller’s hand, he leaped up and grappled with Faljan. The slaves endeavored to help their master, though with little effect; these particular slaves were lightweight and frail, so that it was Synistor himself who was the man of competent muscle—Faljan was aware of that the instant they came to grips. One of the slaves howled in pain, Synistor snapped at him,

“Shut up, lest we be heard! Get back and give me a chance at him. He will learn what it is to attack Synistor!”

Faljan slugged without speaking, his blows falling fast and hard, and the miller giving as good as he got. They were rather evenly matched, but the slave’s outcry had been heard in the street, and now his fellow yelped in alarm,

“Tarbuckets, O Synistor—the Tarbuckets are here!”

In other words, police. The odd and somewhat ridiculous blend of fireman and soldier who were charged with keeping order in Rome of a night; and who, since fire was the city’s greatest danger, carried by custom little rope buckets made waterproof by the addition of tar. The Tarbuckets came running up from the back street, shouting for Faljan and Synistor to leave off and give an account of themselves for disturbing the peace of Rome.

The slaves had darted off into hiding, but neither Faljan nor Synistor paid any attention. They were hitting and wrenching, Synistor plainly intent upon gouging out the drover’s eyes, and Faljan so enraged by this that he smashed the miller once more to the ground,

cracking, by the sound, a bone somewhere in his carcass. Then the Tarbuckets seized them both.

"I am Synistor!" cried the miller, in a confident voice. "This thief was trying to break into my granary and steal grain."

"He lies," said Faljan, panting hard. "I was trapped for service on his grinding beam."

"Silence!" cried the Tarbucket who appeared to be in charge. "The matter is for the magistrate to settle. Come along, the two of you."

V.

They trailed down the Subura to a night court maintained in the district for the disposal of just such rowdy business as this. The Tarbuckets gave quick terse evidence, Synistor talked angrily, the magistrate asked questions of Faljan and looked at the miller—particularly at Synistor's shoulder, which was sagging limp as a weathercloth in a calm of wind.

"The prisoner broke your collarbone?" asked the magistrate thoughtfully.

"He did, and I respectfully demand that the villain be set to work for me, remaining in my charge until he has served out his sentence."

The magistrate silenced him with a gesture, turned back to Faljan. A strong fellow, this prisoner. Tall and with heavily muscled arms, legs like marble columns, a magnificent chest and neck, and in his face perhaps even intelligence. Gray steady eyes, black hair, lips at once sensitive and obstinate. Altogether a kind of young Hercules, and handsome to boot. The magistrate made up his mind,

"Synistor, I deny your request, there being better uses for the prisoner than breaking his back upon your beam."

The miller cursed under his breath, but to no avail. The Tarbuckets took Faljan out through a corridor, traversed the Corso with him, threaded a street which the cattle drover had never seen before, and at length halted before a gloomy big iron door. A rap and they were admitted, the Tarbuckets got a receipt for their prisoner and gave him over into new hands. Again Faljan marched, this time down to a dungeon blacker than the insides of a black cow, so that when the

door was unlocked for him he could see nothing beyond it. He stepped uncertainly forward, the door clanged behind him.

He could smell many sweaty human bodies, and in stepping forward again he trod upon sleeping men and got a kick for his trouble. It was some little time before he managed to find a bit of unoccupied floor.

The drover lay down, hearing the familiar rustle of straw under him, but not comforted by this. Faljan had never been in prison before, and he did not like it.

On the other hand, he was young and healthy and very tired, so that presently he slept.

CHAPTER 3.

I.

OPENING his eyes next morning, Faljan was at first bewildered and then astonished. He lay in a tangled mass of strange men, sardined up against legs and arms and heads he had never seen before—men ragged and coarse and fierce of aspect, apparently accustomed only to hard times and blows. They snored and made noises with their lips, muttering like beasts until they awakened, and then yawning drearily and cursing. Faljan rolled over, thinking to get up.

“Have a care!” said a deep voice.

It came from a burly fellow in middle age, a broken nose smeared about his face, and on his shoulders and legs many terrible scars. This man had grumbled the warning at Faljan, yet upon catching sight of the drover he turned pleasant,

“Oh ho, a fresh fish for the griddle, eh! What is your name?”

“Faljan.”

“I am called Juculus.”

A clang sounded from the corridor; promptly everybody jumped up and began to hunt for earthenware bowls, trading with one another, sometimes snatching and fighting over a coveted vessel until it lay broken on the stone floor. On the other side of the grilled door appeared a couple of soldiers, carrying a huge wooden vat and a big ladle. By the smell, they were bringing porridge, hot and burnt. The two soldiers fell to ladling the stuff through the bars and into the bowls which the prisoners held up, and when Juculus roared out that his dish had been only half filled, one of the soldiers shouted back,

“Be silent, you dog!”

“Dog, is it!” Juculus retorted. “Be careful lest the dog bite!”

The soldiers paid no further heed to him. They shoveled the food with quick careless strokes, sometimes spilling it onto the floor or

onto a prisoner's head, because of so much jostling. Howls and complaints went up, Faljan working his way forward to get a bowl of the food, and then withdrawing to eat it. He was used to plain fare, and burnt porridge was still porridge. But there was a chanting sound somewhere close, a vaguely disquieting noise. Faljan could not locate it; it came from one of the prisoners, but more than this he did not know. He said to Juculus,

"Who is that, singing?"

"Singing—it's cat yowling! From the freak over there in the corner."

Juculus pointed him out, a thin frail man who had no porridge and apparently had sought none. He was on his knees, hands clasped, face to the wall.

"He is what is known as a Christian," shrugged Juculus of the broken nose.

"And what exactly is that?"

"Christians are religious fanatics of some sort. They are mad."

"What is he saying? I hear words, but—"

"I suppose he is praying to his god," Juculus laughed, and he lifted his voice, "Hey, Zenos, if you are praying to your god to get you out of this cesspool, why doesn't he do it!"

The man turned quietly and said,

"I have not asked him."

"In that case you are a blockhead, and he with you."

"What is your god like?" demanded another. "Does he look anything resembling Nero?"

"The man cannot be praying," Faljan objected. "There is no altar or shrine in front of him—no image."

"Cheaper that way," Juculus murmured. "Images cost money, and they are not necessary, are they? A man can lie in bed and call to his wife to come to him, and she will hear him and obey. She does not need to be in sight when he shouts at her."

"Either she will come," put in a man on the other side of Juculus, "or the neighbor's wife will. And no difference. Woman are all alike, once you get to grips with them."

A gust of laughter went up, so disturbing Zenos the Christian that he begged them to be silent.

"Ah, you are the one to keep silent," Juculus retorted. "You are a fool, and fools should keep their mouths shut."

"If they did that," said Faljan, "they would no longer be fools."

The Christian resumed his praying, but this time in so low a voice

that it could give no grounds for complaint. The rest of the prisoners finished their porridge and tossed their bowls away, after which some of them lay down to sleep, and others played catch-finger.

An interesting game, catch-finger; excellent for passing the time. Faljan squatted down opposite Juculus, for a try at it. Each man held up his left hand, and with his right shot out an unpredictable number of fingers; the two men did this simultaneously, at the same time attempting to guess how many fingers the opposing player had thrust out, the points thus made being marked and kept in sight on the fingers of the upheld left hand. It was a game for quick wits, but since neither Faljan nor his partner had any money to bet with, it soon became tiresome, and they stopped.

"Well," said Juculus, with a yawn, "you will be chosen, I suppose."

"For what?"

"The arena."

"The arena? And what should I do there?"

"Fight, and—if you are unlucky—die. It will be soon, too, because Nero sang last night. You know, in former times the gladiatorial combats were given upon the occasion of a god's holiday, a founding anniversary, or to commemorate a great victory, a wedding, funeral, the coming of age of some half-witted patrician or other; but Nero has changed all that. He gives games in the arena to suit his own tremendous petty doings; and having been applauded last night by people calling his voice divine—because otherwise they might lose their lives—he is going to be generous enough to invite the public to the arena where they may see wretches like you and me die in the sand. An exceedingly kind and thoughtful fellow, this Caesar of ours."

Faljan was alarmed, but quickly he told himself that there was no reason to be. It was a drollery.

"The broken-nosed Juculus," he decided, "is lying to me, and watching, in order to see how I will take it."

II.

Juculus was not lying. Three days later, at the hour when the sun was approaching its zenith, soldiers came into the big prison room, and after discussing the probable abilities of this and that man, made a selection. The men chosen were tied about the wrist with rope,

every two men joined as a pair. Faljan's partner was the burly Juculus.

"March!"

The column shuffled out into the corridor, and then off down a long dark winding passage. Faljan was still incredulous.

"I have attended games at the arena," he said. "Gladiators are trained fighters, not amateurs. We are not going to the arena, but to another prison."

"Look, my stubborn friend," retorted Juculus good-naturedly, "our noble Caesar is at peace with the world. The Britons have quieted down, the Rhine and the Danube are barriers behind which savages growl without teeth, Parthia drinks milk from Rome's goblet, the Black Sea affords no more pirates, and all imperial roads have been cleared of robber bands. Draw your own conclusions."

"I do not understand you."

"Then you are thicker in the head than the Christian marching there ahead of us. The situation is this: Nero has no prisoners of war to feed into the arena, and therefore he must comb the prisons for such as you see here. Odds and ends of men, surely; but they can die, which is really all that is necessary."

Faljan said no more. They were passing out of the prison house and into the street. An escort of soldiers fell in on either side of them, a centurion led the way off toward Mars Field.

"Well, it has been pleasant talking," said Juculus. "I would rather be killed by a man I know than by a stranger."

"You and I are matched, then?"

"The rope at our wrists shows that. Speaking of killing, however, I shall probably win against you."

"So you think that!" exclaimed Faljan, in sudden anger. "Just why?"

"Because I have had training. That is how I came to be in prison just now. I had entered a gladiators' school, but grew weary of the beatings; I ran away and they caught me looting a house for what I could find in it."

"I have done no crime," Faljan said resentfully. "I do not deserve the arena."

"What is the difference! It is a weary sad and aggravating world, and if you die there's an end to it."

The Christian had begun to mumble his prayers, the sound so monotonous that at length Faljan was irritated. He gave Zenos a kick, and the praying stopped.

"Kick him again, but harder," Juculus suggested. "They tell me that Christians kill children and drink their blood, which is going too far, eh!"

Faljan stared gloomily ahead. He was to attend the games, not as a spectator high in a cheap seat, as formerly, but this time as a fighter. It did not seem possible. A fighter? The drover had fought a thousand fights, at cattle wells and on controversial pasture and in taverns, and now and then also in dark rooms upon the occasion of a husband or father returning home too soon; yet this was going to be different. Not a few broken bones, but gushing blood and even death were the fruits of fighting in the arena.

"I still do not believe it," he muttered.

"No?" smiled Juculus. "Then lift your eyes."

The arena was just ahead, bulky and ominous. Tramping in silence, the column veered off to the left, marched halfway round the structure, and paused while an attendant opened a gate to them.

"In!"

They marched through the gate, their feet gradually descending as the corridor took them down under the floor of the arena. Passageways kept crossing the main corridor; the column turned, shuffled ahead, turned again. Soldiers called commands, seized this and that pair by the rope and led them off. Finally Juculus and Faljan and perhaps eight others were shunted into a room and left there.

To wait until they should be needed.

III.

The onetime drover of Curtius Criba sat and pondered the catastrophe that had come upon him: lost cattle and a trap door, prison, transfer to the arena, and now the threat of death from which he saw no escape. He could not stomach the prospect before him; it seemed inconceivable that he should end like this. Life was to be savored and lived, not to yield up in pain. Unless you were old, and then of course it made little difference.

Perhaps he would kill Juculus, instead of being killed by him.

This possibility did not comfort him. Faljan had slain many animals, both in farmyard and on the chase, but a human creature was something else. A man was not a four-foot, he was a being set apart,

connected by invisible tendons with the vast world of spirits and demons and gods; all of which made the killing of him a matter fearful even to contemplate.

The glimmer of metal caught his eye. It was a big helmet, lying on the floor beside him. His. And the metal sheath covering his chest, likewise his. Issued to him for the purposes of the fight to come. Shin guards also, and about his loins a kilt of lapped leather plated with iron scales. Finally a sword, lying forgotten across his knees. They had dressed him like this.

Yells sounded faintly from the arena. People were struggling and dying up there. The games had been in progress a long time now. It would soon be the turn of Faljan and his antagonist. The scarred man with the broken nose. Juculus.

"You had better practice with your sword!" cried an attendant. "Otherwise you will not know how to handle it."

"I know nothing of swords," said Faljan, without glancing up.

"So much the worse for you. Ah, but then it does not matter, I suppose."

The drover looked up, his gray eyes clouded and heavy,

"What do you mean?"

"Why, man, cast a glance at Juculus and you have your answer!"

Juculus stood at the far side of the room, swinging a huge net to and fro, like a fisherman preparing to cast. Very few weapons had Juculus: a dagger at his belt, a slender three-pronged spear known as a trident, and a net—that was all.

"I am the net-thrower," said Juculus, seeing that Faljan was watching him. "And you, my friend, are the Gaul."

"I am no Gaul."

"It is the part you play. Come, now, you say you have seen games—have you never witnessed a net-thrower strive against a secutor, or vice versa? Surely!"

Faljan had seen such contests, and he recalled how they came out. An inferior netter could almost always slay a man with armor and sword. It was the treacherous net which made the difference.

A trumpet sounded, a centurion threw open the door and strode in.

"Up and into formation by twos!" he cried. "Lose no time. Caesar does not like to be kept waiting."

Faljan rose and put on his helmet, took his sword. He marched off beside Juculus, he of the broken nose still practicing with his net, and only at the stern order of a soldier folding the thing and carrying it over his shoulder, in what was apparently the proper manner.

Two and two down the corridor, ahead of Faljan and Juculus the Christian Zenos and a mate. This last one was complaining of an empty belly,

"They might have fed us first!"

"Waste food on those about to die?" Juculus scoffed. "That would be nonsense."

"It is the same with killing pigs," said Faljan bitterly. "The brutes get no feed for a day before the butchering, since it could not become meat in so brief a time, and would only clog the guts against their being cleaned."

Juculus had been peering ahead, counting with the help of his moving lips,

"I don't like this! There are four pairs besides us, O Faljan—each a net-and-secutor combination. We shall all ten fight at the same time, which will distract attention from you and me. By the black hide of Pluto, we deserve to be better noticed in the act of dying! That is to say, *you* deserve it."

Rage pulsed up in Faljan, but he said nothing. Their feet were trudging up a slight incline, daylight ahead, and with it a steadily increasing murmur of voices. The so-called gladiators came up into the arena itself, and for the first time. Faljan and his companions had taken no part in the parade which preceded the opening of the games, and they had not been permitted to salute Caesar. They were prison birds, because of which they were forbidden these honorable acts.

"A little farther apart!"

The crowd laughed and watched, while the arena guards spaced the five sets of fighters. They would attack in concert, enough room between the pairs to insure a free play of weapons. It amused the spectators that the poor wretches did not understand the arrangement.

"Stand and await the signal!" cried a herald, and stepped back.

Faljan was gazing numbly at Juculus. The racket of the crowd was an immense compelling roar in the ears of the cattle drover, yet in his gloom he did not so much as glance at the spectators. He only hated them. A curse upon the Roman mob, sitting ringed around up yonder to be amused by blood and death.

"Ready! Attack!"

IV.

Juculus was taking his time; indeed, this was the basic strategy of a net-thrower. He held the trident in his left hand, and with his right he swung the meshes leisurely round and round, so as to keep their folds straight. Faljan, circling with the heavy sword in his grasp, watched, by instinct, not the trident but the whirling net. Once in its folds, he knew well, he was lost; he would then be unable to use his sword, the strands of the net were far too tough to tear asunder.

"I seek not thee, but a fish!" Juculus was declaiming, in a mocking voice; "why flee from me, O bumpkin!"

The net flashed out—Faljan dodged, got safe away. Then a roar of applause went up from the spectators—on Faljan's right a secutor had gone down, tangled in the enemy net. The drover kept watchful with his sword, aware, without looking, of what was happening to the fallen secutor. The net-thrower had turned to the podium for directions, the vanquished fighter was holding up the forefinger of his right hand in a plea for mercy. Mercy? To save was less exciting than to kill; and accordingly the mob turned thumbs down,

"Slay him, give him the steel!"

The net-thrower drew his dagger, knelt upon his enemy, and cut his throat. A gurgling cry and the man was dead.

Faljan trembled with fury. He struck at Juculus with his sword, wanting to finish it, one way or the other. Juculus kept out of his way, crooning his ironic little song, begging the fish to approach, stand still, be patient yet a while. The meshes swished out again, Faljan dodged again. He knew something of nets; in the country you wove them yourself, flung them upon birds and rabbits. A man could tell when the net was coming; he read it in the tensing of the caster's muscles, the minute hardening of his eye.

Another Gaul went down, got his throat slashed. Presently a third, and at length the fourth, which was Zenos the Christian. There now remained only Faljan and broken-nosed Juculus.

"You get your wish!" Faljan declared savagely. "Everybody is looking at us—so kill me, if you can!"

Juculus began to stalk him, for now that they two were the center

of attraction, the crisis could not long be delayed, a mob being impatient. Faljan parried and dodged, his nostrils closing against the smell of blood coming up out of the sand where the four secutors had died. Shouts arose,

“The Gaul is not bad!”

“He is not good, either!”

“At any rate, not good enough!”

“The netter will win. Five to three he wins!”

Then unexpectedly it seemed that Juculus took fright. He turned and ran, Faljan leaping at his heels with sword lifted high. Ready to deal a death blow, the drover was, but at that instant, as suddenly as Juculus had fled, he whirled and thrust his trident between Faljan’s legs. Criba’s man fell heavily to the sand, and before he could even so much as try to get up, the net was over him. He tore at it desperately, but succeeded only in entangling himself still more securely. The crowd roared with laughter, Juculus launching a vicious jab with the trident—Faljan jerked to one side, the trident missed his throat but plunged into the side of his neck.

“To make you lie quiet!” Juculus explained.

Faljan struggled no more. This was the end of the cul-de-sac, Juculus already with a triumphant foot on his chest and his eyes turning to get his cue. Notably from Caesar, bulky and bored in the podium, since it was Caesar who commonly took the initiative in these decisions.

“Steel, steel!” shouted the mob. “Kill him, cut his throat, finish him with your dagger!”

The thumbs began leisurely to turn down—the sign of death, no more hope. Juculus grinned and knelt on the drover’s chest, then a herald sounded his trumpet and a guard ran up, barking at Faljan,

“Your plea for mercy, fool!”

Ah, so that was what they wanted! The preliminary farce of seeing him lift the forefinger of his right hand, as a sign that he sought their pardon and their clemency! And to what end, since no other secutor today had been spared, and Faljan himself had lost!

“Up with your hand, fellow!” cried the guard angrily.

A slow tumultuous hatred took possession of Faljan. Instead of lifting his forefinger, he turned toward the podium and yelled with all his strength,

“I will never beg! Kill me if you like, but I will not plead for my life!”

There was a wide deep murmur from the crowd, half surprise and

half annoyance. In the podium someone was touching Nero on the shoulder, and he was angling around. It was a woman, dark and middle-aged, though still handsome. She whispered something in Caesar's ear; he shrugged, turned back to the arena. Laughing indulgently, he extended his right thumb, but this time pointed it upward.

Slowly, somewhat reluctantly, the mob followed suit.

CHAPTER 4.

I.

FALJAN returned to the runways underneath the arena certain of but one thing; namely, that he had got himself a wound in the neck. A three-pointed stab from the trident, piercing deep enough to redden him all down his side as far as the hip joint. There was pain, too, although he did not mind this. Actually, he welcomed it; the hurting at least was a fact, as sharp and definite as all else was confusion.

Nor was Juculus free from bewilderment. Striding alongside Faljan, he kept glancing at him with disgust in his eyes,

"I was entitled to slay you. How did it happen that they gave you the thumb, and then reversed it on you!"

"That I know not."

A centurion appeared in front of them, ignoring Juculus and taking Faljan off to the spacious well-lighted room which was called the arena surgery. Bronze and silver instruments hung out from its walls, on shelves stood jugs and vials and little wooden boxes of herbs and drugs which the surgeon used in his calling. A few stools and a couch were the only furniture.

"This is the man that Agrippina bespoke," said the centurion. "Attend to him."

The centurion went away, the surgeon gestured to a slave and the slave came and removed Faljan's armor.

"Get his tunic," said the surgeon, then he made Faljan lie down on the couch.

"Agrippina?" murmured the drover. "The woman with the black hair was Agrippina?"

"Yes."

"The mother of the Emperor?"

"The mother of the Emperor."

The surgeon probed at the wound a little, poured an herb water into it. The stuff burned like forty wasps, nevertheless it soon stopped

the flow of blood. This accomplished, the surgeon stitched the wound two or three times with what appeared to be the tendon of a small animal, or else the split tendon of a big animal, Faljan was not certain which.

The slave returned,

“His tunic is not where he left it.”

There was a brief laugh from the surgeon. Faljan understood. He had cast aside his tunic in a common dressing room, and some underling had filched it away, on the assumption that the owner would never return from the arena—at any rate, not in condition to claim his garment.

“Tell Besidus,” said the surgeon.

The slave went out again, the surgeon poured a goblet full of warm wine laced with honey; this he gave to Faljan, who drank it and felt better. He sat up, shaking his head vigorously in order to clear it of mist.

A man came in with a tunic over his arm. Besidus, the surgeon called him. He resembled a soldier, but his attire was less formal: neither helmet nor armor, but a dagger at his belt, and in his hand a spear.

“Put this on,” he said, and tossed Faljan the tunic.

The drover got into it, Besidus made a sign and they went out into the corridor.

“Who are you?” said Faljan.

“I am an attendant at the Imperial Gladiators’ School. You will see.”

Besidus conducted him to a side door, whence they issued from the underground and found themselves outside the arena. The final trumpets were sounding, and by the time that Faljan got around front, the spectators were pouring out in massive streams. The way was blocked by food vendors offering fabulous bargains, beggars screeching and threatening, prostitutes bent on singling out those who had won on the games and therefore had money for license, but most people paid no attention to this importuning: they were throwing away their now useless programs, shouldering the crowd aside and quarreling among themselves as to the showing made by this and that gladiator, then scattering into the city. The sun was going down; it would soon be dusk in a cool November day.

“Have you been in Agrippina’s service?” asked Besidus, as he went along with the cattle drover.

“No—but it was kindness for her to save me, just the same.”

Besidus let out a guffaw of laughter,

"Kindness! She considered you, more likely, a piece of good material for future games. You are to be trained in the gladiators' school."

"Ah, but I lost against the net-thrower!" exclaimed Faljan, and when his companion only grimaced, either at a loss for an answer or deeming none necessary, the drover continued, "Does it often happen that men are chosen, as I was today?"

"Not too often, and yet not rarely, either. All sorts of people get into Rome's prisons, and in course of feeding this chaff into the arena to fill out the lists, it sometimes chances that a promising bit of wheat is sighted. When this occurs, any member of the royal house has the right to signal him out for training. However, do not get a puffed head from it; you have no skill as yet, and the gladiator's road is hard and long."

"I have no puffed head. I am grateful to be alive."

"Above all, behave yourself," said Besidus tartly. "I am responsible for you until we reach the school, and if you attempt to run away from me you will get my spear in your back."

They made a turn to the left, walked only a little way farther, and halted. Standing in front of them was a low stone building which appeared to be a barracks for soldiers, except that its barred windows caused it to resemble more nearly a prison. A knock at the door, a slave opening it; Besidus unnecessarily important,

"Announce us to the Director—at once!"

The slave bowed and introduced them into a kind of office, left them with a gray-haired man who must be the Director.

"A recruit named Faljan," said Besidus, "held by Agrippina for training."

Besidus was dismissed, the Director began to walk around Faljan, feeling his arms and legs as a stock buyer might do with a bullock or a young horse for sale. When he had finished, the Director took the new recruit to a small bare room containing a pallet and a stool and nothing more,

"You will sleep here. Be careful of the wound in your neck, since it is close to blood channels. If it bleeds in the night, call an attendant."

II.

The wound pained him, but it did not bleed. He slept well enough, wakened at dawn to hear the yawns and grumblings of men turned out of bed. Besidus came for him, announced that he was taking Faljan to the trainer,

"His name is Quartilla, and he smiles upon neither laziness nor back talk."

Faljan would have divined as much from the trainer's appearance. He was a tall muscular man, no longer young, but showing numerous scars. Evidently a retired gladiator, whereas the Director was probably a political appointee.

"This wound will need time to heal," said Quartilla, poking at Faljan's neck with a finger. "Until then, you are excused from active exercise—nevertheless you will be under orders, and of course will not be permitted to go out of barracks without express authorization. Is that understood?"

"Yes."

"Go to your breakfast."

The gladiators were already seated at a long wooden table, bent over their platters and tearing fiercely at lightly cooked meat. Faljan caught sight of Juculus there, and since he knew no one else, he sat down beside him.

"So it's you again!" Juculus growled.

"Yes."

Faljan began to eat, made a face,

"There is asafetida in the meat!"

"To dispel the humors of the arena and purge the body," said someone or other; but after that, no one spoke. The men gulped down their meat and snatched among themselves for more, as avid for food as dogs beyond the pale of a farmyard. One man alone did not eat; he had only watered wine which he kept swishing about in his mouth. Yesterday he had sustained a wound in the lung, and this had induced hemorrhage; the remedy had been a measure of hot pitch poured down his throat, this halting the hemorrhage but leaving him somewhat burnt and raw inside. For a few days, wine would be all that he could bear.

"To your exercises!" shouted the trainer, as soon as the last of

the meat had been devoured. "Hirl, you with the others—leave off with your wine, you have had enough of it."

Everybody rose, Hirl protesting but doing it softly, lest Quartilla overhear him. The men shuffled off into a huge quadrangle, open to the sky and floored with sand to supply the chief condition of the arena. Here the candidates did their training, using, for this purpose, the various items of equipment hanging about the walls: swords and spears and long daggers, boxing gloves, weights with hand grips cut into their stone, and the dreaded nets which Faljan could not look upon without shuddering; as well as other articles which were so far a puzzle to him. In addition, one side of the quadrangle was given over to a set of wood-and-iron stocks, where men were put to languish when they broke the rules. If this were not enough, there was a many-tailed whip, each of its leathern thongs tipped in lead.

"Sit down and watch," the trainer told Faljan. "Your eyes can learn, even though your wound keeps you, for the present, from the actual exercises."

Faljan obediently sat down on a bench, watching the men wrestle and box and hurl spears, lift weights. Then he had a visitor.

It was Ershutif.

III.

Faljan blinked at him a long time, wondering if it were worth while to seize the wretch and crack his head against a stone wall.

"A greeting, my friend!" said the little Syrian brightly. "How goes your neck? They tell me you managed to get a trident stuck into it."

"You have the gall of a Calabrian mule to show your nose in here," said Faljan, in a bitter tone. "But then, you are a Syrian, aren't you!"

"I have come to congratulate you."

"On what?"

Ershutif ventured to sit down, his voice warming into confidence,

"Many things, O Faljan, many things—but chiefly your great good fortune, naturally. I spent an hour at dawn this morning, clamoring to the top of the Quirinal Hill to observe the flight of birds, and from that deduce your future. You are destined for important events, my friend."

"With such a friend as you, I need no enemy."

"Destiny is hovering over you, and who has been aiding her? I, Ershutif. Remember, please, that I arranged for you to meet Synistor."

"Go away."

"Hearken to me," continued the Syrian calmly. "The Heel of Achilles has long been a trap for the miller's benefit, but I swear by my father's teeth that this time I had no thought to aid them until I saw what you were—a husky young yokel, powerful and well co-ordinated, and thus a born gladiator. So I said to myself, Ershutif, my soul, I said, how can you help this unlucky drover to reach his high fate? I asked that, and I answered in this wise: keep him first from the wrath of the farmer Curtius Criba, and then match his fists against Synistor."

Faljan shifted on his bench. There was no insulting the rascal Syrian; spit in his eye, and he would merely remark that it was raining.

"This Synistor," growled the drover, "who is he, anyway?"

"You do not know?"

"If I knew, I should not be asking you."

"Synistor was formerly Rome's greatest gladiator," answered Ershutif. "A tremendous redoubtable fighter defeating all comers; he was at length freed for his exploits, and presented with a fortune with which to set himself up in business. But at any rate, Synistor is not yet old and he is in excellent physical condition, so that when you broke his collarbone, it was a laurel wreath for you. I was right in guessing that you would worst him, and right also in foreseeing that the magistrate, learning of your achievement, would then reserve you for the games. Agrippina did the rest, of course. By the way, when she gives you gold, you must pay me for my services."

"And when I am killed in the arena, must I pay you again?"

"Well, you will die, yes—but first you will taste glory, which is more than most of us can say."

Faljan shook his head in disgust,

"I have heard it maintained that a Greek can out-talk three Persians, and a Syrian three Greeks. Knowing you, I well believe it."

"Thank you; and now, we must plan a campaign for you."

"Ha!"

"Listen to me," said Ershutif impatiently. "You are on your way up the ladder, yet you must know which rungs under your feet are rotten and which sound. Especially since Agrippina has undertaken to sponsor you."

"What's that? Why, she is the Emperor's mother!"

"Yet is no longer in favor; indeed, it has been years since she has even been permitted to live in the palace. The blood on Agrippina's hands would float a galley, and therefore Nero is somewhat afraid of her; still and all, the omens are against the woman, not to mention that Poppaea and Tigellinus are against her."

"Who is your Tigellinus?"

"Come, come, you are jesting, and so early in the morning, too! Everybody knows Tigellinus, familiar with his vile record from the day he appeared in Rome as a Sicilian horse breeder, but understood horses less well than knavery. I had once a magic salve, which, when rubbed on the hooves of horses in a chariot race, would cause them invariably to win—and Tigellinus refused to buy it of me! That is how stupid he is."

"If he is stupid, I have no cause to fear him."

"Stupid in the matter of horses, I meant. Otherwise he is cunning as a weasel, and likewise greedy as a cricket. He won Nero's favor by throwing races in such a way that Caesar—driving as an amateur—won time after time, and for reward made Tigellinus his pet. The gallows bird is dangerous; combined with Poppaea, very dangerous. Especially now that Otho has been banished."

Faljan rose,

"You fret me like the wind from Africa, drying up the fields in springtime."

"It will take wise advice to protect you in all that you have got yourself into," insisted Ershutif. "If you have sense, you will retain me to help."

"You fret me, I said."

"Very well," Ershutif muttered. "Let your kid find its wolf, and then when you come whining to me, I will name my own price."

The Syrian betook himself off, Faljan said to the gladiator with the burnt raw throat,

"Why do they let rascals like that Ershutif come in here and play mosquito on us!"

"He did not come altogether for talk," grinned Hirl; "he came also to claim his reward from the Director."

"Reward?"

"For informing against the big barbarian over yonder."

IV.

It was the man that Faljan had seen in the street, the drover walking with Ershutif on the afternoon of losing his cattle, and the two of them encountering a barbarian in a wolfskin. Ershutif had remarked that the fellow was an escaped slave, but would soon be caught. And so he had been.

"What is his name?" said Faljan.

"Vortinax."

Faljan walked over to him. The trainer had given Vortinax a piece of leather to be used in mending his broken sandals, but Quartilla had then gone away and the barbarian had stopped work. He sat hunched on a bench, the leather fallen from his hands, while he stared at the ground. Pausing beside him, Faljan observed that his hair was bright yellow, and his skin smooth as a baby's skin.

"How did you come here?" Faljan asked.

"By misfortune," said the barbarian, without looking up. "I was captured in war and fetched to Rome as a slave. I killed my master and took as much of his money as I could find, thinking to escape back to my homeland. I found no way to accomplish this, and had to spend the money for food. Finally, the soldiers caught me."

Faljan nodded,

"Was there anybody with the soldiers—a tongue, a pointing finger?"

"Yes. That small man here a moment ago."

"Ershutif the Syrian," said Faljan disgustedly. "So he is even an informer!"

The big blond man did not answer, did not so much as lift his head. Faljan said, with a certain amount of indignation,

"You do not care?"

"What does it matter," answered Vortinax, in a flat dead tone. "If one thorn does not puncture you, another will. I am here, and destined for the arena, that is all there is to it."

Suddenly the leathern whip flashed down across his shoulders. It was Quartilla, angry because the barbarian had been idling. Vortinax rose to his feet, so formidable in his size and manner that instinctively the trainer retreated a pace, to say sharply,

"Repair your sandals—so that you can begin training!"
Vortinax sank back onto the bench, Quartilla turned to Faljan,
"You are to be at the baths at the tenth hour of the day. Have
your wound treated first. In the cubicle yonder."

V.

The barracks doctor cleansed and tied up his wound; following which, Besidus appeared and gave Faljan a few silver coins for his wallet, this time treating him with more respect than yesterday in returning from the arena.

"I am to conduct you to the baths," Besidus said. "Let us go. It is early, but there are things to be done."

They headed for the street door, Juculus making an insulting sound as Faljan passed him. Outside the barracks, and walking toward the center of the city, the onetime cattle drover said in puzzlement,

"This man Juculus, was he likewise selected for training?"

"Not exactly. He had been a fugitive from the school, and his identity having been discovered yesterday in the arena, he was returned. And fortunate for him that he did well with his net, too; otherwise, he would have been flogged into raw meat for his offense. Take no thought of him; he is merely envious of you."

"I see no need for envy."

"Do you think that it is usual for gladiators to leave training and enjoy the baths!" demanded Besidus. "If you do, your head is coming apart. Here, wait—you must be put in order a little."

There was a barber in a booth, and when Faljan had sat down on a stool—this placed so nearly in the street that passers-by jostled them—the barber cut his hair with bronze shears, and then spread warm olive oil on his face and shaved him. Besidus paid for it, which amused the barber.

"So you have your private banker!" he said to Faljan.

They went on their way. The odor of food reached out to them, Faljan sniffing noisily.

"Are you hungry?" asked Besidus.

"I am always hungry. Is there time to eat?"

"Yes."

They stood up to a food booth and ordered hard-boiled eggs and

chitterlings, with pale watered wine to wash it down. Faljan ate slowly and with enjoyment, watching the passers-by with the alert curiosity of a countryman. However, Besidus watched, not the crowd in the street, but Faljan.

“Are you afraid I shall run away?” said the drover.

“As a matter of fact, I shall leave you at the entrance to the baths and not even wait for you to come out again. Those are my orders.”

“From whom?”

“The Director. Faljan, may I speak frankly?”

“It is the best way to speak.”

“Then I say this: in my belief you are a soaring kite, and I hereby solicit the opportunity to cling to your tail.”

“Meaning what exactly?”

“That if you prosper in this tumult known as Rome, you will remember my name and perhaps cast favor my way.”

CHAPTER 5.

I.

THE baths were contained in a building both wide and high, its mass the concrete which Rome had so well learned to use, but the facings done in shining marble. Entrance was through a tall arch, with attendants standing on either side, to collect the small payment required.

Faljan gave over his copper coin and went in.

He found himself in a foyer, much loftier than the entrance arch, and of such roomy splendor that for a few moments he stood gawking like a calf at a sunrise. A tangled vision of columns, statuary, and wall paintings pressed upon his startled gaze; and it was only when the in-and-out crowd began to buffet him that he got back his sense and walked on. There was directly in front of him a magnificent fountain playing out colored water charged with perfume; beyond the fountain lay a floor mosaic depicting in bright stones the hero Theseus endeavoring to find his way out of the labyrinth. It was an apt design, for from this point on, the uninitiated visitor had no means of knowing which way to turn.

"After your bath, perhaps a Greek boy?" murmured an insinuating voice. "Young and graceful, very accomplished."

"I am only a peasant," answered Faljan. "I have never learned such city refinements."

"Time you learnt them, then," shrugged the other, and as Faljan started on, "What about a woman, since you are so old-fashioned!"

"Where is the exercise room?"

"Use your eyes, peasant; and your feet."

Faljan did just that, yet for a time in vain. In a Roman bath, apparently, you could pursue any one of many diversions. He noticed an art gallery, a luxurious wine counter, a whole series of arcaded shops selling perfume and jewelry, fruit and books. The gladiator paused a moment to look at the books: they were written on parchment, rolled up and stood on end in marble vases. Odd; he could not

conceive of words so important that men must take the trouble to imprison them. Leisurely he sauntered on his way, traversing a sunken garden where the shrubbery had been cut into the shapes of birds and beasts; and arriving, presently, at a noisy exercise room.

This was better, more like what he had expected. Many youths and older men were playing here, some of them tossing a leathern ball about, others rolling hoops or walking on their palms or foot-wrestling in pairs. Faljan having no one to stand opposite him in a game, he took a wooden hoop and began to roll it about the room with a hooked stick. He grew warm and threw off his tunic, playing in only his breechclout. A certain flabby old fellow indicated Faljan and said to a friend beside him,

“There, Pallas, if you had a physique like that, your wife would stay home to you!”

Laughter went up gustily, Faljan neither heard nor paused in his hoop rolling. Sweat was beginning to course down his hide; in a little while he would leave off, seek out water and swim himself clean. There was every kind of bath hereabouts—hot, tepid, cold, tub or shower or jet steam—to be combined or alternated as caprice dictated; but Faljan’s needs were too simple for him to be interested in all this complexity; he wanted simply to work up a good sweat and—

A man thrust out a foot which sent Faljan’s hoop wavering off down a side corridor. He looked to be some kind of superior steward.

“Why that?” demanded Faljan.

“I will help you find it,” said the steward.

They went down the side corridor, Faljan aware that this was something more than chance. The steward walked him past the fallen hoop, stopped at a door. A sharp rap, a wait. The door opened, a female slave gazed at them in inquiring silence.

“Presenting Faljan,” said the steward, and gestured him to go on in.

Faljan entered, his companion vanished.

II.

The gladiator found himself in what was evidently the vestibule to a luxurious suite. The tinkle of water, the fragrance of perfume and olive oil mingling with steam, all told him that there were baths not

far off, but thus far he saw only small marble tables loaded with bric-a-brac, a bird trilling in a bronze cage, dwarfed plants in profusion, tapestries hanging from the walls. Staring mutely, Faljan crossed the room at the heels of the slave, passed under a damask curtain which she held aside, and entered another chamber. Down a short flight of steps now, through yet another door and into the bath itself.

A number of serving women were carrying towels and unguents to a dressing room. Faljan's guide halted and murmured his name, this was repeated by a slave near the dressing room, and then taken into the chamber itself by a third slave.

Presently a woman issued from the dressing room, Faljan stiffening with surprise. It was Agrippina: black haired as he had seen her in the podium at the arena, hazel eyes, a firm mouth, chin with a cleft which gave her a somewhat masculine appearance. She was clearly past forty, and yet had kept her figure. Or at least enough of it to pass muster in the loose dressing robe she was wearing. Agrippina studied him briefly,

"Have you bathed?"

"No."

"Accompany me, then."

They entered a large alcove containing a pool of perfumed water. A serving woman removed Agrippina's robe, leaving her naked as the day her umbilicus was cut and tied.

In a Roman bath, it was the practice for men and women to appear nude before one another, and think nothing of it; but the custom being otherwise in the country, the sight of Agrippina bare sent Faljan's blood churning. Then as she advanced toward the steps leading down into the water, he observed—spraddling across her abdomen—a series of flesh marks, where in giving birth to a child, the improperly oiled skin had stretched and in places broken, never again resuming its former tight smoothness. A child? Nero himself, the dreaded majestic Caesar. Faljan's desire for the woman went away like a smile before a fist blow.

"Lay aside your garment," she said, "and we shall bathe."

Silently he untwisted his breechclout and tossed it down. Agrippina was already in the pool, seating herself upon a submerged marble seat and playing the water with her fingers. She glanced up at him, her nostrils dilating a little, then contracting abruptly. Over forty, yet still passionate, Faljan told himself.

"You have a good body," she said slowly and deliberately. "It is a pity I cannot enjoy it—but that would complicate matters."

He smiled in embarrassment, descended into the pool. It was, for his taste, nauseatingly warm. Just as well that she had said what she had said—a bath of this excessive temperature would ruin him in no time, render him useless to any woman, were she Venus herself.

“There are advantages to bathing in pairs,” Agrippina murmured. “One can talk and listen without being overheard. Walls have eyes, and in Rome ears as well. Faljan, do you know why I saved you in the arena?”

“To be trained as a gladiator, I have been told.”

“Let people think that; in reality, I did so because you would not beg for mercy. So to beg is the traditional thing, and you astonished us by refusing. It is a valuable trait, obstinately to refuse to give in when the odds are against you.”

She splashed reflectively with her hands, Faljan stood in the pool like a post. He wanted to swim, but how could he do that with an Emperor’s mother sitting naked before him!

“I want you to enter my service,” she said.

“In what capacity?”

“A kind of spy. Not a spy, exactly; I have plenty of secret agents, have always had them—and always have needed them—now more than ever before. Spies,” she added, with an ironical mouth, “are a necessity in this life. My enemies are constantly attempting to poison me, and I require ever fresh information as to what antidotes to take next, in order to be prepared against their infusions.”

“Poison you!” exclaimed Faljan. “Who would dare to do that?”

“How naïve you are,” she replied, with a faint smile. “I like that in you, Faljan. Naïve, and also fundamentally honest, I am sure. Virtue is not so common nowadays that I do not recognize it; it is a rare and timid commodity, running out of the tiniest cracks, and once gone not to be recovered. I know all about virtue, never having had any.”

She gestured to a serving woman standing all this while back out of earshot. The woman hurried forward with a robe, Agrippina rose and walked up out of the pool.

“I am afraid you do not enjoy tepid baths,” she said to Faljan.

“Well,” he answered hesitatingly, “I am not used to them.”

“Go, then, yonder to the cold pool, and have a plunge. Afterward you will be brought to my dressing room, and we shall talk further.”

He went at once, glad for the reviving tang of what she had referred to as the cold pool. The water was not cold, and it was perfumed; yet it was despite this much more agreeable than the cooking

stew he had shared with Agrippina. Faljan splashed and swam, dashed water into his spluttering face, and all the while cudged his brains in the effort to reckon what lay ahead of him. In Agrippina's service? A kind of spy. H'm.

After a time a freedman appeared, over his arm towels and clothing. Faljan got out, and at the freedman's gesture lay down upon a couch and let a slave give him an oil rub. The clothing was for Faljan: a fresh breechclout made of linen, and a tunic of medium-weight wool; also a pair of good sandals, which would enable him to discard his old ones, these being sadder than a last year's bird nest.

"This way now," said the freedman, and ushered him back to Agrippina.

She was in her dressing room, lying on her belly whilst a female slave massaged her back. It was a small room, stuffed full of clothing, cosmetics, and caged birds.

"Be seated, Faljan. Send the freedman away, Pilja; I wish no one to be here with me and Faljan save you, my most trusted maid." Agrippina rolled over, smiling at the girl, "And you *are* to be trusted, are you not, Pilja?"

The maid changed color,

"I swear I am devoted to you, madame."

Agrippina turned to Faljan, as the maid continued to massage and anoint her.

"I desire," she said, "to talk to you about Nero."

III.

Pronouncing the name of Nero, her son, Agrippina became a different woman. Her carking assured cynicism fled away, leaving her simply a devoted mother, softened and unhappy.

"You have doubtless heard evil against him," she said frankly; "but let me disabuse your mind, so that you will understand what I am struggling for, and will perhaps also sympathize with my aims."

The maid was applying some kind of perfumed ointment to Agrippina's breasts, and immediately ambition returned to Faljan—the tepid bath had not ruined him, after all. He wondered if later on the maid would go out and stay out, leaving him alone with her mistress. If she did, the gladiator meant to see what manner of woman this Agrippina might be.

Agrippina read the intent in his face and said sharply,

"Put the body's pleasures out of your mind, Faljan. I told you that it would complicate matters; and besides, I confess that I am still sufficiently a snob to resent engaging in affairs with men of low degree."

Faljan made an awkward little bow of apology. She continued rapidly, back onto her main and absorbing theme,

"In his childhood my son was separated from me by force, neglected and abused; I fought to regain him, and did. I began at once to groom him for great things. It was I who made him Emperor. Without me, Nero would today be an obscure noble, even dead of an assassin's knife. He owes everything to his mother."

Her breath came fast and agitated; she paused a moment, went on in a calmer tone,

"Nero was a beautiful boy, as pure and fine within as without. I saw to that. Early in his life I chose two tutors for him: Burrus, the Chief of the Imperial Guard, to be his mentor in discipline and the practical arts; Seneca the philosopher as an intellectual guide. Nero in those days was devoted to music and art; he hated pain, dreading to punish even the worst of malefactors. Many old senators he caused to be pensioned off, many inept cruel laws were modified at his wish. He loved to do good and to make people happy. And then—"

Agrippina's voice had grown hard. She gestured the maid to begin putting up her rather sparse hair,

"Then he began to drift away from me. In the intoxication of being Emperor, Master of Rome and Lord of the World, he cast off his tutors—ignoring honest old Burrus, and ridiculing Seneca as a talker and writer failing to live up to his own rhetoric. Altogether, the moral bulwarks which I had erected for Nero crumbled away at the assault of his new friends, the fawning vicious flatterers who swarmed upon him the instant he donned imperial purple. In company with degenerates like Otho, and Darin the nasty little mime, my lovely son began to seek out vice, brawling in the streets in disguise, perverting his manhood, and even accusing me, his own mother, of designs upon the throne."

"That does not sound like a son," Faljan said discreetly.

"Nay, but evil companions can very quickly break all filial ties. The core of the present situation is, however, that Nero covets Poppaea, and she is using this passion of his to incite him against me. And of course, it is intolerable that she should ever be Empress. She would bring out the worst in Nero, cause him to be hated and in the end destroyed."

Faljan had scarcely been listening to her—he was resentfully absorbed in the progress of her toilet. She had risen, with the maid's assistance wrapping a breechclout of heavy silk about her loins, fastening it with a jeweled pin. Pilja then fetched a band of soft red chamois leather, perhaps the breadth of a hand wide. The maid slipped this contrivance around Agrippina and began to lace it in the back, in such a way that the leather encircled her just below the breasts and held them up into fuller position. The leathern belt enabled Agrippina to appear younger, disturbingly voluptuous, and yet Faljan had no intention of doing anything about it. It was clear that her one trustworthy interest in life was Nero; in all else she was ruthless and without heart. Any attempt to score upon such a woman would subject the gladiator to risk beyond its worth. He took his eyes away from her youthful-seeming breasts. To Hades with her—and anyhow, old fruit had little savor.

"Poppaea's influence is spreading like a stain," Agrippina was saying; "and it must be stopped."

"How?" murmured Faljan.

"Through the Empress. Nero cannot have Poppaea without first ridding himself of Octavia, and fortunately Octavia is not only a good woman, decent and beyond reproach, but she is likewise popular with the people. Octavia's marriage has got to be preserved, in spite of Poppaea and the machinations of her loathsome horse breeder, the Sicilian Tigellinus. My robe, Pilja. You are slow today—are you perhaps enjoying this conversation overly much?"

"I was not listening to it, madame," said the girl nervously. "Your robe, madame."

Agrippina slipped into it, her eyes still upon Faljan,

"I want you to go to Octavia and act as her watchdog. Mark down in your mind whatever occurs in her presence, noting her visitors and dulling your eye to them—affecting stupidity, if need be. Trust no one but the Empress herself, remembering that even a hair casts a shadow and all shadows are suspicious. Report back to me at intervals."

"Ah, but will she receive me?"

"Burrus has arranged that."

The maid had fastened a belt about Agrippina's waist and was turning to get her ear clips.

"Enough," said Agrippina sharply. "Call my freedman."

Pilja went to the door and was about to pass through, when Agrippina spoke again,

"Merely call him—do not leave the room!"

The girl called to the freedman and he came in, saluting with his spear. Agrippina indicated the trembling Pilja,

"My maid has heard compromising talk, and since she is a known informer, it is no longer safe for her to be about. Take her to the steam baths and smother her."

"Oh, madame, have mercy!" cried the maid, and she fell on her knees and attempted to clasp Agrippina about the legs. "Mercy, madame—mercy! Do not let him slay me! In the name of the—"

The freedman clapped a hand over her mouth, Agrippina gazed at her without pity,

"Carrying tales to Tigellinus has gained you several pieces of gold, my girl—but where will you spend them? One should always think of that, when one earns money."

The freedman dragged the struggling girl out of the room, Pilja managing to utter one shriek but no more. Agrippina was smiling at Faljan, apparently indifferent to the fright this scene had given him,

"Thus do I reward treachery, O Faljan!"

He tried to speak, but the words would not come forth. Agrippina went on abruptly,

"Let it not concern you. You will be faithful, and I shall reward you. With Agrippina as your sponsor, you may well become a successful gladiator, rich and famous. You would like that, would you not?"

He spoke mechanically,

"Yes."

She clapped her hands and a serving woman hurried into the room.

"Conduct this man," said Agrippina, "to the bath apartment of Burrus."

IV.

The serving woman led Faljan out of Agrippina's suite by a different door than he had entered, issuing with him into a deserted hall and then walking rapidly to a wing of the baths which appeared to be little used. In an anteroom she turned him over to a male attendant, after which the gladiator was quickly brought into a steam room and announced to Burrus.

The old soldier rose from a cloud of vapor, skin wrinkled with age and marred by the wounds of battle, but his limbs still agile. He squinted at Faljan, said in a hearty tone as he led the way toward an inner door,

"I must get you to cooler air, otherwise you will be taken off through distemper of the lungs—in which event Rome loses a promising young fighter. And I can assure you," he continued jovially, "that we need men for the arena nowadays; um, that we do."

Faljan understood that this was all said for the benefit of the bath attendant, and so contented himself with an agreeing nod. He followed Burrus into the cool room, waited for him to speak. Burrus was a rugged man, his face gloomy but steadfast, the sunken eyes fearless. Something in Faljan said to trust this man without question.

"I will ask you a number of questions," said Burrus, wrapping a towel about his middle. He put them at once, many probing inquiries laying Faljan bare as bones in an upland pasture—the countryman's past life, how he came to Rome, the stolen bullocks, everything. In the end Burrus nodded, "Have no fear of Curtius Criba; he shall be paid for his cattle, so that he may not interfere with you—or with what we have for you to do, Agrippina and I."

He opened a little cupboard and took out gold pieces, which he gave over to Faljan by way of expense money. Then he drew a signet ring from his finger,

"Keep this safe, perhaps in your armpit under pitch, or in your groin. If it is found on you, it could ruin both of us."

"I will guard it."

"When you leave the baths today, return to the gladiators' school, lest you be followed from here. Late tomorrow morning go to the palace, find your way to Octavia. She is expecting you. Do as she desires, in all things. My signet ring will be your passport to her, of course."

"I understand."

Burrus took the gladiator out to a little court, waiting there with him while a slave went out into the street to make sure that the way was clear. Faljan kept gazing at a statue in the center of the court; it represented a man and two boys, all of them in the coils of two gigantic serpents.

"Why is that?" he murmured. "What have they done?"

"The man is Laocoön. He was a priest, living in the besieged city of Troy and so thoroughly suspecting the wooden horse of containing Greek soldiery that he bade his people refuse it as a gift. Before he

could persuade them his way, unfortunately, the goddess Minerva—favoring the Greek cause—sent serpents to destroy him and his sons.”

“And the serpents succeeded?”

“Yes,” said Burrus, and suddenly his face twitched into a wry smile. “Strange that you should comment upon the statue yonder—for you and I currently occupy somewhat the same position as Laocoön. That is to say, we shall attempt to prevent treachery to the state, but if the forces against us are too strong, it is possible that we shall come to grief for our pains. Nevertheless, the effort must be made. May Rome live forever!”

“May Rome live forever,” repeated Faljan.

The slave came back in through the street door, reporting that no spying eye was about. Burrus took Faljan’s hand in a strong emphatic grip,

“Go now, and may the gods guide your feet.”

CHAPTER 6.

I.

ON HIS way to the Palatine Hill, the following day, Faljan walked slowly and without enthusiasm. He felt himself a blindfolded horse, set upon an unfamiliar road—and no horse likes that. Great events seemed to be clutching at him, which was very flattering, very exciting—but also worrisome.

Still and all, he would have to go through with it. This visit to the palace, at any rate. A certain dark-skinned girl came pushing into his mind; Pilja the slave, dead in a pit somewhere, because she had broken faith. The mere thought of it was enough to quicken Faljan's steps.

The Palatine rose in front of him, a crowded hill which in the beginning had entertained only rabbits and wild birds, trees and shrubs and native flowers; but which for centuries now had been the exclusive residence of Roman rulers. Each emperor lived up yonder in his hour, and when he was dust his successor tore down whatever of the work of earlier incumbents he did not like, and built for himself what pleased him. Until in Nero's time the Palatine Hill had become a honeycomb of masonry, countless wings and annexes, corridors more numerous than the runways of a colony of marmots, a multitude of windows facing in every direction with their awnings of imperial purple. The Palatine was in itself virtually a city, today larger and more splendid than ever before in Rome's history—since Nero was greater than all who had preceded him, and excellence demands its kind.

“Give! Give! Give alms!”

Beggars, crouching on contorted blackened legs at the foot of the street. Faljan paused and got out coppers for them; it would fetch good fortune, tossing coins to beggars upon such an occasion.

He began to ascend the royal way, bewildered by the size and unfolding magnificence of the palace area. There was marble every-

where, some of it crimson veined, other of its blocks and columns green or blue or soft mellow brown, according to the country of its origin. Along each side of the ascending walk stood a row of statues of famous dead Romans—dead Romans on pedestals, very much alive Romans passing up and down: swarms of civic officials, a scattering of visiting foreigners, provincials with petitions, members of the Imperial Guard in gilded helmets. Still farther on, Faljan encountered a bevy of idlers too well dressed and throwing out a strong odor of perfume; these people he imagined to be Nero's intimates, hence Agrippina's thorn in side.

"Halt!"

It was a guard, stopping him at the entrance to the palace proper. Faljan answered,

"I have business with the Empress Octavia."

"Indeed! You are perhaps an ambassador from Egypt?"

Faljan kept his temper,

"Who and what I am, only the Empress shall hear. Direct me to her Chamberlain, if you will."

The guard hesitated, whereupon a hitherto unnoticed man stepped forward,

"Never mind—I will direct him."

The guard shrugged consent,

"As you please, Urstine."

The man called Urstine was furious—he clapped a hand to his dagger,

"My name is my own, fellow! It was not necessary to mention it."

Then he looked at Faljan, smiled suddenly. "You see, guard, this visitor to the Empress does not know my name, anyhow—does he?"

"No," said Faljan. "I never heard it before."

"Bravo!" Urstine laughed. "Well, if you wish to see Octavia, come with me."

II.

Faljan obeyed, yet without too much confidence. His companion was ill-favored: a tall man, but bloated and haggard, with a ravaged face and smoldering eyes. There was something queer about him, something monstrous and revolting.

"You are in Octavia's household?" asked Faljan, as they walked along.

"I am her confidential messenger; so confidential, in fact, that no one knows it."

"What?" exclaimed the gladiator, and halted in his tracks.

"Except for my mistress."

They went on, but Faljan kept shooting puzzled glances at his companion, and presently Urstine noticed this,

"Why do you stare at me?"

"For no reason."

"I am a eunuch," said Urstine fiercely; "that is why you do it!"

Light broke in upon Faljan. Exactly. Urstine had been altered, no longer a man but a skinful of frustration, shame, resentment, malice. No doubt he had a bruised and trembling wife at home, for such people often married and took out their spite by tormenting women. There was a country proverb, where Faljan came from; it said that it were better for a girl to be devoured by hyenas than to marry a eunuch, however rich he might be.

Urstine laughed harshly,

"It is likewise an explanation of why I occupy a position of confidence to the Empress. Nero has nothing to fear from me."

"A case of muzzling the ox that treads out the corn."

"You are clever, my friend. I know of few baboons who could have expressed it so well."

They turned down a side corridor, and in a little while stopped at a door. The eunuch entered without knocking, Faljan followed him into a vestibule. It was a bizarre room, the walls painted garishly with the figures of hermaphrodites, women and beasts entangled, symbolic obscenities which Faljan was too unworldly to understand.

"Is this suite of the Empress Octavia?" he demanded.

"Not at all. It is the apartment of her Chamberlain. This way."

Urstine led him into another and larger room. There was a man at the far end of it, reclining upon a couch and busy with small instruments and a narrow tube of what appeared to be a heavy liquid. Faljan saw, as he approached, that the man on the couch was loading a set of dice, probably so that they would roll always to the winning throw known as Venus. The eunuch said loudly,

"A caller to see the Empress, O Chamberlain!"

Faljan's suspicions grew stronger. Could this fellow be chamberlain to Octavia? He was a commoner, richly dressed but repulsive in every lineament—swarthy as a North African, eyes flat and yellow

like those of a beast of the wilderness, outjutting jaw, thick cruel lips. As he smiled at Faljan, the gladiator observed that he had a gold tooth, no longer clear good yellow but sprouting a greenish crust, foul as the scum on an old watering trough.

"Welcome!" said the Chamberlain. "We have been expecting you, Faljan."

The door had been closed, with slave guards probably in the vestibule, otherwise the gladiator would have turned and fled.

"You know my name?" he murmured cautiously.

"It is a chamberlain's business to know everything. Burrus told us you were coming."

Faljan bowed slightly.

"Let us go to the Empress," said the Chamberlain, in a brisk tone. "Urstine, you will accompany us."

"Naturally," and the eunuch laughed as though it were a good joke.

They exited from the apartment through a side door, coming into a corridor where there were no passers-by of any description. Faljan watched his companions, said nothing. He could only go along, wait and see what developed.

The corridor remained empty. Their sandals reverberated in faint stealth, no other sound audible. They passed through a door and down steps; another descent, this time into a hallway without marble facings. Concrete walls, sweating meanly. An unpleasant odor. Faljan's throat began to contract; he lagged a little, but Urstine got behind him and stayed there. It was impossible that Octavia should be housed in this part of the palace; even if Nero hated her, as was reputed, he would not thus demean her in the eyes of the people. She was popular, Agrippina had insisted.

A third door, this one requiring to be unlocked with a key hanging at the Chamberlain's belt. Once they were beyond it, it was locked again. Now they were below the surface of the hill, the narrow slits of windows showing no sun at all.

"I do not suppose that Burrus told you it was such a long walk," observed the Chamberlain.

"No."

"The palace is very large. A huge and historic pile, a-reek with drama and passion and death. If there were time, I should enjoy showing you the spot where the mad Emperor Caligula was slain by his enemies; his blood is still on the walls; some say that it cannot be washed off. You have heard of Caligula?"

"Yes."

"A wicked man, and deserving of his fate. He was the brother of Agrippina."

Shivers of alarm darted down Faljan's spine. It was a trap—a quarter of beef to an empty cow horn, it was a trap!

"Caligula had several sisters, but Agrippina and Drusilla were the important ones. When they were not yet in their teens, Caligula began to consort with them. It became quite a pastime for the three, although gradually he centered his affections upon Drusilla. Married her, too, and at her death wept like a scullery maid peeling onions. Rotten blood, I should say—what do *you* think?"

Faljan was thinking a plenty, but keeping it to himself. They approached another door, the Chamberlain took his key to unlock it—and that moment, Faljan whirled to flee.

No use. Urstine had his dagger out and was jabbing it against his belly. The Chamberlain got the door open, went through and waited for them. Faljan entered, then Urstine.

They were now in a dungeon, a damp gloomy room with so little light that the occupant had a wax candle by way of illumination. A window showed bars. There was a chest in the corner, a smell of drugs.

"Ah, Locusta!" exclaimed the Chamberlain. "I have fetched you a customer!"

Locusta the poisoner, utterly wicked and depraved, and yet too valuable to be slain. She was kept confined in the prison underneath the palace, a sponge to be squeezed by whatever rogue had access to her. The old crone got creakily up from her stool, hobbled forward. Stringy white hair hung over her face, her arms a couple of withered bones that the hungriest jackal would disdain, her hands crooked as eagle talons. When she grinned, Faljan saw that she had only stumps for teeth, no better than those of a worn-out ewe.

"You have tricked me," he said to the man with the gold in his mouth. "This eunuch is not Octavia's confidential messenger, and you are not her Chamberlain."

"True, I am not," smiled the Gold Tooth; "but have you heard the name Tigellinus?"

III.

Faljan gazed at him in consternation. So this was the infamous favorite of Nero, the Sicilian horse breeder become mighty in the inner sanctum of Rome!

"I see you have," nodded Tigellinus dryly; "and if you only could live another year or two, you would surely hear the name more often. Upon the lips of the mob, cheering as I passed—Tigellinus, hail to the noble Tigellinus! And so forth. Oh, I admit that they would not intend the 'noble' to be taken at face value, since I am of a base origin—nevertheless they would say it, being afraid of the wrath of the commander of the Imperial Guard. But perhaps I am picking tomorrow's grapes—Burrus is still commander, eh, Faljan?"

The gladiator was struggling to collect his wits, Locusta began to grumble impatiently,

"Do you want poison, or is this visit merely to choke my old ears with brag?"

"Fetch poison," said Tigellinus. "Can't you see that we are waiting for it!"

"It will have to be mixed," she reminded him. "I have told you often enough that subtle compounded poisons lose their strength when not used promptly. I cannot store them, as a shopkeeper piles up his artichokes and squashes."

"Then mix a dose, and quickly. The fragrance in here does not please me."

"No, but my art does," she chuckled, and hobbled over to the cupboard in the corner of the room. "My art does, my art pleases you well."

Tigellinus sat down upon a stool, Urstine likewise took a seat. They beamed upon Faljan, so that lest they see how utterly his defenses were down, he felt constrained to speak,

"How did you know that I was coming to the palace today?"

"We have known your movements since Agrippina reversed thumbs on you in the arena," said Tigellinus with relish. "You have been followed, watched during every moment. Your trip to the baths, the interview with Agrippina, the clumsy device of leaving Burrus and

then going, not to Octavia, but back to your barracks—it has all been transparent as moonshine.”

Urstine shifted restlessly,

“What is the good of waiting for the poison! It might not do its work. Locusta makes too many experiments, to my way of thinking.”

Tigellinus burst into laughter, gesturing that Faljan was welcome to join in, if he liked.

“Urstine does not care for experiments,” gurgled the horse breeder, when he could speak again. “He himself being an experiment, you understand.”

Urstine pretended not to hear this; he shouted at the old crone in the corner,

“Where is the potion—the brew—whatever it is!”

“It is ready when I come with it,” she threw back. “Get out your gold, Tigellinus; this will cost money.”

Faljan could not take his eyes from her. Working in the light of the flickering taper, Locusta had ground a bit of herb in a pestle, adding sundry pinches of white powder, dropping in one of her fingernails chopped fine, and then rubbing the whole together until thoroughly mixed. The gladiator turned pale.

“Did you like Burrus?” the horse breeder was inquiring politely.

“Much better than I like you.”

Tigellinus sprang from his stool, but Urstine held him back—the eunuch’s dagger was already out of its sheath,

“Let me take his skin off and present it to you for a doormat! Say the word, only say yes, and it is done.”

“No,” said the horse breeder, quieting himself with a violent effort. “Poison is the better way. I planned it thus, and it must conform to the plan.”

“You are too superstitious,” muttered the eunuch.

Tigellinus gazed at Faljan with cold yellow eyes,

“So you liked him, did you! It seems to me that you are unusually stupid, even for a countryman. Burrus is on his way into the black woe of retirement, and I in my turn am destined to rise to his office—and beyond it, my lucky star assures me. You would have done better to answer differently.”

The old hag got to her feet. She found a corn husk, spread it carefully flat, and deposited the poison on it. Then she began to wrap it up in a neat packet.

“Never mind that,” and Tigellinus snatched it from her. “Do you guarantee its effect?”

"No, but I hope it will work."

"What—you *hope!* If it does not kill him, I will have your entrails torn out and flung in your face, depend upon it!"

"Poisoning is an art," she shrugged, "each dose different—and since this fellow of yours is strong and evidently very healthy, I increased the proportion of the lethal herb."

"Well, then!"

"Do not interrupt me," she said querulously. "I increased the proportion of the lethal herb, but sometimes an overdose recoils upon itself, and is in the end relatively harmless. Try it first on some proportionate creature. That is the better way."

"Oh, you fool, I want him to swallow it here!" Tigellinus cried. "Give me a draught of wine, any liquid you have. I am weary of your ceremony."

"Administer it to him here and bring bad luck to my workshop?" she screamed. "Not while Cerberus has three heads, you will not! Such an act would render ineffective everything I were to concoct henceforth—and methinks, if I know my Sicilian, you will have other customers for me in time to come. Take this lummoX out to the prison court and test the poison on a goat—which is about of his resistance, I imagine. Go on—away with you!"

Tigellinus yielded. He made a sign to Urstine and the eunuch produced a cord from his tunic, bound Faljan's wrists in front of him.

"Come along," the Sicilian growled. "I want this over with quickly."

"My money!" exclaimed Locusta.

"Later—later."

"My money, or I send word to Nero. Two pieces of gold, and neither of them shaved at the edges."

The horse breeder jerked out his purse, extracted two pieces of gold and flung them onto the table. She snatched them up, carefully examining the edges, and then hugging them crooning to her flat breast, as if they were children needing to nurse.

"March, Faljan," said the Sicilian, unlocking the door; "and no dodges, or you will die by Urstine's knife. The eunuch is quite a fellow to twist his blade; he seems to have forgotten—since the Great Experiment—how to stab cleanly and withdraw. March!"

IV.

They went on along the dark deserted corridor, Faljan faint with despair. Until a moment ago, there had been a possibility of escape, but now with his hands bound he saw not even the glimmer of hope. Tigellinus strode ahead of him, the eunuch followed at Faljan's hip, now and then jabbing it with the point of his dagger.

A final door, the Sicilian unlocking it, passing through. Faljan next, then Urstine. The door locked.

They were in a small court, a bumpy area of dirt and dying shrubs, with a few goats grazing in the far corners. Tigellinus called attention to the little mounds in the foreview,

"It is very private and exclusive here, O Faljan. Only prisoners succumbing to torture in the palace dungeons are permitted to be buried in this court."

Urstine walked toward the goats, making friendly sounds and holding out a spear of withered grass. They eyed him and circled off, successfully keeping out of his reach. The eunuch lost patience and began to chase them, Tigellinus laughing uproariously at his antics. Then Urstine pried a stone loose from the masonry, rushed at the nearest goat and cast his missile. It struck the beast in the hind leg, breaking it so badly that the goat could no longer run, but only drag and flop about. He caught it and brought it forward,

"Give me half the powder."

Tigellinus carefully unwrapped the poison, measured out the portion. The eunuch knelt on the goat, forced open its mouth. He tried to shake the stuff down its throat, but the creature struggled wildly.

"You are spilling it!" cried the horse breeder.

Urstine redoubled his efforts to get the dose into the goat, Tigellinus watching intently. Suddenly Faljan launched a kick which took the Sicilian squarely in the kidney. Tigellinus gasped and sank to his knees, Urstine leaped up with his dagger flashing. Too late. Faljan had catapulted himself feet forward, after the manner of rough-and-tumble fighters in the Campagna—his feet struck the eunuch in the stomach and hurled him backward onto the ground, where he lay writhing and groaning like something with a bad case of colic. But Tigellinus was up, and his knife was out,

“Accursed peasant, I warned you!”

Faljan sprang up, wrenching violently at the cord binding his wrists. Without success. Tigellinus leaped at him—the knife skimmed through Faljan’s tunic, but failed of meat for the reason that the gladiator had dodged in time. They fell to maneuvering like two wrestlers, Tigellinus striking with the knife, Faljan dancing out of his way and repeatedly yanking at the cord, without so much as loosening it.

Then he stood stock-still, permitting Tigellinus to rush again. The dagger flashed up, Faljan shoved his wrists into the very path of the knife—the blade cut his hand, but in passing on its way it likewise severed half the cord. The remainder Faljan broke asunder with a jerk, and then before the Sicilian could recover from his surprise, Faljan struck him heavily upon the temple, laying him out flat as a cow chip.

“Now your keys,” muttered the gladiator, and ripped them loose.

After that it was Faljan’s own game. He gave Urstine a kick in the face to keep him senseless, let himself out of the court. Rapidly he walked up the corridor, paused to spit indignantly upon Locusta’s door, and went on. The keys got him past the next door, and from then on he had only to find his way back to peopled corridors and someone who could direct him out of the palace.

CHAPTER 7.

I.

FALJAN'S hand still bled from the slash Tigellinus had given him, but this was a matter easily remedied. Pausing at a little herb-and-drug shop, he bargained for a fistful of cobwebs. These he tangled into the wound, and the bleeding stopped almost at once.

He bought a pair of honey cakes and walked munching on his way, grinning at the memory of what he had done to the Sicilian and his eunuch. A narrow corner, yet Faljan had turned it, and now that it was past he could laugh at all that had happened.

On the other hand, he could not laugh at the prospective days ahead of him. Agrippina's plan had gone astray, Faljan walking into a snare and the whole affair bursting up like a muskball that you step upon in a pasture. What to do now? Escape the city and return to the farm of Curtius Criba? Old Burrus had promised to settle the debt of the stolen cattle; Faljan, if he wanted to, could therefore go back and resume his cattle-tending.

It had been a good life, down there on the Campagna. He ate in the kitchen, and although the food consisted of leavings from the farmer's table, there had always been plenty of them. Criba's wife was indulgent; she patched his clothes, defended him against the anger which her spouse occasionally hurled at him, gave Faljan permission to roam the fields on feast days—provided he did not attempt to take her daughter with him.

Recalling the girl today, Faljan grew soft with pleasure. He had been, in his younger years, a big husky lad, muscular and yet not without a certain nimble grace; the promise, in short, of what he was to become in the days of his maturity as a gladiator. At the age of thirteen, on a certain stormy night, Curtius Criba had sent him out to cover a rick of hay; accompanying him, by way of assistance, the buxom young daughter of his farmer. The darkness blinded them, the rain whipped and pelted, four hands tugged at the mats which had

to be lashed down onto the hay and which the wind kept lifting up and away again; then by accident, Faljan rubbed against the girl's warm elastic body—swift as the lightning in the sky above them, they were in each other's embrace, trying to kiss and not knowing how; but in the lee of the haystack, and with the instinct of animals, managing to mate just the same.

After that she often stole out at night to the stable, awakening him as she rustled against the hay in climbing the ladder to where he lay in his bed. They had their happy moments together; and when she had slipped back to the house, and he was alone in the night, he was deeply content. The blanketing dark, the sound of horses and bullocks munching hay, the smell of beasts and fodder and wind off the eastern hills—it was all very satisfying. Especially if, in addition, the rain were pattering onto the roof just above his head. There was nothing better than rain in the country; in the city it was simply wetness, but on a farm it was refreshing magic, piercing down from the heavens and through your body and on into the earth beneath you, as reminder of your intimate kinship with things which were real, not contrived and false, as in cities. Certainly he ought to go back to that good life.

Um, yes—still and all, the matter needed a little pondering. He walked on in thought, detouring safely away from the gladiators' school and wandering into Mars Field. Trying to make up his mind, and finding it hard. So much had happened since that fateful afternoon outside the Capenian Gate. Danger had entered his life, and there was this to be said for danger: it quickened the blood, lent zest to a man's existence. Rome had done something to him in these last few brief days, no doubt about that. At the same time, the sensible thing was to get back to the Campagna, while he had the chance. Um.

He looked up and saw the arena, clots of people at the entrance, a great hullabaloo of noise and movement everywhere about. Faljan halted.

Nero had arrived for the games. The contests at this season were unimportant, nevertheless Caesar made a point of being present whenever they were given; otherwise the mob would consider it all just a sop thrown to it, something not worth its while because it was apparently not worth the Emperor's.

"Get a program!" cried a vendor, shoving up in front of Faljan with a bit of marked paper. "You will need a program in order to know who is fighting and what his record is, his weapons, against what opponent he is matched. Program?"

“Move aside. I want a squint at Nero.”

It was the first time that Faljan had observed Caesar at close range, and what he saw surprised him. Agrippina had rattled on and on about her beautiful lovely sweet boy, but the man descending from his litter was, while young, neither boy nor pleasing to behold. Pudgy as a barrel, Faljan thought him, with a head which looked to be overbig, something shopped for too hurriedly in the head department. Hair a light red, spare fine beard of the same color; both head hair and beard curled by a barber to something resembling a woman's coiffure. This much but little more Faljan saw, there was such a crowd.

“Bees will swarm round the honey pot,” murmured an idler standing near; “even though the pot is empty.”

Nero had reached the ground and was adjusting his robes, a centurion announcing in a loud patronizing voice that Caesar had arrived to watch the games. And in response, obedient voices were raised in salutation.

“Hail to Nero!”

“May the gods favor the Divine One!”

“Noble Caesar!”

The Emperor bowed in acceptance of their praise, Faljan let out a snort. Nero was a fool soaked deep in vanity, else he would be reading all this greeting as irony, even downright sarcasm.

A fanfare of trumpets, still more shouted compliments from the bystanders, and Nero passed into the arena. The crowd forgot him, turned to the next litters arriving. A whole flock this time, fetching the Vestal Virgins, dressed all of them in white as a symbol of their purity. The vendors and idlers nudged each other, rolled their eyes, made suggestive hints with their mouths.

“There is Rubria—still the same span about the waist!”

“Give her time, give her time!”

“Nay, Caesar is a botch, else he would have had her swollen long before now.”

“A fine situation, that a Vestal Virgin should have to sweat it out with fat Nero. Why didn't she choose *me*—I have a free hour now and again!”

Discreet laughter, the Vestal Virgins strolling primly toward the arena, the program vendors trying to outshout the sellers of food and sweets. Faljan was listening beyond the tumult, his nostrils widening for a deeper breath. A grim business, the arena. And yet fascinating. Matched against the net-thrower Juculus that well-remembered day,

death reaching out her claw for him, Faljan had been filled with terror and rage; but that was then, not now. Shock spends itself and fades away; after all, there was waiting in this world an end to all living men, so why not face the fact? He himself had faced it. Twice. Once with Juculus of the broken nose, again with Tigellinus and the eunuch. And these last two, at any rate, he would gladly have slain, if he could have done it without fear of reprisal. The arena was not such a bad thing. Your opponent there was legally an enemy; he sought to kill you, so it was natural and permitted that you try to kill him instead. That was the way of it, the way to look at it.

There appeared in front of Faljan's eyes a high broad wall, scribbled over with announcements, notices, public and private messages: rewards posted for runaway slaves, lists of articles for sale, auctions proclaimed on such and such a date, tenements to rent, occasionally an appeal to an errant wife to return and let be as before; but for the most part concerning games in the arena, past and future schedules, and the like. Hirl's name was there, and Hirl was still alive. A man could win fame and fortune in the ring, just as Agrippina had said, just as Ershutif the Syrian had predicted for Faljan. Synistor had had such luck, so why not another?

Faljan turned and walked off in the direction of the gladiators' school.

II.

On the following day, Burrus visited the barracks on a purported official tour of inspection. He put his eyes everywhere, sampling the food, listening to the obsequious Director, and at last finding opportunity to talk to Faljan privately.

"Make no move for the present," murmured the old soldier, "but do not be alarmed. Tigellinus is not yet strong enough to proceed openly, either against me or even against you. I will contrive another plan, though it will take time. Have you my ring?"

"Yes."

"Guard it."

Burrus went stalking off, leaving Faljan to squirm under the bantering of his mates. The pet of Agrippina and the darling of Old Burrus—ah, what a glorious fate had descended upon the green

countryman who had still his apprenticeship to serve in the ring! It must be Faljan's good looks that were carrying him so high!

"Or his long tongue," said Juculus.

Faljan whirled angrily, but the trainer was watching,

"You will practice lifting weights, Faljan. Somersaults and hand walking for you, Juculus; and see if you can do better than you did yesterday—you could scarcely do worse."

They went to work in the sand of the quadrangle—all save the blond barbarian. Quartilla's whip was singing again, a shrill tune down through the air and a dull thud. Vortinax was getting his daily thrashing.

"He loves to be flogged, that one," chuckled a thick short man exercising next to Faljan. "Loves it as I love wine. By the way, you have no wine hidden in your room, have you?"

"No," said Faljan. This thick short fellow was called Big Gullet, because of his inordinate appetite. At table he crammed everything possible into his mouth, using both hands for the purpose; and when there was wine he made a funnel and actually poured it in, the sooner to get it to work for him.

The whip was slowly beating Vortinax to the earth—and not even a grunt out of him, which annoyed Faljan.

"A man that is a man will fight back," he muttered.

"Then what sex are you?" asked Juculus. "I keep insulting you and you take it—Long Tongue!"

Faljan glanced at Quartilla, made sure that he was busy with the barbarian, dropped his weights and strode up to the wall where the weapons hung. He took down a pair of boxing gloves and tossed them to Juculus, selected another pair for himself.

"Let us try a round," Faljan said. "Perhaps I can stopper your mouth for a while."

The men in the quadrangle moved in to form a circle about the two, shielding them in such fashion that the fight could proceed unnoticed by the trainer. Big Gullet tied on Faljan's gloves, Hirl did likewise for Juculus. Savage weapons, these so-called boxing gloves. Consisting of long leathern thongs running crisscross around and up the wrist and arm, for the sole purpose of keeping firmly in place across the knuckles a bar of lead, they were not gloves at all. Juculus was trembling with eagerness, as Hirl tied his knots.

"I will open his face for him," he promised. "He made a clown of me in the arena, but now it is my turn."

A soft low-spoken signal and they came together, Juculus lunging, Faljan evading him and swinging back with a blow that sent blood fleeing down his enemy's shoulder. His enemy, yes. The insult of the long tongue had been too much; Faljan was as eager to tear and bruise as Juculus was—and more adroit in his boxing. One of Faljan's blows smashed the broken nose still flatter, blood streaming out of it in a lovely torrent. Cries of admiration rose from the spectators,

"Faljan is good—he is clever!"

"That Faljan will rise to the top, certainly!"

"Like a corpse in a pool he will rise!" yelled Juculus, and rushed forward in a new attack. "You are full of tricks, O Faljan, but—"

Quartilla had run up and was throwing them apart as if they had been children,

"Boxing gloves are to be used only with permission. Take them off."

"We thought," said Faljan, tongue in cheek, "that it would help develop speed in ducking—eh, Juculus?"

"Silence!" cried the trainer. "I'll have no grudge fights here. That is for the arena."

"And when will there be another contest in the arena for this cattle drover and me?" demanded Juculus sullenly.

"Not until after New Year's, in any case. Go on, now, every man back to his task, or he gets the whip."

III.

New Year's was a holiday. Custom and blind human yearning said together, with one voice, that according as the year began, so would it continue; and thus the first day was dedicated to such matters as sacrifices in the temples, the deciphering of omens, and a general tendency to put aside quarrels in exchange for at least brief good will. It was a universal celebration, every man in the gladiators' school at liberty to roam the city until nightfall. Save Vortinax, who was confined to the stocks for ill behavior.

"Since it is New Year's," said Faljan, glancing over at Juculus, as the lot of them left the barracks together, "would you like to shake my hand?"

"And catch the itch?"

"Catch it, or give it?" retorted Faljan angrily.

"Tchut, tchut," said Big Gullet; "no quarreling on this sacred day."

They separated into twos, Faljan going with Big Gullet until the greedy one fell upon a wine shop, after which Faljan went on alone.

He sniffed appreciatively at the houses he passed; inside, by the good smell, women were kindling symbolic new fires with the leaves of the saffron plant. Omens and auguries everywhere, bright hopes and expectations. Vendors gaily offering floral bouquets, selling special cakes and pastries. Faljan bought a cornucopia of pastries, stopped again to bargain for a good-luck amulet to wear about his neck; then he went on to the tavern of the Heel of Achilles. It was there that he had begun his Roman luck, and it was therefore meet that he should visit the place and give the swart Greek a present.

The innkeeper was on his platform as usual, sipping resin wine. Faljan extended him greetings and handed over the pastries, got back a word of thanks and good wish. Then Ershutif called from a table, and Faljan went and sat beside him. The little Syrian had begun to grow a beard, divided into two forks.

"Are the Tarbuckets after you," Faljan laughed, "that you disguise yourself?"

"Not at all. It is simply that the poor have always a north wind in their faces, and I have wearied of this. I am accordingly changing my occupation: with the New Year I drop hawking and become a soothsayer and astrologer, no longer Ershutif the Syrian but Ershutif the Babylonian. I shall specialize in reading entrails."

"Picking them up in alleys and eating them, you mean."

"Come, Faljan, wish me fortune."

"Have it, then, if you can find it."

"I can. The world is full of fools, and a fool is the wise man's door."

"Take care you do not catch your fingers in it."

"What do you mean?"

"Lean dogs live longest," Faljan replied, and forgot the Syrian turned Babylonian. The dancer Lydia had come in from a back room. He called out to her, "I hope you are well, on this New Year's day! Will you sit down and have wine?"

She shook her head, went to the street door and stood there shouting Mikrella's name. Faljan rose and walked over to her. Lydia said,

"Did you see Mikrella in the street, when you came?"

"No, but what matter—she can look out for herself. Let us go for an outing, somewhere beyond the Tiber bridges, perhaps."

She remained indifferent, Faljan added in a persuasive tone,
"It will be a change for you."

"As you wish," she said finally.

The woman got a cloak and they went out, walking in silence down the crowded ravine and across the Corso, then into the Velabrum, which was little less dark and filthy than the Subura itself. They passed through a street obstructed by large poles, set up to brace and hold aloft the upper stories of a tenement.

"Such buildings will come tumbling down one day," said Faljan.

"And do you care?"

He halted at a cookshop,

"I will get our food here. Across the river there are chiefly foreigners, and foreigners always cheat you. What do you want?"

"It does not matter."

A curse upon the wench. He bought an earthenware bottle of wine, some oatcakes and dried apples. Then they went on again, halting briefly at the river to watch an Egyptian snake charmer, and afterward crossing a bridge and ascending the great hill of the Janiculum. Lydia climbed slowly and without zest, but Faljan felt in his breast a distinct happiness at being once more in open country. He pointed ahead, exclaiming brightly,

"There stands an acacia tree. It is yet too early for its blossoms, but later when it puts forth yellow flowers it will be worth seeing."

She did not answer. He saw that he would have to warm her with wine, and quickly—before anger got the better of him and he knocked her slim bones apart.

"I am tired," she said at last.

They were still some distance from the acacia tree, nevertheless Faljan sat down with her. Her legs stuck out from her tunic. Good legs, round and straight. She likewise had fine breasts, neither soft nor too small. In every part she was a desirable woman, except that life no longer stirred in her. This tavern dancer reminded Faljan of a horse which is broken in by too severe a hand, and henceforth has no spirit.

"Will you have wine now?" he grumbled.

IV.

The wine did not help. In disgust Faljan began to ignore her, turning his eyes to gaze at the view lying down the slope; he could at least enjoy that.

Mother Tiber, men called the river yonder, and well named she was, too. The thick yellow stream looped about the city as a guardian serpent, comfortable, reassuring. Galleys nudged her bank like pups at a she-dog, pleasure boats went passing up and down her course, streamers of colored cloth fluttering from their masts and the muffled racket of holidaymakers rising from many passengers. Off to the right, just beyond the Tiber, Faljan identified the cattle market which he was wont to frequent; and farther still the Circus Maximus; and left of the Circus the Palatine Hill. The seven hills of Rome, their upper reaches the green gardens and bright-awned villas of the rich; between the hills, in ravines narrow as a knife gash in a haunch of meat, the huddled drab slums of the poor. Still farther east, well beyond city walls and the square huge camp of the Imperial Guards, he saw the Sabine Hills, blue and beautiful, free of men.

"It is odd how people crowd together," he murmured. "There is plenty of room in the world, yet wherever a village starts, men shove and clutch together like worms in a manure pile."

Lydia stared without listening—until presently the cries of women fell upon her ears with a meaning she could not ignore. Down the slope a bevy of peasant wives had surrounded a girl obviously pregnant. They were chanting a magical song, at the same time slapping her belly and lightly beating it with switches.

"What is it?" Faljan asked.

"They are trying to hasten her delivery, so that the child will be born on this New Year's day and thus begin life under good auspices."

She laughed mournfully, Faljan said,

"What is wrong with that?"

"It is folly that anyone should want to enter the world early. Or enter it at all, for that matter. What they ought to do down yonder is let her bide her time, and then take the child and throw it onto a dunghill."

The women were now chasing their pregnant friend round and round a tree, screaming invocations to the gods.

"On a dunghill, eh!" said Faljan irritably. "Then why did you not do that with your own brat!"

Lydia's pale hollow face grew rigid,

"I should have. She has turned evil, as if there were a bewitched spirit in her."

"Is that you, or her father?" he asked spitefully.

"Partly me, no doubt."

"Who was her father?"

"I do not know."

"You have not kept track of your men, eh!"

"No; only the first."

"And who was he?"

"Tigellinus."

Faljan leaped to his feet,

"What's that you say?"

"How does it concern you!" she said. "I chanced in with him when I first came to Rome, and he took me to bed—which is what girls are for, seemingly."

"Tigellinus!" the gladiator muttered fiercely. "Anyone but him."

"Let us eat," she said, "and then get back to the tavern. I work double tides tonight."

Faljan seized their food and hurled it down the slope, his eyes hot. Up along the east shore of the Tiber, a caravan of camels came creeping with wares fetched in from the Orient; but though it was a wondrous sight, and ordinarily he would have studied every detail of it, today he turned away in fret. It was not, he told himself, that he had any liking for this girl, but rather that he hated everything concerned with Tigellinus.

"There are certainly too many people in the world," he declared; "especially the wrong kind of people. Such as you, and that vile Mikrella of yours."

Lydia said dispassionately,

"She is vile, but also she is unhappy."

"Out of knowledge that actually she may be the very child of Tigellinus, I'll warrant!"

"She hates him for having started me in my profession. It is a fever in her, resenting him, and all."

Faljan was trembling with rage, a queer kind of rage which was altogether new to him. For a moment he glared at the girl beside him, then he reached out and jerked her into his arms, crying,

"May the fiends of the underworld eat your liver—that you should have let Tigellinus touch you!"

Lydia made no effort to get loose from him. She rested limp in his arms, gazing at him without interest, seeming not even to focus upon his face. Faint smudges of antimony clung to the skin about her eyes, its black the remnant of what she applied by night for her dancing. The antimony gave her eyes a strange look—or did it? Perhaps they were strange eyes without the stuff. They were bleak and of no color, unless possibly a pale faded blue. Dead as the rest of her, Faljan decided bitterly.

“Curse you,” he kept muttering, “curse you.”

“Do not trouble,” she said, in a flat tone. “You are carrying water to the river.”

The warmth of her body had begun to reach him; in spite of his anger, he felt his blood stir. She said quietly,

“Take me, if you like; but pay me first. A piece of silver or a handful of copper, either one.”

“Oh, you tavern bitch, to ask me for money!” he shouted. “Do you never do anything for pleasure!”

“I no longer find pleasure in men, O Faljan.”

“Nevertheless I will have you, and without paying for it!” and he hurled her over onto the ground. “Without paying, do you hear? Fight it, and I’ll bash in your face, as surely as Vulcan limps!”

Lydia did not fight it; she simply did nothing, so that although he worked his will upon her, he had no joy from it. The gladiator stared at her in baffled fury, the more outraged because he was realizing that he loved this woman. How it had come about he did not know, but he loved her.

“Get away from me,” he growled.

She sat up, saying nothing. A ragged urchin came leaping down the hillside, pausing beside them,

“Have you seen the villa of Cleopatra? Julius Caesar fetched her to Rome, you know—built her a grand house up on the Janiculum yonder. I am the only one who knows where it is, and the story of it, but for a copper I will take you there. A copper from each of you, that is to say. Cleopatra was a famous siren—you have heard of her, surely. She was a queen in olden times; Egypt, I think.”

“Keep your Cleopatra,” said Faljan. “I have here with me my own siren, and she is beyond compare.”

The boy strolled off, Faljan stared down at Lydia, his heart weary and his eyes clouded with bewilderment.

“Let us get back to Rome,” he said. “The sooner I am rid of you the better I shall like it.”

She rose, and they went down the hill in silence.

CHAPTER 8.

I.

THAT night his anger clawed at Faljan every time he thought of how she had failed him on the Janiculan Hill, but next morning Lydia was brushed rudely aside. Now that New Year's was past and gone, Quartilla was initiating a course of hard training and this left no time for even the thought of women.

"You may none of you be fit for anything save the deadroom at the arena," the trainer told his men; "but until proved so, I will consider you possible gladiators. Attention, for orders!"

He set them to a daily stint of exercises: rolling in the sand, jumping barriers and swinging clubs, tossing huge stones back and forth. Thus all week and another week and still another, the tasks methodically stiffer; and for the man who failed in them, curses and the whip. By the end of the month there was not a recruit who could not boast of scars on his back, except that there was no point in boasting when your neighbor had them, too.

The schedule tightened. They slept, not on their usual pallets of straw, but upon wooden planks. Rising before dawn, gulping down copious draughts of water, running around the quadrangle a hundred times without clothing. Then breakfast of half-raw meat, more exercises, baths, rubdowns, and back to the quadrangle until the sun set in mercy. Faljan lost flesh, built it up again in the form of muscle; he traded short wind for long, learned to spring and charge and retreat with speed. By the close of March he was in better physical condition than he had ever imagined he could be, a beautiful supple athlete each day eating his weight in food. Or so it seemed to him.

There was plenty of food. Chiefly meat, coming to the table on huge wooden trenchers, the stuff already hacked into chunks. The men ate with fingers and teeth, knives being forbidden, lest in irritability at Quartilla's driving pace, they break into private fighting. Juculus and Faljan, for example.

"Good meat," Faljan remarked, and reached for another chunk.

“Why not good meat!” laughed Big Gullet. “It comes from the temples.”

A true tale. From earliest simplest times, even before Rome was Rome, it had been man’s habit to placate the gods by sacrificing animals. Chickens, goats and lambs, bullocks. All for the gods, but because the gods were tolerant—and probably stupid, into the bargain—men had learned that the offal of the sacrificed animals would do just as well in the temple, the flesh itself to be used otherwise. In this way, there grew up the custom of selling meat from temple to private table, with resultant plump purses for the priests and good digestion to hungry laymen. Faljan laughed at the tale, and bolted what had been intended for Mars or Apollo.

Then he frowned. Vortinax sat at the table, but without eating. Faljan tossed meat to him, the barbarian paid no heed. He was still sulking, still fighting the harness and the goad. In annoyance, Faljan shoved a trencher of bread down to him, Vortinax declined it, listless and inert.

“It is the finest of bread,” declared Big Gullet, cramming his mouth full. “And why not—it was made in Synistor’s bakery.”

“Then let me have more of it,” said Hirl. “There is an old saying in arenas, you know—he who eats the bread of a great gladiator himself becomes a great gladiator.”

Vortinax rose and left the table, and when the others had finished, Faljan strolled over to him. A queer fellow, this blond barbarian from somewhere beyond the horizon; he was always sitting slumped over, blinking at the ground, brooding. Faljan took a seat beside him,

“You should stop graveling the trainer. That is why he flogs you so much.”

“What boots it!” Vortinax answered dully.

“You would get along better.”

“I do not want to get along. I despise Rome, and all who dwell in it. The city is a sewer, nothing else. . . . I want to go home.”

Something stirred in Faljan. The barbarian spoke with the air of a child, for all his great bulk and muscle.

“Home,” said Faljan; “where is that?”

“In the forest, beyond the Alps.”

“Alps?” repeated Faljan. It was merely a name to him; he had no notion of where it might be.

Vortinax raised his head and looked at him. Blue eyes, Faljan saw, with a kind of shock. Incredibly blue, like the heavens on a clear summer day. The barbarian pointed north, as a sign that the Alps lay in that direction; but Faljan did not take his glance from the man.

Gazing into the blue sad eyes of Vortinax, an unexplainable sadness was creeping likewise upon Faljan.

"What did you do beyond the Alps?" he asked.

"I lived. My father was there, and my mother—and the forest. We hunted and fished. Then the Romans came, and it ends like this."

Quartilla was ordering everyone back to work. Faljan said hurriedly,

"You had best try to get along with him. If you do not, you are nothing but a horse with the blind staggers."

Vortinax made no answer, and accordingly Faljan flushed and walked away. What was it to him, that the blond giant was dirtying his own nest! Nothing at all.

And yet it somehow was, for when a few minutes later the trainer's whip descended again upon Vortinax, it seemed to Faljan that the leaden balls were cutting into his own flesh, laying it open in quivering mysterious pain.

II.

The elimination games were scheduled to take place in April, upon the occasion of Rome's birthday. In April, but though the season was softening from winter to spring, Quartilla showed no sign of easing his rules. Actually, he stiffened them. Longer hours, shorter rest periods, quarrels and even arguments punished with the savagery of a galley captain.

Nevertheless there was a welcome change in regimen. Basic exercises were put aside, all men assigned to maneuvering with daggers, swords, and long-handled spears. Quartilla demonstrated how to handle each of these weapons, his skill so patent that the recruits ironed out their scowls a bit. He had his points.

"At it now!" he shouted, relinquishing the role of instructor. "And the first man to drop a weapon gets the stocks!"

"I love that fellow," Big Gullet muttered. "I would like to ram a spear into him and break it off. By the by, what is Juculus up to, talking to Quartilla like that?"

Faljan sauntered up to the pair, under pretense of selecting his exercise weapon. Juculus was saying to the trainer,

"Suppose that Faljan and I spar each other with swords—would not that be permissible, O Quartilla?"

"No."

"Yet it would enable us to do better in the arena, thus insuring that Caesar would not be ashamed of us."

"You have the wit of a spoiled cheese," Quartilla retorted. "The elimination games do not involve men fighting men."

"No?" Juculus cried in amazement. "What, then?"

"Men fighting beasts."

Juculus shuddered with defeated rage.

"You are jesting!" he cried, but the trainer gave him a look that sent him off to his exercises without further words.

No further words, but plenty of dagger looks at Faljan, and Faljan laughing at him. Juculus whacked at the training post with his sword, cutting it into firewood to ease his spleen, and still more spleen yeasting up within him.

"He will never be content," said Big Gullet, "until either he or you is slain, Faljan, my chick."

Faljan only smiled. He was not alarmed. The April games would bring beast opponents, not men. And beyond that, he would trust to his star. The cattle drover had risen a considerable way; it was surely in the portents that he would climb still farther up toward glory.

"Juculus does not worry me," he said simply.

Nevertheless, he kept an eye on the broken nose. If Juculus walked by with a weapon, Faljan took care not to turn his back; and when Quartilla fetched in a pack of dogs from off the streets of Rome, Faljan gave as much attention to Juculus as to the cur assigned him.

The dogs were for living practice, a kind of substitute for what the gladiators would find in next week's arena. A whole drove of the yapping snapping creatures was turned loose in the quadrangle, and leave given the men to kill as they chose. Faljan speared a big mongrel, looked round for Quartilla's praise, and caught sight of a dog hurtling through the air toward him—a thing slain by Juculus and now cast at his enemy. Faljan ducked, the carcass slithered up to the very feet of the Director, here today for the purpose of watching his men perform with live meat.

There was a brittle silence, while the Director glared about. An impractical little man, the Director, holding a sinecure and having no actual tasks at the barracks, but still not exactly an idiot. He saw blood on the hands of Juculus, pointed him out to the trainer,

"Cast that fellow into the stocks!"

Quartilla did better. He threw Juculus into the stocks and tied the dead dog about his neck, leaving it there for two days and nights,

and not once interfering when everybody cast jibes at the pair. But when finally he released Juculus from what the gladiators gayly termed the Ankle Breaker, Quartilla said to him,

"Later, perhaps, I will have you matched against Faljan, if you insist upon it."

"When?"

"At some game beyond the beast fight—if you both survive that long."

III.

On the morning of the beast fight, Faljan hid in his room the signet ring which Burrus had given him, not wanting it lumped in pitch under his arm, lest it interfere with his aim in the arena. Instead, he wore his amulet, stringing it securely about his neck on a leathern cord.

"An amulet, eh!" cried Juculus. "It must be that Agrippina has abandoned our pet, so that he has need of animal bones, or whatever that thing may be. What is the matter with your sponsor, O Faljan? Has she abandoned you?"

"It is possible," Faljan replied, with a quiet face. "In the matter of melons and women you can tell nothing, unless you open them up."

"And you could not open her up?"

Laughter rose from the little group of gladiators standing about, Hirl heehawing so heartily that Quartilla said,

"Remain quiet. The soldier escort will be here as soon as the sand-glass yonder is empty, then we leave promptly for the arena."

Big Gullet took hold of Faljan's ear, whispering,

"I wish I had me a flagon of wine. I fight better with a belly full of red."

"If you had told me sooner," said Faljan, "I could have bribed some to the barracks through the attendant Besidus. He is looking for a chance to serve me."

Big Gullet groaned to think of his lost opportunity, then he brightened up,

"I thank you for the good offer, O Faljan—and to prove it I will do you a favor. Slip into your room and fetch a piece of silver. You will not regret it, I promise you."

Faljan went off to his room, got back just in time to stand in

line. The soldiers had arrived, Quartilla was giving a last warning, "Everyone has his weapons? If not, you will be sent out to your beast barehanded. Take charge, centurion!"

The centurion called his commands, the little column filed out of the barracks in twos. They thudded their feet off in the direction of the arena, gazed upon by a desultory crowd of people in the streets. No one called praise to them, for beginner gladiators had not yet proved worthy of it. There were, on the contrary, a few jeers, an amused shout from a woman pointing out Faljan,

"See the big handsome fellow with the red marks on his neck! He probably made them himself, as beggars disfigure their carcasses to get alms!"

Faljan put a hand to his neck. The wound had been made by the trident, and he had forgotten it; it had healed so fast. That was the advantage of being young and in good health.

"They scoff at us now," observed Big Gullet, "but once let a gladiator get past the eliminations, into a spot to fight first-rate men instead of animals, and these jades will crawl down his very tunic. Women are mad for a successful gladiator."

"I smell the beasts," said Faljan, twitching his nostrils.

The odor of animals was stronger as the gladiators approached nearer to the arena, and by the time they trailed through the gate and into the underground galleries, it was overpowering. A nostril-choking stench, accompanied by howls and roars and occasionally the sound of a wooden bar creaking as some starved brute or other lurched against it in the effort to escape.

"Nero probably has a sample of every beast in the world here today," Big Gullet said proudly. "Except a unicorn. Have you ever seen a unicorn?"

"No."

"Nor I. Slow up now—step out of line, right into this cubby room. Do not be afraid—it is all right."

They ducked out of line, finding, in the cubby room, an ill-dressed fellow who apparently sold refreshments to the gladiators. Big Gullet greeted him with a slap on the back, explaining to Faljan,

"His name is Khonca, and he is my brother-in-law. Married my sister, not more than four months after he should have."

Khonca burst out laughing at what was evidently an oft-told tale. And its rejoinder equally worn,

"Six months, you mean!"

"Give him the silver piece," said Big Gullet, chuckling.

Faljan handed it over, the brother-in-law signaled them to follow him. They went by a circuitous route down narrow passageways and around corners, and finally up to a barred window.

"Make no noise," Khonca cautioned them. "Now, remember!"

The brother-in-law went away, Faljan and Big Gullet crouched down to have a look through the window.

They were gazing into the arena itself, Faljan suppressing a cry of astonishment. Last time he had seen it, he had stood on smooth sand facing Juculus and the net; now there was dirt in room of sand, and also great boulders, shrubs, trees, and even a stream of running water. The enclosure had been transformed into a wildwood, around its entire circumference a deep ditch dug; this, together with extra iron bars along the top of the balustrade, would serve to keep the animals from springing up into the laps of the spectators.

"Beasts sometimes go mad from their wounds," nodded Faljan.

"That worries me not at all," laughed Big Gullet. "What concerns me is my own wounds."

The top rows of seats had already filled with slaves and poor freedmen and miscellaneous riffraff, the middle rows were spotting up with a better class of people—that is to say, people with the money to command better seats. Still lower down, plump against the balustrade in the best situation, page boys were giving the last preparatory touches to the seats reserved for Nero and his friends. It would not be long before Caesar arrived. A creaking of pulleys indicated that even now the awning was being hauled over the top of the arena, for protection against the warming April sun. Then a trumpet sounded somewhere back in the underground galleries, and Big Gullet scrambled to his feet,

"Quick, they are allotting numbers—let us see what we have drawn!"

They hurried to the main corridor, where the fighters had already lined up. A centurion was passing out little blocks of wood, each with a number on it, and this corresponding to a number chalked upon a bulletin board nearby. Faljan got his little block and shoved up toward the board, craning over heads to see what he was destined to fight.

"Ha!" exclaimed Juculus, "I draw a bear! Good—he will get no ruth from me."

Big Gullet had drawn a lion, which did not seem to alarm him.

"Well," he told Faljan, "he who brags is marked for destruction by the overproud gods, and so I will not yawp like Juculus—but just the same, my lion will probably be young, since in the wilderness where lions come from, the young are more easily snared than grown ones. It ought not to be so bad. And you a boar, eh? H'm, they are cunning fighters."

"I have hunted them many a time with my farmer, Curtius Criba," said Faljan sturdily.

"Hence understand their ways. Fortune attend you, my friend."

"And you."

Vortinax stood at the bulletin board, his number block lost in his big trembling hand. Faljan went over to him,

"What is your beast?"

"An aurochs, the giant ox from my native forests. It seems that the Romans have rifled even the woods of my country for their sport."

"Can you slay the beast?"

"I have killed many an aurochs in the past," said the barbarian; "but now and here I would as lief it killed me. I am aching weary of this life that is no life."

"Any life is better than being dead."

The barbarian walked away, Ershutif came smiling up to Faljan, "Greeting and good fortune, O gladiator!"

"How did you gain entrance here?"

"I have influence. I am selling out the last of my charms—but I see you have one. What is it?"

"A fox's paw, for cunning and swiftness."

"It is the left paw, which is the wrong one," said Ershutif nimbly. "Only the right paw of the fox could help you. Permit me to sell you a better charm. Very cheap."

"Save your breath to cool your porridge," Faljan scowled. He did not care to have his amulet maligned; that in itself could fetch bad luck in the arena.

"As you wish—but you will need special help today. Your protector will not be here."

"Who is that?"

"Agrippina."

Faljan waved it off. He had another woman on his mind. Ershutif frequented the tavern of the Heel of Achilles; he likely saw her every day. Very casually, Faljan asked,

"And how goes life at the tavern these days?"

"In the usual vein, save that Mikrella is growing up. She has begun to hang about in dark corners, waylaying men."

"And the mother?"

"Plies the same trade. But come back to Agrippina. There was a terrible quarrel between her and Nero, their shouted recriminations so loud as to be heard atop the Sabine Hills, I am told by an ear-witness. Agrippina demanded that her darling son stay true to the Empress Octavia, the darling son insisted upon maintaining what he calls his friendship with Poppaea. It ended in a draw, Nero defying her, and Mamma warning him to beware the punishment of the gods, remembering, as he must, that he was born feet first."

"Signifying that grief will overtake Nero?"

"Of course. A rude thing to tell a man, eh? It is better not to know one's end—as you will doubtless admit."

The Syrian chuckled and moved away, Faljan forgot him. The roll was being called, every fighter answering to his name and then passing into a dressing room to be readied for the parade: hair brushed back in seemly fashion, tunics made straight, proper weapons in hand. And then, at a sounding trumpet, came the command to march.

They strode out of the dressing room and down the corridor, and presently up the incline through the big iron gates, entering the arena to the accompaniment of mild hand clapping. A centurion led them in and out among the obstructions of the artificial wildwood, around the curve of the enclosure toward the podium. Nero sat in the forward place, his companions grouped according to importance or current favor with him: Agrippina absent, pale fair Octavia beside her husband, the delectable Poppaea not far off, Burrus grim as always. A short bald-headed man was talking to Burrus.

"Who is the shiny pate?" Faljan whispered.

"Seneca the philosopher," said Big Gullet, out of the corner of his mouth. "No one pays any attention to him any more."

Faljan grinned. He cared nothing for Seneca, but even farther back than the philosopher sat the gold-toothed Tigellinus—which could only mean that the horse breeder was still not so powerful as he would like. Burrus continued his better.

"Halt!"

The gladiators came to a stop before the podium, at a signal each man lifting his weapon in his right hand and crying,

"Hail, Caesar! We who are about to die, salute you!"

Nero waved a negligent hand and the column moved on around the arena to the nearest door, and thence by underground galleries back to the dressing rooms. Here they were to wait, until each in his turn was needed. Save that with a wink which caused the door guard to laugh and turn a complacent back, Big Gullet hustled Faljan out of the room and off to their barred window.

They crouched down to watch the show, commenting upon the animals as they appeared, studying the terrain for their own use later, gulping when men instead of beasts went down in blood. The rhinos were the most astonishing to watch, the hyenas the most revolting; something about hyenas turned Faljan's bowels over inside him. A pair of gladiators fell before the pack, the spectators applauded, arena attendants dragged the carcasses out of the way, trumpeting heralds announced the next contestants.

"Truly an elimination," murmured Big Gullet; "although I do not lie when I say that the men from our barracks are doing better than the fighters from private schools. Hark, is that your name?"

Faljan rose, touched his amulet with a ceremonious gesture, "My boar is waiting for me."

IV.

He walked into the arena slow but firm, spear held easily ready, eyes sweeping the enclosure. The mob was murmuring in excitement, for wild boars were a favorite with it, being very fast, and treacherous beyond divining.

A gate opened and the boar trotted into the arena, a considerable distance from Faljan, huge rocks and a screen of bushes between them. Shouts of delight went up; the brute was unusually large and heavy, his triangular tusks the length of daggers. Faljan stood perfectly still, watching him. The creature's snout wrinkled experimentally, as he tried for the wind. He got it, turned and saw his enemy, but characteristically pretended otherwise. Abruptly he went trotting off in another direction, as if either stupid or cowardly. Then he came up over a big flat rock, descended carelessly, paused directly in front of the gladiator, at the distance of a good spear throw. The

boar snuffled and rooted up a bit of dirt, which clung to the top of his snout in the form of a small cone. He seemed to be afraid, uncertain; he shambled back a little way, as though retreating—then with incredible swiftness he whirled and dashed forward. The brute would attempt to side-slash Faljan, ripping his legs out from under him and then finishing the helpless gladiator at will.

Faljan stood and waited, the crowd yelled in excitement,

“Throw your spear, while there is time!”

“Too late now!”

The gladiator did not intend to throw his spear. He waited tensely—the beast came bounding nearer and nearer—suddenly Faljan dropped flat on his belly and thrust his weapon forward with all his strength, using both hands, and keeping the point on a level with the boar’s throat. Too late to throw a spear, too late for the fourfoot to check his course—the spear penetrated his throat up to the depth of a man’s arm, blood spouted like a fountain—with a convulsive gnashing of teeth, a gentle kick or two with his cloven hooves, the boar lay quiet.

V.

The better part of Quartilla’s men returned alive to the barracks that evening. Vortinax had awakened at the last moment, and slain his aurochs. Likewise broken-nosed Juculus issued victorious, no more than a few bear scratches on his chest and arms.

Big Gullet lay dying. He called for Faljan and begged for wine; Besidus managed to get a flagon, and Faljan took it in to him. The man on the pallet was clawed and torn beyond recognition.

“Get the funnel,” Big Gullet whispered. “In the corner, in a hole I made, to keep it secret.”

Faljan got the funnel, the dying man muttering in complaint,

“It was a young lion, just as I calculated—even younger than I had expected. I could have mastered him, but at the instant that I struck, the accursed awning rattled in the breeze. The brute took alarm and sprang aside—I missed, and he sprang upon me. I had to finish him with my dagger, which was messy work.”

"I know. Open your mouth."

Big Gullet obeyed. The funnel rattled in between his teeth, one of his jerking hands reached up to hold it in place while Faljan poured. It had always been wine that Big Gullet loved above everything else, especially in quantity and through a funnel; and he was having it now—save that in the midst of his labored swallowing he gave a shudder and almost at once a torrent of blood rushed up out of his throat, meeting the wine halfway and hurling it back up with the force of a geyser. The red flood spread over his face and chest, Faljan slowly put down the flagon.

"Leave him," said Quartilla, peeping in the door. "It is bad luck to remain with a dead gladiator."

Faljan went off to wash himself free of blood. He changed his tunic and came back to the quadrangle. Synistor the miller was there, openly hostile at the sight of Faljan.

"Have you come to congratulate me?" said Faljan. "I escaped my boar and naturally you will rejoice, being my friend!"

"Bastard child of a bastard mother," Synistor answered furiously; "if you are so godlike clever with a spear, take one now, and I will choose another!"

"Ah, but you have a broken collarbone!" Faljan taunted.

"It is healed. A spear, son of your sister and brother!"

Faljan stepped to the wall and pulled down a spear, Synistor seized another. But the trainer was hurrying up.

"Ground it!" he shouted. "This kind of thing is forbidden—Synistor, you know it well!"

"He gave me insult," said the miller; "and insult I take from no man, especially this one who has been a flea in my shirt from the day I first saw him. Stand aside, Quartilla!"

"Nay, I defend him," answered the trainer resolutely. "He is imperial property, and if this were to reach the ears of Caesar you would rue it."

"I am a favorite of Caesar's."

"Caesar's favor is capricious, all the world understands as much. Give me your spear."

The miller swelled with rebellious blood, his hand trembling in defiance. Then he yielded, gave over the spear.

Juculus called out, in a mocking tone,

"And again Faljan escapes by luck!"

"I escape, but not *you*, trouble mixer!" Faljan cried in a fury, and

snatching the spear from Quartilla's hand, he hurled it at Juculus, striking him full in the throat.

Quartilla yelled for guards, and when they came, he ordered Faljan to be prepared for flogging.

As for Juculus, he was dead.

CHAPTER 9.

I.

FALJAN had been flogged before now. In the distant long-ago days while he was still a thin-shanked lad, no father, no mother—these being dead of a pestilence ravaging the countryside—he had been apprenticed to the farmer Curtius Criba and under Roman law become his chattel as thoroughly as the four-foots about the place. Criba often beat him for infractions of rules or manners, yet it was always straightaway flogging, laid on direct, and with a simple club.

Quartilla, on the contrary, used a many-thonged whip, a lead-ended seeking fingering thing beside which Criba's cudgel was the insensate stump of an arm. As punishment for slaying Juculus, the trainer whipped Faljan until he was raw from nape to rump, and then he called Besidus and had him throw salt water over the mess lying face downward upon the floor.

It took Faljan a day to regain consciousness, and a pair of further days to stand up and walk.

A short walk. Quartilla escorted him to the stocks, locked him in beside Vortinax. The barbarian glanced up in dull surprise, as if perhaps he considered himself to be exclusive owner of the Ankle Breaker. Quartilla strode off, shouting for the rest of the men to line up in the quadrangle.

"Well, Vortinax," said Faljan, with a feeble grin, "that is one command we need not heed!"

"In line, everybody!" cried the trainer. "Stand straight—or are you scoundrels got with child!"

The men laughed gingerly, straightened the line. Something was up, the Director himself having appeared from his office. He gave Quartilla a nod, the trainer addressed the gladiators,

"The beast fight was, as is perhaps known to those of you who are not altogether wander-wit, a means of elimination, culling. We lost

some men, but the mere fact that we lost them proves that they were inferior, and hence well got rid of. Those left are material out of which gladiators worthy of the name can presumably be made. By which I mean men trained and able to fight skillful men, not beasts. Do well from this day forward, win, and there will be prizes and rewards."

A murmur of satisfaction passed along the line. Quartilla glanced over at Vortinax, frowned resentfully,

"Every man present here did good work in the arena against his beast—even to Vortinax, whom I took for a dish of suet, of no more use than teats on a boar hog."

The barbarian seemed to hear neither Quartilla's jibe nor the titers of the men in the line. The frown on the trainer's face deepened abruptly,

"You have the makings of an excellent gladiator, Vortinax. I noticed, as did our director, that in slaying the aurochs you were surprisingly fast on your feet, with an arm thrust perhaps more powerful than that of any other man in the ring. Will you come out of your sulk and train properly, or will you continue to make a ninny of yourself?"

Vortinax shrugged,

"I am your prisoner."

"A remark as two-faced as the god Janus," retorted the trainer.

"Proceed," said the Director. He had a mistress out Ostia way, and wanted to get back to her.

"Attention!" Quartilla resumed. "Heretofore you men—except for Hirl and Tuscus—have been amateurs, but today and here, I proclaim you gladiators of the arena! You will repeat after the Director—"

The Director stepped forward, solemn as seven fish. He began to recite the sacred and frightful oath of the gladiator, pausing at every few words so that the men could follow after him aloud. Swearing, each and all of them, to be loyal to Caesar and fail him not, swearing to train faithfully, submitting under authority to be bound, to be burned, to be scourged, if need be to be slain with steel; and always to yield, before this final end, to whatever demands made upon them in the performance of a gladiator's traditional duties, surrendering therein body and soul without protest.

"I swear," the Director finished, and one by one they repeated after him, "I swear. I swear. I swear—"

"Now then," said Quartilla pleasantly, "as full-fledged gladiators,

you will enjoy certain privileges. Among the most valuable, time off. Everyone will find his allotted hours of liberty marked on the notice board by the door, according to name and daily performance. Save that Vortinax will, for the immediate future, enjoy no such liberty."

Dismissed; men wandering off to talk in little groups, Vortinax and Faljan remaining side by side in the stocks.

"You were wise to have taken the oath," said Faljan. "It has saved you another flogging."

"I do not mind floggings. Quartilla does not reach me with his whip."

"Why not?"

"Because I am elsewhere."

"In the forest beyond the Alps?"

"Yes."

Faljan pondered this over, his imagination quickening a little,

"Were there towns in your forest?"

"No towns. Here and there a tiny village, but mostly each family lived by itself. In clean fresh air, inside its own house, constructed of wood and smelling sweet."

"Houses of wood, not rubble and stone, as with us?"

"Logs for walls, and across the roofs split boards overlapping in layers, against the storms of winter. A hearth with fire blazing, game hanging from the rafters. My mother span wool, and in the clearing before the hut we raised grain for our porridge. But the hunting was best of all. The wolfskin I used to wear here, I myself took it from the beast, encountering him one day in the forest."

Faljan expanded with pleasure. He had never heard so many pleasant words from Vortinax. It was possible that the barbarian was wanting to be friends, as Faljan in his heart had long wanted.

"I have never seen a forest," said Faljan; "not a real one."

"It is a wondrous thing," Vortinax said, with deep suppressed emotion. "Often it is so thick and gloomy dark that you are afraid, then down on a slanting out of the hidden sky a beam of light reaches to you, and thereby you know that although you are far from men you are near to the gods. The beam of light is a staircase, and if need be, you can ascend it to where there is safety and freedom." His face contorted, as if from a spasm. "In Rome there is no such stairway of light. I shall never see the forest again. Nor the woman."

"The woman?" said Faljan, in surprise.

"There was a woman, yes. Growing long blond hair worn in braids

thick as your arm, and large breasts for the suckling of many children."

Faljan winced at the sorrow in the big man's voice. He said, intending comfort,

"Ah, well, do not grieve for her. Women are women—they exist in Rome, too. Even to blond hair and breasts, one on each side."

"Rome is corrupt," said the barbarian, "therefore its women must be corrupt."

"You are perhaps right," answered Faljan, and remembering Lydia he scowled. He had a desire to tell Vortinax about the dead fish who had outraged him upon the Janiculum, but thought better of it. A wound was best scratched by its owner; the barbarian might say more against Lydia than Faljan would relish. He led in another direction, "However, you should not lose hope. Train hard, keep winning fights, and at length you may be able to get free of Rome and go back to your forest."

Quartilla came up, drew the iron pins which held Faljan's ankles fast,

"The Director admired the stratagem you used on the boar in the arena, and by way of compliment he had placed your name first on the liberty list. It is this evening."

II.

Supper, a good wash in cold water, a more or less attempt to comb his hair, and he took leave of his comrades,

"No snoring when I come in—I shall be weary and wanting sleep!"

"Keep clear of women," called Hirl.

"Chase bitches, live in ditches!" added a gladiator named Niger.

Faljan went out quickly, the sooner to escape their raillery. He struck for the Corso, watching the crowds, buying himself a little food of a sort not to be had in the barracks, halting to gossip with chance passers-by. In the country it was not wise to talk to strangers, but here in the city everybody was a stranger, and consequently the fear and suspicion of unknown folk must break down, otherwise you had no enjoyment of other people. Besides, Rome was wonderful tonight—or had he been too long confined to the gladiators' school? At any rate, he was enjoying it all—the shops, the clamor of hawkers

exaggerating the value of their wares, the warm pressure of live human bodies against him.

"Hola, my handsome fellow!" a girl cried. "Are you by chance a gladiator?"

She was comely, nevertheless he strolled on his way. Up into the dark Subura, halfway to the Heel of Achilles when shouts of laughter stopped him. In the street ahead, he saw a group of revelers, their faces smeared with soot for disguise. There were three of them, proceeding in slow disorderly fashion in the direction of the Greek's tavern, a good distance behind them a couple of Tarbuckets who appeared to be following.

Suddenly the trio paused in front of a vegetable shop, one of them reaching up and tearing down a flaming torch stuck into a socket by the proprietor, for the purpose of lighting in his customers. The shopkeeper promptly seized a stick, and as promptly got the torch hurled at him. It missed, fell to the floor of the shop, where the affrighted wife of the shopkeeper gradually stamped it into smoke and smudge. Then she saw that the ruffians had dragged her husband into the street, attacking him, and plainly too much for him. She rushed out at them,

"Vermin, swine! Off with you!"

They knocked her down, one of them snatched the blanket which covered her infant in a basket. When the woman came to her senses, they were tossing her husband in the blanket, standing spraddle-legged in the street and heaving him higher and higher, until—while he was still in the air—they exchanged signals and dropped the blanket, after which they ran on up the street with loud laughter. The Tarbuckets calmly strolled on after the wretches, paying no attention to the shopkeeper lying on the cobblestones, his wife beside him, screeching in a frenzy,

"How can there be law in Rome, when such things happen! O ye gods, answer me—what has become of the law in this wicked city!"

Faljan resumed his way. The trio of rascals had vanished, so had the Tarbuckets. The tavern was not far ahead. It was dark, but that was in keeping with the wary custom of the Greek; at night especially, he operated behind tight-closed shutters, and sometimes even took in his sign, as if pretending that he had sold his business and left the city. The smell of wine came to Faljan, likewise the swish-swish of feet in swift movement.

"Just as I suspected," he told himself resentfully.

III.

Lydia was dancing with her supple hips and firm quince breasts, as inviting as when he had first seen her, except that then he had lusted after her and now he stared in disapproving wrath. She beat about the crowded room on her bare rapid feet, a hundred desiring eyes fastened upon her—Ershutif's among them, the lecherous ape. Faljan went and sat down beside him, Mikrella came at once,

“Wine?”

“No.”

“You are here simply to rest your buttocks, is that it?”

“Go away.”

The girl smiled and took his big hand between hers,

“Be nice to me, Faljan. You will not regret it. I can bring you happiness.”

He jerked his hand away,

“You are evil to say such a thing.”

“Why not say it!” she retorted. “Rome is evil, therefore all who lurk in her must likewise be—just as flour must smell from a musty bin. Come, Faljan—I am not a child but ripe, I tell you.”

“Soon ripe, soon rotten,” he answered, and all at once he sprang up and shoved her aside. Lydia had stopped dancing; she was dragging off to her room at the back of the tavern, limp and exhausted from her dance. Half a dozen customers were already lining up at the Greek's platform, money clinking in their palms—but as they turned to go in to her, they found that Faljan had blocked the way.

“Stand back!” he cried. “She is a slut, but you'll not touch her!”

A ripple of surprised laughter passed about the room, the Greek called from his platform, in a mild tone,

“Move aside, Faljan—no jokes, please.”

“I am not joking, you tub of lard!” shouted the gladiator. “Let them stay back, or there will be broken heads all over your tavern floor.”

“They have paid,” said the Greek, still mild. “This is legal business, and I have a license to prove it. Step aside.”

Lydia appeared in her doorway. She pushed Faljan back, blazing at him,

"The Greek has a license, and so have I. You are keeping me from earning my bread, you dung!"

Faljan wilted down. He said slowly and heavily,

"So that is what you think of me—"

Lydia beckoned the line of men to come forward, Faljan clumped back to his seat beside Ershutif.

"If you laugh, you eater of garbage," the gladiator said somberly, "I will squeeze your throat till your eyeballs pop out."

"I am not laughing," Ershutif hastened to say, "but may I observe this: it is folly to pick a wormy pear when there is better fruit on the tree!"

"Be quiet, accursed Syrian!"

"I am a Babylonian," said Ershutif, with dignity. "And beware of insults, lest I lay a curse upon you. I have a wide assortment of curses, all of them ready to work at my bidding."

Faljan reached out and seized his throat, but he did little with it, for the reason that there was an interrupting commotion at the door. Someone in the street outside, laughing and clamoring—then the door flew wide and in walked the three rowdies Faljan had seen earlier in the evening. Their faces still smeared with soot, and their whole aspect and manner enough to terrify the Greek.

"Enter and be welcome!" he cried, and ran up to show them seats. "It is only a poor tavern I keep here, but I will fetch my best wine, and hope that it will afford you satisfaction."

"Fetch your worst," said the leader of the three, and whacked him over the head with a pig's bladder he had picked up somewhere in his nocturnal wanderings. "We are reveling in foulness, so let the wine be as bad as possible!"

The Greek went off in search of what he deemed would be the proper wine, leaving behind him a general silence. His regular customers were uneasy: rascals of the type of the three newcomers might be expected to do anything, depending upon their caprice, and the ability of bystanders to defend themselves.

Faljan gazed at the intruders with sour indifference. Their leader was a man of ugly countenance; the second was burly and heavy set, with a sparse beard and a vagabond's cowl on his head; the third of the trio appeared to be a mere stripling, neat features behind his smudge, graceful controlled movements. The Greek fetched the wine, the burly man poured and lifted his goblet.

"A toast!" he exclaimed jovially. "I drink to the Subura's ghastly

smell, excelling, as it does, anything that the Cloaca Maxima has to offer!"

They drank and filled their goblets again, stared round for means of amusement. A Jew had just entered the tavern with sulphur matches to sell.

"Come here, Jew!"

He sidled up to them hopefully,

"Matches? Will you buy matches?"

"Are they good ones?"

"The best to be found. Very good matches, only a copper a bundle."

"You are a Jew, are you not?"

"Yes, a Jew."

"Not one of those detestable Christians that we are hearing so much about lately?"

"No, no," said the wretch, in great haste. "The Christians are different from us. They are bad people, and the Jews—"

"The Jews are pure and good, eh!"

"Will you buy?" asked the Jew uneasily.

The ugly man accepted a bundle of matches, pulled it open,

"First let me try one. Perhaps they are false, and will fail to light."

The Jew protested that the matches were good, his tormentor lit one and then calmly set fire to the Jew's tunic—whereupon the match vendor screamed and ran for the door, beating out the flames as he went.

"Shame," said the Greek, and clapped a hand over his mouth, as if regretting that he had spoken.

"It was only a Jew," said the burly man, and made a commanding gesture, "Fetch dice."

"Ah, but it is forbidden to cast dice in public places!"

"Fetch dice, or we wreck your tavern!"

The Greek reluctantly brought a pair of dice, and immediately the three revelers began to gamble. A Tarbucket stuck his head in the door, looked about, ignored the proprietor's frantic signals for help, and withdrew. Ershutif shrugged at Faljan,

"I do not understand this."

The dicing rattled on to the accompaniment of laughter and curses, all three of the players cheating openly—until presently the stripling rolled a dog and the ugly man won everything on the table. He threw back his head and laughed hoarsely. Faljan stared with widening eyes. The rascal had a gold tooth. It was Tigellinus.

"We shall play again," the burly man was saying pettishly; "and this time with the Greek's dice. Hand them over, Darin."

Tigellinus the horse breeder, a stripling called Darin and therefore no other than the celebrated pantomimist currently a favorite in Rome. And the hulky heavy-set man? Nero himself, out on one of the brawling expeditions which rumor credited to him, but which Faljan would never have believed—without the proof of it sitting in front of his own two eyes.

The gladiator kept staring at Tigellinus, a delicious idea gradually penetrating his skull. By chance, a happy and benignant chance, the Sicilian was occupying the bench that Faljan had sat upon the evening he first came to the Heel of Achilles. If it were really Tigellinus yonder—but Faljan had to be sure; he had no desire to play a trick upon an innocent man.

He signaled Mikrella up,

"Just how long since you have seen the man who first wronged your mother?"

"What is that to you?" she bristled. "And what do you know about it, anyhow!"

Faljan gestured her to look upon Tigellinus. She did so, and turned pale with hate.

"May harpies tie knots in his guts," she muttered.

"Wait," Faljan cautioned her, and leaned across to the Syrian, "Hark you, Ershutif—do you see the fellow sitting over the trap door? Well, he would be a good hand at Synistor's beam, it strikes me."

Ershutif gave a slow grin, nodded; Faljan said to Mikrella, with a little push,

"Run tell Synistor to make ready for another donkey."

She sped off at once, the Syrian began to complain,

"The fee Synistor will pay for yon fellow, I am afraid I cannot share it with you, Faljan. You see, the Greek must have his share, and that leaves so little."

"Keep it. This is simply my amusement."

"And you want no money?"

"Not a red copper. Be quiet, lest they grow suspicious."

Nero and his friends continued to play, but Tigellinus was winning again—he had an endless number of sets of loaded dice, it appeared. Darin and the Emperor were getting weary of the skinning, and accordingly Faljan himself was restless,

"They may leave at any moment. Where is that chit of a girl!"

"Probably begging Synistor to seduce her," Ershutif suggested. "She is Lydia's daughter, you know—and what is born of cat will hunt mice."

"One more game," Caesar announced irritably, and glowered at the horse trader. "You have phenomenal luck tonight, my friend!"

Tigellinus laughed, picked up the dice and cradled them affectionately. Then Mikrella came in through the back door, hurried breathlessly up to Faljan,

"Ready!"

Ershutif rose to his feet, the girl clutched Faljan with excited fingers. She said, in a voice filled with gloating,

"I told Synistor that the new recruit was mean tempered and would need a good deal of thumping, which ought to get him at any rate a broken bone or two—but do you think they can keep him on the grain beam, O Faljan?"

"Of course not—but what he receives from Synistor's fists will help a little."

"A little, yes; and for that I am grateful. Well, even a blind hog picks up an acorn now and then."

Faljan pulled away from her, walked casually to the street door. Ershutif was huddling with the Greek. The gladiator went out—and a moment later there was a crash from within the tavern, followed by shouts and laughter and cries of rage. The shrill voice of the Greek pierced the clamor, a table smashed over onto the floor. Then silence; or at any rate, nothing that Faljan could hear.

IV.

The gladiator glanced about for the Tarbuckets, praying that they would not interfere. They were standing dark and quiet across the street, watching the inn but making no move to investigate the commotion they must have heard. Faljan strolled to the corner of the tavern—then suddenly there was the sound of a door knocked open. Nero and Darin were hurrying off in the direction of the mill, evidently having slapped a confession out of the Greek. Faljan darted after them, but at a discreet distance. The innkeeper, he saw out of the corner of his eye, was fetching up the rear.

There was a light at the mill end of the tunnel. Synistor stood there

with a torch, peering down into the hole while his slaves struggled with Tigellinus. The Emperor let out a challenging yell, Synistor looked up.

“Stand back!” cried the miller; “else you will get broken snouts, both of you!”

Caesar and the mime Darin threw themselves upon him, yelling gleefully. The gladiator drew off under the shadow of a tree, the Greek waddled up, gasping in terror,

“Synistor, leave off—in the name of the gods, stop! It is Caesar—it is the Emperor!”

Nero and the miller were rolling about the ground like scuffling bears, the stripling Darin now content to deliver kicks whenever he saw Synistor uppermost. The Greek wailed again that it was Caesar, the Emperor himself—Synistor abruptly stopped fighting—he jumped up, staring into Nero’s sooty face.

“Caesar,” he muttered in consternation. “I did not know—”

“So much the better!” laughed Nero, scrambling to his feet. “We had a fair wrestle, because you did not suspect my identity—and speaking of that, I bested you, I think.”

“Yes!” Synistor hastened to say. “I tried my best, but I could do nothing against you—champion of the arena though I have been.”

An obvious lie, Nero and Darin merely having rushed the formidable miller off his feet for the moment; but Caesar swallowed it gladly. He beamed and purred, assuring the alarmed Synistor that he was forgiven. It was Tigellinus who took it hard—he had flung the slaves off and come up with a bump on his skull, wrathfully demanding to know who was responsible for so low a trick.

“The gladiator did it,” said the Greek eagerly, and pointed to Faljan under the tree, where he had been all this while watching and chuckling. “It was he who suggested it, I swear to you.”

The gladiator stepped back, thinking to escape into the shadows, but the voice of the Emperor reached out and clutched him,

“Come forward, fellow!”

He approached, Tigellinus recognizing him at once,

“Faljan, eh! So it is. Our big husky gladiator, Agrippina’s darling!”

“A clever fellow,” laughed Nero, “to work such a trick upon you, Tigellinus. I wish I had thought of it, myself!”

The Emperor went off into a gale of laughter, Tigellinus forced to join in—or at least pretend to; when Nero was amused, it was wise that everybody in the neighborhood of him be similarly amused. Tigellinus said with slow meaning,

"Yes, he is clever—and seeing that the evening is so early, no doubt Faljan will be able to show us other such bright deeds. Suppose we take him along with us, Caesar—make it truly a night of nights!"

"Why, of course!" exclaimed Nero. "A gladiator will be a neat addition to our party—and an extra strong arm, if we should chance to need one. Farewell, Synistor; I shall tell this tale."

"Caesar, I—"

"Nay, nay, you jackass. It is not that we wrestled that counts, but that I threw you. I am getting to be a man of parts, 'twould seem—an athlete as well as an artist."

"A most amazing athlete," Synistor agreed, and he added baldly, "You are the only man in the world who ever threw me; me, Synistor the Great! I, too, shall tell this tale, if I may."

"By all means," and with a happy chuckle Nero led his party back toward the street, Faljan traipsing along with them because there was no alternative.

Tigellinus said to the gladiator, in a low vindictive voice,

"Now, then, we shall see whose foot the sandal is on, my clever gladiator who does not like poison!"

CHAPTER 10.

I.

FALJAN played up to it. The four of them went singing and shouting down the crowded street, knocking this and that honest citizen aside and presently hurling a quarrelsome carter bodily into the gutter, where he lay groaning like a foundered cow; they paused at a wine booth to drink, and then wandered on without bothering to pay. There was a dead torch outside a booth; Faljan took soot from the stump and blacked his face, Nero complimented him upon his improved looks.

"Yes," laughed the gladiator; "now if I had me a gold tooth, I would be downright handsome!"

Tigellinus spat with rage, but Darin thought it rather an amusing remark, and Caesar was intent upon his own virtues.

"A night to be remembered, when I can flatten Synistor!" he crowed. "The greatest gladiator Rome ever beheld, and yet my inferior! Dear gods and buxom goddesses!"

"Bah, it was no feat," growled the Sicilian.

Nero stopped short,

"What?"

"He means," put in Darin hastily, "that naturally you would flatten Synistor, since all the world is Caesar's inferior, and none can stand against him."

"Of course," Tigellinus said, in equal haste. He glanced back the way they had come, "The Tarbuckets are still with us. As if we could not take care of ourselves!"

"It is Poppaea's doing," answered Nero. "She fears lest upon one of these night excursions, I get my divine face caved in."

A prostitute came slinking up, tugging at the arm of the mime Darin; he was attractive in spite of his soot.

"Tarry, my lovely one," she said coaxingly. "I have a pallet you may share."

"Begone," he retorted, and snatching the bladder from Tigellinus he pummeled her over the head with it. "Away, shameless creature—and very probably diseased, to boot."

"Oh, you wicked boy!" she gasped, then Tigellinus got back the bladder and hit her again and again with it, until it broke in his hand. He gave her a kick, and she fled weeping up the street.

"You struck too hard," Darin frowned.

"Mere fun," laughed the horse breeder, and pointed ahead. "Look, my Caesar, there is the shop where we tossed a rascal in his blanket."

"What of it! The place is dark; he has closed the shutters and gone up to bed."

"All the better! Let us break in."

"And take his wife from him?" chuckled the Emperor. "Nay, she was old and flabby."

"I had another plan," said Tigellinus. "My Nero, we injured the man, and thus he will be unable to tend his shop; and if the wife tends it, she will have to neglect her child. I say that in the name of charity we should take his stock of vegetables, so that, with nothing further to sell, he can rest in peace, having no worry of business."

A gust of laughter went up at this suggestion. They halted at the shop and began to pound at the door, demanding to be let in. The shutters swung out from the window above the shop, the wife peeped down at them and then hastily withdrew. Nero and Tigellinus succeeded in kicking open the shop door, after which all four of the marauders rushed in and filled baskets with the produce they found stacked about: carrots and leeks, celery root and beans and small-crooked squash. The cries of the shopkeeper's wife echoed from the sleeping room on the floor above, and once she called through the window for the Tarbuckets to protect her and hers; but no one paid any attention. The thieves grabbed each a filled basket and marched gaily back into the street, Nero wresting the shop's sign from its staple as he passed.

"Behold!" he cried. "We are become shopkeepers!"

"Needing only a spot to set up business and make money," laughed Darin.

"It is a good thing to make money," Nero declared. "In truth, it is the very basis of the Empire!"

"But where can we open our shop?" Tigellinus demanded.

"In the palace," said the Emperor. "Everyone will buy of us—and they had better pay in gold, too, if they know good oil from rank."

"Um," said Tigellinus craftily. "In the palace—and who shall have the honor of being our first customer?"

"Octavia," Nero replied bitterly. "It will wound her pride, but then she has plenty of that."

"What about Poppaea?" suggested Darin.

"Nay; to awaken her at this hour would spoil the darling's rest," Nero said, with the fondness of a lover. "Ah, but then if we went to Octavia, poor little Poppaea would be jealous, and I cannot have that!"

"In which case," said Tigellinus, leaping into the gap; "suppose we award the honor to Agrippina."

Caesar blinked uncertainly, not so gay and bold as a moment ago. He was afraid of the redoubtable Agrippina.

"Well, my Emperor?" said Tigellinus challengingly.

Nero dared not hold back. He was unable to bear ridicule.

"Agrippina it is!" he cried, and lifted his basket of vegetables like a standard in battle. "Forward to the Viminal Hill and the house of Caesar's once necessary pap!"

Faljan tightened his jaw. He said to himself,

"This accursed Sicilian thinks to flip me out of the stewpot and onto the coals."

II.

Agrippina lived in a spacious white villa, set in the midst of shrubbery and a severe pattern of walks and flower gardens, the whole of the property surrounded with high stucco wall pierced by a single gate. It was an iron grillwork gate, and fastened securely.

"Porter!" shouted Tigellinus, shaking it violently. "Porter! Porter!"

"Make less clamor," said Nero uneasily. Now that he was here, Faljan saw, the Emperor did not relish the scene ahead of him. "Leave be, Tigellinus, the porter will come."

"Here he is now," grinned Darin, peering between the bars.

The porter hobbled up in alarm,

"Who is it? Who comes?"

"Caesar and friends," said Tigellinus. "Open the gate, knave."

The porter rested his astonished eyes upon Nero, and then silently unfastened the gate.

"Forward!" cried the horse breeder. He shouldered his basket of vegetables and led the way to the house. The porter shuffled up ahead of him, called a terrified house slave to open the door and admit Caesar.

They went into a vestibule, where the slave lit a lamp and gaped at the visitors in dismay.

"Take us to Agrippina," Tigellinus demanded. "What is the matter, have you the palsy!"

"Madame has retired," answered the slave timorously.

"What of that! Take us to her chamber!"

"Nay, conduct us to the court," said Nero, "and then inform her that I am here." He frowned at the horse breeder, "You are coarse, my friend. It becomes you, yet it is not always agreeable to me. Keep a hand on your tongue."

The slave conducted them past a magpie in a cage, the bird screamed "welcome" and fell to laughing raucously. The face of the Sicilian lightened abruptly. He said to the bird with an indulgent smile,

"Thank you, my feathered beauty!"

"He is a lover of birds," Darin explained to the gladiator in amusement. "An odd weakness, eh!"

They passed into the court, the slave lit additional lamps and excused herself to go inform Agrippina. Faljan put down his basket of vegetables, gazing about in curiosity. He had never been in a well-to-do Roman dwelling before, and it seemed to him very grand. There was a fountain in the center of the court, the night sky brooding down from an oblong opening in the top of the house. Ivy and roses grew about the edges of the pool surrounding the fountain, mosaic floors and wall paintings represented mythological scenes: Juno parading with her peacock, the bull Jupiter carrying off Europa, a version of Leda being enveloped by her god lover in the form of a swan. The door leading to Agrippina's private rooms was flanked by two bronze griffons.

"She has always liked griffons," murmured Nero.

"Which signifies that they are her symbol," Tigellinus declared. "You, Caesar, are devoted to song because you are an artist; Agrippina adores the monstrous griffons because she is so like them."

"I did not say 'adore,' I said 'like.'"

Darin meantime had taken the vegetables out of their baskets and was arranging them on the edge of the fountain; Tigellinus picked up the shop sign which Nero had tossed down, and hung it on a griffon. Nero, for his part, had turned moody and dull; he sank down upon a marble stool.

A rustle of feminine garments brought him to his feet. He was Caesar, nevertheless the woman in the doorway yonder was his mother, and he had never been able to overcome his awe of her.

Faljan looked at her covertly. She wore a loose robe, a gold brocaded belt pulling it in at the waist; but no ornaments save an arm-let set with huge rubies. Her hair was drawn back and curled, rouge and white powder so enhancing her that she seemed considerably younger than when Faljan encountered her in the baths. And yet there was nothing feminine about her tonight; she was cold sexless hostility, lips thin, eyes aglitter as they swept over the vegetables littering the fountain edge, the four soot-smudged men—one of them her son, with a vagabond's cowl upon his head, his garments suggestive of a slave or a dock worker down at the Tiber's edge.

"A pleasant greeting to you, my mother," said Nero, flustered as an errant school boy. "I thought to pay you a visit. Are you well?"

"Why are these vegetables here?"

"They are good vegetables," put in Tigellinus, with discreet insult in his voice. "Very good and fresh, and since everything is so expensive these days, we fancied you would appreciate getting your green stuff at low cost."

Agrippina gave him a quick baleful glance, turned from him as if to imply that he was beneath answering. She said to Nero, who by this time was a little pale under his soot,

"Who suggested this escapade?"

"I, good mother. I am the leader of our little party, and naturally it is I who—who leads it."

"It was more likely the horse breeder, the revolting Sicilian that you carry about with you as a beggar carries a louse."

Tigellinus fumed helplessly, the Emperor shouted at her,

"Have a care, madame! I am Caesar!"

"Aye, Caesar," she answered with melancholy scorn. "The boy I nourished in my womb, suckled tenderly, reared amid a thousand threats and dangers. The lad who in his first years was generous, merciful, pure; and now is become a common tavern soak. O Nero, how could you have fallen to such low condition!"

Darin lay on a couch, fast asleep; Tigellinus continued to watch mother and son with glowing eyes; Faljan was trying to appear unaware of the quarrel. As for Nero, his fear of Agrippina had gone for the moment; she had lashed him into a resentful pique, flavored with self-pity. He broke out,

"So low, you say! Well, I must amuse myself, must I not! Managing the Roman Empire gets to be a bore, I assure you."

"And to amuse yourself you become a rowdy and a clown," she countered. "Reveling with vulgar acquaintances that I will not dignify with the name of your friends. They are turning you into a carnival monkey, Nero, whispering that you are divine and a god, and hence may do as you like. You are exchanging boredom for madness, and were better back with ennui, my son. If you are surfeited with your life, it is only because of overindulgence, depend upon it."

Nero's thick lower lip stuck out petulantly,

"I do not require lecturing. Seneca gave me enough of that—I still have dysentery from it. I came here tonight thinking you would be amused by our antic; but since you are shrewish, we shall withdraw. Come, Tigellinus—Darin—let us depart."

"Leaving Faljan here?" murmured the horse breeder. "I am aware that he is Agrippina's chosen gladiator, but still—"

Agrippina's eyes went to Faljan, yet as they gazed at each other there was no sign that she recognized him. An iron woman, Agrippina, accustomed to tight emergencies.

"You do not know him?" asked Tigellinus.

"Now that I look at him closely, yes. And I am sorry to find him a party to this miserable prank."

"The gladiator is given to worse than pranks," said Tigellinus, facing Nero with a deprecating gesture. "We discovered him a few months ago in the imperial palace, attempting to gain access to Octavia's suite."

"I doubt that," Agrippina smiled coldly.

Nero was blinking from Tigellinus to his mother in perplexity,

"What is this talk! Octavia's suite? Why?"

"That is something which perhaps the Emperor's mother can explain," said the Sicilian.

"I know nothing of it," she answered. "I did indeed save this Faljan from death in the arena, thinking to train him as a professional gladiator; but when he came to the baths to pay his respects to me, he demanded gold, and I in disgust refusing, he declared that Nero's

wife would surely not be so close-fisted. I presume that he then went to seek Octavia, and due to the vigilance of the horse handler, he failed to effect a contact with her."

Tigellinus stared at her balefully, but he could not very well call her a liar—at least not before Caesar. The Emperor was frowning at Faljan,

"Is this the truth?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I have always been poor," said the gladiator, "and I thought that Agrippina should give me gold. Perhaps I did wrong, but—"

"There is more behind this," Tigellinus interrupted loudly. "He is hoodwinking you, Caesar."

"That, my friend," said Nero, "is difficult to do. Are you making charges against our gladiator?"

"Not specifically," the Sicilian hedged; "but if an investigation—"

"You are drunk; and I myself am somewhat knocked about by all the wine we guzzled. In particular, the gruesome stuff the Greek served us." Nero yawned drearily, went and sat down on the couch where Darin was sleeping. "No, Tigellinus; if this were the ears of a plot, you would have seized them at your few months ago, dragged the beast forth into the light—if only for the sake of currying favor with me. Attempted to enter Octavia's suite! If he did, he were a fool, and fools are harmless as last winter's sniffles. O ye gods, I think I am going to be sick at my stomach!"

It was Agrippina's cue. She clapped her hands and a slave came gliding in.

"Our visitors are leaving," she said tartly. "Get their vegetables back into the baskets, that they may depart without delay. Nero, you should hold wine better, even bad wine."

The horse breeder was beaten, nevertheless he still had a barb to discharge.

"Will you not keep the vegetables, O Agrippina?" he murmured. "With our compliments?"

She flew into a rage then, thrusting the slave aside and snatching up vegetables to hurl them at Tigellinus, and at Nero, and even at sleeping Darin, who sprang up in alarm, not knowing where he was or what was happening.

"Out of my house!" she screamed. "Go, get out, before I set the dogs to tearing what is no doubt the best part of you! Out or I call my mastiffs!"

"You would not dare it," Tigellinus shouted.

"Aye, that she would," said Nero, with a shamefaced laugh. "Come along, my friends. A good night to you, my mother."

She flung a squash in his face and he hurried out, Tigellinus and Darin at his heels—but when Faljan started to follow, Agrippina held him back for an instant,

"Leave with them, then return. This needs talking."

He nodded, hastened after his companions. The magpie screeched at them, Darin thrust in a slender hand and wrung its neck for it.

"A bird that croaks and cannot sing is no artist," he said, as the creature flopped to the bottom of the cage. "I never liked magpies."

"Curse you for that!" Tigellinus cried at him. "How can you be cruel to a poor defenseless bird! If ever you get out of Nero's favor, I'll wring *your* neck and see how you like it!"

"Silence—come along, all of you," mumbled Caesar.

III.

They went out into the grounds, Tigellinus settling his ill temper upon Faljan.

"This gladiator must be taken care of, Caesar!"

"Eh? You mean you want to sponsor him in the arena, thus supplanting my mother?"

"Just turn him over to me, Caesar—I will attend to him."

Again Nero yawned. His eyes were heavy.

"Tigellinus," he said crossly, "I need either more wine or deep sleep, one or the other; but I do not require your blather. You are malicious, and that quality is often amusing; yet you overuse it, overplay it. Like a singer who declaims, not two hours, three, or four, but all the livelong night till the cocks crow."

"Ah, but if *you* were to sing all night, my Caesar," said Darin unctuously, "it would be enchanting."

"I thank you," said Nero, and smiled with pleasure.

They were back onto the street, Darin in such delight at Nero's smile that he began to skip and bend in a dance of his own provising. It astonished Faljan to see the youth so light and graceful on his feet, but unexpectedly the mime halted and fell to pouting,

"These cobblestones are too rough—they hurt my feet."

"The fault of Mario Pallas," said Tigellinus quickly. "He had the contract for paving hereabouts, but gave poor materials and pocketed the difference in money. A fellow of that stripe deserves death."

"A slow painful death," said Darin, affecting a bad limp.

"Rubbish," Nero said soothingly. "I was admiring your skill, even as you stopped dancing."

Darin blithely forgot his feet, Tigellinus said in a stubborn tone, "Grant me one boon, O Caesar, O Lord of the Universe."

"Lord of the Universe," murmured Nero, suppressing another yawn. "I like that title."

"Then my boon."

"What is it?"

"The gladiator Faljan made sport of me, dropping me through the tavern trap door and subjecting me to rough handling and insult. I do not ask for his custody—since you do not see fit to grant it—but at least permit me to carve my initial T upon his chest, so that he may remember me. I ask no more, O Caesar."

Nero halted, a perverse amusement in his eyes,

"Could you do it?"

"Yes."

"Try it, then."

Tigellinus drew his dagger and leaped, but the gladiator sprang aside in good time. The horse breeder whirled for a second try—Faljan ran at him head down, bunting him in the belly and knocking a grunt out of him. Nero burst into laughter, the Sicilian advanced with murder flashing from his knife, Faljan kicked him in the groin and Tigellinus went down groaning, this time even Darin applauding.

"Has he made another Urstine out of you?" Nero laughed at the horse breeder, and slapped his thighs in glee. "I trust not! Eunuchs are tiresome creatures—useless, really."

Tigellinus was struggling slowly to his knees, injured, but still far from defeated. The gladiator cast him a swift glance, said to Nero,

"One of us will get killed, if this keeps up. May I go, sire?"

"If you like," Nero chortled; "and luck to you, my gladiator. You have given me a good laugh, and laughs in this world are scarce and precious."

Faljan bowed, turned and walked hastily away in the direction of the barracks. Return to talk to Agrippina? No. He who sups with demons needs him a long spoon, and the gladiator had none.

IV.

He heard from her the following day.

It was a new experience for Faljan, receiving a letter. The thing arrived by messenger, a cylinder of rolled parchment which he was certain was intended for someone else.

"For *me?*" he exclaimed.

"You are Faljan the gladiator, are you not?"

"Yes."

"Then the letter is for you," said the messenger, and having deposited it in Faljan's hand, he took his leave.

The gladiator unrolled the thing, gazing at the written words with a kind of irritated respect. His name and a date, or a figure on a bulletin board, he could make out pretty well, but this was something much more difficult. Faljan gazed about the barracks, seeking someone to decipher it for him. No one came to mind, for his mates were as illiterate as himself. At length he hunted out Besidus, took him to his room and closed the door,

"Could you make out these crow tracks for me, d'ye think?"

"Certainly," said Besidus with a bright face. "My present occupation is lowly, but I am the son of a wholesaler in wool, and was intended for better things. If my father had not died—"

"Read it," and Faljan thrust the letter into his hands.

Besidus unrolled the parchment, exclaiming softly,

"H'm, an expensive stuff to write on!"

"Who signs it?"

"No one. It must be a love letter!"

"Go ahead."

Besidus read,

"Well it is that you did not return as I directed. Stay indoors as much as possible; be discreet and beware of the Sicilian, rancor being an early riser. As for plans, these will be made known to you through him you met at the baths. Have utter confidence in this man, betray neither surprise nor doubt at whatever events lift over your horizon and beckon."

"That is all," said Besidus, and smiled broadly. "You are lucky."

"Lucky?"

"This is from a woman, and she worries for you. I wish I were in your place."

"A neighbor's eggs always have two yolks," Faljan answered dryly, and he took the letter and began to tear it into small bits. "You will end by sleeping better than I, methinks."

"Bah, why should you not sleep!" Besidus replied. "Or Vortinax, either."

"Vortinax?"

"Something is the matter with him. The barbarian occupies the room next to me, and last night he tossed all night, keeping me continuously awake. This morning he was very pale, and would speak to no one. In my opinion, the fellow is possessed."

CHAPTER 11.

I.

VORTINAX was not in the stocks today, not brooding slumped over with a mat of yellow hair in his face; he was exercising like any sensible gladiator, and with a willingness that Faljan found both astonishing and gratifying to behold.

Smilingly Faljan walked over to where the barbarian was lifting weights, hoisting them up into the air, lowering them, shoving them back up as if they were alder wood, although actually they were heavy iron. The strength of the man was prodigious—now that he chose to use it.

"I have just been told," Faljan exclaimed, "that you are possessed!"

The weights faltered, came down before their time. The barbarian gave Faljan a sidelong glance, not really looking at him; but then that was his way.

"Yet if you are," continued Faljan heartily, "it is a beneficent demon, not an evil one. You are on the right trail at last. Keep it up. Don't sulk, don't resist Quartilla; do your tasks and take that muscle of yours into the arena with the resolution to win against all adversaries."

The big man trembled,

"Be quiet—"

"It is excellent advice I give you, and you know it," said Faljan, with a gay laugh. "You want to get back to your forest home beyond the Alps, don't you? Well, there is only one way to accomplish that. Conform to the rules controlling gladiators, win enough times in the arena, and then buy yourself free. That can be done, are you aware of it?"

Vortinax stared straight ahead, obstinately avoiding Faljan's eyes. He said nothing.

"It is Apollo's own truth," declared Faljan. "When a gladiator has

done well in the ring, won a considerable number of times, he is eligible to petition the Director to set a price on his bondage; if he can meet this price, he is entitled to walk out free. As for the money, you will have it. Successful gladiators get presents from admirers, especially after they have defeated notable enemies in the arena. I am willing to wager—”

Faljan stopped speaking. The barbarian was moaning like a child, his face chalky and his lips gaping. There had been a man looked like that in the Campagna one time; rumor said that he was formerly a sailor and had swallowed a live crab, which ever afterward gnawed in his belly, until he died.

“What is it?” Faljan cried. “Vortinax!”

The barbarian walked hurriedly away, leaving Faljan to gawk after him in bewilderment. Vortinax reformed, yielding to the rules of the game, now at last glimpsing a chance to climb his beam of light into freedom—and yet unhappy? It made no sense at all.

“What is wrong, wouldn’t he talk to you?”

Faljan glanced round. It was the gladiator Hirl, and a man called Tuscus. Smiling oddly, the pair of them; and Hirl asking an exasperating question.

“Do you want to swallow perhaps ten of your front teeth?” Faljan asked him.

“Save your knuckles,” Hirl rejoined. “I merely asked. No insult was intended.”

Faljan looked from Hirl to Tuscus. The rascals appeared to be secretly laughing at him, as if they clutched between them some rare delicious news unknown to him. Something concerning Faljan. Concerning Vortinax. More likely it was nothing but sheer envy, the petty spite of men left out. Almost from the beginning, Faljan had liked great shaggy Vortinax; he could not have said why, but he did. It was friendship, as you might say; the deep, aloof, and yet intimate love of one man for another. Doubtless Hirl and his partner Tuscus resented this. In the touchy intense little world of a gladiators’ school, such things were not unknown. They were quite common, in fact; the men had so little to take up their minds that even casual favoritisms became important.

“I advise you,” Faljan said, “not to play chigger to me. Whether Vortinax talks or does not talk, it is my affair, not yours.”

“Very true,” said Tuscus, with false humility. “And his reasons are his reasons, having nothing to do with Hirl and me.”

Faljan had started off, but at this he turned round, came back,

"Reasons? What reasons?"

"Synistor the miller, for example," said Hirl cautiously. "Of course we are not certain, but last night—while you were out prowling—Synistor came and talked a long time with Quartilla. Then they called Vortinax, and all three of them gabbed. Different ones of us tried to overhear—just to pass the time, you understand—but we were not successful. Yet when he left the barracks, Synistor shook hands with both the trainer and Vortinax, and this morning the barbarian is training with new blood and eye, a changed man. From which one may conclude—"

"Absolutely conclude!" put in Tuscus eagerly. "Synistor has got at the barbarian, set him against you—it is well known that Synistor hates you, Faljan."

"Um," said Hirl, "and last night when he showed up here he was red-eyed. Our guess is that you got by mistake into the bed of either Synistor's wife or his daughter, and then whilst you pursued your cock-a-doodle adventures elsewhere—he having chased you out of the house with a thorn cudgel—he hurried here to make a bargain with Vortinax."

Faljan gazed at them coldly,

"You are lunatic. What bargain could he make with Vortinax that would concern me?"

Hirl and Tuscus exchanged glances, decided to pull in their horns. Tuscus murmured discreetly,

"That we do not know."

"Vortinax is an honest man," Faljan said; "he would have nothing to do with a villain such as Synistor."

"He might," protested Hirl. "Every fox looks after his own tail, you know."

"Then look after yours, and Tuscus his," said Faljan, "lest I tie your tails together and hang you over the parallel bar yonder. You are trying to sell me foam for milk, and I am buying none. Synistor and I are enemies, granted! He comes and talks to Vortinax, what of it! I am sponsored by Agrippina, perhaps Synistor will support Vortinax; if he does, well, it is a good thing. It will give Vortinax something to work for; in fact, it has already done so."

"Yes," murmured Hirl. "Certainly."

"You are dead right," added Tuscus.

II.

Faljan had talked well and sensibly, he told himself. He had explained the big barbarian's odd behavior, explained Synistor's visit to the barracks. Except that doubts were creeping back into the gladiator's mind. It was undeniable that Vortinax was acting queerly. He trained and exercised like a fat bridegroom, sweating himself until Quartilla beamed as upon a favorite child—but the barbarian was still avoiding Faljan. Of course, the man had never been talkative. It had always been Faljan who began their conversations, if conversations they could be called. All clear as cattle tracks in springtime, nevertheless Faljan stayed uneasy.

One day it came out into the light.

Wrestling. Two-man contests in the sand of the quadrangle, breech-clouts for clothing, muscle and wit and speed the chief weapons; although body weight was very important, too, and Vortinax was the heaviest man in the barracks. He threw everyone who came to grips with him, until finally the trainer announced him against Faljan.

"Against Faljan?" murmured the barbarian, and looked at Quartilla with a kind of apprehension in his eyes.

"Get at it, before you cool too much and distemper seizes your lungs."

They began to wrestle, Faljan noting that every man in the quadrangle immediately came to watch. A cloud of foreboding crawled over Faljan, a cloud which thickened when he perceived in the resisting tension and heave of Vortinax's muscles a hostility he would never have believed to exist. The two men tugged and twisted, puffed, shoved, writhed like serpents, grunting and sweating without either one or the other gaining definite advantage.

"Well matched," said Quartilla, with satisfaction. "Good. Excellent. Go rub down, both of you."

Faljan rose slowly, went with the barbarian to the dressing room. They took up handfuls of raffia and fell to scouring themselves, still panting a little from their exertions in the quadrangle. When Faljan could bear it no longer, he said,

"What is this I hear about you?"

"I know not what you may have heard," said the barbarian.

"So it is true that Synistor has been at you! You have let him snare you into some nonsense or other."

"It is not nonsense, it is sense."

"What is it all about?" said Faljan irritably. "Spill it out of you and let me look at it, that I may stop imagining it worse than it is."

Vortinax threw down his raffia and began to stare through the little barred window, saying not a word. Faljan's heart sank like a plummet.

"Well?" he demanded.

"I have talked to Synistor," said the barbarian, in a monotone. "We spoke of me, the place where I was born, and how I long to return there. He promised that he would furnish me with the money to buy myself free—after I had earned that privilege by defeating enough other gladiators in the ring. I accepted."

Faljan was conscious of an overwhelming sense of relief,

"I understand. He will take you as his protégé, build you up—and for compensation against the sum he must advance to buy you free, he will bet money on your successive matches and thus earn himself a profit."

"It has been agreed between Synistor and me," said the barbarian, "that I am to attempt to slay all who stand against me in the arena, but especially you."

Faljan was all at once numb and cold. He had deluded himself; he had known this all along, warned of it by some hidden instinct at the very moment that he learned Synistor had come to see the barbarian. Now it was out in the open, that was the only difference.

"How could you agree to such a proposition?" said Faljan simply. "We are friends, you and I."

"Friends?" said Vortinax. "Perhaps so—but freedom to go home is a weightier thing than friendship."

"Oh, so?" said Faljan, turning red.

"Besides, we are not really friends. We are only acquaintances."

"Well," said Faljan stonily, "if that is how you regard it, let be." He jerked open the door, wanting to go out quickly, escape the wretch who could say such things. "To no other man in all my life have I offered friendship and may I be devoured by the Minotaur if I ever do it again."

III.

Faljan resolved to let it stand and come to what it might, but shortly he knew that this was impossible. His inner man stewed in resentment of the trick that had been played upon him. And it was a trick, nothing else.

He sought out Quartilla, insisting upon seeing him alone, in his office.

"Concerning what?" said the trainer, and grinned. "If you have been running too freely with women, you will have to cure yourself, I tell you that flat-footed."

A poor joke, contrived to evade the issue.

"It is a fact, is it not," said Faljan, "that Synistor is now supporting the barbarian?"

"Are you jealous because he did not choose you, instead? Or because Agrippina is reported out of royal favor, and can therefore do no more for you?"

Faljan made a gesture of disgust,

"Stop it. I want truth, not shadow."

"Then the truth is this," said the trainer bluntly. "You will be matched against Vortinax in the arena, and if he wins—and has a good record of achievement otherwise—Synistor buys him free. It will be a good match, you two. You are a balanced pair, not much to give one way or the other. Or do you think there is? If so, tell me, that I may better judge how to place my bets when the time comes."

"I do not want to fight Vortinax."

"Afraid?"

"No; it is simply that I . . . I like him."

The trainer laughed,

"This is a business, not a pleasure court. We do not allow personal feelings around here."

"I tell you he is my friend, and I will not fight him in the arena!"

"Your oath binds you to fight when and how directed."

Faljan tried another tack,

"I realize that, but what about money?"

"A good thing, money," said Quartilla facetiously. "Very good."

"I have gold pieces," Faljan persisted. "I will bribe you to prevent this match."

"Not to be thought of."

"Why?"

"Because I have more to gain by assuring it."

"So my good enemy Synistor is paying you!"

"A man must live. I have my own expenses to meet."

Faljan snapped his jaws together, determined to say no more. Yet there was one other question. A vital one,

"When is this match to be?"

"Some time in the summer, I imagine. The arena does not exist for the convenience of intrigue, you know. There are rules, traditions, institutional practices. Both you and Vortinax are very promising material, but both of you are still green. You will need to be built up, and since there is feeling between you, these build-up fights will be with strange contenders, not with each other. Men from the private gladiators' schools. Now get out of here."

"May you go down to eternal torment," Faljan growled.

"And may your loss of Agrippina cause you no harm," said Quarta politely. "There must nothing interfere with this match between you and the mighty barbarian."

IV.

It was silly the way everybody in the barracks took pleasure in telling him about Agrippina, keeping him posted on the gossip slithering about the city.

Poppaea Sabina had twitted Nero for a mamma's boy, a baby still fumbling for the mother hand, mother teat, although to the rest of the world he was divine omnipotent Caesar. Tigellinus had added his own taunts, so that between Poppaea and the horse breeder, Nero found himself upon a griddle. He responded by denouncing his mother, she fought back. Outcome? An imperial order of banishment, Agrippina and her goods conducted out of Rome to a country villa, she forbidden to return without the express permission of Nero.

Permission never given. Instead, Caesar launched a nuisance cam-

paign against her, encouraging his friends to do likewise, and they responding nobly. Hired miscreants threw stones at the woman, and though she demanded their punishment, nothing was done about it. Someone openly sent her poison; half a dozen former friends sued her at law; Nero confiscated her house on the Viminal Hill; sheaves of ribald verses fluttered about the city, their burden the political crimes and personal wickednesses of a mother once holding the very nub of royal power in her hands. Agrippina had known she had enemies; she could not have foreseen how great was their malice.

"Everyone sharpens his knife when the ox is down," said Hirl, as the news piled up; "eh, Faljan?"

"So it would appear."

They were trying to bait him, and therein wasting their time. Agrippina had never touched his inner bones; let her be banished and forgotten; it was the barbarian who was keeping Faljan awake at night. An invisible wall had risen up between the two; they scarcely spoke to each other, and never freely.

On a certain day, however, Vortinax had leave to go on liberty, alone, without guard. To see Synistor most likely; to talk to the miller, report to him on his physical condition, garner professional tips.

"Wait!" cried Faljan, striding up just as Vortinax was about to pass out the door to the street. "I want to talk to you."

"Nay," muttered the barbarian, flushing.

"I have this to say," Faljan persisted. "I realize fully what it means to you to get back to your forest. You want to smell the wood fires and walk in freedom under the big shading trees where you were born. All right, it is admittedly a good country. Were it mine, I myself would want to get clear of Rome and return there. That slanting beam of light coming down from the heavens like a magic stairway, that especially I should like to see. Yes, Vortinax, believe me, I appreciate all that this means to you—but you are taking the wrong method of achieving it."

"There is no other method."

"Ah, but there is!" and Faljan lowered his voice.

"Then what?" said Vortinax, and for the first time in a long while he turned his eyes upon his friend. "What is such another method?"

"Escape."

"No," said the barbarian, and his face fell.

"It can be managed. I will give you all the gold I possess, and borrow more. You can disguise yourself, slip out of the barracks

one unsuspected night, and be safe on the Great North Road before you are even so much as missed."

Vortinax shook his head,

"I have considered that, a hundred and a thousand times considered it. Between the northern gates of Rome, and my Alps, is hostile Roman territory; it is crawling with soldiers, spies, officials checking travelers. I am not clever, so I could not hope to evade these enemies. I would be caught; and Synistor—outraged by it all—Synistor would abandon me. This is my single chance, and I must take it."

Then Faljan boiled over,

"You are supposing, of course, that when we meet in the arena you will slay me, and not I you."

The barbarian said nothing; he merely walked out into the street, on his way to visit Synistor.

V.

Late May. A bustle of excitement at the barracks. Every competent man here would fight in the arena today, matched, not against a quadrangle mate, but someone from a private gladiators' school. Hirl, Tuscus, Niger, Vortinax, Faljan, each man to his stranger.

Faljan marched to the arena with a light elastic step. It was good that he would not be clanging swords with Vortinax today; whatever other fighter sought to draw blood on him, it did not matter. The risk of violent death no longer troubled the gladiator; the nausea of former days had gone completely away from him. Or, rather, it had been transformed into a keen and calculated pugnacity. The slaying of Juculus had hardened Faljan. The Broken Nose had died, and deserved no less; Faljan got satisfaction out of it, no qualms, no scruples or regrets. And thus easy in his mind he had remained. Today he was cool, unworried, even eager to get into the ring. When you were highly trained, the impulse to do battle was like a caged beast within you, pushing and prodding, craving expression and effect, as a man too long away from women is apt to seize the first one he meets, thus finding satisfaction in the only way open to him. Satisfaction, and in the ring—success. The gods had proved themselves to

be on Faljan's side; without being vain or careless about it, he assumed that they would continue to bestow their benefits.

March, halt. The arena, each man examined and equipped, matched off. Parade, the shouting of the ubiquitous mob, return march to the underground galleries, two contestants at a time tramping back to the sand which was so useful for soaking up blood. Vortinax fighting before Faljan fought, getting himself a wound but also felling his man. The barbarian walked into the dressing room victorious, with a look of somber triumph for Faljan.

"Such is my strength and skill," the barbarian seemed to be saying.

In his turn, Faljan went out—calm, watchful, sword ready. He slew his man, some helmeted stranger whose face he never saw; a nameless unknown, reddening the earth before they dragged him off. Quick work Faljan had made of him, for in his anxiety over Vortinax, it had occurred to him that perhaps he could frighten the barbarian.

"I will kill swiftly," Faljan had decided; "and Vortinax, because of it, will think me too formidable an antagonist, and hence retreat from his bargain with Synistor."

Seemingly the plan was working better than he could have hoped. His antagonist had been capable enough; Faljan's quick spectacular victory over him had raised a flood of applause, loud voices insisting that so redoubtable a swordsman be permitted to fight again—today—now! Will he volunteer to go against another gladiator? Faljan, speak!

He bowed his consent, and the mob bellowed happily. The officials consulted. Very well, since the crowd wished it, since the gladiator had no objections.

They brought in a new opponent, and Faljan destroyed him. The yells of adulation rose in a deafening tumult. Faljan, Faljan the Great! Another, will you fight another?

It was not going to be permitted. In the onetime cattle drover, it appeared that Rome had a magnificent gladiator, and therefore one to be safeguarded against the irresponsible enthusiasm of the mob, "No more, Faljan! Return to barracks."

He turned to march away, then a trumpet sounded, a centurion took him by the arm and jerked him about,

"Give heed—go to the podium!"

Faljan went and stood there, at a loss to understand what it signified. An imperial herald appeared at the balustrade of the podium, Nero flanking him on one side, and on the other side a fair young woman.

The herald cried his announcement,

"In accordance with the right of members of the Imperial Family to choose, and in future games sponsor, individual gladiators who have conducted themselves with exceptional skill in the arena, the Empress Octavia is pleased to confer her favor upon one Faljan, herewith selected and so honored!"

A wave of applause bulged out over the arena. Yielding to an indignant nudge from the centurion, Faljan removed his big helmet, looked up.

The Empress was leaning forward a little, gazing down over the balustrade, a crimson silken kerchief in her hand. As she held it over the rail, their glances met, hers and Faljan's, the man's incredulous, the sorrowful eyes of Octavia brightened by an unaccustomed hope. She did not smile, but slowly gently let go the kerchief. It fluttered through the air, Faljan caught it, hesitated a moment and bowed. Then he tucked the scrap of silk in behind his breast armor and permitted the centurion to escort him out of the arena.

Burrus has contrived this thing. The precarious game was beginning all over again.

CHAPTER 12.

I.

FALJAN returned to barracks to the tune of noisy congratulation—some of it admiration, much of it jealousy thinly tricked out as well-wishing. His mates poked and slapped and pummeled him; he had hard work to keep them from fingering the crimson kerchief, soiling it and in their boisterousness perhaps even tearing it into shreds; it was not leather, but silk.

“Behold, Faljan stands supreme against the sky!” cried Hirl. “He has vaulted to the top of the tree, where the best fruit grows!”

“Aye,” agreed Tuscus, “but in ascending risks a greater tumble than if he had not risen at all.”

“Odd that he should string empresses on his belt. In the beginning Agrippina, and then Octavia. I do not understand such fortune.”

“It is not his fighting that attracts them—it is his handsome face, his muscles.”

“Clap your mouth together, fool—if the Director heard that he would report it. Slander runs on fast feet, my little one.”

Faljan got away from the clamor, went and sat down on a bench in the quadrangle, staring at the fragment of cloth in his hand. Ah, wonder and fantastic magic, that he, a peasant, an unlettered unfriended cattle drover, tossed moneyless and alone into the maelstrom of Rome, that he of all people should rise to this height—chosen for favor, not by an Agrippina on her way to oblivion, but by a living functioning empress. It was inconceivable.

And yet it had happened. The dream did not go away. It remained, tangible in the form of a crimson kerchief.

“You fought like never before,” murmured Quartilla, strolling up. “How did it happen?”

“I had my purpose,” the gladiator said. He glanced across the quadrangle and saw that Vortinax was already exercising again, more

obstinately than ever. It was defiance, the barbarian's way of advertising his scorn of the spectacular showing Faljan had made in today's ring. Killing two men in one afternoon had done him no good at all. Or had it? He looked up at Quartilla with a gleaming eye, "My situation is now changed, my status different, higher. I want it to lever me out of the necessity of fighting the barbarian yonder."

"Less now than formerly will you be able to avoid that," shrugged the trainer. "Niger being today dead on us, Vortinax is the best of our men—save for you, perhaps—and from this day forward you will meet only the choicest of fighters. The mob will demand it."

"You say so," retorted Faljan, "but I doubt its truth."

"Doubt it all you like, but get to the doctor. You have wounds."

Faljan went in and had his wounds treated, ate a sparse supper, and retired to his room. He was ill at ease and got but little sleep, rose the next morning cross as a blind dog. At breakfast he tried to catch the barbarian's eye, but the blockhead would not look at him.

"Faljan to the Director's office!" Besidus shouted, when the gladiators had finished eating. "At once! To the Director's office!"

Faljan rose amid the jeers and envious shouts of his companions, Besidus clinging to him like a leech,

"Remember what you promised in the long ago, O Faljan. You are made, and I would serve you."

"We'll see, we'll see."

The Director sat and smirked at him, signed for him to close the door, took up a scroll which was evidently of palace origin,

"Can you handle horses, Faljan?"

"I was born on a horse."

"More likely born at the tail end of one," said the Director, who did not care for jokes. "However, that is salt in another sea. I have here an order from the Empress, authorizing me to deposit the sum of 50,000 sesterces to your account."

"Fifty thousand sesterces!" cried Faljan. It was a fortune; at least to him it was. "Deposited? Where?"

"Nowhere as yet. Would you like it placed in a savings bank? They pay interest, you may not know."

Faljan nodded stupidly, the Director continued,

"In addition, Octavia presents you with a chariot and a team of four horses. What is this about Besidus acting as your servant? He says you have bespoken him—is that true?"

"I suppose so. If I need someone. A chariot and four horses, eh!"

"To be delivered in a day or so, and stabled handily near. Besidus can take care of them, if you like; the barracks will continue to pay his wages, but all gratuities will come out of your own wallet."

Faljan was still struggling with his amazement,

"I must thank the Empress—"

"When she has signified her desire to see you. Meantime, be good enough to take the day off. I find these suddenly affluent gladiators something of a bore."

II.

The loud proud cries of his servant Besidus rang after him as far as the door, and ceased—which was a good thing. Faljan had no patience with his gush of flattery and praise, his plans for serving the new master and no doubt in the process lining his own nest as well.

He got rid of Besidus, only to run into Ershutif. Apparently on his way to call upon what he now pronounced his famous friend, the Syrian took possession of Faljan's hand and wrung it lovingly, fulsome compliments pouring out of him faster than a cat could trot.

"With Octavia behind you," Ershutif concluded warmly, "you are on the way to success, O Faljan. I rejoice that this is so."

"On the way?" said the gladiator. "I have arrived there. And not at all in need of your imaginary services, if that is what you are hinting."

"Already bloated proud, eh!" scowled the Syrian. "Take care, my friend—do not make the mistake of cursing the crocodile's mother until you have crossed the stream."

"Farewell," said the gladiator, and started on toward the Corso.

"Ah, how rude you are!" complained Ershutif, mincing along beside him. "And how unwise. I am an important person, please to remember. I could be of use to you."

"The use of the garlic I belch up. Leave off. I have something to do."

"Do you want a magic bane laid upon you for insulting me?" cried the Syrian, in a rage. "If so, I can oblige you."

Faljan softened his voice, but not much,

"Neither your bane nor your flattery, O Ershutif. I am in a hurry,

that is all. If you care to drink a bit of wine with me, and afterward permit me to go about my business—”

Accepted. They stopped in at a little wine shop, got their drink. Ershutif was pleasant again. He lifted his goblet ceremoniously,

“Well, then, Faljan, since you are secure let us drink to the fortune of the poor Babylonian.”

“I know no Babylonian, poor or rich—but if you mean yourself—”

“To Mercury,” said the other, forcing back his wrath.

“Why Mercury?”

“Because he is the god of gain.”

Faljan tossed off the wine,

“Likewise of intrigue, is he not?”

“So much the better. How else than by intrigue shall a miserable foreigner like Ershutif get ahead! Do not spurn me, however. I also shall rise in the world.”

Faljan got up, the Syrian rose with alacrity,

“Shall I go with you? I am clever at business, and after all you are only a countryman.”

“Come with me, and you will have the bloodiest mouth in all Rome,” said the gladiator. “Again, farewell.”

III.

Faljan arrived at the tavern with a cornucopia of Persian apricots, a rare and expensive delicacy bought of a hawker in the street. The fragrance of them lifted up into his nostrils like wine; they were a gift for Lydia, and the gladiator had not even so much as tasted them. They would eat the apricots together. Eating was always a bond between people; it coaxed their blood together.

The Heel of Achilles was fortunately deserted at this hour. No customers at all; in addition to the inevitable Greek, only Mikrella to be seen.

“It’s my handsome gladiator!” she cried, in the bantering half-serious way she had. “Bringing me a present! Are they apricots?”

“Keep your paws off them. Where is your mother?”

Mikrella shrugged,

“She is asleep. Working half the night, she requires sleep by day—”

even you will understand that, or shall I take charcoal and draw a sketch of it on the tavern floor! I do not like you, Faljan."

"No?"

"No."

"What a pity!"

"The scoundrel Tigellinus, of the gold tooth—by rights he should have cracked his back on the miller's beam, and he escaped it. Which is your fault."

The gladiator sat down, pondering whether to wait for Lydia to awaken, or to go in to her. Mikrella got onto his lap, a hand stealing caressingly about his neck,

"O Faljan, how unyielding you are!"

He spilled her off onto the floor, rose to his feet,

"I must talk to your mother."

"Keep away from her," cried the girl, in a pique. "You or Tigellinus, I know not which I hate the more!"

Faljan went to the curtained door, stepped on into what served Lydia as home. She was there, sitting hunched over in her little cubby-hole hardly big enough for a pallet and a stool and a row of wooden pegs on the wall for clothing. Lydia was mending her dance gown, if the thin scant thing could be called a gown.

She glanced up at him, returned her eyes to the needle.

"You are hospitable!" he said, with a wry smile.

"Be welcome," she answered dully.

Faljan gazed down at her flowing hair and bent head, the tunic sufficiently agape to reveal her white round breasts. Young as her life, those breasts, infinitely younger than her posture, manner, blank eyes and haggard mouth. A strange and unaccustomed sense of yearning stole over him. He said, in a jerky voice,

"It is a wretched life you lead here—as revolting to me as it must be to you. I want you to leave it."

"Leave it?"

"I am chosen to be sponsored by the Empress Octavia. I have gold in the bank, and it is at your beck."

"And in return for it?"

"You will live with me."

She shook her head,

"I earn my bread here, food for myself and Mikrella and also a trickle of silver for clothing. The work is dependable, and you are not."

"What do you say!" he cried in astonishment.

"You are a gladiator, and as such are due to perish in the arena."

"Nay, I have luck behind me. Have no fear for what may happen to me in the ring."

"It is not fear, it is sense. The rats escape the cat for a time, but in the end it catches them. If I went with you, my place here would be gone; a sword would in time strike you down, and thereafter I would be on the streets. No, Faljan."

She had never used his name before. He quickened, sat down facing her, trying to see her eyes and what they perhaps held back,

"You are cold and calculating, my girl. Is there no leaping in your heart, at the thought that I want you for my mistress?"

Lydia hesitated briefly, a tinge of color in her face,

"None."

"So I mean nothing to you!"

"No man means anything to me."

"Tigellinus once did!"

She lifted her eyes then, regarding him with a flat stare. Lydia said, deliberately, as if desiring to wound him,

"In our short encounter, Tigellinus was no more to me than you upon the Janiculan Hill, New Year's Day last. Have done with your talk, I am busy."

Faljan was trembling with rage. He took his cornucopia of Persian apricots and dashed it against the wall.

"Farewell, then!" he retorted. "There are plenty of women in Rome—I do not need to chase your kind."

He stalked out of the inn and down the street, thinking up new and more bitter things which he could have said to her—if only they had occurred to him in time. Presently he halted; there was an irritating dryness in his throat, which fresh fruit might remedy. The gladiator gazed about, made his way to a kind of big market, where there were a great many trays and boxes of grapes. He took up a handful, saying to the clerk,

"A bunch of these—how much?"

"This is a wholesale establishment," replied the clerk. "We do not sell retail."

Faljan spat out what he had taken into his mouth,

"They are no good, anyhow—your grapes were picked green."

The clerk remained indifferent, but Faljan's remark seemed to interest a man who stood halfway back in the market, checking samples of fruit which were about to be dispatched to various buyers. This man was perhaps forty-five years of age, well dressed, slightly florid

in complexion, with a bright lively manner. He came up to Faljan with a smile on his face,

"How do you know they were picked green?"

"Because I was born in the country."

"H'm; a gladiator apparently, and yet born in the country. The latter is more important than the former."

"Who are you?"

"I am Marcus Vidalius, a fruit merchant and experimenter. And since you are a countryman, somewhat understanding grape culture, would you care to see a most interesting thing?"

"What are you talking about!"

"Come along; I will show you."

Faljan went with him, highly skeptical, yet satisfied not to be returning to the barracks for a while—his bad temper would show on him, and his mates annoy him with their questions. The gladiator climbed with Vidalius up out of the Subura and onto a slope of the hill to the north, watching the man in curiosity. The fruit merchant was apparently well-to-do, a member of the middle class of Roman citizenry concerning which Faljan knew nothing at all.

They arrived at a villa, comfortably large but not showy. Faljan remarked a number of slaves about, and noted that they lacked the sulky furtiveness of menials in the house of Agrippina, or the palace. It appeared that these people respected Marcus Vidalius; and that he, in turn, treated them with humaneness.

"Here is my vineyard," said the fruit merchant, taking Faljan out through a side gate. "These first five rows are my choicest varieties; especially this one. I call it after myself—the Vidalian."

Faljan looked at the vines, observed that all but the Vidalian were well into leaf.

"What is the matter with the kind you have named for yourself?" he asked.

"Insects," replied the fruit merchant. He got down onto his knees and scooped earth from the base of a vine. "See?"

The roots were covered with tiny red insects, avidly burrowing into the wood. Vidalius suddenly gave way to anger, shouting at them,

"Begone, ye creatures—under pain of madness and death, *be-gone!*"

The insects continued to burrow, Vidalius pointed to a paper fastened to an upright stick,

"Neither does that do any good! It is a charm of exorcism which a temple priest contrived for me. I was never of the opinion that it

would help, but then one uses the gods one has. Come over this way, however, and I will show you what *will* help, eventually."

He showed Faljan a row of vines with cloth bandages tied tightly about their lower stalks, the upper branches nothing but twigs.

"Look, my countryman turned gladiator, I am grafting."

"Grafting? What is that?"

"You are ignorant of it, eh!" and Vidalius laughed with pride. "Why, grafting has been known for generations! It is a wonderful thing. Insects devour the roots of my best vines so what do I do! I plant another sort, the roots of which are impervious to insect teeth. This second kind produces poor grapes, but I take twigs from the better variety and wedge their ends into the cut stalks of the insect-resisting vines. At night, naturally, when the plants are asleep and can be deceived."

"Does it work?" asked the astonished Faljan.

"It is beginning to. At first I grafted whenever I took the notion, or had the spare time; now I have learned that it must be done not only at night, but during the increase of the moon. Otherwise the whole project withers into failure. So you never heard of grafting! Well, but then until today you never heard of Marcus Vidalius!"

The fruit merchant laughed in great billowing gusts, his good humor so catching that Faljan himself laughed. It was not until he had returned to the barracks that the gladiator was glum again. The hearty Vidalius had gone out of his mind, and Lydia come back in. Faljan went over it all in his memory: what she said of Tigellinus, how she compared the two of them—the horse handler and Faljan. He began to think up, once more, wounding things that he ought to have said to her, his mood gloomier and gloomier as the day passed along. Not even when Besidus came to announce the arrival of the chariot and its four horses, not even then did the gladiator rouse up.

"Let me alone," he growled.

CHAPTER 13.

I.

A FEW days later, Faljan paid another visit to the vineyard of Marcus Vidalius. He enjoyed the sight of cultivated land, he wanted to take up a handful of it and speculate upon its probable richness, its virtues and its defects.

"What a marvel, those stalks leafing out!" declared Vidalius proudly. "Not even a Roman emperor could work the marvel that some hidden force achieves here with my vines."

"Excepting the ones which you grafted," Faljan objected. "I notice they have not even budded. They must be dead."

"Sh-h-h, don't let them hear you say that," exclaimed the fruit merchant, and beckoned Faljan to come and examine the grafts. "Let us see what they are doing, since you are so doubtful."

The two men got down on their hands and knees and peered at the graftings, their manner so ludicrously solemn that a titter of laughter rose from the laborers pausing at their work and watching them.

"No buds swelling as yet," Vidalius said, getting up again; "but then every egg requires time to hatch. Especially a grafted egg!"

The laborers were still amused, and Vidalius, noticing them, said with a shake of his head,

"How little it takes to arouse laughter in a fool! I imagine that there was laughter when the chariot turned its first wheel, or the original aqueduct was being constructed." Vidalius turned to his workmen and shouted, "Get to work, you rascals, or I shall discharge you!"

"Discharge them?" said Faljan in surprise. "How can that be, since they are slaves!"

"Ah, but they are not! No, no, not even one of them. I have slaves only for household tasks, and if I were not afraid of losing caste with my friends, I should dispense with even these. Slave labor is an ox with a lame foot, perhaps two lame feet. How can you take in-

terest in what you are doing, if you are in bondage! You can't. That is why all my vineyard workers are freedmen, hired and paid wages; if they malingers or crawl off for too many naps, I discharge them and hire others. My experiments here are important, you must remember."

Faljan gazed at the laborers. Some of them were men, some were women.

"That is a device of mine," chuckled the fruit merchant. "Men consider themselves superior to women, and hence endeavor to prove it by turning out more work. The women, on the other hand, resent this attitude and so they, too, bestir themselves. In this way I book myself to a principle."

"A what?"

"A principle, a principle. Well, if you do not know what a principle is, there is no good trying to explain it; nevertheless there is such a thing. And once you attach your doings to the proper principle, it carries you along to success. You see, I am not only a fruit merchant and experimenter, I am a philosopher as well."

Faljan took his leave. The fruit merchant had put too many strange words into him, words which had no meaning for the gladiator.

"Nor do they have meaning for Marcus Vidalius," Faljan told himself, as he went down the slope. "He is trying to impress me, and it cannot be done. Not with words, at any rate. With his vine graftings, perhaps, but then—"

It occurred to Faljan that he must keep track of those graftings. Nothing short of magic could ever make the sap of one plant flow up into an alien stalk, and the gladiator doubted very much if magic would work for so gay and light-speaking a man as Vidalius. Magic was sober business; the gods did not like banter.

"The next time I go to his vineyard," Faljan decided, "I shall wager him that his grafted vines will never show leaf. Um, perhaps I shall do that tomorrow."

He reckoned without the fates. No sooner had he returned to the gladiators' school than the Director called him in, informing him that Octavia desired him to come to her.

"At the eighth hour tomorrow," said the Director, and looked him over critically. "First, however, you must make yourself presentable. She must not faint screaming at the sight of you."

"How vastly I should enjoy breaking your jaw for you," thought Faljan, but aloud he said, "I shall take care of that."

II.

He bathed next day, went out to the finest barbershop he could find. This one situated, not in the jostling street, but indoors—a very special place, really the haunt of rich traders and patricians. Instead of oil, soap before shaving. All ten fingernails cleaned and trimmed, stray hairs yanked out with tweezers, a silk band to tie around his head and thus keep back his black thick hair. Strolling out of the dainty place at the end of an hour, he felt very fine, indeed.

As to the visit ahead of him, he neither feared it nor yet was at ease. The gladiator would not know the proper way to conduct himself before an empress; at the same time, instinct told him that discretion would make up for awkward manners. He had got along all right with Agrippina.

Pause. A small crowd watching an official notice writer as he scribbled on a wall certain fresh announcements concerning the arena.

“The newcomer Faljan, is he handsome?” asked a woman.

Faljan heard this and laughed, so that they turned and saw him. The notice writer said to the woman,

“There he stands—ask him yourself if he is handsome.”

“Odd question to demand of a gladiator,” said Faljan. “Why not ask if he fights well?”

“That is known,” she answered; “but good looks and love are another thing.”

The little crowd flowed closer to Faljan, studying him with curiosity.

“Have you lodgings, O gladiator?” asked a second woman. “Would you care to come to my rooms for refreshment?”

“For refreshment, or to wear himself out?” shouted a man, and the crowd shook with laughter.

“Just now,” said Faljan, “I am on my way to thank the Empress for her kindnesses to me.”

“Another time, then.”

“It is possible. Farewell to all of you.”

They saluted him and he went on, pleased by such attention. Big Gullet had said it would be like this, and Faljan had not believed him. Although, for that matter, he had never had any great difficulty

in procuring women. When he wanted them. Just at present Lydia had spoiled his taste for female flesh. He climbed the Palatine Hill thinking of her, frowning a little. A woman was like a blanket—you pulled it over you at night and it scratched you, you cast it off and you froze.

Into the palace now. Corridors, inquiries and directions. An overseer herding a flock of porters along, as they stooped low under furniture wrapped in cloth padding.

"Careful at the corners," said the overseer sharply. "If so much as the breath of a scratch appears upon that stuff, Poppaea Sabina will have your tongues out."

Faljan arrived at Octavia's suite. A slave admitted him, asked him to wait in the vestibule. It was a plain room, its only ornament a dog done in colored stones, beneath it this legend: "Beware the dog." Not a real dog, but only the picture of one. Was it a symbol, an omen? Octavia perhaps in straits? In a surge of gratitude, the gladiator said to himself,

"If she needs a dog, I am that dog."

The slave returned with the Chamberlain, a grizzled old man of far better aspect than the false deceiving Tigellinus.

"I will conduct you," he said.

They passed through a number of rooms, all of them beautiful in Faljan's estimation, and yet even to his simple taste far from luxurious. A painting representing the good Clytie, another depicting Echo as she disported herself in a sylvan dell. Veined marble columns, fretted ceilings, statues of Horace and Virgil. Perhaps four or five rooms, then a terrace, descending steps, a wide and lovely garden containing a multitude of fruit trees, shrubs, plants of rare description. And finally a pergola, where Octavia waited.

"Faljan the gladiator," murmured the Chamberlain, and when she had risen from her stool and made a sign of dismissal, he bowed and went away.

III.

Faljan recognized the sorrowful blue eyes which had gazed down over the balustrade of the podium at him, but beyond this she was strange. A rather tall woman, hair rather light in color and very

plainly arranged, clothing modest. The face was unduly strained, he thought; there was about her an air of deep continuing anxiety which managed to suggest that she was older than her days. For she was young, they had told him, very young. Married to Nero in her early teens, and that not so long ago.

"Madame," he said, by way of greeting.

Octavia gestured for him to enter the pergola,

"Will you sit with me?"

He came and took a stool.

"The fifty thousand sesterces, the horses and chariot," he blurted.
"I—"

The Empress put up a hand,

"Whatever costs money I can easily bestow, O Faljan. I rejoice if my gifts have pleased you."

"They did," he said, and flushed at his clumsy manner of speaking.

"I saw you looking at the trees as you came forward with my Chamberlain," she smiled. "Do you like trees?"

"Yes."

"What is your favorite?"

"The wild crab apple," said the gladiator; "but of course I like other kinds, too."

"There is no wild crab apple here. It is a natural growth, and trees in our imperial garden must be exotic, splendid but artificial. Tell me, did you have trouble in reaching me?"

"No."

"Saw nothing of—unfriendly persons?"

"I saw only one thing that should not be."

"And what was that?"

He told her of the overseer and the porters, the furniture apparently belonging to Poppaea Sabina. The Empress turned pale as milk,

"Then Poppaea is preparing to move into the south wing of the palace. She herself will not reside there until—until she dares; but the furniture is being installed. It is nothing, of course. Nero's former mistress, the slave girl Acte, has lived here for years. It is a small thing."

The Empress was distressed, the color staying out of her cheeks and lips, and her eyes ashamed. He said sturdily,

"If I can help you, say the commanding word."

"There is nothing."

"In any way, madame."

She flushed, kept her eyes away from him,

"In any way, O Faljan?"

"In any way."

Octavia was silent a long moment, then she said,

"There is perhaps something. I . . ."

She rose to her feet, as if to flee. Faljan got up, puzzled by her behavior. The Chamberlain had remained at the front of the garden during this conversation; now, at Octavia's rising, he came forward. She said to him in a tense low voice,

"Have a bit of the wine of Surrentum taken to my sitting room. My digestion is troubling me again."

"At once, madame."

The Chamberlain withdrew, Octavia signed that Faljan was to come with her. They walked through the garden, in the direction of a side door. Into a corridor, and along it.

"Here," she said.

They passed into her sitting room. A small chamber, and except for an Etruscan vase or two, quite bare of decoration. There was a reclining chair, a few stools, a couch, little more. The Chamberlain appeared, behind him a female slave with the wine and glasses,

"Shall I serve it, madame?"

"No. See that no one disturbs us. I wish to talk in peace with the gladiator, since I am sponsoring him."

"Yes, madame."

"No one is to disturb us."

"No one," he assured her, and withdrew with the slave.

IV.

Octavia began to talk, swift and jerky, and yet with a persistence which indicated she had long thought about the matter presently concerning her,

"I am in desperate straits. It is certain that Agrippina will forfeit her life, and though she was never a friend to me, at least it was to her interest to defend my marriage against our joint enemies. I needed Agrippina and shall miss her; when she is dead and lost, I shall be at the mercy of Tigellinus the Sicilian, and the even more redoubtable Poppaea, who means to make herself empress."

"How can she?" said Faljan, with more loyalty than sense.

"Poppaea holds her body as a great prize," Octavia answered; "a treasure not to be surrendered for less than a marriage contract. She cares nothing for Nero, nevertheless she is determined to usurp my place. To that end, she will stop at nothing."

There was, beside the Empress, a little window made of the strange new thing called glass. It had for its purpose the admission of light into rooms otherwise unpleasantly dark, but it was cloudy ridgy stuff and could not be seen through. Octavia rubbed at it with an absent-minded finger, her eyes troubled.

"Do you know what Christians are?" she asked.

"Not very well. It is an Oriental sect, they tell me."

"They believe in the divinity of a man who was slain for a political offense," said Octavia. "In Palestine somewhere. A good many of them live here in Rome, practicing their rites in secret. I have a servant who tells me these things. The Christians declare that we do not really die but live again, and forever. In some spirit world, I take it."

"Ho!" exclaimed Faljan. "I never heard that."

"You could not believe it?" she said earnestly.

"Such things are magic," he shrugged; "and so unless these Christians are sorcerers—"

The Empress slumped down onto the couch, a defeated thing without strength,

"If there were such a future life, this present one would not matter; being none such, the time on earth is all important. Whatever duty exists for us is therefore not to be postponed until another world; it must be faced here."

Faljan was watching her closely. She had something in mind, and was attempting to convince herself of its merit. The Empress continued,

"Rome is become an evil thing. Half our so-called culture is from the Greeks: we have pillaged their art treasures, taken over their gods, imitated the worst of their manners. Their perversions, I mean to say; nasty habits which only accentuate our own defects. Now we are grown to be a rich but hollow people, divorce too frequent, morals a jest, the family turned into a pair of profligates going each his own way, with licentiousness and lack of children the natural result of such conduct. Do you understand what I am saying?"

He nodded and she went on, more and more disturbed,

"If our Roman stock is to become strong again, it must be through the children, since adults die and are seen no more. And yet where,

in this reigning house, can we expect clean children! Nero's family is rotten as far back as the eye can reach, or has the temerity to reach. Consider Agrippina, his own mother: degenerate since childhood, practicing incest with Caligula, marrying my old father and then—with her son Nero by another marriage safe in the throne succession—poisoning Claudius and Nero my innocent brother Britannicus. Such is Nero's family."

She laughed in melancholy deprecation,

"Not that my own family is immaculate. My father was a weakling and worse, my mother Messalina fantastically lewd. And yet Messalina was more thoughtless than wicked; she did nothing with deliberate meanness in her heart. I—I try to believe that my blood is therefore a little better than Nero's. Perhaps with right mixing, it could produce a normal child; and he, thriving and protected against corruption, might in his turn strengthen the royal stock. It is possible that thus one day our Romans could be persuaded to revere their ancestors, and this for the reason that those ancestors would have become deserving of homage."

The Empress came nearer to Faljan. He rose to his feet. Octavia's face was pale, her eyes fixed and without focus,

"If I had a child, it might conceivably save Rome and Rome's tomorrows. Nero would worship it, not because it was mine but because of the belief that it was his. Thus buttressed to normal living, he would likely resist the blandishments of Poppaea Sabina; whereas without such a child, she will surely win in the struggle for this throne and empire. Yet it could not be Nero's child, since he, as I have said, is degenerate."

Faljan's skin was twitching. He understood her now, understood her fully. She went on,

"You are a countryman, Faljan, healthy and rugged as an oak tree. That is why Burrus has suggested, and I have agreed, that it must be you."

The gladiator stared at her with his heart leaping up in his throat. He was aware of an overpowering need to run, to cry out; and he could do neither. Agrippina he had regarded as a royal old rip, a courtesan known by more men than she could ever have remembered—but this woman in front of Faljan's eyes was different. Octavia was a kind of goddess, and you did not lie down with a goddess; people claimed it happened in myths, but then myths—as everyone knew—were always to be swallowed with a sizable pinch of salt.

Suddenly he perceived that tears were coursing down her cheeks, and that her lips were trembling,

“Do you find me repulsive, O Faljan? Am I so drab a thing that I cannot appeal to you as a woman?”

A woman. Not a goddess, an empress. The female of her had come first, the illustrious tags had been tied on afterward. Faljan’s heart went down out of his throat, his brain cleared, a strange exciting warmth suffused him. He stretched out a hand, and in another moment she was in his arms.

CHAPTER 14.

I.

HE DID not see her again until summer's end.

The court had removed to Baiae, south in the region of the Bay of Naples, and a favorite watering spot for Nero and his play-loving entourage. Octavia had gone along as a matter of course, taking with her high hopes for the child supposedly planted in her.

Faljan had his doubts about that. There had been no passion between them; it was simply a bit of calculated business, Octavia so embarrassed that it put Faljan himself in considerable strain. It struck him afterward that another session or two would more nearly have clinched the matter; even farm animals often failed to conceive as the result of the first trial.

The Empress, however, had gone south with complete optimism.

"I am removing my own altar to Baiae," she told Faljan in parting; "and shall every day make petition to the gods. I have never to my knowledge failed them; they, in their turn, will help me now, when it is of such vital importance."

Perhaps she was right; and if it did chance that Faljan had succeeded with her, Nero's presence at Baiae would act as covering insurance. A large concourse of people had accompanied Caesar, among these being Poppaea Sabina in the role of general friend. It was likely that Caesar would feel guilty in having Poppaea along, likely that as a consequence he would make a diverting pretense of affection for his wife, bedding with her and in all probability exercising the usual privileges. So that if Octavia returned to Rome in the condition wished for, Nero could not think it otherwise than natural.

This reasoning eased Faljan in his mind, and still he could not rest the summer in contentment. The incident with Octavia had oddly enough demoralized him. If he had her with child, and it grew up to inherit Rome, the circumstance would be something to hold in great pride, even though secret pride. Yet it was a queer disturbing thing,

shocking and incredible. The gladiator had maintained a ceremonious respect for Octavia, and lying with her had not abated this. It had, in fact, increased his feeling that she was his divine and inviolable empress.

He shivered when he thought of it, so far subdued by his audacity that all that summer he consorted with no other woman, lest somehow, in some magical way, his tie with Octavia become known, and both of them be ruined.

A dreary uneasy summer, not even his magnificent chariot horses interesting him. He drove them now and then, but always with such lack of pleasure that in the end he turned them over to Besidus to exercise, himself neither mentioning them again, nor visiting their stable.

Vidalius likewise failed to divert him. The gladiator went once or twice to visit him—or rather, to visit his vineyard—but to Faljan's astonishment the grafted twigs had at last produced leaves. The fruit merchant was delighted, and kept detailing over and over again the steps in his triumph over the root-eating insects which now must surely starve to death and vanish from the scene. Faljan made brief replies, somehow disquieted that a man of such fanciful notions should succeed in making one vine grow from the stalk of another. The whole affair was beyond the gladiator's imagination, so that in order to escape hearing more of it, he stopped going to the vineyard.

There was but one piece of good fortune for him; namely, the suspension of arena combat until early autumn, the problem of what to do about Vortinax thus deferred.

They did not speak to each other any more. It was stalemate, Faljan ignoring his deluded friend, Vortinax carefully keeping out of his way. Which was easy to do, for the barbarian, alone of all the gladiators in the barracks, was in daily training. Quartilla had given the men permission to ease down for the duration of the summer months; Vortinax went ahead nevertheless. He developed an insatiable appetite for weight lifting, spear throwing, somersaulting, whatever else he could do alone, since no one would brave the heat to sweat in the sand with him.

"I have heard it noised about," Hirl confided to Faljan, "that when he pays his weekly visit to Synistor, the two of them fence with swords, the miller giving him pointers on how to pierce your left lung, and perhaps the right one as well."

Faljan refused the bait. To continue to ignore Vortinax, that was his program; and meantime, in his heavy unhappy head try to hit

upon some way to evade the impending combat with a man he had grown to love, even though in Vortinax there was no love for Faljan, or at any rate none that could be discerned.

In Rome a dull round, but in Baiae—to judge from gossip—a round altogether different.

II.

The talk came in almost continuous streams, relayed from the South as from a battlefield.

Agrippina had been summering at Antium, until quite unexpectedly Nero sent her an invitation to join his party at Baiae. Highly encouraged by this hint of a reconciliation, she sailed to him in her best galley; Nero entertained her affectionately, except that when it came time for her to return it was mysteriously a fact that her vessel was out of order. No matter; Caesar supplied one of his own, a splendid vessel of ebony and gold and inset mother-of-pearl, with picked men to row at the double oars.

The unsuspecting Agrippina set sail. It was dusk, and the sea glowed a pigeon's blood. The merry crowd on shore waved and called salutation, the oarsmen stroked rhythmically, the galley pushed on and on into the darkening night and out of sight—then without warning the vessel began to wrench apart.

All very natural, since Nero had so contrived it. An old trick, popular in sea fights staged in flooded arenas. Boats going to pieces and spilling everybody into the water.

At Baiae, the divine Caesar entertained that evening with harp and voice. The guests sat with Vesuvius behind them, Nero facing the dead crater which legend claimed was once a spouting red giant from the underworld.

“O Vesuvius,” he declaimed loudly, “wilt thou not live again, cough up flame and searing coals, that I may immortalize thee in song? Fire is the essence of life, the blood of the body, consumer and purifier, slayer of all dross! Therefore would I sing of thee, O Vesuvius, craving a finish to all foul things needing to be destroyed, that only the pure and sweet be left to live!”

His little audience shifted impatiently. They were awaiting news of the foul thing called Agrippina, presumably drowned in the sea.

She was still alive. Thrown into the water by the disintegration of her galley, she instinctively thrashed out with her arms, and so kept afloat. A fisherman picked her up; she came safe to land, and thence to her own villa at Antium. Unaware, so later news said, that the shipwreck had all been design. Yet when she sent messengers to Nero, assuring him of her safety, he was certain that she knew and would attempt to exact vengeance.

Consternation descended upon Baiae, Octavia a helpless bystander, Poppaea and Tigellinus walking the beach with the worried irresolute Caesar, pouring new fear into him, and on the heels of fear the demand for settling action. In the end they prevailed.

A tribune arrived at Antium, some tens of soldiers behind him. He penetrated to Agrippina's presence, and she at once understood that this was the crisis. She spoke to the tribune haughtily, he answered that he had but to obey orders; and then at a signal his men drew their swords. At which, seeing all was lost, she pulled aside her clothing and pointed,

"If then you must strike, strike there—my womb is the criminal, since it bore the monster that now betrays me!"

This command the soldiers were ashamed to follow. Instead they hacked her about the head and neck, blood spurting from her; but Agrippina yielded no outcry to be repeated back to Nero for his satisfaction.

Agrippina had been unpopular for years, and Nero was Caesar; and even if he were himself somewhat less than beloved, his mother was dead and he was alive and astride the Empire. So that upon his return to the capital at the end of summer, Rome went mad with what passed for joy. A rabble thronged out to the Appian Way to meet him, all along the streets of the city trestles and seats were erected and sold to spectators. Nero found his world in festal array, banners and bunting hanging from housetops, people waving and shouting. The city received him as a conqueror, a god kind enough to step down to earth and permit the poor benighted mob to gaze upon him. Riding in a gilded chariot, he shook the curls back from his forehead and smiled like a happy child.

Faljan stood watching the spectacle, waiting for Octavia to appear, and failing to see her. Ah, but then neither was Poppaea Sabina in line, nor Tigellinus. Lesser folk had probably been detoured to another route, so that this triumph might be Caesar's and Caesar's alone.

The Emperor went straight as a bee to the temple of Jupiter where he thanked the god for delivering him from Agrippina's wicked mach-

inations; then he traveled up the palace hill in a sumptuous litter borne by patricians in special costume.

Rome's lord having given them their cue, knights and tribunes and the upper layer of important public officials came flocking to him, pressing his pudgy hands and congratulating him upon his escape. At the request of Nero, the complaisant Seneca put together a letter, and this Caesar presented to the Senate. It recounted the whole affair, attributing Agrippina's shipwreck to accident, and declaring that she had been plotting against Nero's life: guilty documents had allegedly floated off when her galley went to pieces, so that Agrippina feared punishment in their finding, and hence committed suicide. Replying to this letter, the Senate praised the gods for having spared great Caesar, and proclaimed that the birthday of Agrippina from this time onward be accursed and forgotten.

In order to take proper cognizance of Nero's deliverance, it was likewise decreed that games be instituted at once. There was to be a variety of gladiatorial contests, among them a combat between Faljan and Vortinax the barbarian.

On the day that this announcement was scribbled on the walls of Rome, Faljan received a summons to the Empress.

III.

He climbed the Palatine Hill with a calm heart. A saving plan had occurred to him. A bargain.

"I hereby put it up to the gods," he said to himself. "If Octavia is with child, I'll have done Rome a service; and I shall interpret her pregnancy as a promise of divine intercession between me and Vortinax, this to prevent our fighting each other in the ring."

"What are you mumbling about?"

It was Urstine, lounging at the entrance to the palace and surveying Faljan with burning eyes. The eunuch had been at Baiae with the court; Faljan had not seen him all summer.

"When a gladiator starts mumbling," continued the eunuch, "it is a certain sign that he is going to pot."

"Then give thanks!" said Faljan, striding on his way.

"I will!" Urstine cried after him.

Dead leaves in the wind, a jackal howling at the new moon. Faljan

was not worried; it had been happenstance, encountering the eunuch today. More important, much more powerful, was the arrangement that the gladiator had made with the gods, Octavia pregnant or not, and this to determine the outcome of the matter with Vortinax.

He was admitted to Octavia. She looked well, her lips full and firm, posture good, color painting the cheeks that Faljan remembered to have been pale, indeed. The gladiator knew, without her speaking, that his luck was still with him.

Abruptly she sat down.

"I must not stand," she said, as if apologizing. "Caesar is to have an heir."

Faljan took it quietly. He had known it; she could tell him nothing save details.

"I am glad," he said.

"Oh, I knew you would be," murmured the Empress. "You have been ever kind to me, O Faljan."

She flushed at this reminder of wherein he had been kind, Faljan said quickly,

"In Baiae were you—did you see much of Nero? Enough, I mean to say."

"Yes. It is all right; have no fear."

He smiled at her, and she rose and impulsively took his hands. Octavia's eyes were glowing,

"You are a man of the people, O Faljan, a peasant of strong healthy instincts. There is a fundamental humanity in men of your class, however coarse may be its expression. Do not take this amiss, my friend; I am only trying to tell you that I am grateful for what you are giving the child. It will be a boy, of course; and in his good time he will rule Rome with courage and justice, as Rome was often ruled in former days. May the gods bless you always, Faljan."

"They have already done so."

"One thing more. I have the desire to make you gifts of gold and other fortune, but if I did so now it would seem payment—which must not be. Yet when you fight again, entering the arena as my gladiator—and winning, naturally—then you will discover what my thanks can be in tangible form. Farewell, my good friend. I shall never forget you."

IV.

Faljan walked down the hill quickly, eager to reach the barracks and let the barbarian know that their riddle had been resolved.

Below the Subura, however, the going was slow, every street being crowded with merrymakers, the stupid monkey mob which shouts and sings when its masters give the signal. Nero was home again, and games decreed! Great divine Caesar, pure offspring of a slut; and a curse upon Agrippina's memory. The Emperor was clear of her, at this very moment getting a ceremonial shave, beard cut off and face henceforth smooth as Apollo's. Such was Nero's reason—he was a singer, Apollo was god of song, Apollo was smooth shaven and therefore Caesar must be—but the noisy laughing mob in the streets had another explanation for it,

“It is at Poppaea's order. She wants him a man, being long ago weary of his uncut cord, which bound him to his mother and thereby limited Poppaea's influence. Nero shaven will be a man in his own right, Poppaea claims; yet it makes small difference that I can see—beard or no beard to grab her pretty fingers into, she will pull him about as she likes.”

“Have you heard the portent?”

“What portent is that? There are so many of them.”

“Near Ostia a cow gave birth the other day to a two-headed calf. A heifer calf.”

“Betokening what?”

“That two mistresses will be ruling Rome.”

“Octavia and Poppaea?”

“Certainly.”

“May the gods preserve Octavia.”

“Very likely they will. Two-headed calves live but briefly.”

“Are you betting on the games?”

“If I can find silver. I'll bet on Vortinax.”

“Oh, why?”

“He has been attending to his training, and leads a clean life. As for Faljan, he is always out somewhere with a wench. I know that for a certainty. Besidus told me.”

“Bad, that is. The early Romans forbade their soldiers to lie with women on the eve of battle; it weakens a man.”

Faljan strode up to the gossipers, thumped them jestingly,

“Do I look weak? I have never been stronger, better fit for the arena. However, guard your money—bet it neither upon me nor yet upon Vortinax!”

He went on, laughing at their dumfounded faces, still amused when he reached the barracks. Vortinax was at work in the quadrangle, a little press of gladiators grouped about him. Faljan called out,

“Vortinax, all is well! I have received an augury from the gods, and by its token we shall not have to kill each other in the arena!”

The trainer whirled on him,

“It is against rules to talk to your opponent so soon before entering the ring with him. Retire—say no more!”

V.

Faljan kept his confidence. On the day of the fight, he carried it to the arena in full complement, smiling, easy, paying no attention to Synistor and the noisemakers surrounding him. The miller was sitting halfway between the podium and the top row of seats, *claqueurs* on either side, and all of them yelling for Vortinax and announcing bets in his favor.

“Faljan is in poor condition!” they kept yapping during the parade of fighters around the arena. “In poor condition, and will therefore lose! Bet on Vortinax, place your wagers on the barbarian!”

The procession halted in front of the podium, Faljan’s eyes skimming its occupants. Burrus still occupied a better seat than the horse breeder, Darin was waving down at Faljan with a nonchalant hand, Seneca absently picked his nose. Octavia sat beautiful and smiling, Poppaea sulked. All to the good.

They did their hail Caesar, and returned underground. Faljan and Vortinax were shunted into separate dressing rooms. A silly rule, that. Rome was stuffed with rules and regulations. But no matter. After today there would be nothing to keep friends apart.

He sat awaiting his turn. Calm and at peace. The affair was sewn up, settled. As a matter of fact, an augury was a contract; once

entered into, the gods could not go back on it. If he liked, Faljan might thumb his nose at them and the result would be the same. Not that he would do such a thing, of course.

An attendant came in with a cupful of vinegar water, the traditional offering to a gladiator just before a hard fight. Faljan gulped it down, stood up to let himself be helped on with his armor.

"Where is Besidus?" said the attendant.

"I left him at the barracks."

"He should be serving here as your valet."

"I will fetch him next time, perhaps. Today he would fret me with encouragement which I do not need."

The attendant adjusted the gladiator's shin guards, nodding in approval,

"You have what is required for a great fighter: sound nerves and complete trust in yourself. I wish you success."

Faljan nodded, reached for his helmet. A trumpet was sounding the next event. It was his contest with Vortinax, and he was eager to get into it and have it over.

He made sure that his equipment was in order, followed the attendant into the corridor. Vortinax was waiting at the gates. Faljan opened his mouth to speak, but the barbarian looked away.

"Numskull," Faljan muttered, then his face cleared. "Ah, but he does not understand about the augury. I had no chance to tell him."

A second trumpet, and they marched side by side into the arena. Shouts and hand clapping broke upon their ears, continuing unabated while the gladiators took their places.

A signal and they grasped their swords, began to exchange preliminary blows. Vortinax was warming up fast, his blows more and more serious. Suddenly he got through Faljan's guard and a roar of applause went up from the spectators,

"First blood to Vortinax!"

"A wound to Faljan—he is cut!"

Blood was flowing down from his left armpit. Where were the gods? What about the augury, the contract, bargain! Then Faljan realized that he was wearing his amulet. The amulet must be blocking what the gods were planning to do. He reached up and jerked it loose from his neck, cast it aside.

It did not help. Vortinax continued dangerous—in defense Faljan struck back, and with such good effect that his adherents yelled and redoubled their bets. The smell of chick peas drifted down from the upper rows of the arena, sickening him. Or was it suspicion of the

gods that was sickening him? He locked his teeth and drew blood on the barbarian's sword arm, Vortinax began to mutter a kind of incantation,

"I must kill him, must kill him, kill him!"

Alarm seized upon Faljan. The gods were failing him. It was what he had feared for so long: man against friend, sword and sword, with Vortinax doomed to go down before a gladiator who knew himself to be the better fighter—unless Faljan permitted himself to be killed, so that Vortinax could have his wish and return home beyond the Alps.

Yet no sooner had this possibility occurred to him than it went shuddering away. Faljan saw, out of the end of his eye, the dread figure of the mallet man, an arena attendant dressed in black and masked to represent Charon, the ferryman across the Styx. It was the function of this masquerader to advance when a fighter had been slain, and make sure that he was really dead, make sure by striking him heavily on the skull with his big mallet. Fear and protesting rage swept over Faljan. In a series of brilliant sword strokes, he took the aggressive, and kept it.

Vortinax refused to give way. They smashed together with the force of two bulls, so close to each other that Faljan could feel his enemy's hot insistent breath. Thudding blows, flashing blades and wounds again, the sand bloody under their striving feet—then as Vortinax attempted once more to seize the initiative, Faljan's sword pierced his side and the barbarian fell.

Yells and howls of pleasure went up from the arena, Faljan watching in horror as Vortinax sought to rise. The barbarian fought up onto an elbow, sank back. Among the spectators, thumbs were going down as a sign that it was death, but Faljan paid them no attention. He knew they were there; what need to look! Vortinax was struggling to gaze up past the awning, in order to see the sky, a heaven as blue as his defeated eyes. The awning shut the sky away; the barbarian lay quiet upon the sand, whispering,

"Yet I shall see the forest again. I shall see it. I must. . . ."

Thereupon Faljan whirled and held up his bloody sword, not in triumph but in appeal. He shouted toward the podium,

"A noble fighter, Vortinax! I plead mercy for him, beg that his life be spared! I, Faljan, being victor, ask this boon!"

The audience stared in surprise, confused whispers ran about. Never before had a winning gladiator interceded for his fallen enemy. It was an unheard-of thing.

An annoyed flush appeared on Caesar's face. He had his thumb

down, and kept it down. Octavia turned hers up, but most of the court followed Nero. So did the mob. The rabble had decided that Faljan was jesting, putting on a pretense for the sake of adding a decorative touch to his victory. They turned their thumbs down, laughing and commanding that Vortinax be slain.

Faljan glared at them with a pale furious face; hating, at that moment, all Rome—the low cruel mob, the sleek patricians, Nero, Synistor—hating even the poor trapped fool lying at his feet in the approaches to death. For Vortinax had permitted himself to be tricked into a bargain with Faljan's enemy, and having failed in his attempt to profit thereby, he must pay the penalty. There was no other way.

The roars of "kill, kill" resounded louder and louder over the arena, Faljan grasped his sword. He looked down at Vortinax, at the sky-blue eyes no longer capable of seeing what they gazed upon. In a burst of savage despair, Faljan cried out in a terrible voice,

"Die, then, Vortinax, since you would have it so!"

He struck full across the throat, a heavy blow which sent the barbarian's blood gushing forth in a final torrent.

CHAPTER 15.

I.

A BUCKETFUL smack in the face, another against his chest, a third down his loins and legs. Reddish water coursing off him, cleansing away the blood and sweat. They had fetched him to the surgeon's room, taken off his armor. A hand pushed him down onto a bench, clever fingers began to sew up his wounds. An attendant rubbed his bare feet, another applied hot fomentations to his head.

"You lost a great deal of blood," murmured the surgeon, stitching busily.

A great deal? Vortinax had lost more. Suddenly the gladiator lurched to his feet, saying in a loud voice,

"Where is the deadroom?"

"You are a long way from belonging there!" laughed the surgeon. "Lie down—let me finish."

Faljan shoved him aside and went into the corridor. He met Khonca, hurrying along with goblets of licorice water for the gladiators.

"Take me to the deadroom," Faljan said.

Khonca stared a moment, beckoned him to follow,

"I understand. You want to gloat. Very natural, seeing that a dead enemy always smells sweet. This way—"

There was a big door, propped open. Two men with ropes were dragging out a body apiece, hauling them to the rear vent of the arena, the sewer and the Tiber beyond. Faljan paused,

"Give me a coin."

Khonca handed it over, the gladiator walked into the deadroom. Several men were tying ropes about the feet of corpses; these men wore big leathern aprons in order to keep their clothing as clean as possible.

"Vortinax?" said Faljan.

"Over yonder."

He picked his way in and out among the silent carcasses, all of them the bodies of men slain in today's games. The air was rank, the sand stained dark with blood.

Suddenly Faljan caught sight of a beam of sunlight, angling down from a small barred window, and falling upon the face of a dead man. The dead man was Vortinax, great muscular legs sprawled limp and unnatural, one arm doubled under him, a gaping wound in his side. Faljan had given him that. The skull hideously crushed, which was Charon's doing. No need for the mallet man to have struck so violent a blow; but the scoundrel no doubt enjoyed his work—it was safe, and he was, for one hideous moment, the center of the arena's attention. A curse upon such villains.

Faljan paused beside his friend, gazing upon him in bitter sorrow. How calmly the barbarian lay there. No hate in his countenance, no worry, fear, anxiety. Except that the blue eyes were open, he might have been a wounded man sleeping and therein forgetting his pain. The sunbeam playing over his face seemed to be alive.

"I will go back," Vortinax had said. "I will see my forest home again."

Faljan tossed away the coin that Khonca had given him. When a person died, you placed a coin in his mouth, wherewith to pay his ferry fee across the Styx—but Faljan could not believe that Vortinax required such a fee. His shining eyes could not be destined to rot in brute darkness. Under the touch of the descending sunbeam, the barbarian appeared, not dead, but only fled away. Perhaps what he had said of his forest was true, and here, as there, a sunbeam was a stair up which the soul could climb to freedom.

"He is still alive," Faljan muttered, and then in terror of his own words, he turned and rushed out of the deadroom. An observer would have said that he was being pursued by revengeful ghosts.

II.

Pursued, indeed, but by living men, promoting themselves as friends and well-wishers. Noisy flatterers in street and barracks, Quartilla offering him wine, his mates crowding him with praise. He was their brother, their very eye, their darling.

"Faljan, great Faljan!"

"Conqueror of Vortinax, the barbarian!"

"You take it so quietly, man. Brighten up—smile—accept your destiny! You are famous now!"

"What do you want, Faljan? Only name it, and it is yours."

Ah, what did he want! Merely that the sundial of time be moved back, and Vortinax breathe again. For the barbarian was surely dead; the fancy that Faljan had conceived in the deadroom was nonsense, no longer comforting him.

"I am going to bed," he said heavily.

"To bed? Without supper, a feast of celebration?"

He got away from their racket, except that he rose next morning to a resumption of it. Hirl and Tuscus were an especial pair of pests, basking in his glory and regaling him with news: what the gladiators in the private schools were saying, the effect of his victory upon Synistor. The miller, they claimed, had taken the defeat of Vortinax with ill grace, raving and cursing, and currently grinding, not corn but his teeth, so that a number of them had been worn down to the gums and from now on he would have to eat mush.

"They say that for a while he contemplated hiring assassins to knife you," Hirl grinned; "but caution told him better. He would be afraid to go that far. You are become an important figure, Faljan."

More and more important, it appeared. Gifts from unknown admirers began to arrive, rare fruits and fine linen and money and golden ornaments. Silly rich women did this sort of thing as a prelude to suggesting an assignation, professional bettors used it as magical insurance for their future wagers.

The Director called Faljan to his office, the little man polite, even respectful. He had documents on his desk, signifying that the Empress Octavia had graciously bestowed upon her gladiator, in perpetuity and with full inheritance rights, a certain villa on the Quirinal Hill, complete with furnishings, also five house slaves and an allowance for food and other domestic expenses.

"Take this paper to the realty agent listed here," said the smiling Director, "and he will place you in possession."

Faljan picked up the paper. A magnificent gift, truly, yet he found no joy in it. It was Besidus who was in ecstasies: the villa must be seen at once, occupied, flaunted in the face of all Rome. The gladiator gave in—for the reason that barracks rules would henceforth permit him to spend nights at his own house, if he chose. Vortinax had lived and breathed in this barracks, and Faljan on that account had no longer any heart for the place.

Besidus got the chariot and drove him to the agent's office in the Corso. The agent confirmed the gift, stepped into the chariot with them; Besidus took up the reins.

"Drive to where the Old Wall cuts across the Corso," said the agent; "then follow up the hill. But be careful. Chariot accidents are increasing in Rome, and there is growing agitation for the punishment of careless driving."

"Never fear!" cried Besidus, and drove off swiftly. Pedestrians scattered with angry cries, idlers gaped in admiration of Faljan's splendid four horses, the wheels made a tremendous clatter on the cobblestones.

"Never fear, eh!" muttered the agent. "If I fear not now, I would not fear to slap Neptune across the face!"

Faljan took the lines and held the horses down to a slower pace. He turned off the Corso, followed the wall by means of a narrow lane. There was a better road off on their right hand.

"Where does that go?" said Besidus.

"To Numentum, a favorite summer resort for rich people. Pop-paea has a villa there."

Faljan glanced at the agent. The man had spoken flatly, with a distinct suggestion of disapproval.

"And the Empress," asked Faljan, "do you like her?"

"Who does not!" exclaimed the agent heartily.

Faljan said no more. They were winding in and out of nameless green lanes, the agent appearing to find his way by instinct. Then they halted. This was the place. Iron gates, stone wall covered with ivy and flowering vines, a small villa painted blue. Back of the house were servants' quarters, a stable for the horses, and a dovecot without tenants. For the first time Faljan showed a spark of interest,

"I see no pigeons."

"The death of Britannicus caused them to depart."

"Britannicus? The brother of the Empress Octavia?"

"Yes. He used this villa as a play place, his sister desiring it as a means of keeping him apart from the intrigues of the court. A good plan, save that in the end he died of poison, anyhow. You could have pigeons, if you wished."

They descended from the chariot, went into the house. The slaves were presented to their new master: three African blacks, the fourth probably a Scythian, the fifth a Gaul. They kissed Faljan's hand; that is to say, four of them did. When the Gaul attempted to do this, Faljan jerked his hand away and told them to begone about their

tasks. The Gaul was a blond man, a barbarian somewhat remindful of Vortinax.

"There is no food," said Besidus, prying into the storeroom, "but we can easily remedy that. A wonderful house, O Faljan—we ought to be very happy with it."

"We must get food. I want to sleep here tonight."

They drove back to the city, tied up near the agent's office. The fellow was lingering, repeating over and over his conviction that Faljan would like the villa—and if there were ever anything else—

"I am grateful to you," said Faljan, and hesitated. "Tell me; I am not conversant with these matters, but in return for your kindness—"

"Ah," said the agent smilingly; "if you mean that you wish to give me something, and hold back lest I be insulted, let me assure you that there is scarce a man in Rome who would not accept a gratuity these days. Does that answer your question?"

Besidus disapproved of the drain on their purse, but Faljan gave the agent a handful of silver, and again thanked him. The gladiator and his valet walked off toward the food shops of the Corso, seeking what to buy.

"Oh, what a grand little villa!" said Besidus, smacking his lips. "Not so big that it will be expensive to maintain, but large enough for all pleasure. Even a room for your girl, did you notice?"

Faljan stopped abruptly,

"What girl?"

"Why, Lydia the dancer, of course!"

"And how do you know about her?" Faljan scowled.

"I know all your concerns," answered the valet, with an innocent face. "Ever since I hoped to become your servant I have studied your doings and tastes—that I might be of more service to you."

Faljan started on again. A familiar voice reached out and took hold of him,

"So we meet again, my charming gladiator! I was looking for you."

It was Tigellinus, his gold tooth ornamenting an evil grin. Faljan observed that he was accompanied by ten soldiers, but he gave this little thought. The Sicilian was no doubt on his way to some dirty deed in Nero's name.

"What do you want?" said Faljan coldly.

"You," and Tigellinus laid a hand upon the gladiator's arm.

"Loose me," said Faljan, with anger in his voice. "I am not in the habit of being mauled in the street."

"Then come with me, and it will be done in private."

Faljan glanced at the soldiers with new understanding.

"You are under arrest," said the horse breeder.

Faljan laughed,

"You are gnawing at the wrong bone, Tigellinus. I am under the protection of the Empress."

"That is precisely what we want to question you about—the Empress!"

"*We?* Who is we?"

The Sicilian shouted at the soldiers,

"Seize him!"

The soldiers did so, two of them grasping his arms, the others standing grouped about him with spears held ready.

"Evidently you have the better of me," Faljan shrugged. "Very well, let us go where you will."

III.

"To the palace," Tigellinus ordered his men. "Cause him to march between you, and take care lest he play tricks. He is a great one for that."

Besidus stood apart, startled and dismayed, yet pleased not to have been noticed. The Sicilian stalked off toward the Palatine, behind him his soldiers with Faljan between them. The gladiator was whipping his brains in the attempt to discover what it was all about. Octavia? Urstine? Probably the eunuch knew him to be visiting the Empress the other day, and had invented some plot or imaginary offense, all for the sake of involving him in trouble. Spite work.

"Where is your friend Urstine?" asked the gladiator.

"A common eunuch my friend?" retorted Tigellinus. "He is only my creature, my henchman."

"So be it—but where is he? I have generally seen you together, not separately."

"You will see us together."

The soldiers snickered, then scowled. People in the street were recognizing Faljan, and some of them had begun to murmur in sympathy. A gladiator was something of a popular hero; and even if he were not, no lowly man liked to see soldiers taking people off to prison, or whatever. A rude voice called out,

"Eleven to seize one—a fair match, indeed!"

"Oh, but to arrest people gives the soldiers something to do, works the fat out of their guts."

"Observe how they clutch their spears! How long would they last in the arena, with Faljan matched against the lot of them!"

The Sicilian knew better than to retort to these jibes; the Roman mob was at once slave and master—wiser not to bandy words with it. Not until Tigellinus had the gladiator out of the street and was starting up the Palatine itself, did he venture to speak,

"A pity, O Faljan, that your admirers will soon be forgetting you."

"Forgetting me?"

"I said that. Am I suddenly harelipped, that you cannot understand me?"

They strode on, halted at the entrance to the palace. Burrus was waiting for them there, stern and fearsome in his armor, with forty picked guards behind him.

"What does this signify?" he said to Tigellinus.

"It signifies the arrest of the gladiator Faljan."

"In whose name, pray!"

"Caesar's."

"Under the law, a gladiator of first rank cannot be taken into custody save by direction of the chief of the Imperial Guard, and I am still that chief, Tigellinus."

"Still," assented the Sicilian impudently. "I am glad you used that word, since it renders your words accurate. You are less accurate in your reasoning, however; I have Nero's personal authorization for this arrest."

Tigellinus drew a folded parchment from his belt, passed it to Burrus. The old warrior squinted at it, barely able to read the thing, his eyes had grown so weak these last few years. He handed it back without expression,

"What is the charge?"

"In such instances none need be specified."

"Where is he to be taken?"

"To my suite. And from the hearing therein to transpire, you, sweet Burrus, are unfortunately barred. A good day to you."

Burrus reluctantly stepped aside. He had all this while given Faljan not so much as a glance, yet the gladiator understood. Octavia had sent her old champion to try and block whatever Tigellinus had in mind.

"Forward!" cried the horse breeder.

The party resumed its way, clump clump into the palace and off to the suite occupied by Tigellinus. A bigger finer apartment than the one Faljan remembered. Rich new mosaics on the floor of the vestibule, paintings thronging the walls: Prometheus bringing fire to man, Python the serpent writhing in his cave, and of course the phallic symbols which the Sicilian loved. All of these in the vestibule, and then beyond it a larger room, entering which Faljan knew why Urstine had stayed behind. The eunuch had been busy here. Preparing an assortment of tortures against the arrival of the gladiator.

IV.

"Sit down," said Tigellinus, indicating a stool.

Faljan obeyed: The eunuch grinned at him from behind a brazier of hot coals. There were also two or three sharpened olive sticks on a little table, as well as iron pins, a big bronze knife, pincers, and an assortment of peacock feathers. His tools, so to speak.

"I will explain," said Tigellinus, languidly throwing himself onto a couch. "Octavia has confided to her husband that she is pregnant, but Nero declares it is impossible for her to have conceived by him. He maintains that he is sterile, and so has been for years. Very odd, then, that Octavia should be with child—unusually odd, in view of the fact that Poppaea has long been aware that Octavia possesses a heretofore unknown lover. You are that lover."

"No."

"You will do well not to assault my patience, else I shall have to turn Urstine loose upon you."

"I have spoken the truth. Her lover! The mere suggestion of it astonishes me."

"Why should it! You are handsome and virile, and she is a woman."

"She is my empress."

"Giving you expensive presents, including a team of chariot horses and a villa."

"I won recently in the arena, and Octavia is my sponsor. Naturally she is gratified by my success."

"How many times have you visited her?"

"Twice."

"Once recently, in order to thank her for her patronage—and once

at the end of May. It was round about that time that she became pregnant. Come now, own up to it."

"I cannot—without lying."

Urstine seized the hot pincers,

"Let me freshen his recollection, O Tigellinus!"

The Sicilian nodded, four soldiers advanced and took hold of Faljan. They ripped off his tunic, threw him to the floor, kept him there. The eunuch advanced,

"We shall begin as in the arena, light sport at first, then perhaps heavier attacks. Ah!"

He had applied the pincers to Faljan's chest, smoke and the odor of burnt flesh rising up, but no sound issuing from the gladiator. Urstine burned him elsewhere, sometimes at random, sometimes making what he called the pattern of a little springtime flower, each burn a petal and many contiguous burns for the stem. Tigellinus watched intently with his yellow flat eyes,

"Try the pins."

Urstine caught up the iron pins and fell to jabbing them into Faljan's chest and arms and neck. Blood flowed, but the gladiator only said,

"You waste your time. I am accustomed to such tickling."

Tigellinus cried out,

"That's it! Give him the feathers!"

The soldiers took rope and bound Faljan's ankles together, sat on them, and removed his sandals. Urstine was making a selection from his peacock feathers, a chuckle of mirth welling up out of his flaccid mouth,

"A pity we do not have a tree."

"Tree?"

"The Persians make an incision in the prisoner's belly, get hold of the end of a gut, nail it to a tree, and then with whips drive the guilty one round and round the trunk, until he has wrapped his intestines upon it. But that ends a man's life. The feathers are perhaps a better device."

"Get at it."

Urstine took a pair of feathers and sat down cross-legged, facing the soles of the gladiator's feet. He began to tickle them, gently, delicately. Faljan was astonished; after the burning and pin jabbing, this was certainly a ludicrous proceeding.

Very soon, however, he learned otherwise. Cramps began to seize upon his feet—toes, arches, ankle joints. To relieve himself he at-

tempted to move his legs, but the cords and the weight of the soldiers rendered this impossible. Urstine quickened his pace, tickling a foot with both feathers, changing to the other foot, back and forth, faster and faster like a man performing upon a sensitive musical instrument. Faljan began to laugh shrilly, unable to stop. The cramps flashed upward into his calves, knees, upper legs. His laughter became a series of staccato choking moans. Sweat rolled off him. No more laughter, not even moans; he was gasping now, unable to get his breath. In a fog of pain he heard Tigellinus speak,

“Keep at it until he answers.”

Faljan swooned away, they slapped him in the face with wet rags until he opened his eyes. Urstine had thrown down his peacock feathers in disgust.

“There is only one thing left,” he said, with bright eyes; “and that is to alter him.”

“You see, Faljan,” cried Tigellinus cheerfully; “I can do nothing with this detestable eunuch. Being himself no longer a man, he wants everybody else to share his fate. He is what the Greek fabulist would call a dog in the manger. Will you confess?”

“There is nothing to confess,” Faljan muttered.

Urstine began to whet the bronze knife, a soldier ripped off Faljan’s breechclout. The gladiator lay stark naked, breathing hard yet still obstinate. He watched the eunuch steadily, awaiting a possible opportunity to leap up and kill him with his own knife—except that it was not going to be necessary. The door opened—a slave came hastily in, bowing to admit a woman. Poppaea Sabina.

Tigellinus rose in surprise, Poppaea stared at the gladiator,

“Is this Faljan?”

“Yes. We have coaxed him, but he will not respond.”

Poppaea sent her eyes roaming over the body of the man on the floor. Faljan saw her dully, because of his pain, nevertheless it seemed to him that he had never beheld so beautiful a face: the eyes were a soft limpid brown, the mouth infantile and rosy, her skin radiant with pure young delicately coursing health.

“And now you propose?” she asked Tigellinus.

“To make him less than a man.”

“Mutilate that splendid body?” she exclaimed sharply. “No. Urstine, put aside your knife.”

The eunuch howled with rage, but threw it down. Tigellinus was gazing at Poppaea with reproach,

“He will not talk otherwise.”

"No need."

"What?"

"I have just left Octavia. We know her lover's name."

"She has confessed?" demanded the Sicilian incredulously.

"Yes."

"And the man's name?"

"Mario Pallas, the senator who cheated on paving contracts, and the other day committed suicide."

Tigellinus gulped, laughed outright,

"So it was Pallas! He was always praising Octavia, but I never thought—"

"Release the gladiator."

A soldier helped Faljan to his feet, tossed him his breechclout. Poppaea watched him put it on, then she smiled upon him prettily, turned and went out. The gladiator stood on his blistered feet, swaying a little, waiting for the ringing to go out of his head. Urstine gave him a blow which sent him sprawling flat on his face, whereupon Tigellinus joined the soldiers in a round of laughter. Faljan struggled back onto his feet, managed to get to the door.

CHAPTER 16.

I.

A COUNTRYMAN, though he be catapulted into what for him is riches and fortune, has no need of a lackey, a honey-mouthed servant hanging on his every word and grunt, eager to run fetch him a cool drink, a warm drink, take off his sandals, kill his snakes for him. In the beginning, the gladiator had accepted Besidus in order to get rid of him; that is to say, to gain a measure of relief from his constant importunities. Knowing full well that the scamp would prove a sore thumb, a clog to trip over. And so it had worked out. Besidus had been a nuisance.

Until now.

Staggering out of the palace on feet still knotted by the cramps which Urstine had so skillfully put into them, Faljan collapsed onto a bench and halloed up an idler to go find his man, fetch him immediately. The valet came in a great hurry, all concern and virtuous indignation,

"O Faljan, by the last throb of my life's pulse, who has done this to you?"

"Enemies, naturally. Get me out of here."

Besidus called a litter, helped his master into it, scrambled in beside him. They went swaying down the hill and off toward the gladiators' school, Besidus clucking over the wounds upon his lord's body.

"They did their best to kill you!" he declared.

"Nay, not their best. Still unused when I left the mirthful Tigelinus and his eunuch were certain little sharpened sticks of olive wood, for instance. For jabbing up the nostrils, or in under toe and fingernails."

"O Juno!"

"I am fortunate," the gladiator said grimly. "Somewhat badly bent, perhaps—but better bent than broken."

"Why do you go to the barracks? Why not our villa, where you can have comfort."

"I have an idea that I may need the protection of the barracks."

Yet if he did, he was slated to be denied it. Arriving at the gladiators' school, and presenting himself to the alarmed Director, Faljan permitting his injuries to be examined and under questioning revealing something of the wherefore of it all, he got the following advice,

"Go to your villa and lap your wounds for a few days. Above all, play flounder, lying low and being at all times discreet. If there is trouble brewing, it must not touch me, since I have nothing to do with it. Get along, now, and I shall deny you were here. Later, you will return for duty, of course."

Thus Besidus had his way after all, removing Faljan to the villa and fussily making him comfortable, calling up like a conjuror an old crone eager with healing herbs and mysterious mumblings and dirty fingers. The crone tended the hurt man, easing the pain of his wounds, while Besidus made daily trips to the city for foods which might tempt him.

From each of these excursions, Besidus likewise brought back news. Or, more precisely, rumors. There had been a fearful row in the palace, Poppaea threatening, Octavia sick with fright, Nero sulking and cursing. No one knew exactly what was happening, yet for a certainty Tigellinus was plotting mischief, and everybody said it concerned the Empress. As a matter of fact, she seemed to have vanished. Perhaps strangled. Or poisoned, like her brother Britannicus who used to live in this very villa.

"Have done," Faljan grumbled, after five days of this. "Each report you fetch me is yet more fanciful than the one preceding. I will go to the Forum and listen for myself."

He permitted Besidus to drive him downtown in the chariot, but near the Forum dismissed him and went on afoot and alone. Soldiers were taking down the decorations which had helped to celebrate Caesar's escape from his plotting mother. People watched with grave eyes, thinned lips, with now and then a scowl and a whispered guttural comment to a neighboring ear. Faljan paused at a fountain to drink, and a girl recognized him and flipped water at him,

"You are dejected, O gladiator?"

"Dejected in this glorious fine city of Rome?" he retorted. "Impossible!"

She had more to say, but he had gone on to the Forum: this his

destination, the nub of Roman life in all ages. In former days nothing more than a simple market place, the Forum had grown vastly, becoming clogged with splendid columns and temples and public buildings—and yet its essential function had remained: people came here to buy and sell, talk and listen, predict, complain of the political machine controlling their destinies from above.

Once again Faljan noted that people were grave and sulky. Few buyers abroad, shopkeepers rarely calling their wares. Beggars filching scarcely a copper, but getting a surprising number of invitations to go cut their throats.

The gladiator sat down in an arcade, unaccountably ill at ease. Was it because Octavia had plumped into deep trouble? Partly that. He had not loved her, naturally; the gulf between them was too wide; still and all, he had liked her; she was a flower blooming timidly in an ogre's den, and Faljan wished her well. Whatever good that would do her!

A falconer came wheedling up to him, leathern glove on his left hand, and clutching the wrist of it a hawk. A savage heavy-lidded bird, watching the world with the eyes of an insatiable marauder.

"Cheap, and a fine hunter!" exclaimed the owner. "Fetches down her game at the first stroke. Will you buy?"

"Off with you," answered the gladiator, and when the rascal persisted, Faljan rose and walked over to sit on the steps of the temple erected to Castor and Pollux.

There were men near him whispering, but upon his arrival they hushed up, fearing to be overheard by a stranger. Faljan stayed a while and again changed place, listening for a time to a political orator standing on a box he habitually carried about with him, and then insinuating himself into a clot of tradesmen where the talk concerned Octavia. A great deal of talk, but apparently all husks, beaten about the air as a substitute for genuine news. With a mutter of disgust, Faljan went and paid a boy a copper and got back a cornucopia of wheat, with which he began to feed the pigeons. He found a momentary comfort in the rustle of their wings as they settled down for the grain. Pigeons were a fine thing, reminding him poignantly of the Campagna and the farm of Curtius Criba where he had grown up.

Of the farm of Curtius Criba and of the smell of cattle ordure, wood fires on a February day, the softness of field earth in the ploughing season, violets and buttercups glinting back at the sun along a brook. Brook? There had formerly been one here, on this very site—long

ago, away back when Hercules first began to shave with a copper razor. Men had harnessed the brook, covered it over with arches and cement, turned it into the sewer known as the Cloaca Maxima, an underground nasty flow into which arena attendants tossed the bodies of barbarians with heaven-blue eyes, dead at the hands of friends.

Angrily Faljan cast the rest of the grain down upon the heads of the pigeons. They clapped up in fright, the gladiator strode off through their swirl of wings.

He heard the sound of a familiar name,

"Burrus, here comes noble Burrus, great Burrus! Let us ask him for alms, he is ever generous."

Faljan glanced round. He discerned the man slowly descending the steps of some government office or other, at his side Seneca the philosopher. Beggars scuttled up to the old warrior in a drove, hurling compliments and getting back copper coins. Seneca they stayed clear of; he was a stone yielding no blood, no matter what you pleaded in the way of nine sick children at home and a dead grandmother needing burial all this past month.

The gladiator stood still. Burrus had caught sight of him.

II.

The two old men paused near the spot where Faljan was standing, Burrus with a pretense of not seeing him. Waiting for Seneca to leave, he was, so that quite safely and as a matter of course he could speak to the gladiator.

Seneca was talking, his manner smooth and persuasive,

"Words you decry, O Burrus, yet they rule the world. It is words that condition ideas, and ideas are stronger than bar iron. Surely you will admit that much!"

"There are too many words about, too many ideas," grumbled the old soldier. "What we need in these days is simple action and deed." Seneca waited for his breath; he suffered from asthma.

"Too many deeds there have already been," he said finally.

"Of the wrong kind."

"And who is to judge if they be good or bad?"

"Common sense must judge. Common sense and honesty."

"I pray you we be calm and trustful," murmured the philosopher,

with a bland smile. "For to what end anticipate evil, and before death lose one's life?"

"We shall lose it the faster, by not taking action," declared Burrus, and flung out a surfeited hand. "Enough of this. You talk exceeding well, Seneca, but there your value ends. Say no more. I bid you farewell."

Seneca went off in a huff. Old Burrus turned to the gladiator; he looked him over with care, his eyes especially upon the wounds which Urstine had given him,

"You did not confess."

"No."

"My confidence in you was well placed."

"And mine in the Empress."

Burrus permitted himself a leathery smile,

"It is a bit of belated justice, Octavia naming Mario Pallas. She saved you by it, Faljan; and yet did Pallas no harm, since he is dead and long ago of exhausted reputation. Incidentally, his grave has been opened, and the body removed and thrown to the wild dogs beyond the city wall."

"Very poor eating, I should say."

"My litter waits yonder. Walk with me toward it. A stroll will excite less comment than our standing here."

They began to walk.

"What has become of the Empress?" asked Faljan.

"Banished."

"Are you certain?"

"I wish I were not," said the old warrior tartly. "She is even now out of the city, but the fact of it kept secret until Tigellinus and Poppaea have distributed scandal against her, so that when the banishment decree is known, people will agree that it serves her well for her crimes."

"And you?"

"Tigellinus is climbing fast. It will not be long before he has cajoled Nero into ousting me."

"Oh, that scoundrel!"

"As for you, Faljan, a word of advice. The turmoil in the palace may spread, and since you were asked into this affair, and responded and acquitted yourself honestly, I have no wish to see you punished. I suggest that you get out of Rome as soon as conveniently possible. Buy yourself free of the arena, and leave."

Faljan said slowly,

"Perhaps I shall take your advice."

"Do so, and count yourself fortunate. Well, then, my thanks, and good fortune."

"Farewell, O Burrus. May you, too, have fortune, in all good ways."

"All good ways?" murmured Burrus, turning to his litter; "'twould not take long to count them."

Faljan watched him move off above the head of the crowd, then very thoughtfully he betook himself to the gladiators' school.

III.

The Director received him with an uneasy face. Evidently he would have preferred that Faljan stay away a full week, or even longer. Until things blew over, quieted down.

"Your wounds are not healed," said the Director reproachfully; "and therefore you cannot resume training, lest they break open into running sores. A fighter of first rank must be taken care of, you understand. There is always an outcry when something incapacitates him for the arena."

"It is the arena that I have come here to discuss," replied Faljan. "I have decided that Rome is too heavy a diet for my belly. I wish to buy myself free."

"Oh? But you are only just entering your best form, still a good way from your zenith."

"Perhaps so, but just the same I understand I have the privilege of buying my freedom."

"That is true," and the Director became judicious, a little man playing with wisdom. "You are a fool for trouble, Faljan; and as I told you, I will not become involved in danger of your courting. On the other hand, you have shown promise of becoming a gladiator such as Rome has not seen in a hundred years."

"How soon can I get loose?"

"Very well; I will report your petition to the Control Board."

"Will it take long?"

"No. A week or two, perhaps."

"Would there be any objection, do you think, to letting me go?"

"You are not that valuable to us!"

"What will it cost me?"

"About two hundred thousand sesterces, I should say. Possibly two hundred and fifty thousand, at a maximum. Can you raise so much?"

"Yes."

"Let it stand. I will inform you when your petition is granted."

Faljan bowed, went back to the quadrangle. Tuscus was whacking the wooden post with a sword—with an eye out for Faljan,

"Did the Director say anything to you about Synistor?"

"No. Why should he?"

"Synistor was here this morning."

"Well, let him be here, for all of me."

"He made me a proposal."

"So?" and Faljan smiled grimly. "Suggesting that in exchange for a bursting bag of gold, you train against me and do what Vortinax failed to do—is that it?"

Tuscus stared in astonishment. He was a huge man, scarred at ankle and waist where galley chains had once bound him. A powerful fighter, apparently never tiring, such was his endurance. But far from bright in the head.

"Who told you?" Tuscus gasped.

"I read it in the pattern of the clouds above the Sabine Hills," Faljan smiled. "And do you intend to accept?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you are a man marked by the gods, Faljan. All who stand against you are destined to damp the sand with their blood; and with such odds I will have nothing to do."

IV.

Faljan had sworn to stay away from Lydia, never look upon her ravaged face again—but who has not broken oaths in the matter of women! He crossed the Corso and entered the dark and crooked Subura.

A commotion somewhere ahead. Mikrella's shrill voice, jerky with hysteria. The child was surrounded by a pack of women, flinging herself this way and that in the effort to escape them, but they holding her fast. Foam curdled at the corner of her mouth, her eyes were a

beast's eyes. She had probably stolen a melon, a salt fish, a piece of fruit.

She caught sight of the gladiator, broke away from the women and ran and flung herself upon him. He threw her off angrily—the girl resembled a ferret, running amuck because of the drought and bound to drink blood of the first comer.

“What ails you?” he demanded. “What have you pilfered?”

“Nothing, nothing!” she screeched. “It is my mother! She has gone mad.”

“Mad! You lump, it is you who are mad. What are you raving about?”

“My mother, my mother!” she cried, and threw her head from side to side. “She is out of her senses, Faljan! All day long she weeps and mumbles, won't work, doesn't care about anything. This world cannot interest her any longer; she wants to die, begs to be allowed to go to another world. And what about me? Oh, she doesn't care about that—it is nothing to her if I am left alone—she thinks of nothing but herself and that man.”

Faljan seized her in a paralyzing grip,

“What man is this?”

“I know not. Just a man. Three nights ago she spoke a long time to him in the street, and since then she is demented. A curse upon you, Faljan, and upon all your hateful sex. It is men who do these things. Tigellinus began her ruin and now there is another to finish it. Oh, if I could kill them both, and you, too, you offspring of a goat and an ape!”

She hurled herself at him again, wild as fire. Faljan held her away with a stiff arm.

“A man, eh,” he muttered. “I will go see about this.”

“I'll go with you—she may lie to you.”

“You stay back—and don't take on so, or the Tarbuckets will lock you up.”

Mikrella trembled, but said nothing further about going with him. He walked off, cast a look over his shoulder to make sure she was not following him, and then hurried on to the tavern.

It was early afternoon, too soon for many customers. Which was good, in case Lydia were really mad. He entered the inn, headed for her room.

The voice of the Greek spoke out sullenly,

“She is not there.”

“Where is she, then?”

"In the kitchen—where she belongs."

Faljan went up to him.

"In the kitchen, where she belongs?" he repeated. "What do you mean to say?"

"What I have said. The girl Lydia no longer dances for me. She is henceforth just a kitchen wench. A curse upon her."

Faljan seized his nose, began to twist it,

"Watch your tongue."

The Greek said nothing further, and accordingly Faljan let him go—he turned to the kitchen.

It was a sloppy wet den of a place, no windows, light entering only from a door opening onto a back court. There was a big wooden tub, copper pots and pans piled in it. Lydia was bent over this tub, scrubbing and scouring with a handful of raffia. Her feet were bare, a coarse cheap cotton tunic hung from her stooped shoulders, a rope around her waist served as a belt.

"What is it now!" cried Faljan, in a voice made harsh by fear and exasperation. "Are you gone lunatic?"

She looked up from the tub; her face calm, the marks of tears and blows and sleepless nights upon it, but nevertheless serene.

"Nay, Faljan," she said. "It is simply that I have become a Christian."

CHAPTER 17.

I.

SHE said she had become a Christian, but it made so little sense to Faljan that he could only gawk at her, not taking her seriously.

Nevertheless there was no jesting in her thin hollowed face. H'm; it must be that she was drunk, or perhaps had been nibbling at one of those Eastern drugs which underground fellows of the stripe of Er-shutif were always peddling about the city.

"A Christian," she repeated, and glowed like an oilskin window with a candle behind it. "Do you understand what I mean, Faljan?"

"You have been sleeping under a rainy hedge—your brain is addled."

"Not addled, but wondrously cleared," she said, and for the first time that he could remember, she smiled at him. "A Christian is a follower of Christ, and Christ was a man called Jesus, a Jew that the Romans killed."

He grinned,

"Now I see, clear as sunshine. You have got yourself a dish of Jew religion. Tell me, does a hooked nose go with it? Do you intend to peddle sulphur matches in the street? How much are they—I might buy a bunch, even though I have no need for them."

Lydia straightened up from the barrel where she had been scrubbing and scouring. The gladiator frowned at her—how ugly her tunic was: a coarse sack, nothing more.

"Christianity is not the same," she declared. "It is an offshoot of Jewishness, an altogether new sect."

"Yes, we need that in Rome! Already we have religions from Egypt, Syria, Persia, a hundred other corners of the Orient, but that is not enough—we must invent another one to go with the herd we already have! You are a fool."

"This new sect is the true one. It is the only real and living religion."

"And what makes you so sure of it?"

"I have met a man who knows all about Christ, having traveled with Him, talked to Him often, even become His disciple. This man—"

"Mikrella told me there was such a fellow," Faljan growled. "He has become your lover, I suppose!"

Her mouth fell open in horror,

"No—no, you are tangling it all up! He is simply a kind friend—an old man—a teacher."

"Old, is he!" exclaimed the gladiator. He felt easier, now no more than curious. "The name of your graybeard?"

"Peter."

"A Roman?"

"No."

"Dwelling where?"

"Beyond the Tiber bridges. He lives there with other Christians. Peter has lately come from Palestine where Christ was killed; it is his purpose to tell Rome about the new religion."

"He can do that, but will Rome listen!"

"It will in time. Many have already accepted his words, Faljan. I, among them. Henceforth I shall live my life according to the laws of Christ."

She spoke with a certain fanatic insistence, but Faljan was not going to object. If her Peter was not a man to be jealous of, the gladiator did not care in the slightest what the so-called disciple told her in the way of religious flummery. On the kitchen shelf beside Faljan, there was a dish of anchovies; he took a handful and stuffed them into his mouth, chewing and nodding briskly,

"Have your new sect, then—if it makes you happy. I see no harm in it. To be downright, everybody ought to believe in something, and certainly the gods of Rome have gone to grass. They are mocked by their own people, and clowned up by additions which are clearly illegal. Nero, for example, has proclaimed himself a god, and if that paunchy bastard is a god, I am a six-horned bull. Also Caligula, the mad one who was brother to Agrippina—didn't he declare his favorite horse to be divine? All rubbish and garbage—so probably it is high time for people to invent new gods. In fact, now that we speak of it, I have heard something about your Christianity. It's all right—go ahead with it."

Lydia's face lit up with joy. She lifted her arms as if to embrace him, but did not—Faljan was continuing in the most casual manner in the world,

"However, believing or not believing in your newfangled sect, you must get out of this filthy tavern, once and for all."

She shook her head,

"I cannot."

"Cannot?"

"I am in debt to the Greek."

"So!" and he gave her a bitter grin; "but surely you earned your keep here, dancing and—the rest of it."

Lydia cast down her eyes, a flush in her cheeks and her lips trembling,

"Let us not speak of that. It is all past, and best forgotten—or at least not mentioned."

"All past?" he demanded incredulously, and stopped his jaws on the anchovies. "Not to be begun again?"

"Never," she said, in a low voice. "I was not reared to be a prostitute, or ever wanted to be. I became infatuated with Tigellinus and then—well, I kept on with the only thing I had to sell, hating it nevertheless. You must have known it."

"Anyhow, I am glad it is over," Faljan muttered. "It is a bad thing to like a woman, and to have to watch other men seizing her. A bad thing even to see her dance her whore's dance, simulating passion, her body exposed to strangers—you will never know how I have cursed you for it all!"

Lydia sank down upon a stool, her face white and drawn.

"Pity me, Faljan," she whispered, "as Christ has pitied me."

"He has done that, has he!"

"Pitied me, and forgiven me, even as He forgave other harlots before me."

"You are getting out of this tavern," Faljan said gloomily. "I am buying myself free of the arena, and shortly leaving Rome; you shall go with me to the Campagna. Only look at your arms and shoulders! The Greek has been beating you, and yet you want to pay your debt to him! We shall take your rags and walk out of here today; he can suck rotten eggs, for all the good it will do him."

"No," she said miserably; "not until I have worked off my debt—as Christ wants me to do."

"What has Christ to do with it?"

"I must obey His teachings, don't you see? If the Greek beats me,

even though he kills me, it is really not important. This present life is nothing; it is the next one that matters."

"What gibberish are you talking now!" the gladiator cried irritably. "By the egg that Leda hatched, you have more riddles in you than a dream book!"

"It is not a riddle. Christ declares that we shall all live beyond the grave, and since He says so, it is true."

"Crazed again!"

She smiled faintly,

"Faljan, you tell me to follow this new religion, if I like; yet apparently you do so without realizing what it demands. I am forced to believe in another life, because the history of Jesus Christ demonstrates that such a thing exists. He stayed a while on earth, healing disease and performing miracles, then after the Jews crucified Him He remained but three days in the grave before He rose from it and lived again."

This sounded to Faljan a bit like Octavia. He said suspiciously,

"Lived again?"

"Yes, Faljan."

"Where is he now?"

"I do not know. He has been seen by different of His followers, but Peter declares that He has risen to sit upon the right hand of God, Who is His Father."

The gladiator remained silent. Lydia said sorrowfully,

"You cannot believe that, can you, Faljan?"

He did not answer at once; he was thinking of Vortinax, the barbarian's words in barracks and arena, the beam of sunlight down through the dank forest of this earthly life: a ray descending like a ladder, penetrating everywhere, even to the deadroom of a Roman arena, to touch the face of a dead man who believed that he would get back to his home beyond the Alps, where his soul was born and longed to return. Something terrible and tender began to stir in Faljan at the recollection. He kept his voice steady,

"I could perhaps believe it."

Simple enough words, yet they cast the girl into his arms and sent her tears flooding down his neck. Faljan stood in amazement. He had never known emotion in this woman—until now. She was human, after all. The gladiator's hand slipped up around her breast, but at that she jumped back affrighted—you would have thought her a new vestal virgin, sworn to avoid even the touch of a man.

"No, Faljan, no!" she cried. "We must not stray back into sin."

"Sin? Why, it is pleasure, and very natural—the most natural thing in the world!"

"Let me go!"

"You have lain with me before."

"Yet with no man since I repented and accepted Jesus Christ, I tell you! I have sworn to lead henceforth a pure life, doing nothing which would be wicked in the eyes of my Lord."

The gladiator turned black as a rain cloud,

"Your precious Christ has too many rules and regulations; he is worse than an overseer."

"He has many rules, but not too many," said Lydia, disentangling herself from him. "They are all necessary, Faljan. Christ wants us to keep ourselves from evil, doing good to those who revile us, loving our enemies, refraining from all—"

"Wait! We are to love our enemies, you say?"

"Yes; it is enjoined upon every Christian."

He laughed boisterously,

"Including Tigellinus? Urstine? That pair of monsters who would gladly have thrown my flesh to the palace cats?"

"Don't mock," said the girl. "You must try to love them, Faljan, as I am trying to love those who have spitefully used *me*."

"Oh, of a certainty I shall try! Tigellinus, Urstine, and especially Synistor—who only today sought to hire a gladiator to train and slay me! Why, you are bitten by a mad dog; all you lack is froth in your teeth to play the part to perfection."

"Do not say such things," she begged, and tried again to embrace him. "Faljan!"

He thrust her back,

"I have had enough of this prattle. Farewell to you!"

The gladiator strode back out to the tavern room, where the Greek was just lifting a glass of resin wine to his lips. The fat one made the mistake of smiling in derision—Faljan shot out his fist and smashed the wine glass against the Greek's mouth.

II.

He strode swiftly down the crowded street, bruising pedestrians aside with his muscular legs and shoulders.

A chanting sound came to him from somewhere, monotonous as a

water wheel in need of greasing. Shrill sexless voices in a chorus of lessons, said out loud under the direction of a teacher, the better to learn it. The voices seemed to be following the gladiator down the street, though actually they belonged to school children seated on a near-by balcony. In exasperation he shouted at them,

“Leave off! What is there to be learned in this world, that a bright fool would not know at birth!”

The chanting ceased abruptly, then resumed. Faljan went on his way, down out of the Subura and to the Corso, where another murmur of voices arrested him. Dealers in rumor this time, small knots of people discussing the doings on Palace Hill. Good Octavia; pregnant perhaps; but if so, by her husband. The artful Poppaea, weak Nero, the pair of them conniving against an innocent wife. It was said that Caesar was maneuvering a divorce from Octavia, or already had it. Intending to marry the infamous Poppaea Sabina.

“Infamous she may be,” murmured an idler, nodding toward a statue of Poppaea at the edge of the Corso; “but beautiful.”

“So was Helen of Troy beautiful, but sowed grief just the same. And why are Poppaea’s statues all of a sudden blooming in Rome? She is not a public personage.”

A workman picked up a stone, took aim, hurled it at the statue. It struck Poppaea on the nose, chipping off a fragment. The crowd laughed and moved forward with an unspoken intent; men knocked over the statue and began to flow in a disorderly column toward the Forum where there was said to be another statue of Poppaea. Faljan went along with them; for the mob had called out the name of Octavia, and he liked the manner in which they did it.

“Down with Poppaea, up with Octavia!” voices shouted. “Long may the good Octavia live, well and sweetly may she prosper!”

Pouring into the Forum, the roisterers discovered the second statue of Poppaea and broke it into many pieces, after which they surrounded a pedestal supporting a bust of the Empress. They saluted it with upraised hands, a garland appeared from somewhere, a hand flung it about the neck of Octavia, and then somehow her statue was off its base and aloft on the shoulders of indignant men, marching out of the Forum and off toward the entrance to the palace grounds.

“To the Palatine! Let us face Nero and demand that Octavia be returned from banishment! Forward—forward—forward!”

A few Tarbuckets ran up with the notion of interfering, but they were swept aside. Faljan elbowed his way forward, placing himself in front of the mob and marching as its leader. A soldier got directly in

his path, Faljan drew his dagger and the fellow retired. Then a hand seized the gladiator,

"Are you out of your senses? This could cost your life!"

It was Besidus, pale with terror. Faljan kept marching along, the valet tugging at him like a bramble, and with no more effect. Lose Faljan his life? He recalled the rubbish that Lydia had been stuffing down his gullet and said wryly,

"Aye, lose it perhaps, but live again in another better world! Get away from me."

"No, I shall not!" and in sudden resolution, the valet stuck out his foot and Faljan tripped over it. He fell, the crowd began to trample over him, paying no heed to his curses. Besidus was attempting to drag his master out of the way, Faljan yelling at him,

"I will double the number of your ribs for this, I swear it by the bowels of my father! Let be—I can get up alone!"

The gladiator struggled to his feet, shouldering the crowd first to one side and then to the other, in order to get clear of it. Besidus followed him, twittering in alarm as he pointed up the hill,

"Just look, then, what you have escaped. I did you a service, O Faljan!"

With Octavia's statue aloft on their shoulders, and their throats bellowing her praise, the mob had got well up the Palatine, only to be confronted by Tigellinus and a detachment of soldiers. Shouts of defiance went up from the crowd, the soldiers presented their spears. An order from Tigellinus, and they attacked, men sinking down in blood, Octavia's statue falling to the ground. Presently the mob broke and ran back down the hill.

"If Tigellinus had seen you," Besidus quavered, "it would have been the end of my master."

The gladiator stared up the slope at the statue of the Empress, lying prone and forgotten by the mob so lately chanting her praises. He turned away with a heavy mouth,

"Let us get away from this rotten Palatine, find some air."

III.

Best of all places in Rome for finding air, stretching legs and amusing yourself generally, was Mars Field. Originally a great alluvial plain in a bend of the Tiber, it had once served almost ex-

clusively as an exercise ground for troops, chariot racers, ambitious young gladiators who were not yet gladiators. In time it grew up to gardens and temples, porticoes and theaters, booths and shops and even tenements, nevertheless there was still space here. And diversion as well.

The gladiator stopped at a booth and had wine with Besidus, afterward feeling a little better. They walked on, pausing again at the sight of Faljan's name on a wall. Two inscriptions, one later than the other. Said the first,

"O my handsome gladiator Faljan, I would bed with you!"

The second one said,

"Whether he will bed with you depends upon whether you be man or woman. Therefore declare yourself, O amorous one!"

"An idea," muttered Faljan. "Come."

They went down to the Tiber bank, where in huts and thatched arbors the prostitutes of a dozen races lay and beguiled the boatmen passing up and down the river, or whatever other man chose to come along. Besidus paired off with the first wench he saw, the gladiator chose a companion with huge fertile breasts, which he accounted a good thing. A woman should have large breasts; Lydia's were much too small.

"Wine, wine," he growled, and when he had swilled down all he could hold he staggered to the bed and fell upon it, heavily as a dead bullock.

He remained in the arbor for the better part of a week, drinking and brooding, trying to extract pleasure from a woman whose breasts were too big. In the end he gave up trying and drank himself insensible, lying like a corpse until the pale disheveled Besidus came to get him. Faljan sat up and yawned, felt for his purse.

"You still have it," laughed the woman. "I know better than to rob a gladiator. However, I did lose money on you, handsome one! There were men here in the last few days that would not stay because you were in the way."

Faljan tossed her a couple of gold pieces,

"What is that infernal pounding?"

"Slaves and workmen. They are preparing for the feast."

"Feast?"

"See the artificial lake yonder? It was hollowed out for water sports, but before that it will be used for an imperial banquet. Celebrating the marriage of Nero and Poppaea."

"What about Octavia?"

“Divorced.”

The gladiator permitted Besidus to lead him out into the air and off to a nearby bath. He soaked a long time in hot water, fumbling with his bilious disgruntled reflections. Faljan the possessor of a villa and household slaves, a chariot and gold in the bank, and at the same time miserable! Not even when he used to have to sit in the rain tending cattle, under just a reed cape, had he felt so wretched as now. To the midnight underworld with the vaunted glories of Rome!

Besidus came in, smiling,

“Ha, you look better—although there are still a few half-moons under your eyes. Shall I get the chariot?”

“What for?”

“To take you home in, of course!”

IV.

It was a jolting head-cracking ride back to the villa, but once there, comfort: the house cool, slaves reading his face and betaking themselves off, a bed inviting his aching bones. Besidus started to remove Faljan's tunic, but the gladiator blazed forth,

“Keep your hands to yourself! Are you a Greek, that you seek to become familiar with me?”

Besidus turned red. He said stiffly,

“I only sought to help you undress.”

“I am still a man and can undress myself. Bring me wine—and then get out of my sight.”

The wine came in a big amphora, Faljan drank his fill and lay down to heavy unpleasant slumber. When he awakened next day he drank again, and again slept. This he kept up until he lost count of time. And why not! What was there in time that was so precious? A curse upon time, likewise a curse upon Rome and Nero and Lydia of the beautiful breasts just the right size. He drank himself back to sleep once more, dreaming a dream in which Charon was swinging at him with the big mallet and Besidus the traitor, the louse and spy, Besidus was helping Charon by dragging the gladiator out of bed and under the threatening hammer.

“Curse you, what are you doing!”

"Wake up," begged the frightened valet. "There is a centurion waiting to see you."

"Break his nose for him and pitch him out the door."

"Hush, in the name of the holy gods! There are ten soldiers with him. You must get up. They are arresting you, I fear."

"Prison is all I need," said Faljan, slowly rising to his feet. "With that, my goblet of bliss will be brim full. Where is the centurion?"

"I will fetch him."

Besidus hurried out; Faljan looked at his dagger, wondering if he should take it in his hand as protection. No time. The door had opened and the centurion was striding in, the valet fawning at his heels.

"You sleep hard, O Faljan!"

"The proper way to sleep. What is your mission here?"

"The compliments of Caesar," said the centurion, unrolling a parchment. "Greeting to Faljan the gladiator, him hereby invited to attend an imperial banquet in honor of the marriage of Caesar and Poppaea Sabina. On the lake, three days from today, in the evening."

CHAPTER 18.

I.

FOLLOWING less than an hour upon the invitation, came a note from the Director of the gladiators' school. He, too, had been asked to the banquet, and he herewith suggested that Faljan wait for him at the gangway to the royal barge, so that they might go aboard together, sit together.

Besidus saw through it at once. He had a cunning head in such matters.

"So long as you smelled of danger," laughed the valet, "our Director shunned you, preferred that you stay home and out of his sight, lest your presence undermine him. But now that Nero's sun shines upon you, he thirsts for your company. That is the way it is with political appointees; they always have a wet thumb in the air, testing the wind and hurrying accordingly."

"I do not understand this invitation," Faljan shrugged.

"Oh, why! There was a time in Rome's history, true enough, when an Emperor supped only with high dignitaries, men of wealth and power, social good odor; but under Nero all that has been changed. He consorts with every class—and anyhow, you are yourself a celebrity."

"Well, then," said the gladiator, without enthusiasm, "we had better set about assembling the proper clothes for me."

It was not difficult. Faljan had no appetite for shopping, but Besidus fetched him plenty to choose from. They settled, finally, upon a tunic of deep red wool, sandals of subdued yellow leather, and a matching band to go about his short black hair.

"You will look rich and yet not boastful," said the valet sagely, and Faljan agreed.

On the afternoon of the banquet the gladiator visited the baths, got himself ordered at a barbershop, and came home to dress. Be-

sidus curled his hair a bit at the ends, but when he suggested perfume, Faljan said no. Then he added,

"The sun is going down. Perhaps we should get started."

"I will fetch the chariot."

"Have you groomed the horses?"

"Of course. They shine like an Arab's heel."

Besidus went out, Faljan picked up a bronze mirror and gave a last look at himself. H'm; if Lydia were to see him like this—

Ah, yes, but what did he care about Lydia! He went out. The chariot came swinging round to the front of the villa, Besidus proud behind his four horses,

"It is a little early, but there will be much to see."

Faljan got in, took the lines. Darkness was descending fast, for this was October, and the days short and sudden at the end. They reached the Corso, glad for the double row of torches which Nero had provided, as a means of lighting his guests to the scene of the feast. Down the Corso almost to the Subura, then right, still between rows of flaming torches, alternated, now, with tall poles from which waved banners and pennants. Music by concealed players, ragged crowds gathering to watch the guests go by.

Ahead, the double row of lights expanded into a huge circle, marking the outline of the artificial lake where the barge lay waiting. The crowds had increased, their press at last so great that the chariot could not advance. Faljan halted and they got down, Besidus securing the horses in an alley and then proceeding with the gladiator on foot. The valet had thought to fetch silver, and this he tossed piece by piece to the crowd, bawling loudly,

"Make way for Faljan the gladiator! Make way!"

"Faljan?" murmured a handsome black-eyed woman on the sidelines. "So it is! Hola, Faljan, take me with you!"

"There would be too many witnesses to what I should have to do to you!"

They could now see the barge. It appeared to be constructed of mahogany, with scroll insets of silver and ivory, flaring torches ringing its deck and streamers fluttering. A double set of oars, to be manipulated by a bevy of beautiful naked youths. A beribboned gangplank, soldiers watchful against intruders.

"This is far enough," said Faljan, "else I shall miss the Director. Not that I would care."

Faljan had arrived early, but other guests quickly put in appearance. A few in chariots, the richer in slave-borne litters. Senators,

some of them; bankers and various officials, a considerable number of patrician whores. Seneca, small and hawk-nosed; and presently Poppaea herself.

She came in a litter of dazzling gold, especially made for this occasion. A multitude of slaves before and after her, pages to announce her, breechclouted Negresses to spray her with refreshing perfume. The crowd pressed forward to see, and yet at the same time it seemed to shrink away.

"Perfume!" muttered a tradesman wrathfully; "'twould take more than perfume to make that one fragrant!"

"Make way for the Empress! Back, back, let the Empress Poppaea get by!"

She reached the gangplank and was carefully lowered in her litter. A centurion stepped forward and gave her an assisting hand. Poppaea descended, an unbelievable vision in saffron-colored silk. Her amber hair had been sprinkled with gold dust; she wore no jewelry whatever.

"My youth and my loveliness are my adornments," her manner proclaimed.

Her attendants cast money among the crowd, and immediately voices rang out in flattery. Hail to the Empress, a greeting and good fortune to Poppaea, long live and prosper the divine wife of divine Caesar. Faljan felt someone at his elbow; it was the Director.

"A beautiful woman," he murmured; "eh, Faljan?"

"I held Octavia in great esteem," said the gladiator bluntly. "This one has ousted her and nabbed Caesar, and she may regret it. It cannot be too safe to grab a wolf by the ears, methinks."

"Shhh, you fool! Talk of that caliber will get you nowhere, save into trouble. A good thing I am with you, if you are going to think such things of our hostess."

"I did not ask you to come with me."

"Anyhow," sighed the Director, "it is all over with Octavia, hence why discuss her! Her fate was settled the moment she was banished, for the Empress being young and inexperienced, there was no chance that she could have launched a counterblow—a revolution, or something of that sort. Agrippina, of course, was dangerous to the end, which explains why people argued the case until her very death."

Poppaea had mounted the gangplank and was turning around. She stood under a torch, as if by intent, since its light glimmered upon her hair so impressively. With her bare arms outspread, she exclaimed in a benevolent voice,

"Later there will be food distributed. Rejoice in my happiness, and await the baskets."

A fanfare of trumpets, shouts of acclaim, and she went aboard. Besidus tugged at his master's sleeve,

"Perhaps I could go aboard and act as your servant."

"No," the Director said sharply. "It would seem pretentious of Faljan."

"Take the chariot home," added the gladiator. "There is no telling when I shall be ready to leave."

The guests by this time flowing up in a steady stream, the Director proposed that he and Faljan go aboard. Nero would arrive last, but the moment he was on the barge's deck, the vessel would set out upon the water and the feast begin,

"Anyway, we must get to our places, before all the best couches are taken. There is a greedy bold crowd here tonight, if I know my Romans."

II.

Faljan followed him up the gangplank, at its far end both of them stopped by a chamberlain inquiring their names. Next they were intercepted by pages laden down with garlands; made of flowers to counteract the effects of wine, and embellished with sprigs of myrtle in symbol of Aphrodite-Venus, the goddess of love, these were to be worn about the head, and kept on as long as possible. Faljan bent over to receive his garland, and they went on toward the tables, halted a third time by a young slave girl with bare breasts. The girl smiled and took perfume from a dwarf attending her, sprinkled the gladiator and his companion, stepped to another dwarf and took from him a second variety of perfume, then likewise there was a third and a fourth scent, until Faljan was choking.

"Your names, please."

It was a fourth interceptor, this time a steward, hearing who they were and conducting them to a table where they might choose couches to their liking. Practically all of the guests were now present, although save for Poppaea they were still standing. Then from the shore resounded a chorus of hail Caesar, divine Nero, and the Emperor tramped aboard. A murmur of fond greeting and compliment

went up, he strode to his place and seated himself beside Poppaea. The guests sat down, Nero clapped his hands and the barge captain signaled to his boatswain. The vessel began to move.

"Caesar acts as if this were a business meeting," murmured Faljan, "instead of pleasure."

"Not at all. There is an enormous quantity of food and drink to be disposed of, so the affair must start without delay. Hark!"

Laughter and muffled exclamations broke from the rowers, the barge jerked slightly. Faljan was puzzled, the Director explained,

"The lake has been filled with crocodiles, and the rowers keep striking them with their oars."

A long file of slaves appeared, the first of them with basins of perfumed water to be offered the guests for the washing of hands, the remainder presenting towels of fine linen. The initial course of food came on, Nero lifting a jeweled goblet of wine,

"My friends, the feast begins—and cursed be he who remembers what has gone before it!"

"Or remembers what happens during it," added the clear girlish voice of Poppaea.

What Faljan remembered of the banquet was chiefly the welter and glut of fine food: lampreys and mullet, two kinds of oysters, huge eels from Boeotia roasted on coals and afterward wrapped in beet leaves to enhance their flavor, peacock brains and the tongues of flamingos, woodcocks from far-off savage Britain, turtledoves and thrushes out of local Italy, gigantic capons stuffed with grapes and almonds and spices.

The gladiator was thinking himself full, when a troop of liveried cooks bore on many lambs, roasted whole but apparently not cleansed of their entrails. With a flourish the head cook took a sword and ripped open their bellies, song birds flew out and away with shrill cries.

The courses became more and more fantastic. Transparent bowls were placed upon the tables, in these bowls live fish; the water was boiling hot, so that the guests had the novel pleasure of reclining upon their cushions and observing the ruby and emerald hues which the creatures threw off in their death struggles.

Yet what most amazed Faljan was a whole flock of live plucked geese, tethered on metal boards, and coals of fire heaped about them. Attendants basted their heads and hearts with cold water, to prevent the birds from toppling over and dying prematurely, all while they slowly roasted alive.

"Romans are monsters," muttered the gladiator.

"Have some wine and you will see it differently," suggested the Director. "This sort, for a change."

The gladiator had long ago lost track of the wines. There were too many varieties, arriving in too many kinds of goblet, amphora, flagon, glass vase: rare imported vintages, soft to the palate and then in your belly suddenly extending talons you had not suspected they possessed. He drank heavily, and yet could not keep his eyes from the moaning geese. The big birds were staggering, their mouths gaping wide against the pain of the hot coals; then when it seemed inevitable that they collapse, they were cut loose and passed among the guests, to be torn apart still breathing, the quivering flesh devoured with exclamations of delight.

"None for me," said Faljan, waving it away.

Suddenly there was a commotion on shore, curses and howls reaching across the water to the guests, and Nero laughing,

"It is Tigellinus, driving too fast through the crowd in his eagerness to join us. Ah, well, once a chariot driver, always a chariot driver."

"A chariot driver and a horse breeder," observed Seneca, with a slur in his dry cracked voice.

"A horse breeder and my friend," Nero said reprovingly.

Seneca discreetly kept silent, content to go on eating. He had gorged all evening; and when, now and again, he had no more room in him, he called for a heron feather dipped in a decoction of wild thyme, turned from the table and inserted the tip of the feather into his throat and vomited, thus making space inside. The Director, his usual caution shattered by the warmth of the wine, murmured for Faljan's benefit,

"Our philosopher yonder is fond of saying that an abundance of food dulls the sensibilities, and, if it be rich into the bargain, he says, it also operates to strangle the soul. Yet at table he is a glutton—and away from it a greedy lecher, a merciless usurer and a collector of voluptuous slave girls. I shall never again pay silver for what Seneca writes—he is all talk and no flour, sand without lime, a cackling hen who cannot lay eggs. If he ever—"

Here the Director caught himself, closed up very tight. Faljan smiled at him in derision, turned to watch Tigellinus come clambering aboard the galley. The horse breeder was expensively dressed, but garish as an African. There was a square box in his hand, and on his swarthy ugly face an expression of triumph. He made his way

toward Nero, then abruptly he paused beside a very old man, some sort of decayed patrician, apparently. To Faljan's astonishment, the face of the Sicilian softened, his manner not so much deferential as kind. He stood for a moment chatting amiably with the old fellow, the gladiator whispered to the Director,

"Why that? What can a scoundrel like Tigellinus hope to gain from so old and weak a man?"

"You do not understand," answered the Director, with an amused smile. "Tigellinus was in the beginning an orphan, brought up by a grandfather. Our Sicilian was devoted to this grandfather, used him gently all his days. And as if to proclaim his undying affection for the old fellow, Tigellinus always goes out of his way to indulge men who are aged and infirm. It is a queer soft streak in an otherwise ferocious character."

The Sicilian exchanged a last compliment with the old man, and went on to the table occupied by Nero. At Caesar's wave of permission, Tigellinus sat down. He placed the square box beside his chair.

"Attention!" Caesar was bellowing. "We shall be entertained, at this time, by my favorite mime!"

A burst of applause, expectant admiring smiles as Darin leaped into the area in front of Nero's table. During the banquet the guests had been diverted by clowns and tumblers, dancing girls from Andalusia, naked women wrestling each other's oiled bodies with much yanking of hair, yet it had all been crude fare beside this. Darin virtually soared in the air, his gestures and posturings so expressive that they were a story without the need of words. To all except Faljan, that is to say; the countryman failed to get the point, although there certainly was one—every belly right and left of him was shaking in delight.

"What does he tell?" Faljan asked the Director.

"He is pantomiming an incident from the reign of Claudius, the Emperor absent from Rome, his wife Messalina engaging in a series of erotic bouts with her lovers, then slander reaching Claudius, the Emperor returning toward the capital, Messalina's drunken revelers warned, her chief paramour fleeing in terror, and then—but the rest of it you can see before your eyes."

Faljan could follow it now. The lover fleeing, Claudius drawing nearer to Rome, the terrified Messalina taking her two children and going out to meet him. He spurns them, goes on—the paramour is

killed—Messalina likewise meets death—the two children grope about the scene motherless and weeping, the boy interpreted by Darin as an idiot, the girl vicious. The mime finished to the accompaniment of applause which rose in violent surges, women tearing jewels from their throats and tossing them to Darin, gold coins clinking at his feet.

“Magnificent, eh?” said the Director, well pleased.

Faljan was depressed. The pantomimed children of Messalina were Britannicus and his sister Octavia, Britannicus later dead of poison, Octavia banished. Why this choice for Darin? Surely the mime had a multitude of themes at his command! To choose one casting shame upon the exiled Empress seemed to Faljan an evil portent.

“Where is the wine?” he muttered.

“Hearken to me,” the Director said warningly. “Until now our wine has been chilled by snow fetched from the Atlas Mountains, but the supply of the cooling stuff is running short, and the attendants are consequently saving what is left for Nero and his immediate entourage. Drink sparingly, therefore, tepid wine being bad for the digestion.”

Out of perversity, Faljan drank copiously of the tepid wine; and when presently the Director cautioned him against eating too much, he piled his plate high. The night air reeked with the odors of wine and sweat; slaves released jets of perfume, showered the tables with rose petals; the diners belched loudly as proof that they were enjoying the food. The viands were now coming on in the shape of obscene images—fruits and pastries fashioned, not for the stomach, but for the suggestible passions. Finally there arrived a whole procession of barbecued swine, creatures merely sows in the beginning, but in the kitchen provided with male organs as well. Nero, glassy-eyed, his mouth loose and wet, bent forward and cut off what was never a part of a living sow, hurled it across to an outlying table,

“For you, Urstine! To compensate you for your sorry lack!”

Roaring laughter went up, Urstine hesitating over his titbit. Caesar stared at him coldly, Urstine made a satisfactory pretense of devouring the thing which had been thrown him.

“Nero is drunk,” observed the Director. “There will be an orgy later, mark my word.”

Tigellinus was lifting his voice,

“My Caesar, thanks to your lavish generosity, we are almost all of us sated.”

"Almost all?" frowned Nero. "And who is not?"

"The crocodiles."

The Emperor laughed. In the area before his table a group of Macedonian young men and girls were going through their routine, all of them muscle dancers of grace and skill. Their act ending, they bowed to Caesar and he commanded their hands to be filled with as many gold coins as they could hold. The gold was brought, the Macedonians warm with delight. They had earned, tonight, enough to keep them in comfort for the balance of their days.

"Now, then, into the lake with them!" Nero cried.

Accustomed to Caesar's capricious orders, a party of soldiers stepped forward and with spears began to prod the dancers toward the edge of the barge. The wretches screamed in fright, fell onto their knees to appeal for mercy, but the soldiers forced them on their way. The Macedonians wavered, one by one plunged into the water with loud wailing cries. A swish of powerful tails, screams of anguish, a splashing of sorts, then the racket died down. The crocodiles had availed themselves of Caesar's generosity.

The guests had run to the rail to watch the spectacle, but Nero was cross. He knocked on his goblet for order, everyone returned hastily to his couch.

"Enough of these brute pleasures," said the Emperor. "I shall now sing for you!"

Applause rose up, but under it subdued groans. Nero's caterwauling might last for hours; and on full stomachs, this would be indeed an ordeal. Then Poppaea, all during the feast discreet, chaste, modest, Poppaea the new Empress lifted her flutelike voice,

"Yes, Caesar, sing—and let us hope that the lowland air will not get into your throat and injure the cords."

Nero had turned to call for his harp, but at this he paused,

"H'm—I had forgotten how foul the air is here by the river. I am sorry, but I cannot sing for you."

"Foul is all of Rome, for that matter," said Tigellinus. "Someday, my Nero, you should tear down this rotten city, where palaces must hold their noses against the stink of neighboring hovels and tenements; then build you a city worthy of Caesar and his divine voice."

Nero nodded absently, glanced around,

"Is Synistor present? I invited him."

"Here, Caesar," and from a table behind Faljan the onetime champion rose up bowing. "At your command, sire."

"Synistor and I will wrestle," the Emperor declared, and scrambled to his feet. "I threw him once before, d'ye recollect, Synistor?"

"I do, sire—but then you could throw Hercules himself, and I count your victory no reflection upon me."

"Certainly not," Nero admitted. "You are a redoubtable foe; even I had a bit of trouble with you, as I recollect. Clear a space, slaves—this will require room."

The guests were amused at the prospect, but Poppaea did not propose to allow so embarrassing an exhibition. She whispered to Tigellinus, and the horse breeder called out to Nero in an insinuating tone,

"Would you rather wrestle Synistor, good Caesar—or a nymph? Perhaps both, but—"

"Ha, the nymphs!" cried Caesar; "I had forgotten them!" He shouted at the barge captain, "Pull for the far shore—with all speed. Nymphs cannot wait, else like cherries in July, they spoil."

III.

As the barge drew steadily nearer the far shore of the lake, arbors and bowers became visible among the trees, subdued laughter and mocking love calls drifted across the water. Invisible musicians struck up a tune, slow, blood stirring, libidinous.

"Faster, faster!" Nero shouted, and the boatswain seized a whip and fell to lashing his rowers.

The guests had left their tables and were crowding to the rail, so impatient that they scarcely bothered to adjust the tiny cloth masks which pages were handing out. The barge grated ashore; the passengers, with yells and laughter, threw off their garlands and sprang onto the bank, without decorum, and indifferent even to Nero. This was license, everyone for himself. The bowers were impromptu brothels, the women beckoning therein being, not gutter refuse, as along the lupanar district on the Tiber bank, but the wives of senators and knights. Poppaea leaped ashore and turned with uplifted hand,

"Let nothing be remembered!"

"Nothing remembered!" echoed a multitudinous shout.

"For the men, there are nymphs," she continued laughingly, "for the women satyrs and fauns—but only one at a time, ladies, only one at a time!"

A drove of sylvan figures peeped out of the wood and then darted away with inviting cries, Nero's guests scattering after them yelling and howling. Faljan, losing the Director and seeing no more of him that night, ran off after a half-naked nymph who must have been Atalanta herself, for she escaped him with ease—and mocking cries. The gladiator uttered a curse and wandered off in search of another.

He caught sight of someone farther on—a woman, apparently. He stalked her craftily, all of a sudden halted. Poppaea; and with her Tigellinus the horse breeder. Not lusting, but engaged in sober conversation.

"You were late in coming," Poppaea was saying to Tigellinus. "It was spoiling my food."

"Where is Nero at the moment?" Tigellinus asked cautiously. "If he should find us here—"

"My husband has already found what will keep him occupied for some time to come; namely, the widow of Mario Pallas. Well?"

The Sicilian lifted the box he still carried. He opened it, turned it upside down. Something fell to the ground, pale and bloody in the moonlight. A head.

Poppaea stirred it with her foot, so that the features might come uppermost and be recognized.

"Have no suspicions," laughed Tigellinus. "It is Octavia, no other. I have already shown it to Nero—a matter of necessary tact, since it was he who gave the formal order that she be slain. He has recognized this poll as hers, and accepts the deed."

The Empress nodded, Tigellinus picked up the head and clapped it back into its box.

"Now I can rest in comfort," Poppaea murmured. "You have done well."

"And the reward you promised?"

"You shall have it."

"I am satisfied with that assurance."

The horse breeder bowed and withdrew with his box. Poppaea went off in another direction, and presently Faljan heard her calling for a slave to fetch her a certain perfume.

The gladiator sat down upon a rock, sickness tugging at his stomach, so that he vomited, heaving and retching as if demons were inside him and hurling his entrails out through his gullet. It relieved

him, but when he turned to stare incredulously at the spot where Tigellinus had shown the head of Octavia, spilling it contemptuously and in triumph out upon the ground, the gladiator's illness returned, this time more violently than before.

He rose finally, and went off on shaking legs. At a rivulet of murmuring water, he lay down and drank, and afterward felt a little better.

Suddenly it was darker in the wood. Sly hands had extinguished the torches at the water's edge; now only moonlight illuminated the scene. Faljan began to walk without aim, seeing nothing of what was going on about him. He tripped over a couple and fell sprawling, promptly getting himself cursed for his clumsiness. Silently he got up and went on.

A nymph shot across his path. She wore nothing save a tiny black mask and a brief flowing garment of such thinness as to be no more than a veil. The nymph saw Faljan and paused an instant, but there was someone chasing her—she accordingly ran on, dodging around a tree and across a moonlit dell, until with a final burst of speed she outdistanced him. Her pursuer gave up, shouting after her in anger,

“A curse upon you, nymph—you should only have piqued and tantalized me, then let yourself be captured!”

Faljan trudged on his way. He wanted to get home, put distance between himself and such monsters as Tigellinus and Poppaea Sabina. The barge was tied up, and would doubtless remain so for long hours; but if he could skirt the lake, cut around in the direction of the Corso—

A pale slender vision appeared off to his right—it moved toward him. It was the nymph he had seen a moment ago, now gliding up to nestle in his arms. Her mouth came against his, clinging there with such vehemence that it seemed she intended to suck his very life from him. For a moment Faljan responded with the mechanical willingness of the male, then in suspicion he drew back to look at her. He saw her face, and uttered a hoarse cry.

It was Poppaea.

IV.

She was smiling at him, teeth shining white as sea foam, her amber glinting hair flowing free. The small breasts stuck out arrogantly, the flanks of her body were youthful and slim—nevertheless Faljan retreated a step, his limbs trembling.

“And have I the plague,” she laughed, “that you do not even caress me, O Faljan?”

Bitter accusing words began to crowd into his mouth. This woman was the goddess of Vice, no less fatal for being small and white and deliciously perfumed. He stammered evasively,

“You are Caesar’s wife.”

“Do you fear my estate or me?” she murmured, and pressed against him. “Poppaea was ever a woman, Caesar’s wife is still a woman.”

Her hair had drifted up and across his face like gossamer, the enchanting smell of her flesh pushed into his nostrils. And still he held back, revolted by the knowledge of what she was, the horror lurking behind so soft and sweet a façade. Poppaea said, in a voice like April wind,

“I noticed you in the arena, O Faljan, remarking your great muscles and curved limbs; and then in the apartment of Tigellinus still further observing—as you lay naked upon the floor—how magnificently you were a man and all that becomes a man, I said to myself, I must have him.”

“Then it was you,” he muttered, “who had me invited to the banquet.”

“Of course! You are handsome, Faljan, but not too intelligent. Come, let us retreat into a glen, where there will be no prying eyes.”

She took his hand, but his legs had turned to grass; he could not move. Poppaea smiled up at him,

“You are trembling! Am I then so adorable?”

“I—I am sick. I—”

Abruptly he sat down on the ground. Violent shudders ran over him, convulsing his throat and chest.

“Sick, are you!” she said, with distaste. “Well, why did you overstuff your belly at table? Only fools do that!”

He seized upon this excuse,

"Yes, I ate too much—drank too much. It was my first banquet. I was not accustomed to all that it offered."

"Lummox!" she cried. "You have pandered to your stomach and thereby lost an opportunity to taste the delights of love."

She started off, but she had not yet said enough to ease her, and therefore she paused and spoke further,

"There is an old saying—'Once a peasant, always a peasant.' That epitomizes you to perfection, O Faljan! I had hoped you were different—with a spark in your great hulk which could animate you into something worth while, as leaven in a vat of dough—but apparently I was mistaken. Farewell, O stupid glutton of a gladiator!"

Poppaea went on again, and this time she did not turn back.

CHAPTER 19.

I.

REACHING home late, and quickly and solidly asleep, Faljan nevertheless awakened early. He at once thought of Octavia's head, thought of Tigellinus and longed to take a dull jagged knife and rip him open from crotch to chin. As for Poppaea, he did not know whether to curse her, or regret not having seized her.

Last night he could have done no more than he did, which of course was nothing. True—but what of the future? This most delectable of women had offered herself to him, and he had declined. What must she be thinking of him? And what must he think of himself! He, the brawny countryman, the rugged demanding male never before failing in so vital a regard. Faljan had, in his past, taken so many women: market wives, neighbors' daughters, wandering female peddlers, girls in field and copse, and indoors as well—when the menfolk were away. He had enjoyed Campagna amateurs and Roman whores in a wide variety, yet when it had come to the prize of them all—golden, tender-fleshed Poppaea, Empress and Nero's bride, he had slumped down onto the ground and moaned; and she had lifted her lip at him, said barbed things, and gone away.

He twisted and squirmed on his bed, attempting to turn his thoughts against her. The most dangerous woman in Rome, Ershutif had told him on the first day of Faljan's seeing her. And this was not mere opinion; it was fact, as the gladiator's own eyes and ears had learned in the wood beyond the lake where the barge was tethered last night. Treachery lurked in Poppaea's enchanting body. She could well prove a Circe, able to turn him into a swine—or even pork, which would be worse. He ought to fear her, and he did; by rights, the woman ought to revolt him, and she did that, too.

Nevertheless he had his masculine pride, and in his heart he regretted his poor showing in the wood. For the sake of her better opinion, and likewise for his own reassurance, the gladiator was this

morning convinced that he ought to rise and go to the palace, hurl Caesar from her presence and himself take the royal place.

A strong odor drifted in to him from the back of the villa. The slaves were boiling cabbage, no doubt under the direction of Besidus. The stuff would be everywhere in Rome today, cabbage admittedly being the best remedy for overindulgence in wine. Um, his nose was right—presently the valet fetched him a bowl of the stuff, smiling broadly,

“And did you enjoy yourself at the banquet?”

“Only moderately.”

“Meaning that you drank too much wine. Ah, well, eat your cabbage and you will feel better almost immediately.”

“Fah, take it out. I feel very well.”

Besidus surveyed him with care,

“The signs are contrary, as the astrologers are in the habit of saying. Your manner is listless, and yet your eyes are clear!”

“So should they be,” answered Faljan, with assumed lightness. “I had a good purge last night.”

“With assistance, of course!”

“Come, come, don’t talk like a fool!”

“Of *course*, with assistance,” nodded the valet. “Well, then, you must put a cord on her, since she renders your eyes so clear and all. Do you expect to see her again?”

Faljan hesitated.

“Certainly,” he said at length, then he raised his voice crossly, “Will you take that cabbage out of here!”

The valet hastened away with it. Faljan tried to get back to sleep. Impossible. He continued to toss and fume, Poppaea the center of all his unsatisfactory thoughts. Toward midday he rose and bathed, dressed with nervous fingers. Besidus stood by and detailed gossip he had picked up from the household slaves, who in turn got it at the markets early this morning.

“It is said,” murmured the valet, “that Tigellinus is to be maneuvered into the role of Assistant Chief of the Imperial Guards.”

“Maneuvered?”

“By Poppaea.”

Faljan said nothing, Besidus resumed,

“Also it is rumored that as soon as Burrus can be dismissed without danger of public clamor or rebellion, Nero will be prevailed upon to dismiss the old man, Tigellinus thereupon to step fully into his sandals. What do you make of such report, O Faljan?”

"I make idle talk," said the gladiator shortly. "Get the horses ready; I am going down into the city."

"May I drive you?"

"No; I shall go alone."

"Very well. What about an aphrodisiac? I know a good one."

"Do I look as though I need that!" roared the gladiator. "By Faunus, I have no stone bruise—so do not attempt to whack me on it!"

"I spoke without thought," said the valet hastily. "I just happen to know of an aphrodisiac, but—"

"Then take it yourself—and afterward get a needle."

"A needle?"

"For sewing up your mouth at the ends. It is far too big."

II.

Faljan stood in the chariot with his legs spread apart, leaning back on the lines, the horses plunging because they had lately had too little exercise. The pull of the brutes was a good feeling, easing his nerves, letting sense into his hot brain. Ye gods, no, he could not go to Poppaea; that is, he must not seek her out directly. She was the Empress and newly married; such an intrusion would fetch down suspicion, and with suspicion trouble, even disaster. There was no digging a well with a needle; he would have to wait until she sent for him.

He drove to the foot of the Palatine, got out and gossiped a while with idlers there, heard nothing of Poppaea's plans or whereabouts, and reluctantly wheeled off to Mars Field to give the horses further exercise. Perhaps an hour of this and he disconsolately turned back toward the Corso. A second chariot turned in from a side street, likewise proceeding toward the Corso. It was Tigellinus, driving at a moderate pace and pausing at intervals to cast copper coins to pedestrians in the street, at the same time shouting,

"Drink to the health of your friend Tigellinus, and may happiness dwell long with you!"

"Tigellinus, long may Tigellinus prosper!" cried the wretches who had got his coins.

"And far may he rise!" prompted the horse breeder.

"Far may he rise—far, very far!" came the response.

Tigellinus was preparing public opinion for his elevation to the rank of Assistant Chief of the Imperial Guard; and Faljan, not caring for the sight, touched his horses with the whip and sent them ahead of the Sicilian's chariot.

Presently he heard a shout. Tigellinus had resumed his way, and being behind the gladiator, he was eating dust. The Sicilian whipped up his horses with the obvious intention of getting ahead and letting Faljan take the dirt.

"Ah, you will not!" muttered the gladiator, and swung his whip.

The Sicilian came rattling on at a tremendous clip, Faljan kept ahead. Tigellinus lashed his beasts, they plunged madly, drew nearer to the gladiator's chariot. A little more and they would pass, but Faljan had purposely pulled over so that there was scarce room. Tigellinus hurtled forward, cursing furiously—all of a sudden his off wheel struck a hole in the pavement, the chariot swerved, hit a marble fountain with a resounding crash. Only a broken wheel, yet from the way he roared you would have thought his neck broken,

"Stop! Halt, you vile clod!"

Faljan kept on, cheerful again. It had done him good to turn the dice on Tigellinus, a great deal of good. He pulled his horses down to a trot, swept into the Corso, and was on the point of heading for home when he caught sight of a litter. Poppaea's, outside a fashionable shop. Faljan could not be mistaken; it was the very one she had ridden to the banquet, a new and costly affair of gold and inlaid ebony.

The gladiator jerked his horses back onto their haunches, drove to the nearest hitching rack, and tied up. Stealthily he smoothed his hair, dusted off his tunic. Poppaea's conveyance was waiting at the curb of a jewel shop, her black slaves idling and telling jokes, a small crowd of beggars already gathered to exact alms of her when she issued forth. But Faljan, too, was fair game.

"Give, give!" they wheedled, and held up their bony mutilated hands. "Give, in the names of the gods bestow alms, kind master!"

He tossed them a sprinkling of silver and copper, and strode into the shop.

III.

She was seated on a bench, the shopkeeper in process of displaying his wares for her on small trays. It was an elegant shop, of a sort the gladiator had never visited before: draped curtains, potted flowers in bloom, rugs on the marble floor stones, incense burning pungently in an onyx bowl. Yet Faljan really saw only the slender figure on the bench, Poppaea with her back to him, her eyes bent upon a collection of cameos.

The shopkeeper glanced up, frowned,

"When Caesar's wife deigns to examine wares for sale, it is customary for other clients to remain outside."

"If I am intruding," said Faljan, looking only at the Empress, "I will retire, but—"

She did as he had hoped; she turned and saw him. A languid smile lit up her fair features, the brown eyes were amused. Good! If she were amused, she must have forgotten last night's anger. Unless, out of pride, she was covering up.

"Ah, Faljan, what brings you here?" she murmured.

The gladiator was taken aback; he did not know what to say to this,

"I—I came to select a jewel."

"Jewel?"

"A cameo."

She laughed; for she had seen him dart a glance at the tray before her, and knew that he lied,

"You seem scarcely the kind of man to wear cameos. Likely it is for some palpitating sweetheart!"

"Nay," he said earnestly; "women do not interest me, any more. That is, women in general."

"Properly got out of," she smiled, and observing that the shopkeeper was fretting, she waved him off, "The selection of the stone can wait, I imagine."

"Yes, madame, of course," and he bowed and retired.

Faljan was alone with her and unaccountably embarrassed. Or was it unaccountably? He had entered the shop with confidence; he had thought to find the nymph who last night on the shore of Nero's

artificial lake had come into his arms and invited him to license; and he was not finding her. This was Poppaea, yet a different Poppaea. Now that he stood face to face with her, the infantile rosebud lips and innocent eyes, the indescribable air of purity which clothed her like a goddess aura, he was a bumpkin on two clumsy shifting feet.

"You flush," she murmured. "Is it warm in here?"

"Yes," he jerked out.

"Then you are really kind to have paused to greet Poppaea, instead of hurrying on to some masculine haunt to enjoy a cool drink! What a coincidence that you should find me today!"

"Not a coincidence," he blurted. "I have been looking for you."

"What!" she said, with a startled face.

"I was hoping to see you again—"

Poppaea shrugged, none too well pleased with his boldness, it seemed; no, this was certainly not last night's nymph! Then before she could speak, Tigellinus strode into the shop, a glower for Faljan, a smooth smile for the Empress,

"Greeting, Poppaea—and to you also, Faljan. Although, as to that, we met only a little while ago, did we not?"

"Where?" said Faljan, with affected surprise.

"In the street, west of the Corso. You refused to let my chariot pass, and I ran into a fountain. A mistake on your part. We have traffic rules in Rome: this is not the Campagna where a yokel may chase rabbits at will."

"I was not chasing you."

"What is this?" said Poppaea, cutting in between them with her cool voice; "our gladiator also a charioteer? He bested the renowned Tigellinus, victor in Zeus only knows how many races at the Circus Maximus? I cannot credit it."

"Nor could I," said the Sicilian, with wrath murking his eyes; "had it not been done by trickery. Faljan, my brash fellow, I shall bring action against you for this."

Poppaea's face remained childlike and flowered, but her voice hardened,

"Passion in a public place is better strained and watered down, Tigellinus. And when the affair is trivial, it is even best forgotten."

"Is that a command?" he growled.

"It is. Faljan chances to be an important gladiator, and as such is needed in the arena. I imagine Nero might be annoyed if Faljan were dragged into court. Or," she added significantly, "knifed in some alley or other. Put your quarrel aside. Give him your hand."

The Sicilian knew when to kick against the goad and when not. He composed his face, obediently thrust out a hand. Faljan clasped it with a show of regret,

"Not knowing it was your chariot, O Tigellinus, I held to the right of way. Another time, you shall be permitted to pass me."

"I bid you good day, Poppaea," mumbled the horse breeder. "And ask your pardon."

"Granted," she replied, her voice gone back to its light sweetness. Tigellinus stamped out, Poppaea shook her head at the gladiator, "You must learn discretion, my friend."

"I thoroughly hate that Sicilian."

"Do so all you like, but dissemble it. In my own case, I hate many people, yet so conduct myself that they never suspect it."

"Including me among them?"

"Nay, Faljan, I shiver at your touch," she said, with irony; "myself a poor heart-bursting hare to your overtaking fox."

She was offended, after all. Probably because he had been useless to her in the wood. Faljan said earnestly,

"I regret that I hold my food and wine so poorly, but I shall not be at fault again."

"*Shall* not?" she said haughtily.

"*Would* not, I meant to say."

She appeared to be on the point of calling for the shopkeeper to return. His heart trembled with anxiety; he said, as urgently as he dared,

"When might we be together again? I have a villa—"

"Oh?" she murmured, and unexpectedly she was interested.

"It is on the Quirinal, near the wall."

"Too near the headquarters of the Imperial Guard," she objected. "If Burrus himself did not spy me in passing, someone else would. And anyhow, the Quirinal is dusty, which would be bad for my complexion."

"Where, then?"

"The palace, of course."

"Ah, but Nero!"

Poppaea regarded him with disdain,

"Let us be frank, my gladiator. The times are troubled and Caesar thinks to calm them, partly by giving games in the arena, partly by bestowing song upon the rabble. He will for some considerable number of days be preparing to sing at the Theater of Marcellus, and

this preparation requires him to lie upon a marble floor for hours, leaden weights on his chest, for the improvement of his breathing. Likewise he is on a strict diet, eating scarcely anything save leeks and oil. That, too, for the sake of his divine voice. Well, then, during this period I shall see him but little, despite the fact that he is my bridegroom. Between his leaden weights, his leeks and his oil, and the long hours at practice with his teachers, I am my own mistress—if you understand me.”

“I do.”

“Behind the southeast wing of the palace there is an area of gardens exclusively set aside for my use. They can be reached by climbing up the wall which forms the escarpment on the south side. In the gardens you will see a melon arbor, roofed over with mica sheets for cozening the sun down upon the fruit. I will send you word when you may come. And meantime, take care not to get yourself slain in the arena. I adore your muscles when you fight.”

“I am glad,” he stammered happily.

“You must leave now,” she smiled, “lest this long talk be remarked.”

Long talk? It seemed to Faljan, as he drove off to the gladiators' school, that his conversation with Poppaea had occupied but a single breathless moment; seemed to him, conversely, that between this present hour and their meeting in the melon arbor, a thousand aching years must surely elapse.

IV.

“Ah, these imperial favorites!” cried Quartilla, at the sight of the gladiator sauntering in through the door; “flouting the rules of the barracks, carousing and mauling wenches under culverts! What a lovely precious life they lead!”

“You are only envious because you were not invited to the banquet,” Faljan grinned at him.

“Banqueting is for you at an end,” retorted the trainer crisply. “The games are starting up thick as scars on a slave, and you will therefore make sure that you are in condition to fight.”

Faljan threw off his tunic and went to the quadrangle. Upwards

of thirty men were there, a few of them old-timers such as Hirl and Tuscus, but most of them strangers that Faljan had never seen before.

"Nero is promising games and more games," Hirl chuckled, "a gladiator these days being a bone which Caesar tosses the dog which otherwise might rend him."

"Is that a riddle?" Faljan said indifferently.

"No riddle. Talk has it that Octavia is dead, and if she be dead, she was slain. The mob accepted her banishment, the divorce, Poppaea's marriage, but a murdered Octavia is something else again, as the peasant said when he reached for the cow's teat and got a kick in the mouth. All this muscle and meat which you see sweating here is for bribery; let Nero amuse the rabble with arena fights and it may pass over what has happened to the Empress Octavia."

Faljan went to work, but thoughtfully. A little worried. All important in his heart's new dream was the note he expected from Poppaea, yet if the assignation fell on an evening prior to a combat in the arena, he would be restricted to quarters, unable to go to her. The threat was intolerable.

"If it happens thus," he told himself, "I shall break training, go anyhow, the consequences notwithstanding."

CHAPTER 20.

I.

BACK in training, Faljan quickly became the riddle and the wonder of the barracks. Never had a gladiator worked so hard, spilled forth so much energy and still had no dearth of it flowing to his powerful legs and swift-striking arms. He was a flail against a threshing floor, a bottomless spring of pulsing water, a spider reeling out endless web.

All done in joy—and fear.

He must redeem himself in Poppaea's eyes, yet what if suddenly the Director were to announce that Faljan had been granted the privilege of buying himself free of the arena, the arrangement consummated and the gladiator forced to quit the lists! In such case Poppaea would no longer see him contesting in the sand, her eyes glowing at the sight of his great flexing muscles.

"I must keep on as I am until I have had an assignation with her," he told himself, and struck out with the flat of his hand. "Perhaps two assignations, or three; whatever number is necessary to wipe out of both our memories the shame I did on the night of the banquet."

He slapped out again, and a man fell sprawling in the sand. Quartilla came up,

"In the name of sense, Faljan, this is practice, not combat in the arena! Get up, Recula."

Recula? It must be one of the newcomers, a big fellow now picking himself out of the sand, where Faljan had knocked him.

"I will take it more gently this time," Faljan said, by way of apology.

"I am outmatched," said Recula, with a short laugh; "but then, of course, he who conquered Vortinax is naturally a heavy hitter."

Faljan turned red,

"Where did you hear the name of Vortinax, you being new in here?"

"It is on the wall posters," said the other; "advertisements showing the two of you, he dying and you in triumph."

Faljan looked gloomily at the trainer,

"Need that have been done, Quartilla?"

"It was a notable fight, and the mob likes to roll such things in its mouth. Get back to your work, the pair of you."

Silently Faljan resumed sparring and slapping, his heart embittered. Vortinax he had thought buried in the merciful bowels of oblivion, and behold! the barbarian had jumped up again, strong as anise seed eaten but an hour ago.

"You said easier this time!" Recula gasped. "By chaos, you are too rough, my Faljan. Go find yourself another partner; I am done."

There came other partners then, yet none of them ever happy to stand up against Faljan. He was too irritable, too quick to fly into temper. He asked that his name be moved forward on the arena lists, thinking to ease himself by extra combat. And it did not help. It was bliss to glance up at the podium, see Poppaea sitting there watching him—but Nero's presence invariably spoiled it. The gladiator in the ring therefore tried to keep his eyes away from her, clenching his teeth and attacking his opponents like a madman.

The fame of Faljan the gladiator rose swift and steady that winter. He fought utterly without fear, his successive enemies lumps of beast meat to be spitted on a swordpoint, death a lively but impotent cripple to be slashed down in blood. One after another, redoubtable fighters entered the lists against him, and died. They changed their amulets, and still died. Amulets? Faljan carried none; after the death of the barbarian Vortinax, his friend, Faljan had no faith in fox paws, dried dragon eyes, fate compellers of any kind. What he was, and was destined to be, resided in himself, his brain, eye, arm, sword.

His name and sketched face appeared everywhere upon walls about the city. Everywhere he passed, cries of adulation arose, with the delirious Besidus bowing and answering in Faljan's stead. These days the valet was in his glory; fastened to the gladiator like a leech, a tick to a bullock, he took care of Faljan's expanding wardrobe, bore his armor to and from the arena, boasted of the bronze bust that a celebrated metal caster was making of the master. The bust was finished in April, and under the necessity of speaking grateful words in return for the honor, the gladiator drove to the Corso where it

had been placed on a pedestal of Egyptian marble. Yet when he could, he walked away. Popular acclaim had already taken on, for Faljan, a suspiciously hollow sound. Only two things really gave him pleasure nowadays: the arena, and his yearning dream of Poppaea. It was strange she did not send for him, as she had promised.

"Hail, glorious Faljan!" cried a woman, one day in the street; and Faljan lifted a hand in careless acknowledgment, without so much as glancing at her.

A chuckle then, a smooth familiar man's voice,

"O fortunate gladiator, to flutter all the women of Rome—save one!"

It was Ershutif, clad in a new expensive tunic, bejeweled sandals. His hair was expertly curled and perfumed, his forked beard dyed to a startling green. The gladiator had not seen him for a long time.

"Save one?" said Faljan. "Who is this one?"

"Lydia."

Abruptly the gladiator walked on his way, the little Syrian followed with his purring voice,

"She reads the posters in the tavern, and then weeps. Without noise. Very silent tears. Quite large ones, if I am a judge of tears."

"Let her weep."

Faljan walked along with his eyes straight ahead, hoping that the Syrian would drop back and away. The rascal was a bot fly, piercing your hide and laying eggs down under, so that they could hatch into maggots and these eat you, piecemeal, yet none the less surely. Weeping! Silently, and without rancor. Why should she do that? If her newfangled religion were fit to be gathered up in a horn cup and carried home, it should put iron in her belly, stiffen her bones and inflame her heart to strength, not turn her into a sniveler. Ershutif told him such things out of meanness, nothing more. Envious eyes never sleep, said a Campagna proverb; which fitted the little Syrian like a shirt. A rash upon him for falsely claiming that Lydia spent time sighing and weeping; and even if she did, what of it! The girl no longer figured in Faljan's life.

Ershutif opened his mouth again, the gladiator whirled on him,

"Come, now, what do you want of me?"

"A favor, O Faljan, in return for all that I have extended you."

"In which case you are asking for very little, and will get less!"

"You are a friend of the Empress Poppaea," murmured the Syrian; "and since I am an astrologer, a soothsayer—"

"Self-appointed!"

"Faljan, Faljan, you have gained fame at the expense of your heart. The thing has become solid marble."

"Not to be carved on by you," said Faljan, and then yielded to his curiosity. "What have I to do with your wanting Poppaea's acquaintance?"

"You could introduce me to her. Five days from today she receives informally in her suite, and I desire to be present. The Roman mob has finally swallowed the bitter pill of Octavia's murder, and, woman-like, Poppaea desires to test the higher-ups by offering hospitality to her friends and acquaintances. A kind of challenge and brag—imperial variety."

Faljan looked at him hard. The gladiator had known nothing of such a reception,

"How came you by this news?"

"Oh, I know most of what happens in Rome," chuckled the Syrian. "I am no longer a tavern tramp, O Faljan. Nay, I, like you, have risen in the world, the eagle having wearied of catching flies and gone after bigger game. I am fairly rich, I have my own apartment, and list many clients for my art's end. I play them softly, it being my policy to shear the sheep, not kill it. Not that you are a sheep, noble gladiator; I did not mean that, in any sense. Nevertheless, I could help you with my wisdom."

"If wisdom you have," Faljan retorted, "I need it less than I need lice. Farewell to you."

"You are hasty," said Ershutif, with a hint of a threat. "Do you remember Urstine the eunuch?"

"What of him?"

"He has been sent to join Rome's troops on the Euphrates, where he stands an excellent chance of bloodily ending his days before the summer has well begun. Urstine is no longer a menace to you, but there remains Tigellinus; and in him, Faljan, you really have an enemy. He is, in fact, the cruelest and most sinister man in the Empire, hating all the world because he himself is low—and furthermore, he knows how to implement that hate. The vacillating bungling Nero is a pawn in the hands of the horse breeder; Tigellinus is now Assistant Chief of the Imperial Guard, and steadily puffing toward still greater heights. When he arrives at his eminence, you are a chicken for some fine evening's supper."

Faljan was listening with more respect. He could not deny that Ershutif knew things, found out things. And, as such, might be useful to a man in the gladiator's high but windy situation.

"The reception?" murmured Ershutif.

"I will take you—but no overreaching, bear in mind, else you yourself will play chicken to an evening's supper."

II.

Faljan had promised and Ershutif had hurried away, as though suspecting that the gladiator would soon regret it.

Faljan did. The days before the reception he spent cursing himself for a gullible fool, and Ershutif for a scoundrel that was best kept far from Poppaea; the Syrian was too cunning to be in any way worthy of trust.

"It may be that he will forget the appointment," Faljan told himself hopefully; "or fall sick, or break a pair of legs."

Nothing happened to Ershutif's legs; on the appointed day he showed up with them, brisk as a bug. He had attired himself in fine linen, several ornate rings on his left thumb, and a smug gloating expression on his foxy face. Worst of all there was his beard, bright green and lending his olive features a most unearthly look.

"You should be in a circus of clowns," said Faljan, as they climbed the hill to the palace.

"Gently, my friend. You are doing me a service in taking me to the Empress, I in my turn shall be able to bring you kernels of information, concerning Tigellinus and the like."

"See that your kernels are not delivered to the wrong address."

The Syrian laughed, completely at ease. Save that he was excited. He stared at the massive palace, spied everywhere with his eyes as Faljan led the way to Poppaea's suite. Outside the door, whilst they waited to be let in, the gladiator spoke a final word,

"Remember, no double dealing."

"Have no anxiety, O Faljan. I am your well-wisher. And actually, it is I who am conferring a boon upon *you*, getting you here and thus affording you another chance to see the beautiful Poppaea! Ah, you had not thought of that, I see!"

No, Faljan had not; he had been too intent upon suspecting and resisting Ershutif's plans. Another chance to see the beautiful Poppaea? More; she would probably give him a sign, or even a word of encouragement in the matter of their assignation. He expanded, smiled upon the Syrian,

"There is now and then a point in your behalf, I admit."

The porter let them in, perfume and the distant hum of voices issuing from a more distant room. Ershutif peered at the vestibule as they passed through it. Newly decorated, it was, and characteristically—according to the Syrian. A mosaic depicting Pandora peeping into the forbidden box of Epimetheus, paintings representing Diana hunting, Eros doing something very vague indeed, Oedipus, the rape of Lucretia.

"Rape," murmured Ershutif. "H'm, true it is, Faljan, that what we use for decoration is a finger pointing unerringly to our tastes."

"Chain up your tongue, I beg you!"

They could hear music now, alluring but soft, in order not to interfere with conversation. Suddenly they came into a huge oblong room, with well-dressed people everywhere, the largest group clustered at a divan where Poppaea was receiving the compliments of her callers. There was a press about the Empress, so that Faljan and Ershutif paused, awaiting their opportunity to go forward to her.

"Rome, Rome, thou art nothing if not predatory," the Syrian murmured, as his eyes went flitting around the room.

"Do you want to finish on the torture wheel!" Faljan hissed at him.

"No one hears us; and it is obvious enough. All the world has been rifled to adorn such chambers as this, O Faljan. That yellow amber, those bronzes straight out of a Minoan palace, yon bits of carved Phrygian stone, the tortoise-shell inlays in her very couch—"

The crowd about Poppaea had shown a rift; Faljan went forward with his companion. The Empress was now in full sight, so lovely a thing that the gladiator's pulses stopped beating. Lecherous and angelic in a single skin, this woman still aroused in him a painful ache of desire. The fair smooth skin kept from blemish by baths of asses' milk, the snowy white tiny teeth, the luminous burnished copper eyes and gracious mouth smiling like a child's mouth—he could not gaze upon these attributes without a swirling hot confusion in his head. He loved her and he despised her—for she was giving no sign that they had long ago planned a meeting.

"A greeting, Faljan!" she exclaimed pleasantly, and put out her delicate narrow fingers.

He pressed her hand, murmured a wish for her health and happiness; and she answered that she possessed both.

"The gods," she said, with a rosy smile, "are kind to Poppaea."

Faljan presented his companion,

"An astrologer from the East, longing to see you at close range. I presumed to bring him—perhaps wrongly."

"Nay," said the Empress, and giggled at Ershutif's green beard. "Green! I wonder how I should look with green hair!"

"Most enchanting, madame," Ershutif assured her; "but amber becomes you better—it is natural, and artifice is beyond your needs."

Poppaea glanced about the circle of listeners, as if inviting them to agree with her that this was a clever speech. The Syrian had drawn from his tunic a bracelet of beryl stone, two writhing serpents carved along its length. He held it up before Poppaea,

"May I dare, madame, to present you with this bracelet bearing tangled serpents? They signify that your enemies will become embroiled with one another and so strangle themselves, not harm their intended lovely victim."

The gladiator was irritated. Dolt of a Syrian, his bracelet was man size, by no imagination small enough for Poppaea's wrist. The Empress had taken it and was pushing it over her hand and halfway up her arm. She removed it petulantly, gave it back,

"It is too large, clearly."

"Nay," said Ershutif, and he rubbed the bracelet a few moments between his palms and showed it again. It was now quite small, and when he bowed and once more extended it to the astonished Poppaea, she put it on and it fitted perfectly to her wrist.

"Sleight of hand," declared a courtier, but Poppaea frowned him into silence. She was delighted.

"I shall keep it as a talisman," she told Ershutif. "And your reward, O soothsayer?"

"The happiness of serving you, if by mischance you should require my aid."

"Does Faljan vouch for you?" and she turned to the gladiator.

"Yes," said Faljan, hiding his reluctance. "Yet may you never need his arts, it being the hope of all of us that there appear no trouble in your stars."

She nodded and gave a hand to a slave, rose from her divan with a whiff of verbena. How slight she was, short-statured even though the heels of her sandals had been built up. A tiny waist, made for a gladiator's arm to encompass and crush. He turned away, lest some eye read his thoughts. Poppaea was clapping her hands for attention,

"My guests must refresh themselves before they go. Food and wines are to be found on the terrace."

The company flowed in leisurely fashion out into the open air,

where tables bearing cakes and small pastries and fine wines awaited them. Faljan went with Ershutif, relieved that they would soon be taking their departure. He did not care for his companion's brassy assurance—or for Poppaea's coolness. She must have forgotten her promise in the jeweler's shop, incredible though it seemed to him.

"Tigellinus!" whispered the Syrian, and jerked a warning finger. "If you are wise, my friend, you will avoid him."

Not possible. The horse breeder had seen them and was coming forward, Darin the mime at his heels.

III.

"Ah, my gladiator!" exclaimed Tigellinus, "I did not expect to find you here. You are getting to be quite an intimate of the palace, it would appear! And who is this with you?"

"The soothsayer Ershutif."

"A rare bird—but then there is no accounting for gladiators and what they will pick up."

The gladiator stared coldly, Ershutif bowed away,

"If you will excuse me—I am hungry."

The little Syrian pattered off, Tigellinus opened his gold-toothed mouth for further jibes, then Nero entered. The Emperor came without fanfare, a loose house tunic about his thick middle, and at his eye an emerald which he sometimes used to compensate for his near-sightedness. He was in good humor—Poppaea's reception was a success—Rome had accepted her. Nero smiled upon everyone, replying to each salutation with marked friendliness,

"Tigellinus—Darin—Faljan the gladiator, eh? A chance meeting, but a good one."

The small talk of greeting and reply went around, Faljan veiling his eyes. This poor buffoon with the heavy paunch and bandy legs, blotched skin, dull eye, a nervous squint—this wretch could lie with Poppaea whenever he chose, and yet little good was it doing him or her—Caesar looked old and worn. A spiteful satisfaction spread in the gladiator.

"No, no," Nero said hastily, as Darin offered to get him cakes. "I am still on my diet of leeks and olive oil. I sing tonight, you know."

"I wish you success," said Faljan.

"A trifle unnecessary," Tigellinus observed. "Caesar reaps nothing else than success, O greatest of gladiators!"

Nero detected the sarcasm in this speech,

"Eh, what's that? He *is* our best gladiator, is he not?"

"Synistor defeated more men."

"Oh, yes, Synistor," and Caesar chuckled amiably. "Do you recollect how I threw him that night? He has not been much about of late; perhaps I fractured a bone or two for him, poor fellow. At the banquet he glowered a great deal and ate but little, as I recall."

"He was afraid you might wrestle him again," said Faljan, with a nimbleness that came he knew not whence. "Wrestle him, and in your victory hurl him overboard to the crocodiles."

Nero laughed and slapped Faljan on the shoulder,

"I wished I had thought of it! And you, Faljan, tell me, are you never uneasy in the arena?"

"No more, Caesar. I bear in mind that I fight under your standard. It is enough to cast fear out of me."

Tigellinus mocked silently, but Darin let out a light approving laugh,

"By my ankle joints, this Faljan has become a courtier!"

"It is rumored," the horse breeder murmured, "that in the arena Faljan fights for unrequited love."

"When in his position he can have any woman he wants?" Nero objected.

"Any woman?" said Tigellinus, pretending horror. "Caesar, you forget that the Empress—"

In sudden pique Nero seized a platter of fruit from a passing attendant, and hurled it into the Sicilian's face,

"Dry rot to the marrow of your bones, you dog! You are always turning my words inside out—I meant women by and large, not all of them literally; and you know it."

Tigellinus was bowing humbly,

"Your indulgent pardon, Caesar. I spoke thoughtlessly."

Nero ignored him, turned back to Faljan,

"So you are not afraid in the arena! I wish I could match that in the theater. I invariably shake and tremble when I enter upon the stage, terrified lest I fail in my rendition."

"With your excelling voice?" Faljan protested. "I cannot credit it. Tell me, rather, that an eagle fears the sparrow."

The Emperor blinked rapidly through his emerald. He was peer-

ing full into Faljan's face, smiling, vanity burgeoning upon him like a boil,

"You fight well, and you make good answers. Someday I shall have to wrestle you, Faljan, in order to see how you compare with Synistor."

"And injure me for the arena?"

"In Apollo's name, no. We have need of you, Faljan. The games must go on with success, please the people; and you are currently our chief drawing card. Baited with you, perhaps the rabble will stop talking."

"Talking?"

"Insulting their Emperor," said Nero, his lower lip twitching convulsively. "Do you know what they call me—respecting Agrippina?"

"I have heard them call you Mother Killer, but—"

Nero turned purple as his robe, the Sicilian laughed, Faljan hastened to patch up the rent he had torn,

"And why not, Caesar, when a mother is grown evil enough to threaten the life of her own son! Such wickedness is unnatural and deserves to be punished. And you, therefore, should be proud of the title, Mother Killer."

Nero smiled briefly,

"I never thought of it that way. Yes, you are right." He glanced at the sundial, "I must rest for my concert this evening. *Poppaea!*"

"Yes, Caesar," and she came gliding up with a fond smile. "Your pleasure, my lord."

"You promised to adorn your vestibule with a painting of Orpheus putting wild beasts to sleep with song, and you have not done so."

She patted him as though he were a sulky child, lied glibly,

"I confess it, lord—but I insisted that your own features be painted in for those for Orpheus, and I could find no artist worthy of the task. Be patient; it shall be done when it can be done perfectly."

"A perfect painting, a perfect wife," he smiled, and saluting the company he withdrew.

Faljan discovered Ershutif at his elbow, said rapidly,

"Let us cut out of here."

IV.

They said a perfunctory thanks to Poppaea and got away without further attracting the attention of Tigellinus. Faljan was wet with nervous sweat, but though anger and resentment rode him like twin hags in a nightmare, he was still glad he had come. The sight of Poppaea had paid for all of the Sicilian's insults, the villain's attempts to arouse suspicion in Nero. If only she had given him the expected sign, the word of encouragement he craved!

"I was amazed at you," the Syrian chuckled. "You did not talk like a peasant—you had the wit and skillful response of a Roman himself. Probably you picked it up from me."

"I hope, if I did, that it is the only thing I shall ever pick up from you. By the way, now that you have entrance to Poppaea's presence, what do you propose to make of it?"

"As yet I do not know," smiled the Syrian; "but in these cases there are always matters to be searched out and exploited. I shall watch my opportunity, and then—well, I send my dagger where the meat is."

"No matter where it is, I suppose!"

"No matter where it is. If Poppaea, for instance—"

"I am sorry I ever took you," said Faljan. "Have done with your donkey talk."

"As you wish," said Ershutif, with a shrug.

They walked down the palace hill, Faljan struggling with a sudden and overwhelming sense of sadness. He glanced moodily at the Syrian,

"Tell me one thing—"

"Nay, I am forbidden to speak. I am to have done with my donkey talk."

Faljan gave him a backhander, waited in silence for him to pick himself up. Ershutif was whimpering like a pup; blows did him good, apparently.

"Speak, O Faljan. What is it that you want to know? Ask it, and I will endeavor to answer."

"This girl Lydia—"

"Yes?"

“Does she still weep?”

“I cannot say, as I have not seen her for several days—but if you are curious, why not go and find out for yourself?”

“You are a nitwit,” said Faljan sullenly. “Why should I do that!”

“Because you love the creature. Why else should you eternally be asking for her, why else glower so fierce and dark, whilst all the time pretending to be strutting happily atop Rome as if it were your private dung pile! I a nitwit? It is you who are that—an utter fool, Faljan, not to realize that there is no swamp like a woman to catch a man’s feet and pull him down to her!”

CHAPTER 21.

I.

POPPAEA'S message arrived on Tuesday—a tiny slip of paper, three words inscribed upon it,

“Moonrise Wednesday night.”

Faljan passed the day in a drugged mad-happy stupor, but in the evening roused up. He got permission to leave the barracks, a certain diverting notion lodged in his brain. It would be folly to go direct to his assignation tomorrow night, lest he be followed by some spying eye. He must proceed after the fashion of a fox out marauding; that is to say, pursue a roundabout route. And such a route was best settled upon in advance. This evening.

He wandered up into the Subura, studying where he was going to cut to the right across a spur of the Esquiline Hill, and then arc over to the back of the palace grounds.

It was market night in the Subura, everywhere crowds, jostling, noise, the gaiety with which the poor are accustomed to lighten their lot. Various women recognized him as he went along, and one of them called out,

“Hola, Faljan, not working?”

“Would you want me to be?” he retorted good-humoredly.

“As soon as I finish marketing, perhaps.”

“Nay,” he said, glancing her over. “Your legs are too short.”

“Ignorant child, don't you know that all women end at the torso!”

He laughed appreciatively and elbowed his way on up the street, presently stopped short. He had come face to face with Lydia, a heavily loaded market bag in each hand. It appeared that the Greek was putting her to the uses of a household slave, sending her out to buy food for the tavern kitchen. She was ill clad and thin.

“Were you going to the tavern, O Faljan?”

“Why should I be!” he said harshly. “I am on my way, not to the tavern, but to an assignation. At least, tomorrow evening, I am.”

She grew pale, slowly put down her bags,

"You must not."

"No?"

"Christ bids us not to defile ourselves."

"By Saturn," he cried, "you sicken me with that gab of yours."

"I beg you, Faljan, do not swear by Saturn."

"Then by Kronos, if you prefer the name your friend the Greek innkeeper would give him!"

"Nor by Kronos."

"I should swear by Christ, I suppose!"

"Nay, not that; swear by no one, since you merely blaspheme."

"You have been out in a thunderstorm and soured your wits," he grumbled, then his eyes flitted over her arms and shoulders, "Has the Greek stopped beating you?"

"Oh, yes. The new dancer has become well liked, so that he is making fully as much out of her as he did with me. He leaves me alone; I do my work, and am satisfied."

"A scullery slut!"

"I work in the kitchen, if that is what you mean."

Faljan grew hot with the desire to hurt her, puncture her self-esteem,

"And my assignation, you are not curious concerning it? You do not want to know the woman's name and condition?"

Lydia flinched, but her voice remained steady,

"Her name is as water, and her condition vile. Yours, likewise. Why do you do these things, Faljan? Believe me, sin is a hollow log, containing neither heart nor substance. You ought not to love it, but despise it."

"When it is so pleasurable?" he retorted. "No, no, I am afraid I cannot agree with you—especially since in this case the lady is of high patrician stock."

He thought to lead her on, torment her, but Lydia was not responding. She looked at her market bags, picked them up. Mikrella was a little distance away, watching a man who used a trick monkey to attract customers for his sandal dyes; Lydia called to her, and the girl came forward,

"Why, it's our stupendous Faljan! You honor our pigsty, do you not, Faljan?"

"Even a pig would honor this noisome slum."

"You are out of sorts," Mikrella laughed. "Methinks you have

been arguing with my mother—in the matter of her new-found religion, the rigmarole of a certain Jesus Christ.”

“Be quiet,” said Lydia wearily.

“Why be quiet!” demanded the girl. “If it is a good thing, it deserves advertisement. Mother, have you asked Faljan to share the holy light which has come upon you?”

Lydia said,

“I ask him now. Faljan, will you be a Christian with me? I beg you try it; and then if you cannot believe—”

The gladiator broke in, scowling fiercely,

“Hush up. I will have no rubbish in my maw, if you please.”

“Nor I,” chuckled Mikrella. “It is a milksop religion, my Faljan, made to custom for fools and exhausted sinners. That is the reason my mother has come to it; dancing and passion’s round have worn her out, and being now beyond use, she sees Christianity as a haven and a sop. Well, as for me, none of that appeals. I am not dead but only begun to live. I intend to taste and seize whatever the world offers me that I like, then when weary to dropping into a gutter and there expiring like a beaten cat, perhaps I, too, shall turn Christian.”

Lydia had started off in the direction of the tavern, Mikrella lingered to grimace and laugh, as if she and Faljan shared some delightful joke. The gladiator seized her by the shoulder and gave her a shove,

“Go along with your mother, and help her with the bags—you talk far too much.”

Mikrella spat at him and ran off into the crowd, Faljan turned and went back to the barracks. He was muttering furiously,

“I shall enjoy Poppaea all the more for having encountered that kitchen wench of a Lydia. More? A hundred times as much.”

So he said, nevertheless he did not sleep well that night. The kitchen wench kept pestering him. She crept into his ears and whispered her irritating Christian jargon, she slid under his tight-closed eyelids and stood up strong and accusing. With a curse he turned over onto his side, but she knew how to deal with this evasion—she came around to the other side of his bed and began to repeat her annoyances. Because of all of which, he got no sleep until practically dawn; and then it was not sleep that did him any good. He dreamed of her.

II.

The gladiator in no way resembled Vidalius. Marcus the fruit merchant had a brain like a chisel; he cut skillfully with it, chipping down through puzzles and problems until he had the core of them exposed, ready to be picked up—or so Vidalius at least pretended. Faljan was different. Emotions rushed upon him and he grappled with them, but clumsily, without knowledge of where the vital center of the enemy lay and shuddered in its vulnerability.

Nevertheless Faljan awakened on Wednesday morning with the conviction that within him something was being decided. He spent a nervous silent day, and by suppertime acknowledged himself defeated. It was not Poppaea Sabina that he wanted. The Empress was a skinful of corruption; to accept her moonrise invitation would likely bring him to disaster. Go to her tonight? No. He hereby rejected the assignation, and with it, all that Poppaea represented. Rome was a foul thing, a pyramid ugly and wretched at its base, rotten at the top.

What he really wanted was Lydia.

III.

The Subura was chilly tonight. It was nothing but a steep gully, actually; and at this season always a damp ache in your passing bones. Trudging up the narrow gloomy street, Faljan smelled the acrid fumes of charcoal, burning in a thousand braziers behind a thousand tenement walls. In another month people would be able to keep warm without fires, but not yet, and certainly not at night, even then.

Another month? It was already spring. He glanced up past the rookeries lining the street, saw the sky and a few stars. In Rome you had to search out the stars; they did not stand in your eyes as they did in the country. A city was a wretched thing; living in it resembled living in the recesses of a dank stale cavern. Jupiter had kindly divided the year into seasons, and this was spring, the period of the most beloved of all Campagna ceremonies—the Ambarvalia, with its

procession of the entire population of the village, gathering and marching around the fields, sacrificing a pig and a sheep and an ox for the purification of the coming crops and the fertility of the farm animals destined to enter the world during the ensuing year. In the country they would shortly be celebrating the Ambarvalia; in Rome no one would remark this important festival. So much the worse for Rome.

He saw the tavern ahead, observed no light, but heard, as he approached, the laughter and jest of patrons inside. Cautiously he circled the inn, found the kitchen door and from there made his way to Lydia's room.

This was it. The little cubbyhole where he had once found her sewing, and they had quarreled. A pallet lighted tonight by the moon. Lydia lying on her side, with her back to him. Facing her, Mikrella. The two of them asleep, the child's arms around her mother. Mikrella softly at peace; in this night's slumber, all vice and violence purged out of her wizened little features. For an instant the gladiator stood there lost in astonishment at the sight.

Lydia rolled over, murmuring sleepily,

"Who is it?"

"Come outside."

She recognized him and rose at once.

"This way," she whispered.

They made their way out through a narrow corridor and into the tavern's back court. It contained chiefly rubbish and forgotten garbage, but there was a bench also.

Lydia sat down, facing him in silence.

"Listen to me," he said fiercely, "and do not speak as yet, since I am bursting full, and must purge myself."

He paused, as if suspecting that she would try to say something, ask questions in the usual silly manner of women. She did not; she merely touched his hand, as a sign that he was to go on.

"Rome I once considered the golden apple of a golden garden," he said in a turgid rapid voice. "I was a peasant, a countryman, and here in this city was jammed all the grandeur and splendid wealth of the world. Beyond my reach, of course—then by unaccountable circumstance, the edge of it in my grasp. Fate threw me into prison, into the arena, into popular favor; I rose higher and higher, until I, Faljan, who had slept all my life on straw, and eaten lentils and common cheese, I at length found myself in possession of a villa and slaves, a chariot and gold, my statue in the Corso, the rabble applaud-

ing whenever I showed myself. I had all that riches and fame could purchase."

He paused again, Lydia held her peace. It was as if she had expected him to say all this, as if she had been waiting for him to come and tell her.

"There are no doubt men who are rendered happy by a Roman success," he went on; "lapping it up like cow's cream, reveling and wallowing in it, and beyond its limit venturing into intrigue and theft in order to add to their store. As for me, I thought it was for me, too, but now I am weary of it all. I have taken it far into my gullet, but being what I am I cannot digest it. A little more and I vomit."

She reached out and drew him down onto the bench, her manner soft with sympathy, but her tongue still silent.

"Or *can* I vomit?" he muttered. "Perhaps I am sick and will continue sick, without remedy."

"There is a remedy," she said.

"Name it, then, and I will seize the thing! What may it be!"

"Christianity."

"Must you forever be throwing that in my face!" he exclaimed resentfully. "If you can say nothing sensible, be still and I will go home."

"It is surely the remedy, Faljan."

She had placed her hand on his arm, but now he cast it off and jumped to his feet,

"I renounce your superstitions, your cult of worshipping the head of an ass, drinking blood in a midnight orgy. Be yourself a fool, if you like, but as for me—"

"The religion of Christ is none of that. Someone has maligned it to you."

Lydia had risen, which was a mistake. It placed her directly before him, and in his need to vent his anger he seized upon her, jerking her by the hair and slapping her across the head until she sank to the ground. She said nothing in remonstrance, which enraged him still further,

"Ah, I forget that you are a Christian, and must take abuse in silence! I beat you and you love me for it, not as a woman when her man gives her a good whacking and she yearns after him doubly, but out of Christian forbearance! Be quiet—say no more!"

Faljan's legs were trembling so that he was obliged to sit down on the bench. Lydia got to her feet, her hair strewn in disorder, a

trickle of red blood on her underlip. She wiped it absently away and stood gazing at him in a kind of speculative serenity,

"Would you talk to Peter about it?"

"Peter, who is Peter!"

"The apostle of Christ. I told you about him."

"Concerning my own private affairs, I would not talk to Christ himself!"

"You would like Peter. He is a plain man, honest and to be believed."

"An Oriental trickster and liar, I'll wager gold. A parasite without occupation, feeding upon those others who work."

"Peter is not that. He is a working man."

"Eh?"

"He is a fisherman—or was, until Jesus chose him to be a disciple."

The gladiator was impressed. A fisherman? Well, that was something. As a matter of fact, being a fisherman was almost as good as being a cattle drover, a farmer. Such men were solid, of use in the world. Foolishness stemmed from other sources, not from peasants and their general breed. Faljan stared upon the ground, thinking in slow bewildered circles. It was all as difficult as untangling a stake rope which a fractious goat snarls up, knots and little loops leading nowhere but only back upon themselves. Peter, eh!

"Have you heard," murmured Lydia, daring to kneel beside him, "of the Ten Commandments?"

"No."

"They are teachings from the mouth of our Lord, and concern the life which alone can make us happy. I know only a few of them, but—will you listen to them, Faljan?"

"Go on, go on, curse you."

"One commandment says that we are to worship no god but the true god, another enjoins us not to steal, and a third forbids the coveting of other people's property."

"Ershutif should hear that one!"

"A fourth forbids us to commit adultery, and a fifth—"

"Oh, it does, does it! What else?"

"Most important for you, Faljan," she said slowly, "is the commandment which says thou shalt not kill."

The gladiator looked at her, half laughing and half ashamed,

"You tell me this because I roughed you about just now? You are afraid I will take on a rage one day and kill you?"

"No," she answered. "You may kill me if you like—if it would make you happy. But it would not."

"Nothing will make me happy," he said gloomily. "I am lost beyond the Styx."

"You're not, you're not!" she cried, and put her face down against his knees. "Oh, if you would only listen to me, Faljan!"

He looked at her hair. Odd that he had never really noticed it until now. It had heretofore been hair, and nothing else. Gingerly he put out a finger, touched it. Very soft, at the roots of it dark as earth on the Campagna, yet where the sun had bleached it, a lighter color. Like grain ready for the sickle. He could see her, in his imagination, lifting up from her bed on a misty spring morning and going forth onto the ploughed ground, then scattering, with great rhythmic sweeps of her arm, the wheat which must grow into grain to make bread and porridge for the family. Long hair for tall grain, yellow hair for its ripeness, the dark underneath of it for the strength of earth. A wave of nostalgia and regret and tenderness swept over Faljan; he placed his hand upon her head and wept.

IV.

They remained in that position a long time, the man weeping and the woman crouched down with her face on his knees. She knew that he wept, for his tears had long since dampened her; yet she did not move. Instinct told her that the gladiator was being purged and cleansed, and during this shameful holy process, no eye must look upon him.

Then at length his weeping stopped, and he struck the last remaining tears from his cheeks.

"Women are a cruel thing," he said heavily. "The strongest of men are made into simpletons on their account."

Lydia rose up then, and sat on the bench beside him. She stroked his face with her fingers, and when he did not object, but rather appeared to hunger for her caressing, she felt her own tears rise.

"Don't blubber," he muttered. "I am sick of your tears."

She laughed jerkily, once more in possession of herself. Music had stopped coming from the tavern; the customers of the Greek were

wandering away. The girl looked up at the heavens, her mouth softening. She began to speak,

"It has been with me, Faljan, somewhat as you say it has been with you. Save that my life was more vicious and degraded. Evil and bitter and without hope, I encased myself in a shell, a mask with only my dead eyes looking forth. I ate despair, my existence a horror without respite. I used to long for sleep, long for drunkenness, for when my senses were gone I was free, during a time, of the guilt which was dragging me farther and farther down. Yet now I have peace. Through the word of Jesus Christ, our Lord, I have found contentment, Faljan—and so will you."

"I doubt it."

"Will you promise me something?"

"What is it?"

"That you will henceforth obey the commandment which says thou shalt not kill."

He shrugged carelessly,

"I am willing. It is wretched business, slaying people for a living."

"And you will also stop being a gladiator?"

"Naturally! I would be in pickle otherwise, an arena fighter who has promised not to kill, when killing is the unavoidable bread of the arena meal!"

"But can you withdraw from it?"

"I told you once before I could. I have sent in my application, and I have the money required. It is a mere formality. I shall attend to it."

"I am glad," she smiled, and she added in sudden worry, "Now promise. Say that by the blood of Christ you will, from this moment forward, shed no more human blood, kill no further man."

"I promise."

"By your hope of future happiness?"

He stooped and grasped a handful of earth, rose to his feet and lifted his fist in a solemn gesture,

"By the blood of Christ, by this earth which is my mother, father, heart, and very life! May I be accursed unto all time if I break this, my sacred oath!"

He cast aside the earth,

"And concerning this detestable inn, I shall leave you here not a single hour longer. Go into your room and fetch what clothes and other belongings you possess; I have a better place for you to live, until we can leave the sinkhole Rome which calls itself the flower of the world."

"Where will you take me?" she asked in wonder.

"To a friend of mine. Get your things. Here is money, to pay you free from the Greek's debt. Leave it in your room."

"What of Mikrella?" she said.

"Must she come along?"

"Oh, Faljan, she is not so wicked as she seems. She hates her life, and what she is, and what I have become; and it is this and only this that brings sin spurting out of her like water out of a fountain; at night, while she sleeps, she cries on my shoulder and is herself again. I will vouch for her, if you will only take her, too."

"Get her, then."

V.

Mikrella was heavy from slumber, and accordingly came along quietly. The gladiator went out into the street, Lydia beside him with her belongings tied up in a rag, the child stumbling along behind. It was daylight, so that Faljan had no trouble in finding the tortuous way which led up the slope to the north.

They reached the gate of Marcus Vidalius. The gladiator called out, and a porter came. He admitted them, and in a few minutes the fruit merchant himself appeared.

"Ah," he said jestingly, "so you have brought friends to see my graftings, eh!"

"Will you hire this woman, and let her work in your vineyard?" asked Faljan.

Vidalius took Lydia's hands and examined them, nodding to see that she was accustomed to labor,

"Yes. And the child?"

"She, likewise, is used to work," said Lydia eagerly.

"H'm, and a place to sleep—let us see."

Vidalius conducted them across the vineyard where men and women were already at work; he stopped at a long shed,

"In here will do, I imagine. It is the women's quarters, crowded, but no matter! Now if you will excuse me, I will go tell my foreman. Oh, yes, wages! I shall have to see how they work first, my Faljan—*then* I shall set the wage!"

The fruit merchant laughed and went away, Mikrella promptly sat

down against the shed and dozed off, Faljan said earnestly to Lydia, "Tell no one of your Christianity; it might be dangerous."

"As you wish."

"Tonight, try to get your full sleep. Your eyes are hollow as the holes in a skull."

She pressed against him.

"O dear lover, I will be a true wife to you during all the years of my life. A true and eager wife, joining my flesh with yours in happiness, not mere submission."

"As soon as I am a free man, I shall come for you."

"Come before then, if you can—to visit me."

"I will."

VI.

It was a long way back to his villa, yet he walked it gladly. There was so much to mull over in his mind, savor and smack at, enjoy. He felt freer than he had felt since the hour when thieves set upon him outside the Capenian Gate, robbing him and then abandoning him to the whirlpool of Rome. Thieves? Now again, turning off the highway and winding his slow steps up the lane toward his own gate, he was set upon; Faljan struck the footpad a single absent-minded blow and the rascal skittered away like a wounded rat.

Home, and in bed, the gladiator slept until noon, got up and roused Besidus, gave orders. Everything in and out of the villa was to be brought to a reckoning, in preparation for its sale.

"What!" cried the valet. "Are you joking? Are you drunken with last night's wine?"

"I am buying myself free of the arena, therefore hold your noise and obey me."

The gladiator left Besidus stunned and stricken, went out and harnessed the horses, drove downtown. To the barracks, where he tied up, stalked in; he was headed straight for the Director's office when Quartilla called out,

"He is not yet arrived."

Faljan went to his room, sat down and waited. Very impatiently. When he could bear it no longer, he hunted up the trainer,

"Just what is keeping him?"

"Not being in the habit of sleeping with our esteemed Director," answered Quartilla, "I cannot tell you."

"When will he be here?"

"Around about the moment he arrives, maybe a little later, possibly a bit earlier. Get to your exercises, Faljan; I am tired of your high proud ways."

"I am leaving you today," retorted the gladiator; "and therefore your accursed exercises no longer concern me."

"Leaving? Buying your freedom, do you mean?"

"Where can that rascal be!"

Quartilla showed his teeth,

"Ah, you are really cutting loose from us when you dare to refer to the Director as a rascal! If I were mean in soul I would tell him what you have said."

"It might be your last telling, my friend."

Quartilla turned hot, but the Director was coming in the door, and so quite naturally the quarrel broke off. The Director nodded to them, went to his office, Faljan behind him.

"Yes?" said the Director, and sat down as if he were ending, not beginning, a day's work. "What is it? I had very little sleep last night, and a lengthy conference this morning; therefore be brief."

"I will. Did you present my petition to the Control Board, in the matter of buying myself free?"

"Yes, I did."

"And the answer?"

"I have not yet received it."

"When may I know—the price and all that, I mean."

"As soon as the Board has considered your case. The matter cannot be rushed."

CHAPTER 22.

I.

FALJAN was not worried. It was only a formality. He would certainly have a decision within a week.

On the third day he went to visit Lydia. She was at work in the vineyard, her skin already tanning under the sun, and her eyes bright. The gladiator liked the grip she had on her mattock; she would soon learn the ways of the soil.

"And Mikrella?" he asked.

"Weeding vegetables," said Lydia, pointing beyond a row of fruit trees. "I fear she is not really interested in it, but for the moment she is taken by the novelty. Are you free of the arena?"

"Not yet; but it will not be long. Have no fear."

"Oh, I haven't!" she smiled, and seeing Vidalius approach, she added, "Will you visit me again tomorrow?"

"Yes."

Vidalius came up, Lydia resuming her task and gradually passing out of earshot. The fruit merchant nodded approvingly,

"She does well, for a green hand. Works willingly, and is extremely conscientious."

"Good," said Faljan.

"I wonder about her," murmured Vidalius. "Is she a satisfactory worker because of habit, or because she is a Christian!"

Faljan was startled.

"A Christian?" he said guardedly. "She is not a Christian."

"No games with me, please," smiled the fruit merchant. "Certainly she is. Not that she told me, or that I argued her into a circumstantial confession, nevertheless I got it out of her—enough of it to be sure, at any rate. What is the matter with you, Faljan? There is no cause for alarm. I am broad-minded, and I myself have now and then done some thinking on this matter. You see, the gods are what we make them, and in our blundered yearning we wound up by creat-

ing too many of them; more than a few of them appallingly defective, at that. Perhaps this Jesus Christ is the *real* god! What do you think?"

"I don't know. I—"

"He may be the principle I so often harp upon."

"Whatever you mean by that."

Vidalius laughed,

"As to what I mean, I am not certain. Yet at any rate, one sound god would be better than dozens and hundreds of shifty ones. The way it is now, a man can bring no accusation against, say, Jupiter, and make it stick. Reprove Jupiter for ignoring your pleas and he can easily maintain that you ought to have addressed them to Apollo, and Apollo—if you demand satisfaction of *him*—Apollo will perhaps inform you that you should have gone to Mercury with your problem. And so on and so on, to the bottom of the list, which is admittedly so long that you can never finish with it. Ah, but if we traded all these divinities for *one* god, then we would have him, himself and no other responsible for the fulfillment of our prayers!"

The fruit merchant said this last in a joking manner, but Faljan did not laugh, did not even smile. The whole discussion had rendered him uneasy. As soon as he could do so with decency, he took his leave.

"Vidalius is too strange in his talk," the gladiator told himself. "I shall not go back there until I have got myself free of the arena, and then only to get Lydia."

II.

"Come into my office," the Director said, next day.

Faljan went in. The Director's manner was evasive and hidden, and yet when he spoke, his words were encouraging enough,

"The Control Board has reached a decision in your case. It is willing to release you—if the price is met."

"I have the money," answered the gladiator, "or in any case can raise it quickly. You said a maximum of two hundred fifty thousand sesterces, I think."

"The price," murmured the Director, "is five hundred thousand sesterces."

Faljan laughed outright,

"You must be thinking of someone else."

"No."

"But you told me two hundred fifty thousand!"

"I was merely offering an estimate. After you made your application for release, you won greater and greater renown in the ring—which renders you more valuable. If the imperial arena is therefore to lose you, it must receive adequate compensation. What is wrong, are you unable to raise five hundred thousand sesterces?"

The gladiator pierced him with suspicious eyes. There was something amiss. The little Director was too casual, too oily, possibly too well rehearsed.

"Then five hundred thousand is the price?" Faljan demanded.

"It is."

"I cannot raise that amount, and you know it."

"How should I know it!" cried the Director, and lifted his palms, so that the gods might bear witness to the justice of what he said.

"One thing more, I would know."

"Yes?"

"Who are the members of the Control Board making decisions in these cases?"

The Director reddened,

"That is no more your concern than the workings of Nero's digestion. Begone with you!"

Faljan strode out, got his chariot. He drove off slowly, aimlessly. It was another trap, this time the worst of all possible traps.

It was worse than he imagined, at any rate. Ahead of him there was an official notice writer, surrounded by a small crowd which read what he scribbled and then yelled in surprise. Faljan pulled up his horses. The announcement proclaimed the return to the arena of Synistor, greatest of all Roman gladiators. And below this, an additional line,

"To be matched against Faljan."

III.

The notice writer was moving on, behind him a little crowd trailing along as children follow a bear strolling through a village at the end of its master's chain. Faljan's horses worried the bit, threw up their

heads; the familiar compelling odor of their sweat reached back to the gladiator and awakened him from his lethargy; he loosened the lines and the chariot started forward. Faljan, too, was following the notice writer; as if perhaps the fellow must presently halt and scrawl a denial of what he had scribbled earlier.

The notice writer was halting, indeed; unfolding his collapsible stool and mounting it with red chalk again in hand. Red, because of the importance of the announcement. The watching idlers murmured in excitement, others came up to help them gawk. Stopping his chariot, Faljan saw the chalk do as before—it wrote of the return to the arena, the triumphal return, of Synistor the Great. To be matched, in his first combat, against the reigning favorite, Faljan.

“Ha!” cried a voice from the crowd; “as for Synistor making a triumphal return, that will depend upon what Faljan does!”

“The miller’s first combat will be his last, I’ll wager my mother-in-law’s purse!”

“You lie, Synistor is the better fighter!”

The notice writer sketched the face of Synistor, and opposite it the face of Faljan, not so much as looking round until there came a great murmur of noise from up the street and Synistor himself appeared. Carried high on the shoulders of friends, the miller was glowing with pride and arrogance; his partisans advanced with trampling tread, chanting gayly,

“Synistor, Synistor the Great! Most magnificent and terrible of fighters, conqueror of all men! Synistor, Synistor, Synistor the Great!”

The procession came nearer, Faljan observing it with a face yielding no emotion—for the bystanders were eying him as well as the miller, and he would give them no satisfaction. Synistor had caught sight of Faljan, but was pretending otherwise. The miller made a sign for his henchmen to halt, and when they had done this, he opened his mouth and cried out cheerfully,

“Friends and Romans, it is true what you have heard! I have consented to return to the arena!”

“Bravo! Bravo for Synistor!”

“Nay—bravo for Faljan—a better man any hour in the long summer day, and twice in winter hours!”

Synistor held up a silencing hand,

“I retired four years ago for the reason that there was left no suitable opponent for me, and a man wearies of fighting striplings. There is still no opponent worthy of my talents, but—”

"How about Faljan, constant victor since his debut more than a year and a half ago!"

"But," Synistor continued imperturbably, "fighters are needed, and so I offer myself—desiring, as I do, to help celebrate the divine joining of Nero and Poppaea Sabina. Let us all rejoice at the marriage of these illustrious two, whose rule will of a certainty lift Rome to new heights of glory!"

There was a howl of approbation, mingled with catcalls from those who did not like the miller—or at any rate liked Faljan better. Synistor shouted above the clamor,

"Wish me honor, my friends! Today I enter the private barracks of Inius Gallo, to commence training for whatever opponent may turn up, although methinks that under the circumstances such training is wholly unnecessary."

"Oh, *is* it!" rasped a bystander, and an angry stone hurtled in the miller's direction. Synistor ducked, jumped off the shoulders he had been riding, and smilingly withdrew from the melee. Kicks and fist blows had begun to fly about, some of the crowd shouting for Synistor, others for Faljan,

"Faljan is greatest, Synistor is a braggart!"

"Never conquered was Synistor, and never will be!"

"So? Take this, then, you offal!"

"Bastard child of your mother's black slave, I give it back to you, and another to join it!"

Faljan stood in his chariot, looking on without apparent interest. Himself destined to meet Synistor in the arena? It was one of those fantastic things that you know cannot be; being, instead, impossible. Especially now, at this time of all times.

"The Tarbuckets! Tarbuckets! To the alleys, comrades!"

The crowd scattered like birds before a stick, Synistor stepped forth to welcome the policemen, and at the same time bend them to his purpose,

"Conduct me to the barracks of Inius Gallo, where I shall be quartered for the honor of Caesar and the Empire!"

The Tarbuckets recognized him and saluted, fell in on either side of him. They marched off, Synistor still without so much as a glance at the man in the chariot.

It was clear enough. The miller cared less than two spoonfuls of soup for the divine marriage of Nero and Poppaea, Caesar, Empire. The whole affair was a puppet show, manipulated from behind a curtain: Synistor fetched back in the attempt to destroy Faljan, and

Faljan by a ruse of raised price kept from buying himself free. Enemies had contrived this. Or rather, an enemy. Tigellinus. The envenomed horse breeder was out to even an old score, no doubt finding in Synistor a most willing confederate.

And what was to be done about it? Well, there was a time when Faljan would have been glad, even revengefully eager, to match swords with Synistor, but since he had promised Lydia not to slay again, kill no further man, he must resolve the issue in another way. In other words, ram through his demand for freedom.

Faljan drove to the Forum, called an urchin to watch his horses, and strode off toward the booths of the money dealers and bankers.

IV.

He watched these gentry one after another figure his assets—money on deposit, interest due, the amount to be gained by selling the miscellaneous gifts which miscellaneous admirers had bestowed upon him, his chariot and his horses, and the villa. He had counted most on the villa, hoping that since it had at one time been Octavia's, it might well prove more valuable than he had reckoned. And it proved less so. Not that it was not an excellent bit of real estate, but Octavia was dead in disgrace and her memory suspect; it would not do to advertise the villa as formerly hers, lest the Imperial Treasury be reminded that under a hoary old law the property could be seized away from Faljan.

"Gifts made within the year by persons convicted of treason are specifically in that category," said the banker, with a flutter of a smile. "Also to be considered is the fact that Britannicus lived there, and he being ill starved, prospective buyers would shy away. No; everything taken into account, all your assets and moneys, you could raise possibly four hundred thousand sesterces, but no more."

The gladiator turned away. Whoever had set his dismissal price at five hundred thousand sesterces had known all this in advance, most likely.

He would have to appeal to Poppaea, beg her to use her influence in his behalf, so that he could buy out for as little as four hundred thousand. A bitter prospect, his having to ask Poppaea, but under the circumstances he knew of no other remedy.

Faljan looked about for a professional letter writer, found one just

ornamenting up the end of a message for a silversmith's apprentice. The letter writer chuckled and put down his own version of the laboriously concocted phrases of the young lover, gave him the result in exchange for five copper coins, and turned briskly to Faljan,

"And yours, how will you have it? On wood bark, leather, or fine linen?"

"On the best quality of parchment," answered the gladiator, seating himself on the stool which the silversmith's apprentice had vacated.

"Ah, a high-born lady, then!"

"Write, and quickly."

A sheet of parchment, reed pen dipped in ink, and a slanting inquisitive look at Faljan,

"Name?"

"No name need be put down. Write as I declare."

The scribbler was displeased. The money reward for his services was slight, and he consequently depended for most of his satisfaction upon a knowledge of secrets and intrigues otherwise barred to him. Who desired to supplant what husband, who was urging drugs to bring about abortion, all such fascinating items—and this present mean customer had said no name.

"This is the message," said Faljan. "'Have the kindness to meet me tonight at moonrise in the designated place. Faljan.'"

The letter writer glanced up intently,

"Now I recognize you. The gladiator! H'm, but men of your class have no need to write letters; they merely stand in the street and take their pick of women. Is something gone wrong this time, perhaps?"

Faljan ignored the question. He caused the note to be sealed, paid and went off with it. As soon as he was out of sight of the letter writer, he approached the arcades and studied the idlers there, choosing, finally, a ragged fellow who seemed to Faljan to be more or less worthy of trust. To this one he gave the note and a piece of silver,

"Tuck this message inside your tunic, deliver it at once to the Empress Poppaea, and upon your return you will have also a gold piece."

"Yes, master! I go at once."

"And return here promptly."

"I shall be thinking of that gold piece at every step."

"Put the note into the hands of the Empress herself—otherwise you will get, not a gold piece, but your knuckles broken."

"Yes, master—rely upon me, master!"

The messenger sped off, Faljan hunted out a shady spot and sat down. To think; alternately to hope and to despair. The note might not reach Poppaea, she might receive it and scorn him. Faljan had disappointed her twice, and in a manner most distasteful to a prideful woman. Yet she must still covet him, perhaps more than ever, having been denied. If this were true, it would be natural for her to permit a rendezvous, so that she could demonstrate her clutch upon him and also nourish her self-esteem by then dismissing him for good and all.

Let her. He would get her promise to put through his withdrawal from the arena, and right gladly see her no more.

"Well, now, it is the famous gladiator himself!" said a voice, and there stood Tigellinus.

Faljan gazed at him with calm eyes,

"So you follow me, do you! As horse dung follows a horse."

"Nay, I merely paused to have a look at the cattle drover who has killed so many enemies and soon himself will die in the ring."

"The gods do not approve of bragging, O horse breeder!"

Tigellinus ripped out his sword,

"Horse breeder, is it!"

"Slay me not," smiled Faljan. "Nero wanting me for the arena, and you likewise planning to see my blood spilled there, 'twould be a pity. And in addition, it might bring imperial wrath down upon your lice-infested head."

Tigellinus sheathed his sword, smiled his gold-toothed smile,

"You are right. Much better, much more enjoyable it will be to see Synistor master you, O Faljan. I will wait."

The gladiator watched him go on his way, Faljan glad in his heart that Tigellinus was here at the Forum and not at the palace, where he might possibly have intercepted the note to Poppaea. Then the messenger returned, his face shining.

"Delivered," he whispered. "To the Empress herself. Oh, how lovely she is, and how sweet she smells!"

"So would you, if you now and then took a bath. In what room did she receive you?"

"The vestibule."

"How was she clad?"

"In a yellowish robe with a sky-blue girdle. Pearls about her throat. Ah, what a vision! I did not know she was so beautiful. Do you know her well, master?"

"Be quiet," and Faljan continued his questioning. "What mosaics or paintings did you remark in the vestibule?"

"Pandora and the box, the rape of Lucretia—why do you ask me these things, master?"

"To make sure you are not lying," said Faljan. He took out a gold piece and gave it over. "What did she say when she read the note?"

"Nothing. She simply smiled a most heavenly smile, and said there would be an answer, but none by me."

"Here is another gold piece for your trouble."

V.

It was his inclination to leave Lydia in the dark, permitting her to wonder—if she liked—why he was staying away on this day when she would be expecting him to visit her. Yet somehow he could not do this. Faljan was experiencing in himself an undeniable urge to be kind to her, save her from unnecessary anxiety. She had been so long unhappy.

He went to her, finding her this time in her quarters, it being the noon rest hour. Lydia was busily washing her few sorry rags of clothing, in preparation for her departure from Rome. She gave the gladiator a fond smile, said confidently,

"Is it finished—are you free of them, Faljan?"

"No, not yet, but—" He looked about, "Where is Mikrella?"

He asked this simply to shift her away from a dangerous subject, but Lydia considered that he was beginning to care for her child. She said, in a grateful tone,

"I am glad you miss her, when she is not about. Mikrella went to the Greek's tavern. He owes her three coppers, and she means to collect them."

The gladiator had already forgotten Mikrella. A vision, his messenger had said of Poppaea; yet this Lydia beside him was far more beautiful. Not in the contrived and milky soft fashion of the patrician, but in ways befitting women who were women. Lydia had a dark skin, nevertheless it was all hers, and healthy. Her strong arms and straight legs, firm breasts and parted lips and sun-and-earth hair, all were wonderful to behold. Something swelled in Faljan's heart, so that he told her more than he had intended,

"They have doubled the price on me."

"Doubled the price?" she murmured. "Why should they do that?"

"They want to match me against Synistor, who has just announced his return to the arena."

"The miller?" Lydia cried out. "Oh, but he is a terrible one, that Synistor!"

"I could slay him in any fair fight, my sword in my left hand," grumbled Faljan. "I myself am no amateur, you know; no babe in its mother's arms."

Now she was really frightened,

"Do not talk so, my beloved! That is all past for you. You have promised not to kill again. Surely you remember!"

"I remember it well," he said wryly. "That is what is bothering me. A match against Synistor, and you with my promise in your pocket."

"Where I shall keep it," she replied, "Faljan, you must get free! Perhaps if you went to the bankers—"

"I have tried them, and without luck. However, there is another way—something else which I am relying upon."

She brightened like a child,

"Of course! I am ungrateful to have forgotten, even for a moment. Another way which is the only way!"

Faljan stared at her. Could she know that he had written Poppaea for an assignation? Women were mysterious creatures at times; they did not reason well, or at all, but often in dire extremity they leaped over sense to arrive at truth with the instinct of animals.

"What do you mean?" he asked cautiously.

"Christ, and his loving protection," she answered. "Isn't that what you meant?"

"Yes," he muttered, and stirred uneasily. "Well, I came to tell you, and I have, so now I must get back."

She was disappointed that he was going. He said hurriedly,

"If you do not see me for a while, do not be worried. This business may take a day or so to work itself out. Farewell."

Lydia came and kissed him, searching his eyes until he said again he must go.

He walked away rapidly, lest she suspect and call him back. Well, she was putting her confidence in Christ, and he on the other hand was relying upon Poppaea. Nothing wrong in that. Two arrows were better than one. The all-important thing was to secure the result, lock

the calf away, pull the horse out of the bog. And if it chanced that Poppaea maneuvered him loose from the arena, he would give Lydia and her Christ the credit. That was fair enough. It was probably a good religion she had found, even though in sudden emergencies a man would do well not to rest too great a weight upon it.

VI.

That evening. At the villa.

Besidus had heard the news and was bristling with indignation. The worn-out ancient miller returning to the ring in an attempt to capture new honor? He would only make a jackass of himself, yielding his middle-aged strength to young Faljan, than whom Rome had never seen a greater fighter. The next time that anybody mocked at Faljan, as the valet had learned they mocked today, Besidus was resolved to take a cudgel and pummel their brains into an omelet.

"Take, rather, your long tongue," said Faljan impatiently, "and tie a knot in it. Get out—I am dressing, can't you see?"

"Yes, but now that Synistor is against you, should you not give up evening pleasures and start special training?"

"Do you hear me?" Faljan shouted, and the valet hurried off to the back of the house.

Faljan extinguished the torch which stood in a socket beside the door, went out. He drove to the Corso, tied up his horses, walked up the Subura. When he was certain he was not being followed, he cut over the lower spur of the Esquiline, and thence to the back of the Palatine Hill. It was a steep bluff, but he climbed it with no great trouble.

At the top he vaulted over a low wall, and found himself in the palace grounds. They were empty and peaceful. The moon had not yet appeared—but with Poppaea, early was better than late. He set his foot upon a little path, passing an artificial pond where swans lay asleep, their beaks tucked under their wings. Presently there was a series of flower plots, and beyond these the melon arbor. It was a long low structure with its roof agleam with mica, thus easy to identify.

Softly he made his way to the door, threw a glance about, saw nothing untoward, and went in. He explored a little. There was a

couch at the rear of the arbor—placed there by Poppaea, no doubt.

He went back to the door, to wait for her. There was a loud muffled sound, but after a moment's fright he recognized it. Caesar was practicing his singing exercises in the opposite wing of the palace. All the better; the racket would cover Poppaea's footsteps, when she came.

Restlessly he began to move about, absently manipulating the catch of a small ventilating window cut into the wall of the arbor. Criba had ventilators in his milk house, but nothing so elaborate as this. H'm.

Another sound outside, this time a faint one. The gladiator took hold of the ventilating window, tipped it up a bit, peered out.

Someone approaching from the palace. Poppaea.

Not Poppaea. A darker bulkier figure.

A man.

Not simply a man, but a man in armor, carrying a spear. One of the palace guards.

Faljan went stealthily to the door. There was time; he could get out and away, before the guard saw him.

Except that when he reached for the door handle, he heard sounds directly outside the arbor. Very cautiously he opened the door and peeped out.

Two guards, standing back under a tree and gazing toward the arbor.

He closed the door again. The two out yonder must have moved to their station immediately after the gladiator entered the arbor. The guard approaching from the palace was a third to their party. It was an ambush.

"Tigellinus has done this thing," Faljan muttered. "He learned of the note, kept Poppaea away, and set a snare for me."

A murmur of voices told him that the third guard had joined his fellows. Doubtless they were conferring, agreeing that the quarry was in the net, and now they had only to advance and seize it, lay it out by the heels.

Faljan whirled toward the couch. A stool stood beside it; the gladiator scooped up the stool and tiptoed to the ventilator window. It opened on the north side, whereas the guards were huddling to the west of the building. Fortunate, that; a helpful arrangement on the part of the gods watching over gladiators.

He got up onto the stool, tilted the ventilator as far as it would

go, and eased himself through the opening. Once outside, his courage mounted. There was only one thing wrong, at the moment: the moon had come up, and very shortly the palace gardens would be flooded with light.

The guards were advancing toward the arbor, no longer taking any particular care to quiet their movements. Faljan listened, heard the door creak slightly. They were entering.

Now was the time.

He slipped back under a tree, began stealthily to circle around in the direction of the wall over which he had clambered a few minutes earlier.

Suddenly a torch flared within the arbor, moved about. The guards had discovered his escape. Faljan rose up to make a dash for the wall—but the door had burst open and they were running out, cursing as they came. They scattered, began to thrash about in the jungle of shrubbery, prodding into every possible covert with their spears.

Faljan got down on his hands and knees and crawled away from them. In a little while he heard no more voices. Perhaps they had moved off, or had given up the chase.

Not yet. The legs of a man moved into view just ahead of the gladiator. One of the guards, stopping, standing still while he peered about.

After a time, the guard turned round, but without moving off. Faljan got to his feet. The remaining two guards were some distance away, but this third one stood between the gladiator and freedom. Delay would be serious, for as soon as the fellow's two companions combed their area out, they would probably join him here.

Faljan came up behind him, reached out carefully, took sudden and violent hold of the guard's throat. The gladiator pulled him down, clamping onto him with his legs so that he could not flop around and make telltale noise. Then he proceeded to strangle him, not releasing his grip until the guard had decided to grow quiet.

The gladiator got up, threw a look at the two farther off in the gardens. They were coming this way. He scampered toward the wall, got over it just as they discovered their companion. Yells of fury went up, but it was too late. Faljan was bounding down the bluff like a goat, safe from their spears. Even though when he was half-way down he lost his grip and fell.

VII.

He pounded lustily on the door of the barracks, ready to cuff the porter when the thing should finally open.

It was Quartilla who opened the door. He let Faljan in, holding a torch the better to see him,

"I thought it would be you!"

"So you have become a porter!" said Faljan, trying to push past. "Congratulations."

"Hold!" and the trainer thrust the torch in his face. "I'll have a look at you, my handsome fellow. Ha, clad in your best tunic, but the thing mussed and torn. Scratches on your legs, a black-and-blue mark in your upper right arm. Excellent, Faljan, excellent! Your right arm is your sword arm, and you are to fight Synistor. There is nothing like entering the arena with a handicap; it makes it easier to win!"

"Let me pass," said Faljan savagely. "I was in a brawl, yes; but it was not my fault."

"Of course not! Brawls are always forced upon us. Get to your room, and know this: from tomorrow onward, you are confined to barracks until your match with Synistor."

CHAPTER 23.

I.

QUARTILLA sat at the head of the breakfast table, taking no part in the conversation lipping up and down and across the board. Nevertheless he was aware of it; his eyes said that.

"Tomcatting is admitted pleasure," observed Hirl, "but unfortunately it is no substitute for training."

"I understand that Synistor is already hard at work," Tuscus put in slyly.

"He needs to be," grunted Faljan, "being so soft and old."

"Not so soft," Tuscus objected. "He has pretty well kept in condition, they say."

Hirl cast an elaborately innocent glance at the trainer,

"I wonder when the match will be? Does anyone know?"

"It will take place," said Quartilla shortly, "just as soon as Synistor is ready."

"In other words," laughed Faljan, "along about the time that Venus begins to grow whiskers."

Quartilla was incensed. He rose and gestured for the men to get up,

"I will show you apes something—Faljan especially. Come with me."

They trailed after him to the Director's door, Quartilla opening it and entering, but permitting the gladiators no more than to peep in. There was a bronze plaque on the wall, a thing Faljan had seen upon his various visits to the Director, but which, from preoccupation with his own affairs, he had never taken the trouble to notice. He did so now, his eyes following Quartilla's undermoving finger as the trainer quoted the words for the benefit of those who did not know their letters. A plaque, bestowed upon the Imperial Gladiators' School by the young Emperor Nero, in commemoration of the hundredth victory of Synistor the Great.

"He resided at this barracks," Quartilla said proudly. "I myself trained him."

"A hundred victories!" exclaimed Tuscus, whistling softly. "Whew!"

"He gained a hundred and thirty-six, to be exact," said Quartilla. "Then, such was his prowess and fame, he was awarded the wooden sword."

"I should think that by that time he would have earned a gold one," said Faljan lightly; "with sapphires set into the hilt."

"He did, but the wooden sword is the arena's symbol of freedom, because harmless. Synistor was a mighty fighter, and he retired undefeated. It is something for you to bear in mind, my Faljan."

"I will bear it in mind," replied the gladiator, "but I refuse to let it keep me awake."

"Synistor was a most superior fighter," persisted the trainer, bound to make a dent in Faljan. "He did things with a sword that no one had ever done before. For instance, he could take his blade, and light as a feather rip open the artery just inside the groin, causing his opponent to bleed to death in the space of a few minutes. If you are going to stand a chance with such an antagonist, one so able and tried and formidable, you, Faljan, will have to hump yourself, stop trifling and buckle down to training. That is all I have to say—"

The gladiator went to the quadrangle and began to exercise, but without zest. For he felt himself through with the arena, his professional fighting career at an end. This farce of training, standing matched on a future day against Synistor, it was nonsense. He must avoid the issue, break away and escape with Lydia to a life more tolerable than Rome could offer them.

The nub of his problem was, of course, Poppaea. Had she received his note and then deliberately set the guards on him? Or had the assignation gone astray because of some trick of the Sicilian's? Impossible for Faljan to settle these questions here in the barracks, throwing weights and hacking at wooden posts with a sword. No one could tell him the answers save Poppaea herself. And if she were innocent of treachery, perhaps she would help him.

He went boldly to Quartilla,

"I must be excused for the balance of the morning."

"So?"

"I have an audience with the Empress."

"Actually!"

"Your permission to go, then?"

"You are confined to barracks," the trainer barked. "Get back to work."

"The audience is at Poppaea's instance," Faljan said coldly. "If you detain me, I will not answer for what her imperial wrath may load upon you. I shall be back in an hour or two."

Quartilla had to give in. The gladiator dressed and went to the palace, presented himself at the door to Poppaea's suite. He was refused admittance.

"By whose orders?" Faljan demanded.

"Those of the Empress, naturally," said the Chamberlain.

Faljan retired down the corridor, his wrath mingling with a rising sense of foreboding. If Poppaea were against him, if she were perhaps at the bottom of the set-to last night, behind his match with Synistor, then he was a plucked goose. In any event, however, he must know where he stood with her.

He returned to her door, banged loudly. The Chamberlain opened it, outrage in his face. Before he could speak, Faljan had shown him a ring. The signet given him by Burrus, in the preceding year, at the baths.

"Show Poppaea this."

The Chamberlain recognized it, that was clear as frost on a cowshed roof.

"Wait in the vestibule," he said finally, and opened the door wide.

Faljan stepped triumphantly inside, waited with confidence while the Chamberlain took the ring in to Poppaea. She would bite; Burrus was not yet out of the running, and her woman's curiosity would never permit her to forgo questioning him about the signet.

The Chamberlain returned, his manner somewhat less forbidding, "You may come."

They proceeded through a series of rooms and out onto a private terrace. There, on a couch of filigree bronze inset with blobs of lapis lazuli, reclined the Empress Poppaea. A bevy of female slaves and toilet women in attendance.

II.

Poppaea had her back to him, apparently intent upon the ministrations of her women. The terrace was open to the sky, but for the protection of the lady's delicate complexion, a canopy had been

drawn over the couch and its environs. An assortment of purple cushions lay bunched behind her, for the support of her shoulders. Beside her, a table crowded with vials and jars and boxes of what Faljan took to be the ointments used in perfecting a female toilet. There was also a small marble stand on which reposed a fluffy soft cushion, and on the cushion the little lap dog which the gladiator had glimpsed on his first day in Rome, he standing beside Ershutif the Syrian and watching the modest charming progress of Poppaea litterborne along the Corso. And as before, the dog began to yip.

"Come around to where I can see you," said the Empress; and because she spoke pleasantly, he took courage. It was possible that he had only imagined himself in her ill graces, and that there would prove to be some very simple explanation for the ominous events of the past two days. He walked around to the other side of the couch, gave a little bow; at which she laughed gaily, "Now, now, Faljan, do not attempt to turn yourself into a palace idler! One must be born to that—and anyhow, a gladiator has no need of such frilled pretensions."

"Thank you."

The dog was still yipping, angry, and very persistent about it.

"Zidu does not like you," she murmured, tilting her head for the hairdresser.

"It is all one," Faljan said, "so long as his mistress does not snap at me."

Poppaea smiled absently, to all appearances intent upon her toilet. His eyes traveled over her. She wore, this morning, a tunic of silk which had been slit and slashed in such cunning fashion that it was practically no covering at all, her flesh peeping through wherever you chose to look. On her feet silver sandals, the toenails rosy and shell-like; Poppaea had a foot that a grown man could hold in his hand, it was so tiny. The dog's racket increased in intensity, and at length Poppaea said in annoyance,

"Take Zidu out."

A slave lifted the beastlet from his cushion and carried him off. Poppaea yawned prettily. She gave the impression of being in no hurry whatsoever, either with her toilet or her talk. Faljan had remained standing; she did not intend to let him sit down, he saw that plainly. Nor was she going to send her women away.

"How came you by Burrus' ring?" she asked.

"It was given me."

"By Burrus?"

"Yes."

"You are a peasant, Faljan," she said with faint irony; "and thus do not realize the importance of attaching yourself to people only when they are rising or definitely on top of the heap. A descending falling dying star can only drag you down into disaster."

"Burrus gave me the ring in case I wished to call upon him."

"Concerning what?"

"I do not know," he said lamely.

"Nevertheless you used his signet to gain admission here."

"I wanted to see you," he said, with a frank face. "It was a ruse."

"And not a bad one," Poppaea admitted. She gestured to the hairdresser, "Fetch in the Germans."

The hairdresser spoke to a slave, the slave went out and presently returned with some twenty big fair women trailing after her. Women of Germanic extraction, of a physical type which reminded Faljan of the dead Vortinax; one of these creatures could well have been the barbarian's. The women lined up like so many domestic animals, while Poppaea studied their masses of gold amber hair. She raised a languid hand,

"The fourth one, and perhaps also the seventh. No, wait! Have them turn round."

The women were wheeled about, so that now their back hair showed. They were slaves, kept—and perhaps in the beginning even captured—for the express purpose of supplying Poppaea with living hair of the shade of her own. The Empress finally decided upon number four and number nine, the hairdresser snipped off the locks she wanted, and the still silent Germans were taken out.

"Mind that it matches in all lights," Poppaea warned; "otherwise there will be grief in your goblet."

"Yes, madame."

The hairdresser began to arrange Poppaea's tresses, curling bit after bit by means of a pair of tongs cupped in a little brazier heated with red coals. The locks of the captive women were to be twined into Poppaea's for the sake of her better appearance.

"A ruse, and not a bad one," the Empress repeated. "Yet for what purpose, O Faljan?"

"It is a matter of some privacy," he said hesitantly. "I was hoping to be able to talk to you alone."

"Though I be engaged with my toilet? This is a ritual not to be disturbed—and anyhow, I should be afraid to be alone with you."

"Afraid?"

"Lest I yield to the fascination of your big powerful muscles, the scars decorating your arms and legs and massive chest. What if you were to assault me, O Faljan—what a terrible item to go down in history! The dainty and exquisite blameless Poppaea Sabina violated by a gladiator on her private terrace—I assume of course that you would not bother to carry me indoors."

She laughed, and immediately her women took the cue and laughed with her. They had been darting secret interested looks at the gladiator; it was pleasant to gaze at him openly, and to feel safe to laugh.

"Do you not agree?" Poppaea said to them. "Faljan has striking features and is much sought after—would you not fear to be alone with so desirable a man?"

There was a murmur of agreement, except that the hairdresser said with a spark in her dark eyes,

"Not I, madame. I would not fear it at all."

More feminine laughter, but Poppaea chilling.

"Careful with the comb," she murmured, and the hairdresser, realizing that she had been overbold in her answer, began to fumble her implement.

Poppaea reached out and picked up the tongs, lifted a coal with them, and pressed it against the woman's breast. The coal burned through her tunic and into the flesh; she sank down with a shriek of pain; Poppaea signed for her to be carried out, signed for an assistant to take her place. The Empress turned smilingly to Faljan,

"I am a perfectionist. Bungling annoys me—bungling and incapacity."

The gladiator jerked his eyes away from the writhing hairdresser, returned them to Poppaea.

"Incapacity," she murmured, as if he had missed the point.

"Yes," he said woodenly.

"I hear," she resumed, with a brightening manner, "that you are matched to fight Synistor."

"That is what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh? And what is it that you wish to say?"

"I desire to buy myself free of the arena. That is the privilege of my rank; yet when I came to pay the price asked, it had been doubled on me."

Poppaea stared at him with her limpid brown eyes,

"Meaning that you are afraid to contest Synistor?"

"No. The reason is another."

"What reason?"

"I had some time ago planned to buy myself free," he said carefully; "and I wish to go through with this plan."

"Out of stubbornness? Or is there some important motive behind your desire?"

"Important, yes."

"What is it?"

"I do not like to say."

"Then I cannot help you," and she turned to her mirror and began to inspect the towering mass of hair which was being erected upon her small fair head. "You may retire, Faljan."

"A woman has caused me to promise not to kill again," he said desperately. "I would like to keep that promise."

He saw instantly that he had made a mistake. Poppaea did not in any manner love him, yet in mentioning another woman he had attacked her pride. She continued to smile, however, her lips tender as a dawn,

"What, a woman? Someone you love, perhaps?"

"Yes," he said bluntly. He was in a morass, and it was probably as easy to slog on through as to pull back out.

"Have you lain with her, Faljan?"

"Once. But—"

"Then you must have met her only yesterday," said Poppaea, and with her own laughter once more gave her serving-women the signal to break into merriment.

The gladiator flushed. He was growing angry.

"What is her name?" murmured the Empress, but added quickly, "Nay, I will not inquire it. The name of one's beloved is sacred, best held private. Do you not think so, Faljan?"

"Of course," he said, with an effort. Curse her, she was tangling him in wool skeins, and he, as helpless as a newborn kitten, unable to prevent it.

Suddenly she smiled at him,

"You are sick from love, my dear friend, but permit me to advise you that this woman does not care for you. Otherwise she would not fear the outcome of the match with Synistor. Consider my own lover and husband, Nero, always so frightened of the audience when he gets up to sing. Yet do I fear for him? Nay! with my devoted heart I have utter confidence in his ability, and this brings him safe through to triumph. Your woman is false, I tell you that truly."

He did not know what to say to this, but by good fortune there was no necessity for saying anything. Nero had appeared on the terrace.

III.

Caesar was in high spirits, striding up at such speed that the slave behind him was forced to trot.

"Good morning, Poppaea! I have brought you a gift."

"Oh?" and she turned with delight. "What is it?"

Nero motioned the slave forward. The fellow bore, on a tray, a contrivance of transparent glass: two swelling bowls, a waist narrower than that of Poppaea herself, and water dripping drop by drop down from the upper into the lower vessel.

"A water clock," Caesar explained, then he saw the gladiator, blinked a moment with his nearsighted eyes. He said pettishly, "I find you here often of late, O gladiator!"

"A casual visitor, nothing more," observed Poppaea lightly. "But the water clock!"

Nero forgot the casual visitor, launched into an explanation of the clock. It was able to mark even the ten-minute periods, as the horizontal lines on the side of the bowls testified.

"How kind, how truly thoughtful," she murmured. "Caesar is a paragon among men—he thinks of no one save his wife!"

"I admit it," smiled the Emperor happily. "And especially did I think of you last night, regretting that illness kept you from attending my dress rehearsal."

Faljan shot the Empress a resentful look. She had been free and unencumbered when he climbed the wall; it was simply that she had not chosen to appear at the arbor, preferring to loose the guards upon him. Instead of Tigellinus, Poppaea. He was certain of it, now.

"Did the rehearsal go well, my Nero?"

"Extremely well. Better, in fact, than my last Thursday's concert, when the applause following my composition celebrating the fall of Troy became so deafening that I was forced to pause three times to let the tumult die down. I am greatly encouraged for next week."

Poppaea cast Faljan a mischievous glance,

"You see? Love does that. Love has confidence, fears nothing."

Nero glanced from his wife to Faljan, back again,

"What's this?"

"Faljan is in love," she explained mirthfully, "and his dearest trembles for his safety when he comes up against Synistor."

"Oh? Well, anyhow, it will be a good fight. I am looking forward to it. Poppaea, I shall dress and then dine with you."

"Best thanks, my Caesar!"

He was not yet ready to go,

"By the way, there is a new-come painter in Rome, hailing from Alexandria and very clever, they say. He could do the Orpheus."

"Orpheus—what Orpheus?"

"The painting you promised to have done in your vestibule. Orpheus taming the wild beasts with song. Had you forgotten?"

"Certainly not! I merely wondered if you preferred Orpheus singing to the beasts, or Orpheus singing alone."

"To the beasts," he answered, and cruelty flashed into his pale eyes. "That is what all audiences are, in the last analysis—beasts. Farewell, my dearest wife—farewell, O gladiator."

They murmured their responses and he strode off, bursting into impromptu song as he went. As soon as he was safely gone, Poppaea knocked the water clock from its stand, breaking it into many pieces upon the floor,

"That I should desire to mark the passage of time! I, who am young, and hold the world like an apple in my grasp. What stupid creatures men can be—it is unbelievable!"

A slave picked up the pieces of glass and carried them away, abruptly Poppaea gave Faljan a charming smile,

"This woman that you love—without warrant, I say, since she fears for your safety—remember never to give her a gift of a water clock."

"I shall remember," said Faljan, and pondered in his mind how to withdraw without further irritating her. There was nothing to be gained by remaining longer—and probably a good deal to lose.

"Now my face," said Poppaea, and the hairdresser gave place to a new expert. This one began to treat her skin, first straightening the line of her eyebrows with tweezers, and afterward applying white and red cosmetics, antimony and belladonna, at length rouge for her pouting lips, Poppaea constantly peeping into the mirror to judge the effect. She seemed to have forgotten the gladiator; and since he knew better, he was becoming apprehensive.

"I must get back to the barracks," he said finally.

"Do you tire of seeing me become beautiful?"

"You are beautiful without adornment."

"Do you admire my hair?"

"Yes."

"Liking it better than when it is flowing free?" and she turned to smile into his eyes.

He replied evenly,

"I like it both ways."

"Ah, you are a diplomat! I should ask Nero to appoint you to a post in Lusitania—where my former husband is exiled."

He choked back his wrath. She had turned against him, and was even tossing threats. Poppaea continued,

"You admire my skin, Faljan—but what about my hairpins?"

He glanced at the assortment which had been stuck here and there into her coiffure. The pins were of silver and gold, the shafts slender, the heads fashioned in intricate design. One pin represented a female figure; and Poppaea, divining that he had noticed it, gestured for a slave to remove the thing. The Empress held it up,

"Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Take it to your darling, as a gift from Poppaea."

He hesitated, extended his hand,

"Thank you."

All at once she was irritated, signed to a slave,

"Fetch the dog back. I am lonely for Zidu."

The slave hurried out, Poppaea returned once more to the attack,

"Just why does your mistress object to your fighting in the arena?"

"She believes that to kill is an evil thing."

"Really? A strange belief, is it not! Why, the world could not get along without killing! In such event, our enemies would clog the streets, prevent our very passing. Confess, Faljan, do you not breathe more easily when you have slain an enemy?"

"I have known the feeling."

One of Poppaea's attendants had dipped a tiny brush into blue paste and was carefully accentuating the veins at her temples.

"You have known the feeling," the Empress murmured, "and so have I. It is a good feeling."

The gladiator was rapidly approaching the end of his tether. Either he must flee her presence, or else smash her lovely malicious face into blood. He said in a trembling voice,

"Then I shall not be able to buy myself free of the arena?"

"After you have fought Synistor, perhaps."

"But I—"

"You will fight him, Faljan. My divine husband is initiating a new and special series of games to celebrate the advent of Rome's new Empress, and even if I myself were to petition in your behalf, Nero would refuse to release you. Besides, it will give me an ecstatic and delicate pleasure to see you in the arena with your sword flashing and blood flowing—flowing from your enemy, that is to say."

Faljan bowed; he did not trust himself to speak. The little lap dog was back, yipping instantly he caught sight of the gladiator.

"You may go, Faljan."

"Farewell," he muttered.

IV.

Well out of the palace and down the hill, he drew her Aphrodite hairpin from his belt and hurled it into the drain. And then, because rage was causing his stomach to throb painfully, he betook himself to a drink booth and sat down to a bowl of hot water. Sipping the scalding stuff, he wrathfully went back over his interview with Poppaea. She had got his note, but by that time she had been alienated. The wicked little slut, she centered her whole entire life upon the beautiful body which he had scorned; and hence she hated him and would have his death. If she could accomplish it.

"I have won money on you in the arena," murmured the man behind the counter. "Therefore I am your warning friend."

Faljan looked up at him. A small dark fellow, evidently a Calabrian. Tattoo marks on his bare arms. Probably a sailor retiring to the profits of selling hot water in a Roman street.

"Do not turn round," said the Calabrian. "You are in danger."

"In danger?"

"There is a tribune yonder across the street, and with him ten soldiers. They are pretending to gawk into that shop where Lucurgus sells false antiques—you know, furniture artificially filled with worm holes, aged with fire and ashes, and then the price jacked up for the stupid patricians? The tribune is a palace guard; he is following you."

"To be warned is to be half safe," nodded Faljan, and put down silver instead of copper.

"Take care."

They grinned at each other, Faljan rose and sauntered off toward

the Corso, presently entering the narrow smelly Subura he knew so well. He contrived to glance back long enough to see the centurion's helmet, the glint of spears.

Very casually the gladiator lost himself in the crowd, all of a sudden leaped into a doorway, waited. In a little time the centurion went past at a brisk walk, the soldiers following him, and then—well behind the soldiers—the eager face of Ershutif. With a shock of enlightenment, Faljan reached out and seized the little Syrian, jerked him into the doorway.

"Unhand me!" Ershutif cried—as well as he could, seeing that Faljan had him about the throat. "Faljan, we are friends—let go!"

The gladiator eased his grip, but his eyes continued to blaze,

"I introduce you to Poppaea and you become her henchman, now confirming to her that Lydia is mine, and you undertaking to betray her to a pack of arresting soldiers!"

"Nay, nay," protested the Syrian, but Faljan cuffed him silent, resumed in a threatening tone,

"Do they seek her at the Greek's tavern?"

"Where else!"

"She is gone from there, but Mikrella having at least once returned to the Greek's to collect a debt, they will probably be able to trace her. Therefore you will go to where Lydia is staying presently, get her, get Mikrella likewise, and take them to your house, there guarding them."

Ershutif was recovering his confidence,

"And where are they now, O Faljan?"

"With Marcus Vidalius, at his vineyard. Branch off to the left at his fruit establishment, and inquire your way. You must get them away before the Greek puts the centurion on their track—do you understand?"

The Syrian rubbed at the roots of his beard, his eyes speculative,

"It might be done—but it is risky. And risk without payment is a very dull knife, O Faljan."

"I have money. You can easily deceive Poppaea; report that Lydia fled the city. And when I myself am safely out of Rome, and am assured of taking her with me, I will give you thirty thousand sesterces in gold."

"You have fifty thousand in the bank, presented to you by the unfortunate Octavia."

"Guarantee Lydia and me out of the city, and you shall have forty thousand."

"No more? Surely, Faljan, you ought to be willing to strip yourself naked as a pair of fire tongs for the sake of so beloved a girl! Make it fifty thousand."

"Very well—but see that you keep your bargain."

"I will," Ershutif said earnestly; "by Mercury's wings I swear I will. Lydia and the child will be spirited away within an hour. You can believe me."

Faljan released him,

"In this instance, yes. Because you know that I esteem this woman above gold and will therefore pay the money; and also because you fear Nero's wrath—in case he ever discovers what you once said of him."

The little Syrian turned a muddy yellow,

"What I once said? Nay, Faljan, I never in my life said words against the divine Nero, never!"

"You once told me," said the gladiator, with a brazen face, "that his singing reminded you of the squealing of a pig caught under a gate."

"Oh, in the name of Aurora's mother, no, I did not!" Ershutif cried, and so loudly that Faljan was forced to seize his throat again,

"Do as I have said, and I will suppress your treasonable slip and pay you the gold in addition."

"Yes, Faljan, yes, my noble friend. At once. By Medea's cunning eyes, I will do it all as you command, and report to you at the barracks upon every detail, so that your heart may rest. Have no anxiety, O gladiator; I shall outwit your enemies for you. I know how. I am skillful in all such matters."

"Get at it, then!" said Faljan grimly. "And remember the pig under the gate!"

CHAPTER 24.

I.

HE RETURNED to the barracks, where for the sake of occupying his mind—and for no other reason—he began to practice at lifting weights.

In the middle of the afternoon Ershutif was announced.

The Syrian was smiling broadly, which could mean little or much. Faljan led him aside, safe away from possible eavesdroppers.

“Well, what of Lydia?” the gladiator said impatiently. “Where is she?”

“She is safe, O Faljan; depend upon it.”

The gladiator doubled a big fist,

“In the Campagna we have a saying to the effect that donkeys have ears only on their backs; signifying that they give no heed until they are beaten. Will you answer my question?”

“At once,” said the little Syrian, shying away from the fist. “It is my roundabout Eastern manner of speech—you must forgive me. She is safe, I tell you. I permitted the soldiers to go their way—they to the Heel of Achilles, whilst I, in my turn, ran swiftly to the vineyard of your Marcus Vidalius. I told Lydia what was brewing, she got the child and left with me. I conducted them to my own house, although you must realize, O gladiator, that this subjects me to a great hazard. If it were known—”

Faljan allowed himself a tight smile,

“If it were known, you would be handed over to Tigellinus to be tortured; therefore see that you keep discreet, betraying neither Lydia nor me.”

“’Twill be difficult to handle Mikrella. The brat runs the streets, as you know.”

“Warn her.”

“I shall at least tell her that if she fetches men to my house, I must charge her the regular lupanar rate.”

“If any man lies with her in your house it will be you, I’ll wager.

Speak of Lydia, not her wayward daughter—was she alarmed at the necessity of leaving the vineyard?”

“Nay,” and Ershutif turned thoughtful. “She took it most calmly, and in return sent you a message. Lydia directs you to be of good cheer. Odd . . .”

“Why odd?”

“It is not a Roman expression, that ‘be of good cheer’ of hers.”

“She is not a Roman. Lydia comes, I think, from Thrace.”

“Which is over toward Palestine.”

“What do you imply by that?”

“Nothing.”

Faljan let it drop. The Syrian was suspecting Christianity in what Lydia had said, perhaps also guessing that the gladiator himself inclined toward the new religion. It was a subject matter best left under a stone.

“I dislike the mention of money among friends,” Ershutif was murmuring, “but if you could give me something on account, it would oil the hinge, surely. You see, if I wait for my total gold until you and the girl are outside the walls of Rome—well, you understand, do you not?”

The gladiator paid him two gold pieces, Ershutif held out his hand for more,

“I am feeding your women, remember.”

Faljan tossed him a third piece,

“Come to me again in a few days, and fetch Mikrella.”

“So? What for?”

“That is my affair. Bring her, or you will rue it in your purse.”

The Syrian touched his breast with a quick instinctive gesture; Faljan pondered him,

“What is that you do?”

“I touched my patroness, the guardian and filler of my poor wallet. Ops, the Greek goddess of wealth.”

“Ah, so you believe in the gods!”

“I do, and I do not.”

“Let me see this Ops.”

Ershutif hauled on a leathern cord, drawing forth from inside his tunic a small hideous image carved in jade.

“Did you not tell me better,” said Faljan, with a short laugh, “I would take her for a madwoman sick with dysentery.”

“Be quiet! She could wreak vengeance upon you for such an insult.”

“What do you mean, you believe in the gods and yet do not? You surely have confidence in your Ops, else you would not be carrying her about.”

Ershutif tucked the image back inside his tunic,

“My gladiator, I bought Ops some months ago, wanting her to fetch me riches; and true, I have flourished since then. In my small way, you understand—a crumb here and a crust there. Yet what would have happened if I had not bought her? I was prospering, anyhow! Thus it is possible that Ops entered my life on a rising tide, and in getting credit for the continued tide, she merely *passes* for an aid, not really being one at all. One never knows, of course. The problem is confused, even for us soothsayers and astrologers. Still, when everything is said, the gods do exist; we know that as surely as we know our tongues lie between our teeth.”

Faljan had listened attentively to this. He nodded,

“Well reasoned, Ershutif. Now get along with you; and do not forget to fetch Mikrella next time.”

“She shall be here, as you demand.”

The Syrian hurried away with his three gold pieces, Faljan returned to his weight lifting. In his vitals a contradictory tearing storm: belief and doubt, trust and suspicion and resentment. Lydia and her sect, a religion proclaiming itself true, and all but the Christian god false and to be forsworn! Nay, it was impossible to forswear the divinities that Faljan had sucked in with his mother’s milk!

Well, of course, Mars might be dispensed with—Mars the god of tillage later grown truculent and become almost entirely a patron of war. Down with Mars. But not the others, not all of them.

He shook his head angrily. Great supernatural personages like Jupiter and Apollo had become corrupt, and hence were not to be clung to at too great a cost; yet it was undeniable that at the base of the teeming pyramid of Roman gods there were spirits and wild-wood deities which were as necessary as air and water. There was Faunus who watched over cattle, and Pomona presiding over fruit trees; Bona Dea who enriched the fields, and Sterculius the manure piles; Pales conserving pasture for the flocks, Ceres flourishing grain. There was Sylvanus of the woods, Terminus the god of landmarks, sweet Diana who accompanied you hunting and fetched beasts to your spear instead of you to their teeth. Why, even the earth was a goddess, a divine mother on whose bosom you lived and breathed, and without whose support you must surely plunge down into a Stygian void.

The gladiator had attempted to go Lydia's way, the way of her new religion. He had done his best to get clear of the arena; and had failed. The contest against Synistor was become as inevitable as tomorrow's sunrise—a struggle destined to end in death for one of them, and Faljan hamstrung by an oath not to kill!

"I shall have to break that oath," he muttered, swinging furiously at his weights.

"You are a hearty fellow!" laughed Hirl, coming up behind him. "The weights do not appear to be heavy enough for you."

"Perhaps not," and the gladiator whirled and seized Hirl by the waist, upending him and hurling him across the quadrangle to plop headfirst down onto the sand.

Hirl sprang up chuckling, came and gave Faljan his hand,

"Expertly done—if you move that swift in the arena, my money is on you, not Synistor."

Faljan grunted and turned away, bumped into Quartilla.

"I am glad you are beginning to knuckle down to your work," said the trainer; "but—"

"Ah, there is always a *but* in you!"

"You are strong and you are skillful," continued the trainer; "but keep a clutch on your feelings, even when exercising. Good fighters are fighters with control which never slackens, never lets them into temper. Once you lose your head in the ring and make a false move, not all the raised forefingers in the Roman Empire can save you."

"All of which I know. Have you so much breath that you must waste it on tales weathered over?"

"Be warned."

"May demons choke you," retorted Faljan. "I know my trade."

II.

He knew it well, and practiced it conscientiously all that day and the next and into the week following. Then Ershutif came with Mikrella, the girl all big eyes at the sight of so many torsos sweating in the quadrangle.

"Women are not allowed in barracks, save on the night before an important contest," said Quartilla. "Get her out of here."

"She is not a woman, she is a child," Faljan answered. "In two

minutes she will be gone—until then let me have peace with her. Come, Mikrella, I want to talk to you alone.”

Mikrella followed him with a disgruntled face,

“Still a child, am I!”

“Tell me, are you and your mother living in Ershutif’s house?”

“Yes.”

“Does he treat you well?”

“Well enough. Why?”

“Do not be so pert. Listen to me. I want you to take strict care not to mention to anyone that your mother has taken up with Christianity. This religion is not popular in Rome; indeed, it is beginning to run afoul of the law. She could be seized and thrown into prison for it.”

The girl sparkled with excitement,

“Is that why the soldiers were after her?”

“Do not ask questions, but be cautious in your talk and action. Above all things, do not permit anyone to follow you home to her.”

“Agreed—”

“Can you be sure that no one will follow you?”

“Not if I wish it otherwise. Who is the big man with all the scars?”

“He was formerly a slave in the galleys, which would be a good place for you. Now go home, and live your days with caution, until I come for you and your mother.”

“Are you going to marry her?”

“That depends.”

“And that,” retorted Mikrella, “is what men are forever saying to women—it depends! Well, regardless of the affair between you and my mother, what about me?”

“You I shall thrash daily with a bull whip, until you are grown and have sense. Farewell.”

She laughed and went slouching off to the street door, Ershutif remaining with the gladiator. Faljan said gloomily,

“How is Lydia?”

“As always—serene as a summer afternoon, and not at all worried about the outcome of your fight with Synistor. Naturally, she wants you to win, and that, with women, is enough—a wish is to them a guarantee of results! They are queer that way. By the by, Faljan!”

“Yes?”

“I am going over to watch Synistor at his training. Will you come along?”

“Will they allow us to enter?”

"We can wheedle our way in; I know how to manage such things. You had better come; it will give you a notion of what you are up against."

The gladiator hesitated,

"If Quartilla has no objections."

"None," said the trainer, when Faljan asked him. "There will be many people wagering on you, when you stand against Synistor; so you need all the pointers you can get. Be back within the hour."

III.

The private school conducted for gladiators by Inius Gallo was no more than a sheep's run from Faljan's barracks, yet even on so brief a walk he was reminded of what Poppaea had said.

"My divine husband," she had told Faljan, "is initiating an extraordinary series of games, in order to celebrate the advent of Rome's new Empress."

So, indeed! The streets on the way to Gallo's were filled with holiday crowds going to the arena, the gay expectancy of these people indicating that a first-rate and unusual spectacle awaited them. Today, and likewise tomorrow, and on many successive days. Weeks of sword play and water combats and wild-animal exhibitions, until at the peak of the program Faljan would enter the ring against the much-lauded Synistor.

"How do you feel about fighting this miller?" murmured Ershutif, as they trudged along.

"I do not feel about it at all."

"Do you want a reading of your future?"

Faljan said with emphasis—a little too much emphasis,

"Why not!"

"I will attend to it for you."

"Getting your information straight from the Cumaean Sybil herself, I suppose!"

"Or an equally good source. I will purchase a young goat and read its entrails in your behalf."

"I prefer a pig."

"Why?"

"A pig walks closer to the ground, and the earth is my deity—if I have one."

"As you like. I will select the animal on our way back to the barracks. Well, this is the place. Let me do the talking, remember."

"Easy enough," retorted Faljan, "since you rarely do anything else."

Gallo's private school was a small well-kept establishment, without outward sign of what it contained. The Syrian whacked the knocker down, a porter came to see what was wanted.

"We are admirers of Synistor," said Ershutif, "wagering on him in the coming battle, and therefore wishing to see him in training."

As he spoke, the Syrian attempted to push in, but the porter thrust him back,

"I will call the Master."

The porter closed the door in their faces, presently returned with Inius Gallo, a man obviously a patrician gone far down the hill. Report said that in a certain notorious embezzlement of public funds, he had been signaled out for dismissal so that bigger culprits might escape.

"Admirers of Synistor?" murmured Gallo, and smiled at Ershutif's companion. "Then Faljan intends to bet against himself, I take it! Enter, however. This is unusual, but I am a man of tolerance."

They walked in. The place was well furnished, kept very clean. Not more than a dozen gladiators were in residence, at the moment all of them in the quadrangle, for the most part watching Synistor at his exercises.

Synistor had been fisting at a bladder stuffed with wool and suspended by a stout chain. He stood stripped to his breechclout, a man perhaps fifteen years Faljan's senior, equal to him in weight, not so tall, blockier. The miller was scarred from head to foot, yet plainly tough—there was a great scar on his thigh where the muscles had wrenched an old wound into their own shape and line, instead of yielding to it, as ordinarily. The neck was thick and the chest deep, legs slightly bowed but big as trees. An almost imperceptible paunch.

The miller left off work to accept a big bowl of some kind of food. Ershutif whispered to Inius Gallo,

"What is that he is eating?"

"Barley. It hardens the muscles."

"His belly muscles need it," Faljan rejoined.

Synistor turned and saw his visitors. He finished the barley, cast aside the bowl, and without a word strode over to the hacked and battered post where swordsmen practiced their art. He held out a hand and an attendant fetched him a blade. Then he called for chalk,

carefully marked the post red at a point below middle, and another spot he marked near the top.

"This post is an enemy," said the miller, with a haughty drawl, "the red marks being arteries. The one below is in the groin, the upper one in the neck. Watch!"

He sprang back, made a few preliminary flourishes and leaped forward—the sword darted to the lower red mark, nicking it out of existence but scarcely touching the wood. Another bound backward, and again forward—the upper red mark vanished. The spectators applauded, save that Faljan said in affectation of the miller's drawl,

"Ah, yes, but a post is not a man."

Synistor glowered,

"We shall see!"

Inius Gallo was annoyed with Faljan, touched his arm commandingly,

"You and your friend must go. I'll have no quarreling here."

"I have seen enough," Faljan nodded.

The visitors permitted Gallo to escort them to the door, Ershutif murmuring,

"A feat, nicking arteries like that. Is it a new routine with him?"

The barracks keeper threw him a scornful glance,

"You must be freshly in Rome, my friend. Synistor has slain at least twenty men by that method. It is his speciality."

"H'm, a formidable fellow!"

"Rome," said Inius Gallo solemnly, "has never seen his equal."

IV.

In the street. Faljan walking steadily, eyes ahead, mouth saying nothing. It was Ershutif who talked,

"It does not look well for you, O Faljan. Better perhaps that you settle the matter by assassinating him before the match."

"No."

"Then cause another to do it. There are professional killers in Rome who would slay him for a gold piece or two."

"His blood would still be on my head."

The Syrian stopped in his tracks,

"By the horns of the Beast, you talk strangely of late! A man who

lives by dealing death, and yet hesitating over such a scruple! What has got into you?"

"To assassinate is one thing, to kill in the arena quite another."

"I see no difference, save that one is legal and the other not—and what is law but an artificial and arbitrary contrivance! Hold—wait!"

A vendor was approaching, on his back many little wooden cages containing pigeons and doves. Ershutif stopped him, examining his stock and resisting the fellow's efforts to sell him a pair of the big chestnut-colored pigeons so common on the Campagna. Instead, the Syrian purchased a white dove.

"Only one?" exclaimed the vendor. "How can it raise young ones, being only one!"

"By means of magic," said Ershutif, and paid him and went on with Faljan.

"Why the pigeon?" asked the gladiator.

"To read your future by."

"I said the entrails of a pig."

"Be advised, O Faljan. A pig is close to the earth, and the earth is perhaps your guardian, but a pigeon flies."

"Stop riddling."

"I mean this: swiftness will determine the contest lying ahead of you, and the pigeon is an emblem of speed. I know best; believe in me."

Faljan said no more, the Syrian began to study the sky,

"It is queer weather. Not so clear as June should be. Murky, in fact; what would be called, in my country, constipated weather. Heaven cannot void herself, which confirms other portents lately appearing."

This talk was rendering Faljan uneasy. He said reluctantly,

"Other portents?"

"Plenty of them. They are coming in from all parts of the city, and even from abroad. For instance, a farmer in the Alban Hills has reported that the crows thereabouts are singing like thrushes."

"His ears must be on backward."

"There is lightning striking in unaccountable places, colts being born with the feet of chickens. A red glow has appeared from the top of the Vesuvius which has been dead for so long."

"Portending what, all this?"

"Trouble, disaster, a great cataclysm."

Faljan laughed,

"Is, then, my fate so tremendous that entering the arena once more can stir up all these omens?"

Ershutif made a face,

"I am but reporting what is happening—interpret it for yourself, if you like. One moment, I must conceal our pigeon before we enter your quarters."

"Why conceal it!" Faljan said irritably.

"Quartilla would spot it and be angry. He would assume that I was attempting to foresee the outcome of the combat and then place my money accordingly."

"Which is no doubt true."

Ershutif tucked the pigeon snugly inside his tunic and they went into the barracks, making their way to Faljan's room without being noticed. In the room, with the door closed, the Syrian drew out the bird and surveyed it from all angles, even blowing against the feathers in order to examine the skin.

"Do what you must do," said Faljan; "you are only putting on a pretense, and you know it."

"The bird is ideal," Ershutif declared; "healthy, snow white—as it should be, of course—and possessing clear eyes with which to discern the future for us."

"Rip it open—let us see what the guts say."

The Syrian held the pigeon in his left hand, and with the forefinger of his right hand made an incision just below the breast bone. The bird struggled convulsively; he tore open the abdomen, pulled out the entrails and tossed the pigeon into a corner. The entrails he carefully spread in his left hand, peering at them with shrewd bright eyes. Faljan likewise bent over them, not knowing what he hoped to learn from an art which he did not understand, yet eager nevertheless.

Ershutif pawed the bloody mess to and fro, turned it over, pulled it apart. Then he pursed his lips.

"Well?" demanded Faljan.

Silently the soothsayer threw the entrails aside, wiped his hands on his bare ankles, sat down on the bed,

"The situation is confused."

"Meaning that you cannot read it straight. Where is the skill that you are always prating about!"

"In times of undue portent, contradictory signs, great magical struggles, any foreteller is at sea," replied the Syrian testily. "I know

not, Faljan—save that the entrails say you will not succeed in killing Synistor.”

Faljan took a long deep breath, but his eyes remained heavy,
“And as to his slaying me?”

“I read nothing concerning that. In mercy, the gods are perhaps veiling your unhappy end. Yes, that could be. Pity is now and again an attribute of our divinities.”

The gladiator pondered a moment, shook his head,

“Bah, the thing is ridiculous. One of us will be killed, that is as plain as a broken front tooth. Speak up—what is the truth of this matter?”

“I can only say what I have said,” answered Ershutif. “You will meet the miller in mortal combat, but you will not destroy him. I am sorry I cannot speak more clearly—there is some contrary magic at work, I suspect. Or it is as I said before—the gods, in mercy—”

“You liar, you are only seeking an excuse.”

“Perhaps Marcus Vidalius is confusing the issue!” said Ershutif, suddenly with a new idea. “Yes, that’s possible!”

“You are not only a liar, but mad. What are you talking about?”

“Listen to me, Faljan. The palace spies at last discovered that Lydia had been in retreat on the estate of this fruit prince, Vidalius. They went there and he professed to know nothing of where she had gone. The villains did not believe him. A watch was set, the notion being that he would slip off to wherever Lydia had fled, and warn her to be on guard. He did slip off, but when they followed him, found him, he was in a cellar where a pack of Christians were holding ceremony, or whatever Christians do when they come together. The lot of them was arrested, and all have been condemned to die in the arena. The charge: espousing a religion which has for its purpose the overthrow of the Empire.”

Faljan stared in dismay.

“And among those arrested was Vidalius?” he stammered.

“Exactly. Well, that finishes the fruit merchant—unless he can bribe himself out of it. But let us speak of more important things. Faljan, you must write me a paper.”

“What?”

“An order on the bank where you maintain your fifty thousand sesterces. I am keeping Lydia safe, and will continue to do so against the day of your calling for her and fleeing Rome. Yet if you die in the arena, you cannot fulfill your part of the bargain, and since I

shall have done my own part, I ought not to suffer loss for your failing. Give me a written demand for the money."

"So you can trick me, sell information of a certain damaging character to Poppaea!"

"Faljan, Faljan," said the little Syrian, with a wounded face; "how can you think such things? Come now, be reasonable; an order on the bank, dating it the day after your fight with Synistor. If you issue alive, you will have Lydia; if not, I shall have been protected."

"Very well," the gladiator said slowly. "I shall give you such an order—leaving the date open and filling it in only when we know the actual day of the combat."

CHAPTER 25.

I.

THE month of June dragged along heavy and humid, July arrived with a dull fierce heat which smote upon the city at earliest dawn, and baked it in pain until long after sundown. In his desire to solidify Poppaea's position as Empress, Nero had ordained a long full series of games for the pleasure of the people—but now, in early July, he became so impatient for the cool breezes of Antium, where he planned to go with his court for the summer, that he suddenly set the conclusion of the games for July eighteenth.

"Only five days more?" frowned Quartilla, receiving the new schedule. "This is squeezing our feet into very small sandals, indeed!"

The barracks hummed with excited talk, with an inevitable change in wagers. For, by all reports, Synistor would not be in first-rate condition by the eighteenth, and this would tell against him.

"I am betting five to two on Faljan!" cried Hirl jubilantly.

"And I at least better than even money," Tuscus said.

"He will win, for a certainty," added Recula. "Or ought to!"

It was good reasoning. Faljan had long ago settled down to hard training, strictly behaving himself, never going out to disport himself of an evening. He had, in fact, no desire to go out. Poppaea was a sour bitter taste in his memory's mouth; Lydia he dared not attempt to visit, lest he be followed by spies. The gladiator had to content himself with the news brought him almost daily by the little Syrian, Ershutif the combination comforter and tormentor who loved to detail Lydia's words and questions, hopes and messages. She apparently was calm, having no fear that her man would die in the arena.

"All in all," chuckled the Syrian, "she is either a fool or a seer; and being a woman, probably a fool."

Faljan spoke little during these last few days. A sense of profound fatalism hung over him. Come what might, he saw no way of being

able to affect the outcome. He stood at the bottom of a well, helplessly submitted to the gods and their problematical will.

July seventeenth. Morning. Ershutif at the barracks, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. The gladiator had filled in the date of the order for fifty thousand sesterces. The little Syrian could claim the money on July nineteenth, as soon as the bank opened. It was a good haul for him, nevertheless it was not enough—Ershutif must consider his wagering as well.

“Despite the pigeon entrails, you may win,” he kept murmuring. “Therefore take care. Watch the miller’s every move. Strike hard and fast. I am going to bet on you.”

Faljan roused up, his eyes broody with thought. No longer considering himself bound by his promise to Lydia, he meant to do his best in the ring; yet if he did so without first warning her of his change of intent, she would flee and he would never see her again. He must at least look upon her once more, speak to her, explain what he must do.

“I want to talk to Lydia this evening,” he said, “and since I could not possibly get permission to leave the barracks, could you fetch her here?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Safely? Without risk?”

“There will be small risk. I happen to know that Poppaea’s spies are still hunting for her, but at the moment a poor wretch of a fugitive from imperial wrath is of no consequence. For the space of today and tomorrow Rome will think of nothing save the games.”

“Go, then, and tell her to prepare to come. Use caution.”

“The caution of a thousand serpents,” Ershutif assured him, and went off.

Faljan returned to his exercises, training carefully, since at this late hour he could easily overreach his nerves and break from strain. He confined himself to rolling in the sand and somersaulting, shadow boxing, a brief hand-wrestle with Tuscus, and afterward manipulation of the type of sword he would be given to use against Synistor in the ring tomorrow.

“Keep your wrist quick and supple,” said Quartilla, watching him critically. “It is your best safeguard against that habit he has of flipping open an enemy’s artery.”

“He will never do that to me.”

“Good, that’s proper spirit. How is your bruise feeling?”

“Bruise?”

"On your arm, the one you brought back from some brawl or other. It is still black."

"I had forgotten it. It does not bother me at all."

The trainer was easier in his mind, and so were Faljan's mates. Every man in the barracks would fight tomorrow, yet it was the contest against Synistor which was by far most important. The onetime cattle drover was at the top of his form, lithe and graceful on his feet, his chest magnificently plated with muscle, waist nipped in, loins both powerful and slender. Twenty-four years old, as far as he knew; possibly twenty-five, but certainly not over twenty-six.

In the middle afternoon he was called into the doctor's cubicle for a physical examination. The room was crowded: the Director, Quartilla, the staff doctor and two bonebreakers fetched in for this special occasion. The gladiator stripped naked, the three doctors went over him in meticulous detail, touching up wounds, manipulating muscles, prodding his softer parts.

"Have you been out with women lately?"

"No."

"You are apparently in the peak of condition. You may put on your breechclout."

The visiting doctors dismissed, the Director took Faljan into his office for a confidential talk.

"I am between Scylla and Charybdis," said the Director frankly. "You see, it is secretly a fact that Synistor is favored by—well, by certain imperial elements. And yet this is the Imperial School! It has been a difficult position for me, causing me to wonder whether to support you or your enemy."

"And what," asked Faljan dryly, "have you decided?"

"Tell me first—were you acquainted with a man named Marcus Vidalius?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"He became involved in a certain intrigue, and was yesterday slain in the arena. By a netter, if I remember rightly."

The gladiator managed to say nothing, the Director resumed without suspicion,

"Faljan, I have made up my mind to stand back of you, not Synistor. This is a grudge fight, with intrigue yeasting behind it; but in cases of intrigue, motives and opinions change like wind, and I therefore feel that the wisest thing for me to do is to be loyal to my own man."

"Thank you."

"One last word."

"Yes?"

"Synistor is a fighter of much more experience than you," said the Director earnestly; "and in addition a born killer. Moreover, he hates you most vehemently. On the other side of the slate, you are in better condition and have your youth to draw upon. Have no dread of his past record, therefore; a young gladiator must inevitably conquer an old one. You have at least an even chance, and probably better."

Faljan nodded quietly, whereupon the Director was encouraged. It was an excellent sign in a fighter, this calm cool confidence.

Save that in Faljan it was not confidence. It was a benumbing dread of seeing Lydia this evening, facing her and having to tell her that he was rejecting her Christ.

II.

Ershutif led her out of his apartment just before sunset, purposely choosing a time of day when people would be hurrying home from their tasks, weary and without interest in anything except an evening meal and rest. No one remarked her in the streets; she was wrapped in a cloak and thus was simply another female figure.

Faljan had been expecting her. He saw the porter go to the door, and followed him.

The Syrian came in, behind him Lydia. Only her face was visible in the enveloping cloak. She said not a word, but put her arms about Faljan's neck and laid her mouth to his. A soft and yet a firm kiss, shattering away all the brusqueness which the gladiator had been building up against her. He was confused, thrown off stride.

"Come to my room," he said.

Ershutif followed them like a shadow, on the way sniffing at the odor of good food wafting about. On this evening, as was the custom before an important fight, the barracks provided a most excellent supper for its gladiators—not only for the gladiators, but likewise for such outsiders as friends and relatives of the men fighting on the morrow.

"Including me, of course," said the little Syrian insinuatingly. "Eh, Faljan, my brother?"

"Be quiet."

Quartilla intercepted them, his eyes darting over Lydia's figure, "This woman is staying to supper?"

"No; she is merely a visitor. I have certain things to discuss with her."

"In your room?" scoffed the trainer.

"Yes."

"I will allow it—but leave the door open."

"Why is that necessary?"

"Because you are not to disport yourself before the fight. Get along with her; and mind, the door remains open."

Faljan took the girl by the arm and led her into the room, wheeled and gave Ershutif a violent shove backward,

"This is private!"

The Syrian went off grumbling, Faljan turned to gaze at the woman. She took off her cloak and laid it on the bed. How beautiful she was! A little thin, even haggard about her great luminous eyes, but lovely just the same. Lydia had gained weight since he saw her last; there was color faintly in her cheeks, the lips were pink and full. They stood gazing at each other in silence, the girl smiling fondly until she observed a red angry wound on his shoulder,

"A cut, my Faljan?"

"Merely the skin broken. It is red because the doctor cauterized it with a hot iron."

She shivered a little, took her eyes from the wound. Very calmly, and with an air of possession, she extended her hands and clasped his,

"Oh, how long it has been since we last met!"

"And perhaps even longer until we meet again," he said, in sudden dejection. "If ever we are to meet again."

"Hush," she whispered reproachfully. "You must think upward, not downward, my dearest."

"I fight tomorrow," he reminded her. "Synistor my redoubtable antagonist; he determined to slay me, and I—if I were bound by what I promised you—I, his certain victim."

"If you were bound!" she exclaimed. "Ah, but you are, Faljan! You gave me your sworn word. You would not break your oath, would you? Oh, you could not!"

III.

The gladiator fixed his hard gray eyes upon the wall, saying nothing.

What a weak switching weathervane of a thing a man could be, where a woman was involved! He had determined to tell Lydia that her Christianity was a mirage, a snare, and that consequently he was renouncing it. Thus he had decided, and all these days and weeks had been living accordingly—training to kill Synistor, expecting to kill him. And now he was faltering in this sensible resolve. Lydia was his woman, his warm life; he could not find it in him to thrust her down into hurt and disillusion. He was betrayed; by her, and by his own weak longing, betrayed.

“Speak to me,” she said anxiously. “What is it?”

“Ah, what is it!” cried the gladiator, in a furious voice. “Very little; it is simply that if I do not fight him, and fight with honest effort to kill, he in his turn will slay me. There is no other way.”

“There will be another way.”

“How?” he demanded, and sprang to his feet. “What way?”

“I know not, but—”

“Nor I!” he retorted. “Will it be by magic, miracle, or what? I should like to know, being somewhat involved in the matter! Perhaps in the midst of our contesting, Synistor will throw down his sword and proclaim that he is secretly a Christian and thus I am his brother, friend, and fellow spirit, to be spared from his sword—and if someone must die, if only that will satisfy the lust of the mob, let him be struck to earth by the arena guards, so that neither of us may be contaminated by the blot of murder! Will it be like that, do you think!”

She did not quail before his anger, but only said in a quiet voice,

“It is unseemly to speak thus. You must be tranquil, O Faljan.”

“Tranquil! And in the ring tomorrow, tranquil likewise?”

“There is a thing called faith,” she answered; “and if you hold it strongly enough, it will move mountains.”

“Move mountains, will it!”

“Move mountains, Faljan.”

“Bah, you are talking myth!”

"I am talking Christ, and the necessity of trusting in Him. Won't you try to have faith, my dearest?"

The gladiator was trembling, his skin hot and cold with such violence that he felt himself in danger of swooning. He believed in this woman, whatever his opinion of her Christian god. And believing in her, he could not believe that she was deceiving him, selling him the bleat of a sheep for mutton. At least not purposely. Women had clever instincts; perhaps she was right and he was wrong.

He fell to reasoning against himself, drawing up from his secret longing heart arguments as strong for her view as those he had once piled up against it. Until the death of Vortinax, he had trusted to his luck, which was only another name for the favor of the gods. They had failed him, the barbarian dying at Faljan's own hand. What, then! Could he credit the gods further, trust them with himself in this most vital of all trials, the combat against Synistor? Probably not. Why not throw in his lot with Christ, or Jesus—whatever he preferred to call himself—see what fortune this strange divinity might fetch him! As a matter of fact, he had no choice—he could not break his word to Lydia, and hence must go with the god who had caused her to exact it of him.

"I will keep my oath," he said.

"And will you have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?"

"I will try. I can guarantee no more."

"It is enough," she smiled. "Peter himself would ask no further assurance of you."

"Peter! Have you been talking to him?"

"Oh, yes. I went often to him during these past few days, needing the comfort he could give me. I told him everything concerning you and me, Faljan, and he has commanded us to take comfort in Christ's name. . . . Faljan!"

"What?"

"I have been baptized."

"Baptized?"

"It is a sprinkling on of holy water, a symbol of cleansing sins away, a being received into the Christian fold."

"Who did that to you?" he asked wonderingly.

"Peter the Apostle."

"I never heard of such a thing."

"You have heard of similar things, surely. Water, even among the Romans, is a thing used in ceremonies for purposes of purification."

"That's true," then his eyes sharpened. She was drawing a small

earthenware bottle from her wallet, her manner slow and ceremonious. The girl unstopped it,

"The bottle contains water which Peter blessed for me—in case you were willing to be baptized."

"Well!" he exclaimed in surprise. "I am not so sure about that!"

"It would make me very happy, Faljan."

"Has it made you happy for yourself to be baptized?"

"Yes. Happy, and trustful of the outcome of the ordeal ahead of you. It is holy water, and able to secure you the loving protection of Christ our Lord."

Faljan swallowed painfully,

"I need that—if I need anything! But this Peter—he is not here—"

"He consecrated the water for me, gave me permission to use it in his stead."

"Just how is it done?" he asked dubiously. "Maybe you don't know the trick of it."

"You are sprinkled with it, and certain words are said. That is all. Will you let me?"

He nodded slowly,

"Do it."

Lydia signed for him to bow his head, which he did. Then she took a few drops of water in her hand and scattered it over him, repeating solemnly the words she had learned from Peter,

"I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen."

He lifted his head, a little frightened,

"Is it over?"

"Yes."

"Father and Son, I understand," he said in puzzlement; "but who is this Holy Ghost?"

"I do not know, exactly."

"He sounds powerful, anyway."

She kissed him gently,

"I must take my leave. You have things to do here, and I need to go home and pray."

"Pray for me?" he said wonderingly.

"For no other," she whispered. "Will you take me to the door?"

Faljan clasped her hand and led her out of the room and across the end of the quadrangle. A long supper table had been laid, the gladiators and Ershutif prowling about it like hungry dogs.

"No going into the street, Faljan!" called the trainer.
The gladiators looked up, grinned and guffawed discreetly, Faljan paid no attention. He went on with her, stopped at the door.
She faced him with steady eyes,
"I shall be there tomorrow, my darling."
"Where? At the arena?"
"Yes."
"Stay away from there!"
"I cannot. I must be there among the spectators, to witness how Christ shall save you from death. Let my presence comfort you, my constant prayers bring you easy mind."
"I don't like it," he muttered.
She kissed him a last time,
"Farewell, my husband—until our further meeting."
"Farewell," he answered. "Farewell. . . ."

IV.

She was gone, and somehow Ershutif was walking beside him,
"I have a confession to make, O Faljan."
"Eh?"
"I made inquiries at your bank."
"What for?" said the gladiator, and spoke mechanically, his thoughts being upon Lydia.
"Because I suspected that you might have withdrawn the money. To be frank, I was quite certain that you were deceiving me in the matter of my fifty thousand sesterces."
Faljan said nothing. He scarcely heard.
"However, I found that the money is still actually there. I crave your pardon, Faljan."
"You are a knave."
"Not so; I am merely practical. I could not believe that you would sign away a young fortune just to be assured of the safety of a woman! My mistake, of course. Tonight I believe it. You are stuck deep, my friend; far into the heart and liver with her, eh?"
"Yes."
"Love must be a splendid thing—splendid, indeed."

"Hold your peace."

A gong sounded. The supper guests were trickling in from the street, the food was about to be served. The Director appeared and took seat at the head of the table, Quartilla this evening occupying a bench at the lower end. A clamor of voices arose, particularly from those visitors who were professional handicappers, bettors dropping in for the purpose of sizing up the gladiators and thus knowing, perhaps, how to place their money on the morrow. The more silent guests were friends and relatives of the fighters, brothers or fathers or a wife or two, present to encourage their kin or possibly take charge of their few possessions—on the expectation that next day would see them dead. Tuscus had a father at the table, Hirl a brother, Recula noisily introduced a little boy as his natural son, fortunately resembling not at all his outrageous mother. Everybody ate heartily, whether they felt like it or not: it would not do to appear worried.

"Meat?" said a guest, politely shoving a platter toward Faljan.

"Nay," put in the Director; "he has special food tonight."

The special food came on, Faljan's mates identifying its several items with envious shouts. The flesh of a lion killed that very day in the arena, for whoever ate lion's meat thereby took in courage. Lion; and also a roast of bear, for burly strength; and then finally a small platter bearing nothing but a pair of eyes.

"From the eagle of Sardinia!" announced the trainer Quartilla, and a roar of approval went up. "Eagle eyes to lend our gladiator quick sight in tomorrow's combat!"

Hands beat upon the table until the bowls and trenchers jumped, Faljan got to his feet with the eagle eyes between his fingers.

"To the glory of the barracks which schooled me for the arena!" he declared stanchly.

Then he swallowed them, and the applause welled up again. Likewise boastful shouts,

"Faljan will triumph! The miller is a sack of wind, nothing more! He is a lump of his own flour, ready to fly apart into dust as soon as Faljan blows upon him!"

The Director rapped on the table,

"Mention of enemies here on this last night is forbidden. It brings bad fortune; the gods do not like it."

The table quieted down, knives flashing and jaws munching.

"Well," said Ershutif, "the odds are now in favor of Faljan, I understand."

"Mention no odds here," frowned the Director. "It is forbidden."

"No enemy names and no odds," Ershutif said; "but of omens surely I may speak!"

"Omens," answered the Director contemptuously, "are twenty to the copper coin."

"Not if they be important. Did you know, for example, that a ship docked down at the Tiber bank this afternoon?"

"As on any other day."

"This ship is from Egypt."

Ershutif said this but no more, which rendered the company eager and impatient. The Director asked brusquely,

"What of the ship from Egypt?"

"It fetched grain from the region of the Upper Nile, and not only grain but a fearsome tale."

"Ah," said Hirl, with a laugh, "the Sphinx has whelped, I expect!"

The little Syrian threw him a fierce protesting glance, went on with a lofty air,

"My portent concerns the phoenix."

There was a sudden stiff silence. The phoenix, rare and legendary bird of antiquity, always a source of baffled speculation! When the phoenix thrust itself into the news, it was important, no man cared to deny that.

"What has happened?" asked the Director, now respectful.

"The phoenix," said Ershutif, slowly, because he meant to enjoy his moment; "has settled upon its nest, fire has risen to consume it—as is always the case when that strange bird must end its career—and out of the crumbling cooling ashes the new phoenix, the chick, has arisen into the world. Which foretells, as you all must realize, an event of great and even cataclysmic importance. I do not claim, being mere mortal man, that this has anything to do with Faljan and Synistor tomorrow, yet it is odd, is it not! that such an omen should reach us on the very eve of their combat in the arena?"

CHAPTER 26.

I.

RISING time at the barracks was announced by a double gong, followed invariably by groans and curses as the gladiators got up to another day's labor.

This morning, however, there were no such lamentations. The men rose quickly, faces alert and sober with a consciousness of the risks to attend them before another night. Only Tuscus ventured to joke, as they gathered at the long wooden table for breakfast,

"By all the gods in Rome, big, little, and medium sized, it is a sorry thing that although a man's dream is his own, private as his belchings or the rumbling of his bowels, yet he cannot understand it without calling in some pox like Ershutif to interpret for him. I dreamt last night that I was a woman, and Recula was at me!"

"That was not dream, but wish," said Hirl, and a gust of brief laughter went up from the gladiators.

Faljan did not laugh. He himself had had a dream, an awesome frightening thing awakening him chill with sweat in the hour preceding dawn. After which there was no sleep for him. Rome was ever noisy at night, and upon this occasion the whole city seemed restlessly on the move. Nero had decreed that today, on the final session of the games, all upper seats at the arena were to be free; and accordingly the rabble had begun to trek off for them not so long after midnight. The multitudinous feet were still shuffling past the barracks as Faljan lay and struggled with the meaning of his dream.

He dreamt that he was fetching cattle home from pasture, but was yet a considerable distance from the stables of Curtius Criba when a fog descended upon him. For a time he could see the beasts ahead of him very well, then they faded and he was in a kind of vacuum, this so disquieting that he feared lest spirits had taken the cattle and would presently seize upon him as well. He reached out and managed to clutch something, and it turned out to be the tail

of a bullock. The warm solidness of the thing lent him courage. The fog dispersed and he came safely home with his creatures.

What could it portend! On the face of it, the dream was rubbish, and yet because it had come to him on the eve of his last and greatest fight, it must surely have meaning of some sort. He sighed, and at once his companions threw fearful glances his way.

"No moods now," said Quartilla briskly. "Remember, Faljan, today you are the jewel in our heads."

Faljan ate his meat, chewing it slowly and well. Not much water, as was best before combat. He recalled the day he fought Vortinax, the blond barbarian so feverish that at breakfast he drank quantities of water on the sly. Vortinax of the heaven-blue eyes, gone home to his forest upon a trail of ascending light.

Tiny drops of sweat appeared on Faljan's lip. As soon as he had eaten enough, he rose and went to the barracks barber to be shaven. The barber talked,

"The wind today is from the south. An African wind, which means an aggravating wind, tormenting the spirits of men."

The gladiator did not reply, but when the barber further observed that it was hot even for July, Faljan said,

"You will be telling me next that you are a barber. I know it is hot."

The offended one finished him quickly, Faljan rose and went to his room to dress. Quartilla peeped in,

"We leave within the hour."

"Why so early?"

"To keep from being trampled by the crowd. They will expect us later, so we must outwit them. Anyhow, it is always cooler underground."

Faljan completed his dressing and sat down on the edge of the bed. A bullock's tail, and fog. Surely it must mean something! No doubt, but although he thought and thought, he could discover no clue to his dream. He was still pondering the matter, when Ershutif came into the room, sly as a conspirator,

"Have no fear for Lydia. She is already at the arena."

"Just how do you know that?"

"I took her."

"Was she noticed?"

"Not even the dead Cleopatra parading the streets with her adder would be noticed today. Or was it an asp?"

"Where does she sit?"

"I know not, having left her at the entrance arches. I myself will be in the underground galleries, and thus near you, my friend. May fortune light upon us today, Faljan! I have decided to wager three thousand sesterces upon your winning, pigeon entrails notwithstanding."

The gong sounded, Quartilla's voice began to bawl,
"Everybody line up! Line up—line up!"

II.

They stood stiffly in a row while the Director inspected them. A mere formality, over quickly, and the gladiators transferred back to the more sensible hand of Quartilla. The trainer maneuvered them to the door, out into the street, where a detachment of soldiers awaited them. The gladiators were formed into twos, marched off.

There were plenty of people in the streets, most of them waiting for the gladiators to pass. When they saw Faljan they fell to shouting,

"The tall handsome one, that is the one!"

"Faljan, Faljan will win today!"

"O wondrous gladiator, slay the miller who makes bread dear and thus deserves to die! Give him a thrust for me!"

Marching alongside Faljan, Tuscus said out of the corner of his mouth,

"All fine praise and honey-sweet, yet when Synistor comes along, they will shout for him, too. These rascals care for no man; they are interested only in a rousing fight, with certain death at the end for someone; it matters not which. Unless they have placed bets; then they care."

A man with a boy pushed up to Faljan, held up a hand in supplication,

"Permit my little son to touch you, O Faljan, that he may grow to be a famous gladiator like you!"

"Get back," Faljan growled. "You are a monster to rear your son to such an occupation."

The crowd laughed at the father, the boy wept angry tears, the column of fighters passed methodically on its way. Faljan could see the arena now. There was a thick press of people hanging about the

entrances, and also along the side where the gladiators must enter. The soldiers escorting the column began to strike out with the flat of their swords, crying,

“Make way, make way for the imperial gladiators!”

Hirl caught sight of a bet maker in the crowd, called out,

“What odds, my friend?”

“Three to two on Synistor!”

Surprise jerked over the column. Everybody had expected at least even rates. Faljan could not believe it; this was practically the only time in his career that he had not been the favorite. However, it did not matter. A bet was not a fight.

They paused; the entrance gates swung back, they began to trudge down the incline to the galleries under the arena.

“We enter,” rumbled Hirl, “but will we come out again!”

“Certainly,” said Tuscus.

“What?”

“If not by this door, then via the Tiber.”

It was cooler down here, but unpleasant as usual with the body-and-dung smell of wild beasts. The odor of them was everywhere, raw and sinister in the nostrils, choking the throat like invisible fingers. Above the heads of the marching gladiators, there sounded a deep wide unseen murmur of human voices, as the mob waited impatiently for the games to begin.

“Faljan, you in here!”

He was shunted off to his dressing room, where Besidus was awaiting him. The valet fetched him a stool, began to gossip. The day’s program was badly mixed up, not at all sensible. It seemed that Nero, with his usual disconcerting blend of penury and wastefulness, was determined to use up today all the acts intended for tomorrow and the next day as well; not actually all of them, of course, because they would be impossible, but the best and showiest.

“When do I come against Synistor?”

“Not until late this afternoon. You two are the big entry, and hence reserved for the very last.”

“Where is he?”

“He arrived a few minutes ago, by the west entrance. You will not see him until the parade to the podium; which, by the way, will not occur for some hours.”

“No? Why the delay?”

“The games are to begin with a water festival; a battle, I think.

The parade of gladiators will have to wait until this is finished and the water drained off. Are you uneasy, my master?"

"Why do you talk so much—was your mother forked by an ape?"

"I was only trying to amuse you."

"It would take more than you to do that!"

The door opened and Khonca looked in,

"Psst! Would Faljan like to avail himself of the window?"

"Window?"

"The one where he watched before with my brother-in-law. He has paid, you know. And besides, he is Faljan."

The gladiator remembered now. A brother-in-law named Big Gullet, dead of the disease of going too often to the arena. Dead long ago. No; not long ago; on the hectic mad calendar of Rome, it only seemed so.

"Take me there," he said.

"May I go along?" the valet asked eagerly. "I will not chatter, O Faljan; I swear it."

"Come, then."

III.

Khonca conducted them to the little barred window, and went away. The gladiator crouched down to observe the arena, Besidus imitating his every move.

The arena had become a sea, sand removed and the planking caulked with pitch and oakum, water run in, and now the agitations of a hot wind producing the semblance of small waves. A number of galleys lay anchored at the edges; how many of them Faljan could not tell, his window was so small. Gaily decorated galleys, and yet equipped for combat, that much was apparent.

A flurry of applause; Nero had arrived.

Presently the trumpets sounded, armed men appeared on the decks of the galleys. Column after column of sea warriors, until the ships were packed. Then slowly, gracefully, the galleys were rowed out into the open water. Seven of them. They maneuvered for position, the decks lined with men bearing swords or spears, or great stones to be thrown by means of slingshots resembling the bird-killing things

which Faljan had used in his boyhood. The trumpets signaled combat, the galleys bore down upon one another.

There was no plan, no specified enemy. It was simply that seven galleys were ordered into battle, the commanders to use their own judgment as to which ships to attack. To attack, that was all that was required.

The clash of weapons and the encouraging shouts of the thousands of serried spectators filled the air. Two galleys slammed together, their crews linking oars and instantly their fighting men tangling in hand-to-hand struggle. The losers were stabbed, slashed, beheaded, disemboweled; the victors threw the corpses overboard and the water began to heave.

"Crocodiles!" whispered Besidus. "The water is full of them."

Faljan nodded, watching intently as the so-called naval battle proceeded. A second galley was defeated and its men tossed to the crocodiles; a third, fourth, fifth. The water was crimson with blood, the stench of death almost insupportable. Two galleys remained, between them, now, a desperate struggle which threatened to destroy both aggressor and defender. Then inevitable victory to one, and the triumphant crew turning toward the podium with uplifted weapons,

"Caesar, Caesar! Great noble Caesar, hail!"

Their victory chant ended in yells of consternation. They had won, but by way of reward their galley was coming apart at the seams. Exactly as Agrippina's vessel had done upon her journey homeward from Baiae the summer before—save that here the breaking was initiated by a slave, upsetting balance weights and then leaping overboard to try his luck against the crocodiles. Yells, curses of rage at Nero's ingratitude—rending timbers, inrushing water, the yawning maws of crocodiles gathering round. Men lost their footing and sank into the turbulent water, attempting to use their swords and spears against the brutes of the Nile, while the mob in the gallery seats shrieked with laughter. The water turned redder, the tails of the crocodiles stopped lashing, the cries of the dying men fell away and away.

Noon recess.

IV.

Caesar and the greater part of his high-born companions returned to the palace for cool baths, fresh clothes and perfume, and a light lunch. The masses of the spectators, on the contrary, stuck to their seats, fearing lest these be taken if they went out for food or whatever else nature demanded. The arena was being drained of water, galleys and corpses removed, the swollen hideous crocodiles driven back into their dens.

Vendors appeared in the aisles, to chant their wares and the prices. Music struck up from somewhere, but quickly drowning it came a great rhythmic shouting,

“Gifts, gifts, and the lottery tickets! Gifts, gifts, where are the gifts?”

Everybody was craning up toward the awning, where by means of cords an enormous number of small packages had been suspended. The spectators stood and yelled impatiently, stretching up their hands, even forgetting to eat their nuts and honey cakes and chick peas, so great was their desire for a gift. Then at a signal by trumpet, the little packages began to tumble upon the crowd, the rabble snatching them as they fell, grabbing away from one another what they imagined to be a better prize. Impatient hands ripped open the packages, out came cakes, or gaudy masks, whistles fashioned out of willow wood, plums or raisins, sometimes little figurines of various gods.

Conventional trivial gifts, but enlivened by the biting humor of Tigellinus the Sicilian. A poor fool opened his package and out darted a dozen yellow hornets, stinging him into howls and curses. Still another, avidly plunging his hand into a box, brought forthright a handful of the odorous dung of the Rhodian hens so popular in the Campagna, and always laying very good-sized eggs. His neighbor guffawed at him, and promptly got the stuff rubbed in his face—the two of them fought and scratched like a pair of drunken wenches. Down came packages somewhat larger, and presumably more valuable. These contained bundles of cloth, or sandals, food in quantity—but Tigellinus had had a finger in this, too. A certain man unwrapped

his package with joy, probing at it through a hole and shouting for all to hear,

"I think it is a fur piece for winter! Ye gods, I ought to have married the girl instead of merely seducing her—then I could get some good out of this thing!"

It was not a fur piece but a dead cat, long and black, with horribly grinning teeth. With a cry of startled fury the unlucky owner stood up in his seat and whirled it round and round his head,

"May Caesar be accursed for so low a jest! I give it back to him, the mother killer!"

So saying, he hurled the cat in the direction of the podium, aiming well, but himself too far removed for the cat to reach Nero's place. The carcass fell over the balustrade into the arena, where a soldier picked it up and disposed of it. But the cat thrower continued to rage,

"He is a mother killer, which is something I have never been—even if I am a cleaner of pots and barrels! May Caesar boil in pitch, the goggle-eyed bastard!"

Laughter and hooting followed this sally, no one giving him a great deal of heed because other and really valuable gifts were about to come. Not actual gifts, but lottery tickets. Many blanks among them, as in all lotteries, yet a surprising number of tickets calling for rich prizes. Faljan, staring from his barred window, noticed with amusement that bald-headed beaky little Seneca had returned to his seat, no doubt shortening his lunch for the chance of a lottery prize.

The racket of the crowd sank to a murmur, everyone waiting, gazing upward, making signs for luck or muttering pleas to small god images which they drew from their tunics. The vendors put aside their baskets, got ready to grab with the others. A steady stream of well-to-do spectators was returning from the noon recess. Then a trumpet, and the tiny packages falling, coming down straight as arrows, because of the lead weighting each one.

The shouting and trampling began all over again, save that this time even rich merchants and senators took part. The paper packets were ripped open, cries of despair rising when a blank was found, exultant shouts going up at the discovery of a substantial prize,

"I have won an Hispanian mare!"

"For me, a statue out of Greece! I'll sell it. Who can eat a statue!"

"A slave, I've drawn a slave! O immortal gods, make it a female slave and young, with luscious breasts! Thanks, O Caesar, thanks—especially if it turns out to be a female!"

"A chariot! Look, it says a chariot—or *is* that the way to spell chariot? Martius, Martius—how do you spell chariot?"

"That is nothing!" cried still another. "I have won a villa, and furnished, too, it says here. Beyond the river, which is all right, I suppose. Rome is spreading like a ringworm—the Transtiber will soon be as much in the city as the Forum itself."

Faljan looked on without comment. He was thinking of Lydia, wishing for the time to pass, the parade to come. So that he could go into the arena and search her out with his eyes. There was in him a great hunger for her, as well as an intolerable sadness. The gladiator could not explain it, nevertheless it was there. Perhaps it signified that this day he was to die, and never see her again, never feel her soft warm lips on his. Many new religions had sprung up in the world, and many were false and in the end went to pieces, like the treacherous galleys which Caesar built for his water games. Lydia believed in her Christ, yet what assurance was there that this confidence was justified?

All of a sudden he vomited, his mouth gaping wide and his eyes bloodshot. Besidus was terrified,

"What is the matter? Are you ill, my master? Shall I get you a bit of food to settle your stomach?"

Faljan rose and turned from the window,

"No food. A drink of vinegar water, perhaps. Fetch it to my dressing room."

V.

He drank the vinegar water and rested a little. To judge from the murmuring in the arena above his head, Nero had returned from his leisurely hour of refreshment. The games were resuming.

The superintendent of the underground galleries came into Faljan's dressing room, followed by two soldiers. One soldier bore a sword made of steel plated over with silver. The other carried an oblong shield, likewise silvered on the surface.

"No helmet?" said the gladiator, with a wry smile.

"It is desired that your faces be clearly seen," answered the superintendent.

"Our faces and the expected rage and pain upon them, eh!"

"Try the sword for weight."

"No helmet, and no breastplate," said Faljan, taking the sword and hefting it. "So that also our wounds may be plenty. Tell me, why is my equipment silver?"

"Synistor wears gold today, you wear silver."

Faljan did not relish that,

"And gold being more valuable than silver, does this imply that he is the better man?"

"Not at all," said the superintendent quickly. "It is the result of the current betting odds, nothing more. Synistor became the slight favorite over you."

Besidus put in with a grimace,

"The odds did not swing normally against my master, but only because of rumors manufactured among the wager takers."

"It will all even up in the arena," the superintendent reminded them. "The parade is forming. Be ready."

Faljan tried the shield, particularly the handholds, its weight and balancing properties. A trumpet again, an attendant popping into the dressing room to warn him to come quickly.

The gladiator slung the shield up his left arm, took his sword, and strode out. He walked to the end of the corridor, found Synistor there in golden armor, paused beside him. They did not speak.

A sound of gates creaking open, and the column of fighters marched forward. Faljan had never seen so many combatants, or such variety. There were dwarfs, black men from Africa, a scattering of clowns, women, cripples, and even a young patrician. Yells and jibes went up as this one appeared in view,

"A high-born noble! And what will he fight, a dwarf or a woman?"

"A clown would suit him better!"

"Ho, patrician, what brings you here, my fine fellow?"

Faljan and Synistor marched at the end of the long column, out of the gates and onto fresh sand. The water had disappeared; this was the regulation arena. The patrician was far ahead, his mockers still baiting him—but suddenly the crowd caught sight of the miller and Faljan—applause and howls went up, Faljan's supporters incensed because he was not wearing the golden armor, Synistor's friends delirious with joy and immediately seeking to increase their bets.

They were approaching the podium, but Faljan looked elsewhere. His eyes swept up over the rows of senators, bankers, politicians, the priests, officials, important provincial visitors. Lydia would be among

the lesser folk, far up toward the rim of the slope of seats. He searched for her in vain; all Rome was here today, the stands full as an egg; even love and longing could not pick out one single lone individual.

The column halted, faced the podium in preparation for the usual salute. Faljan turned his eyes upon it, quickly taking in all that he saw up yonder. Nero was there, bland and careless; Poppaea sat beside him, lovely as a flower, and smiling down oddly upon the gladiator. No Agrippina, no Octavia, and no Burrus. Rumor said lately that the old warrior was ill of a throat ailment, yet this afternoon Tigellinus was well forward in the podium, and moreover the Sicilian wore the uniform of the Chief of the Imperial Guard. A coincidence? Nay; Burrus was doubtless dead of opened veins.

The gladiators raised their weapons, declaiming in unison, "Hail, Caesar, we who are about to die salute you!"

Nero scarcely noticed them. After all, that was the function of the wretches down there on the sand—to salute him and to die, in order that he might stave off boredom for a little time. The column wheeled under command and went back underground, only immediate contestants remaining behind.

The tempo of the games quickened. Cripples were brought out and put to fighting dwarfs, a spectacle both comical and fantastic, and vastly enjoyed by the onlookers. Attendants hauled out the dead bodies, spread fresh sand; women gladiators came on to contend with others of their clumsy sex. And again death, blood and a smell which not all the perfume in Rome could drench away. Women, and after the women men blindfolded and armed with swords, striking wildly and shouting in rage as death took them. Men next fought with knobby clubs, and others with net and sword, after the manner of Faljan and his first enemy here in the arena on a certain never-to-be-forgotten November day. And then picked spearmen strove, and following these there were more swordsmen. The quality of the fighters improved; there were excellent combats now; the games were building up to Faljan and Synistor.

To the surprise of the watching gladiator, crouched again at his barred window, the young patrician was matched against the scarred and formidable Tuscus. Faljan turned to his valet in disgust,

"This is a jest! The patrician has no more chance than straw in a fire."

"It is not intended that he have a chance. He is a man named Nillas—have you heard of him?"

"No."

"In other words, a lover of Poppaea's."

"What's that!" said Faljan sharply. "Where have you heard such a thing?"

"In the barbershops, the Forum, the streets. Ever since about the time that you were matched against Synistor, it seems that this Nillas had been her paramour, visiting her in an arbor at the rear of the palace grounds, but at last caught by guards set for the purpose. It is said that Nero suspicioned all was not proper in the moonlit grounds, and had them watched. You yourself were luckier, O Faljan."

The gladiator scowled at him. This low villain of a Besidus seemed to ferret out everything. Not that it made any difference in tomorrow's bread, nevertheless Faljan had small liking for such long noses. He turned back to the arena. The patrician was making futile attempts to defend himself, but in vain—Tuscus struck him to the earth, stood a foot on his chest, and faced the podium for instructions.

The thumbs went down, Tuscus finished him off. Besidus murmured,

"It was fated. Nero took this way of publicly humiliating him."

Faljan stared at the body of the patrician, without seeing it. What he was seeing was his own humiliation, repugnant as aloes to his taste, senseless as an idiot's yammering. The lovely delectable filthy Poppaea had been the weak knot in his destiny; through her he had come to disaster and likewise brought Lydia to grief. Revulsion seized upon him, weakening his knees and retching at him in his belly.

Yet he did not vomit again. There was no time. A centurion had touched him on the shoulder. It was Faljan's turn in the arena. The ordeal was at hand.

CHAPTER 27.

I.

THE two contestants marched slowly toward the podium, Faljan lifting his eyes to the rows upon rows of gesticulating monkey faces, the applauding yelling mob to whom this was great holiday, finest and most exquisite pleasure. Bits of white fluttered into the air; the spectators had all day kept their programs, checking off this and that item, but in the present moment casting them aside. No more need to consult programs; there was but one combat more, and this the main event, now beginning.

"Halt!"

The racket eased down, the chief herald faced the podium, his voice rising strong and clear,

"I present to the noble Caesar the gladiator Faljan, aged twenty-four, and victor in seventy-one battles!"

A burst of loud hand clapping, prolonged shouts of encouragement. Seventy-one battles! Only seventy-one? It seemed many more to Faljan. He would have said he had been fighting in the arena since time itself began, slaying hundreds and hundreds of nameless opponents, enduring countless multitudes of blows and wounds. The herald was speaking again,

"I likewise present to noble Caesar the gladiator Synistor, aged thirty-eight, and victor in a hundred and thirty-six battles!"

The roaring voices went up again, this time louder, it struck Faljan. He glanced at the podium, Nero smug, Ponnaea with eagerly parted lips.

The herald beckoned to an attendant,

"Bring the wooden swords."

The swords were made of olive wood and highly polished, being exact duplicates of the steel weapons to be used later on. Synistor took one, Faljan the other; they faced up, set to fencing.

It was preliminary, a kind of snorting pole to whet the appetite for

blood. Child's play, really; neither of them was doing his best, lest his enemy discover in his routine some weakness, special talent, a prized technique against which to guard in the struggle to follow.

The mob saw this, and protested,

"No more wood!"

"Give them their steel!"

"Steel, sharp swords, in the name of merciful Clytie! My rump is so weak from all this sitting that I shall have to carry it home in a sack!"

Nero frowned at the brash demanding crowd, signaled for steel swords to be brought. Faljan had a moment of ease, a last opportunity to hunt the circling rising diminishing ranks of spectators. The light hit his eyes with the force of a club. It was late afternoon, the sun at its most ardent; and although an awning covered the arena, this canvas ceiling seemed to intensify, rather than to lessen the heat; surely Phaëthon was driving his chariot too close to the earth today. The gladiator's eyes swept round and round against the shimmering sun waves, and by a miracle spied out the face he sought. Nay, not a miracle; for in all that squirming shouting rabble there was but one who sat silent and immobile. Lydia. Pale, and yet composed. He stared at her as if he would seize her image and imprison it within him as a tangible living thing, a charm and amulet against the dread ahead.

"Your sword, Faljan."

He accepted it. Synistor already had his weapon and was swinging it boastfully in the air, to and fro and down in great swishes which levered his partisans into wild inarticulate yells of joy.

The gladiators were moved seven steps apart, placed each behind a line drawn in the sand. They faced each other, shield on the left arm, in the right hand a sword. There was a momentary hush, the crowd leaning forward breathlessly. The chief herald raised his staff,

"Ready, Synistor?"

"Ready!"

"Ready, Faljan?"

"Ready."

The staff was lowered abruptly, the herald's voice rang out,

"In Caesar's name!"

II.

It began deliberately, and with caution. The spectators were content to have it so; they had been looking forward to this, and would not have it quickly over; rather, it was something to be rolled in the mouth as a sweetmeat, leisurely sucked for full enjoyment. Synistor did a little footwork, a little sword feinting, all his movements and posturings identifying him as an experienced fighter. Faljan leaped forward in a skirmishing thrust at his breast. Up came the miller's shield, the enemy sword clanging against it and sheering off.

"First blow for Faljan!"

"Nay, first fumble!"

Faljan moved in again. It was his plan to keep the miller properly busy, off balance and confused by unorthodox tactics, whilst he waited for Lydia's Christ to intervene—in what manner the gladiator knew not, yet must believe not only possible but certain. He advanced steadily, weaving and striking, and the miller shifting adroitly, Faljan jibing,

"Afraid of my steel? Is that the trouble?"

"You will soon be floating down the Tiber," retorted Synistor. "I have waited long for this opportunity, cattle drover!"

Faljan laughed and struck again, Synistor made a counterattack and the crowd jerked out of its tense watching to exclaim in pleasure. Their applause encouraged Synistor; he maneuvered for better position, nipped at the artery in his enemy's groin, as Quartilla had warned he would. Faljan averted the blow, but narrowly—the crowd laughed and stamped with their feet, for they understood the stroke Synistor had intended, and many wished him success. The miller sprang in once more, this time at the neck artery—missed, but opened Faljan's shoulder. Exultant cries went up,

"The affair is quickening a little!"

"What odds on Faljan now?"

"It is the miller's game!"

The supporters of Faljan scowled and stayed silent. Synistor was taunting him,

"Your blood flows dark. Could it be that it is already blackening for death? Methinks you—"

Synistor broke off—Faljan's sword grazed his side, and now it was the miller's turn to bleed.

"Which evens us, my baker boy!" Faljan grinned.

"I am slaying you today," said the miller. "My soothsayer has so promised me."

"Many promises are made in this world, and few kept!"

The rabble was beginning to grow restive. Slight wounds were well enough at the start, yet for best enjoyment there must be steady progress to more serious hurts, the gradual and inevitable build toward death. Voices fell to chanting,

"Leave off with sparring, and fight!"

"Fight, fight! Fight, fight! Fight, fight!"

"Shove in your steel, Synistor!"

"O Faljan, slay the bastard, as I have wagered you will!"

"Fight, fight! Fight, fight! Fight, fight! Fight, fight!"

The swords, as if in obedience, began to swing harder, Synistor now definitely the aggressor, Faljan only defending himself. He could do better, but there was his oath, the woman Lydia, her god who must step in and by magic save the gladiator trusting to him. Or did her Christ intend to help! Perhaps not. It might be that he meant Faljan to yield to the miller's sword, and then in death rise to live in paradise.

Hateful prospect for one so young as Faljan! To perish under a despised enemy, to walk no more on fertile earth with his sandaled feet, to give up the sun and moon and bright stars of a night, smell no further flowers or ripening grain, stop listening to running brooks in springtime? Nay, he could not bear it, and would not! Christ died perhaps to achieve some plan—but what were they asking Faljan to die for! What good purpose could it possibly serve! Away with that other and bemused vague life beyond the grave, Faljan would cling to this one—Lydia notwithstanding.

Fighting and thinking thus in the churning sand, it occurred to Faljan that Lydia had never been a proper staff to lean upon. She was unwittingly the cause of the death of Marcus Vidalius, now she threatened to be the cause of Faljan's. The girl possessed an open face, even a well-intentioned heart; but as for that, the *sforda* plant out on the Campagna was pleasant enough—until cattle ate it in springtime, and then its pale blue innocent flower was understood to be a lure, its mild-tasting bulb fatal poison. It was possible that Lydia was as deadly in her way, as Poppaea Sabina in hers; as every woman was deadly, for that matter. A man did not need women to

conduct him into right ways, lying and wheedling and trussing him up in promises. A curse upon the Thracian dancer, a curse upon all women everywhere, born and yet to be born! Faljan slashed out with his sword, warding Synistor off with a violence which tipped the miller back onto his heels.

"I shall hold back no longer," Faljan said to himself, and advanced.

Synistor met his attack without retreating. The sword in Faljan's hand flashed and struck, Synistor somehow always escaped its full force. The miller was neither sinking down in death nor showing signs of nervousness—it was Faljan who was becoming nervous. It seemed to him that in his seventy-one previous contests, he had encountered only poor or fairly able fighters; Synistor was tougher material, a seasoned warrior and Faljan's equal, possibly even his master. Terror began to clutch at the gladiator, a loud mocking voice cried from the gallery,

"It is Synistor's fight—he has cut into Faljan's leg artery!"

The terror in Faljan became a kind of mechanical despair, his arms and feet moving him in a trance. He could feel the blood coursing down his leg—in a few moments he must collapse like a punctured wine bag, gasp out his life on the sands where he had achieved so many victories. So be it, then, yet before he yielded he would kill Synistor—with both hands grasping his sword, Faljan delivered so tremendous a blow that the miller was knocked down. Instantly Faljan rushed upon him, ready to finish it—but Synistor kicked aside his enemy's forward foot, upsetting him with such force that as Faljan fell he lost hold of his sword.

The crowd was roaring and screaming with excitement. Synistor down, Faljan down! Nay, the miller was up again, coming at Faljan like a mad stallion. Faljan threw himself to one side and evaded the blow—his hand brushed against his groin and he knew from the shallow feel of the blood there, that he who had cried out concerning the cut artery had lied, doing so for the sake of alarming Faljan and thereby giving Synistor the advantage. With new life, Faljan sprang up and grappled with the miller, wrenching at his arm until Synistor was off the ground, onto Faljan's shoulder, then hurtling down hard onto the sand. Still without his sword, Faljan ran for the thing—the miller recovered and rushed him again, Faljan grasping his weapon yet not having time to get back onto his feet. He fended off Synistor's blows, lurched upright. The fight resumed properly, the contestants once more balanced, neither with any apparent advantage. In the

stands, people sat rigid, their eyes glittering senselessly, their hands clenched into whatever they could grasp; not a sound from them, save for their painful breathing.

And then like a bolt of godly fire from above, it came to Faljan—the loophole, method of escape! Synistor was not old by common measuring, yet by arena standards he was. Look at him pant and blow, sweat zigzagging down his face and breast, his belly heaving like a tormented beast, lips gaping for air! A round of steady persistent attack could wear him out, exhaust the wretch—and thus would be outwitted the death which was threatening them both.

Faljan pressed forward with fresh hope, diverting the miller's blows and smashing him back with his heavy shield. The shield struck Synistor under the chin, sent him reeling and cursing; and when he plunged back with fury in his eyes, Faljan hit him again with the edge of his shield. The crowd had sluffed off its tension and was laughing now, shouting and jesting, while Synistor struck repeatedly but in vain. The miller's face was bloody, and presently he could not see except by dint of blinking and shaking his head from side to side. No longer did he try for Faljan's arteries, or even seek to cleave open his head; he was satisfied to protect himself, stay on his feet. Faljan kept leading with his shield, leading, leading, hitting again and again, until he lost count. A little more and Synistor would be spent; and when Faljan saw this, a sweet expanding joy seized upon him—he glanced toward Lydia far away in the upper rows, and cried out,

“I believe! I believe! I believe at last!”

“Believe what, you dung?” panted Synistor, swinging hard.

“I do not believe, but know that you are weakened and at rope's end,” said Faljan, once more smashing him in the face with his shield. “Do you say different, or can you speak?”

Synistor was exhausted. He lurched forward in a desperate effort to end the struggle, Faljan deflected his blow, banged him in the mouth with the shield. The miller spat out blood and teeth, the crowd began to growl,

“The settling blow, Faljan—what are you waiting for!”

Aye, for what, indeed! He was clearly Synistor's master, yet what now! The mob had come to see death, and where was it, why was it delaying! What now, what now—in the name of the honored immortals!

“O Christ,” muttered the gladiator, “if such a god there be, help me! Put out your saving hand and avert death, both his and mine, either being an intolerable thing, not to be borne. I am blind in black

midnight darkness, O Christ, therefore light me! Give me a sign!"

There was no sign—the cries of the people kept beating upon Faljan with an urgency he could no longer resist. Nor, at this savage unleashed moment, did he in the marrow of his bones want to resist it. Ever since the fateful blood-chilling day, when, as a green recruit, he had faced Juculus and the net, Faljan in combat had always fought to win. That was what fighting was for, what it did to a man when he had yielded back to his beast instincts. The gladiator cast a ferocious glance at the spectators, caught an instant's sight of Poppaea at Nero's ear, flashed his eyes back to Synistor. Time to strike the death blow, stab the groggy miller down to sand and oblivion. Faljan gathered his muscles, then incredibly—loud and startling as a thunderclap—a trumpet sounded,

"Cease fighting! The gladiators will lower their swords!"

III.

For a moment there was utter dumfounded silence, the two gladiators rigid with astonishment. Stinging sweat ran down into Faljan's eyes; he dashed it away, gazing in sudden thanksgiving toward the podium. He did not understand what had happened, yet it was certainly the expected intervention, the succoring hand of the merciful Christ.

Except that Nero resembled no merciful god. The Emperor was red with anger; he had risen and with a brief nod to Tigellinus was leaving the podium.

Tigellinus stepped to the balustrade, held up his hand for attention.

"Friends and Romans!" he began.

"And Sicilian horse handlers!" yelled a voice.

There was a ripple of laughter, Tigellinus choosing to ignore it. The temper of a hostile mob could not be successfully challenged, he knew that well; and this one was near to getting out of control.

"Romans," he continued, with a persuasive air which sat ill upon him, "the contest between Faljan and Synistor is no longer capable of entertaining you. It is obviously a stalemate, and what could be duller than that!"

A rumble of mingled agreement and protest, with the voice of Synistor cutting into it with indignation,

"I demand to be allowed to continue! I have wounded him grievously, and was about to deliver the final thrust!"

Hoots of laughter went up at this, Tigellinus looked down with his flat yellow eyes,

"The combat will not resume. Caesar has so ordered."

"But by all the rules of gladiatorial combat—"

"Remove that man from the arena!"

Guards seized upon Synistor and hustled him away amid boos and catcalls, even his former supporters against him now. Tigellinus held up a hand in a plea for silence,

"Friends and Romans!"

"What, are we still your friends?" cried the pot cleaner who had drawn the cat in the lottery. "To what purpose, O keg of Sicilian slops, if the touted famous combat is to end like this!"

"It has not ended," Tigellinus shouted, "it has begun!"

That nicked the crowd. People turned to one another, inquiring by shrug and furrowed brow and small mutterings. Did the arena have another fighter to stand against Faljan? Not likely. Save for the once formidable miller, he had never had any serious rival. But then, of course, Nero was full of planned surprises. Possibly there had been something of this sort arranged from the beginning. The puzzled spectators looked at Faljan, but he knew no more than they did. He waited in silence, the blood of his wounds dripping unheeded to the sand. He was uneasy, and yet not worried. Whatever it was, it would soon show.

"Now volunteering to fight and slay Faljan," announced Tigellinus, "is the greatest and noblest of gladiators—Caesar himself!"

A tide of stupefied silence swept the arena, in its wake chuckles of glee that such foolishness could even be suggested. People slapped one another, bent double in laughter, wiped tears from their eyes, gasping out incredulously,

"Caesar?"

"He a fighter, a swordsman? Oh, ye gods, we shall be hearing next that Juno had grown herself a third teat!"

Tigellinus again, stern and reproving,

"You shall see if it be jest or not! Nero is even at this moment arraying himself in armor for the event. And while he is thus occupied, permit me to name his record as athlete. Our Emperor has won triumphs as a discus thrower, a Greek runner, a lifter of weights; he has driven chariots to victory in the Circus Maximus."

"With your connivance, O pig of a Sicilian!"

"Aye, Goldtooth—it is well known that you would peddle your own children in a cart, if there were a market for such ghouls!"

"He has won chariot races," Tigellinus continued, when he could; "and likewise—which is more to the point, of course—Nero has vanquished Synistor himself in wrestling. Therefore, since the combat with Faljan has resulted in Synistor being withdrawn as incompetent of the task accepted by him, Caesar is his natural successor against the so-called champion down yonder."

Faljan had begun to get the drift of it. The miller failing her, Poppaea had whispered something which turned Nero hot with anger. Whispered what? There could be but one tidings—the news that Faljan had betrayed her, seized her and enjoyed her against her wish, most likely on the night of the banquet, since admitting to an assignation in the melon arbor would incriminate her as willing. It was Poppaea's last throw of the dice, this bitch who in a later year would die of a kick in the belly, delivered by Nero himself, coming home drunk and forgetting, for the fatal moment, that his wife was pregnant. Faljan jerked round as a trumpet sounded—a herald proclaimed,

"The gladiator Nero, greatest of athletes and fighters!"

Caesar was striding across the sand, clad, like Faljan, in no more than breechclout and sandals, shield on his left arm, sword in the right fist. Uncertain laughter rose at the sight of him, ridicule descending like a shower of blistering sparks,

"And your weight, O royal gladiator? Or can it be measured!"

"Gladiator and athlete, eh! What does he intend to do, run and have Faljan chase him?"

"Faljan will never catch up—he will fall alauding to see Nero's two-basket butt shaking like jelly!"

The Emperor flushed, but made no attempt to answer. Ignore the howling mob, that was the best way, lest it show the skull behind its face. Nero advanced with eyes straight ahead, step martial, shoulders thrown back, chin lifted. In the dimmed late afternoon light of the arena, Caesar presented a creditable appearance, revealing even a certain dignity. His jowls were fat, but from a distance they could pass for firm; he had bandy legs, and yet these were perhaps compensated for by his sizable chest. The laughter simmered down, voices muttered,

"He has long been a street brawler—perhaps he *can* fight!"

"Anything is possible. My mother had pups when she was forty."

"I see she did, but Nero as a gladiator—bah!"

Faljan watched the approaching figure with astonishment. This silly Emperor could not stand against a man that was a man—he would go down at the first hard blow, dead as pork on a hook. Nero was challenging only because he felt himself secure in his imperial holiness—for what commoner would have the audacity to assault a Caesar!

“Well, let them fight!” shouted the cat thrower; “but no tricks, remember!”

“That’s right, no faking, no pulling of sword strokes!”

“It must be real, with meat at the end. By the gods, we came here to smell this final death and smell it we shall!”

“Tigellinus, what say you?”

The horse breeder shouted back reassuringly,

“No deception is intended, my friends. The Emperor has long wanted to enter the ring, and he has secretly practiced for this very day.”

“A louse-ridden lie, but go ahead—what, then?”

“Nothing, save that he will fight well, asking no quarter and giving none.”

“So be it! Let them get started! Forward, gladiators, what are you mumbling about—do you want to go the latrine first?”

Nero was glaring at Faljan, his lower lip twitching in the way it had when he was unpleasantly aroused,

“I will avenge what you dared to suggest to my Empress.”

“Suggest?” Faljan retorted. “I did far more than that. And upon many occasions.”

Caesar turned livid. He shouted for the torches ringing the balustrade to be lighted, and at once slaves ran to execute this command.

“I wish light!” he cried; “so that all may see my victory over this swine of swine!”

“You’ll see your guts strewn on the sand!” yelled a supporter of Faljan. “And what becomes of our bets, I should like to know!”

“The name of Caesar will be substituted for that of Synistor,” declared the horse breeder. “All bets stand.”

The awning was being rolled back, so as to afford as much sky light as possible. Faljan struggled out of his confusion, all remembrance of his promise to Lydia now fled away—he knew only that this monstrous tyrant of a Caesar was taking unfair advantage—or so attempting. Faljan said, with mounting resentment,

“O fat buffoon of an emperor, you are thinking that I would not venture to strike you with my sword, and hence you can win and I

die—but it shall be otherwise. I swear by all the gods that you hold sacred, and which I now spit upon, that I shall not stay my arm, but slay you.”

“How do you dare to say that!” exclaimed Nero haughtily.

“I say it, and will accomplish it. I have sworn the thing.”

Nero was suddenly frightened. His face paled, he put out a thick pink tongue and tried to keep his lips moist.

“Do you hear me?” Faljan demanded hoarsely. “I shall kill you, Caesar, rip up your belly and slit your throat for you!”

The circle of lamps was nearly lit. Nero threw them a hurried glance. As soon as the last one flared up, there could be no more delay. He faced the gladiator again, his voice shaking between rage and an attempt at friendliness,

“I propose a solution, thus serving both of us.”

“What is it?” Faljan said disdainfully.

“Simply that we make a show of fighting—”

“A *show* of fighting!”

“—I wounding you with your consent, you falling and putting up the usual supplicating forefinger, I then to indicate your pardon with my upturned thumb. In this manner, my honor can be satisfied.”

Hope came creeping back into Faljan’s heart. Possible, yes. Naturally it would be galling to pretend defeat at the hands of a clumsy amateur, even though he be Caesar, but this was a desperate case, being life or death, and Lydia for special prize or loss.

“Well?” said Nero uneasily.

“Agreed.”

The last torch flared up alight in the ring about the balustrade, Nero signed that he was ready.

IV.

A long loud trumpet and they began, Nero at once assuming the part of aggressor. He lunged forward, slashed viciously at the gladiator, thrust up his shield to ward off a halfhearted blow from Faljan. The crowd applauded. Perhaps they had underestimated Caesar. There were strange things in the world, and this could be one of them.

Faster and faster, Nero’s blows rained down. Faljan defended,

made feints, retreated as if bewildered by the onslaught. Cries of surprise and delight arose, Faljan dark with shame yet nevertheless submitting to his role. It could not go on much longer—Nero was already panting like a sow in heat, near to losing his wind—then the Emperor swung his sword full at Faljan's head. Intending to cleave him in two, the gladiator knew that well. Faljan warded it off, getting angry—but at that moment Caesar managed to pierce him lightly in the thigh and the gladiator took his cue and fell to the sand, as if mortally wounded.

A roar of astonishment shook the arena—astonishment, and quickly doubt, and disgust. It was false doing! Such a light wound to send Faljan onto his back, unable to rise again? By the furies, no, it could not be done—even though Faljan was doubtless weary and worn down from the long fight with Synistor! And Nero advancing to place a foot on the fallen gladiator's chest, turning in triumph to the spectators? Incredible, not to be tolerated!

"A trick, it's a trick!" screamed the mob. "He is browbeating you, Faljan, and you a bribed scoundrel to let him! A curse upon you, Faljan, betraying us like this!"

The gladiator slowly held up his right hand, the forefinger extended. Begging—doing what he had refused to do in that long-ago day when Juculus netted him into powerlessness.

Abruptly the clamor funneled into a howl of indignation. Faljan looked up at Nero. The Emperor was standing with his right hand held out horizontally, the thumb turned down. The sign for death, Poppaea aping it in the podium, more thumbs down from the Vestal Virgins, the patricians, lickspittles, officials, whatnot.

In the seats above the podium and all around the circle of flickering smoking lamps, however, every thumb pointed upward. Caesar pretending to wound an adversary and then signaling his death—the affair reeked of farce and treachery! Bellows of wrath rocked the spectators,

"No, no!"

"Rise, Faljan, and slay him!"

Faljan had already thrown Nero's foot aside and got to his feet, but he remained uncertain as to what to do next—for Caesar had cast away his sword and was risking everything upon the commanding power of his thumb. Cries, and still more cries from the spectators,

"Kill him, Faljan, kill him!"

"Give us his skull and we will drink a health to you!"

"The mother killer has gone too far this time! May ten thousand centaurs trample him into the slime where he belongs!"

Faljan watched in bewilderment; Nero kept his thumb down, his eyes sweeping the arena, his pale angry glance imperiously demanding that the mob accede to his decision. And it was refusing. Paced by the cat thrower, the cry of mother killer leaped up like a flame, to repeat itself round and round the arena, like a gloating malignant echo growing momentarily in violence,

"Mother killer, mother killer, wife killer, mother killer, Nero the mother killer, the wife killer, slayer of Agrippina, murderer of the good Octavia, mother killer, wife slayer—!"

Nero stood pale as the mushroom that slew Claudius, and yet still with his obstinate thumb turned to earth. The mob rose to its feet and began to surge down the aisles to the edge of the balustrade, such a concourse of animal rage that fear sweated into Caesar's face. They were hurling refuse at him, earthenware wine bottles; they were trampling over the patricians and piling so vehemently against the balustrade that in the turmoil many of them fell over and broke their legs and arms in the arena below, and yet did not cease yelling hate at Nero. It was the frenzied demanding fury of people who, though wretched poor and customarily held in contempt, are nevertheless the most powerful of all earthly forces, to be denied by no man, Caesar or another. At last, Nero put up his thumb, and immediately the mob did likewise, everyone wagging his hand at the wrist and yelling in triumph. The Emperor turned to Faljan with red rage in his eyes,

"For the moment you are saved, yet you will surely die for what you have done!"

So saying, Nero stalked toward the podium, leaving the gladiator free to cross the sand to the gate which led to his underground quarters.

CHAPTER 28.

I.

BESIDUS stood white-faced in the doorway of Faljan's dressing room, for all the world like a crane poised toward flight. In a calmer moment, the gladiator would have known that the valet meant to flee, yet could not, until he had satisfied his swelling curiosity. Faljan went in, Besidus followed and closed the door, came and took his sword. The gladiator threw down his shield, but did not speak. It was the valet who had to break the shell of silence.

"What an astounding thing!" he cried. "You fighting Caesar, and then saved by the intercession of the mob! How did it happen? What was Nero saying to you all that time while the attendants were lighting the torches?"

"Get herb water for my cuts. Quickly; can't you see I am bleeding!"

The valet hastened to obey, yet without stopping his chatter,

"I think you were saved, not because the mob loved you, but because they hate Nero and he was tricking them."

"Enough of your herb water. Get my tunic. I am leaving here at once."

Not at once. There was a murmur of growing tumult in the corridors, alarming Besidus,

"They are coming!"

"Who?"

"People. The rabble, I am afraid."

"Go see, while I get into my tunic."

Besidus cautiously opened the door. The corridor was full of men surging toward Faljan's dressing room, strangers who were customarily barred from the underground galleries and had no proper business there. They were spectators from the arena, fierce-eyed and sullen, some of them carrying sticks, others holding up torches snatched from this and that socket.

"Yonder is his servant!" cried a voice. "We are on the right track, comrades!"

Besidus slammed the door, barred it. His teeth were knocking together,

"The mob! Angry with you, O Faljan, and probably intending to tear you leg from arm."

"That would be hard to do," muttered the gladiator. "Listen!"

Fists had begun to beat upon the barred door, voices calling,

"Are you there, false gladiator? We would talk with you, wanting explanation."

"Explanation and satisfaction. We risked our money on you and now the bets have been called off. What about our money?"

No need for Faljan to answer. The superintendent had arrived in the corridor and was ordering the mob to withdraw. They jeered at him, but he was backed up by soldiers—his orders sharpened into threats, the mob howled defiance and presently there was a mighty scuffle of feet, yells, blows, curses, followed by cries of triumph—the soldiers had been beaten back, the rabble left in possession of the corridor. Once more hammering fell upon the door, insistent and threatening.

"How shall we escape, O Faljan?" whimpered the terrified valet. "Do something—if not for your own sake, then for mine!"

The gladiator was prowling about the dressing room. There was a back closet, half urinal and half storage place, and opening out beyond this closet a small window barred with iron. Faljan said in a low tone,

"Talk to them. Say I am dressing and will open the door when I have finished."

Besidus hurried to the door, Faljan mounted a stool and began to wrench at the bars. They did not resist him long, for the inner bulk of the wall was more sand than tufa, and he was strong enough. One bar after another came loose. He crawled through the opening, Besidus ran up to seize the edge of his tunic,

"Wait for me—by my mother's paps, you cannot leave me to perish here!"

"I had no such intention," and Faljan turned and hauled the valet through the window. "Although it does look to me that you have changed into a hare very rapidly today."

"I am no hare," retorted Besidus, scrambling to his feet; "but I did not contract for death at the hands of a mob. You have no right to expose me to it, Faljan."

The gladiator led the way along a back corridor. To judge from the racket, the mob was breaking down his dressing-room door, while the superintendent marshaled a larger force of soldiers against the intruders. But here where Faljan strode with the frightened Besidus at his elbow, there was no one.

"The deadroom," said the valet, as they approached a door and a dreadful odor. Besidus jerked an amulet out of his tunic and made defensive signs over it, Faljan paused for a somber moment. He lifted his hand in salute,

"Farewell, O Vortinax, my friend."

"Come," said Besidus. "Don't linger, or they will catch us."

They went on to the end of the corridor, where a door stood ajar, beyond this door the evening air and freedom. Footsteps outside, coming this way. The gladiator and Besidus stepped into a niche and waited until whoever it was had come in and passed—corpse haulers, going back to the deadroom for more. In another moment, Faljan and his valet were outside the arena, a protecting dusk settled all about them.

"Now what?" Besidus grumbled.

"Here we part," said Faljan tartly. "So long as I was a rising gladiator, on top of the struggling heap, you fawned upon me; now that I stand in danger, you yip like a cur with a bur under his tail. Away with you!"

"Gladly," cried the valet. "I am a servant, not a soldier—I cannot afford to champion a lost cause, and yours is as clearly lost as spit down a sewer."

"I will require your dagger before you leave."

"How so?"

"I have no weapon, and need one, whereas you do not."

"You'll not have it!" declared Besidus, and started to run. Faljan tripped him up and drew the dagger from its sheath, after which he gave him a boot in his fat, so that Besidus was glad to vanish into the darkness, yelling maledictions as he went.

Faljan headed for the river.

II.

What he intended to do he could not have said, save that he sought safety, and this lay away from the city. Caesar would surely set soldiers after him; and finding him fled from the arena, these would throw out a net with himself as fish.

He strode along until he saw the lights of boats and lupanars along the riverbank, then he turned left in the direction of the Velabrum district. In a little while he struck a street which would presently become a road, certain to take him south and a trifle east to the corner of the Circus Maximus.

"Matches, matches for sale! Will you buy?"

A crooked long-bearded figure appeared out of the gloom beside him. A Jew, similar to the one that Faljan had observed in the Greek's tavern, sulphur matches in a tray at his waist. Faljan paused,

"Concerning your matches, they fetch you very little, I suppose."

"Very little and less than that, master."

"I know how you can earn money."

"How?"

"Walk along with me and I shall explain," said Faljan, and when the Jew hesitated, he added heartily, "What, are you afraid? Do you not see my wounds, still red and bloody through my tunic! I am a gladiator, going home from the arena."

The Jew's eyes roved over the spotted tunic, torn flesh here and there visible above the neck of the garment,

"You are a gladiator defeated, then—otherwise they would be escorting you in triumph."

"Be that as it may," said Faljan, beckoning the Jew to come along; "you can still earn money by serving me briefly. However, it is for you to decide."

The Jew hesitated, trotted after him. They proceeded on toward the Circus, the Jew murmuring,

"You are in trouble, perhaps?"

"That is true."

"Then I go no farther until you say what you require," and the Jew halted in his tracks. "Speak, O stranger, or I turn back. I will not venture into the dark with you."

Faljan halted,

"Do you know a soothsayer, astrologer, a Syrian seller of charms turned Babylonian? Ershutif, by name."

"I am acquainted with no such person."

"You are to find him and give him a message from me."

"And *your* name?"

"Go straight to the Forum; you will probably find him there, chewing and rechewing the news of the games and trying to collect his bets. He is a small man, with good clothes, a hound's snout, and a forked beard dyed green."

"Bah!"

"Tell him to send Lydia—remember that name, Lydia—send Lydia to the Capenian Gate at daybreak. To meet a friend there. Is that clear in your skull, or should I repeat it?"

"It is clear, yes—but not yet clear is my payment."

"I have no purse with me, but Ershutif will reward you. Say to him that I direct him to give you a gold piece."

The Jew hesitated. He doubted payment, nevertheless a gold piece was worth chancing. Another question or two concerning Ershutif's appearance, and he went off toward the city, Faljan proceeding on into the darkness alone.

The gladiator was hungry. He had eaten but little at breakfast, and nothing at midday; the tremendous exertions of the arena, moreover, had depleted his strength.

Then miraculously he smelled food, and at the same instant saw a small fire. At the northern tip of the Circus Maximus, concealed behind broken masonry once a part of some monument or other, three men were squatting and cooking food in an earthenware basin. Wild whiskery fellows, all three of them, human beasts prowling at an unfrequented edge of the city. Cudgels lay beside them.

Faljan went toward them with the intention of asking a share of their food, but the ruffians understood the situation differently. Spying him in the gloom, and quickly calculating that he might have money on his person, they jumped up, scattered into a circle, and attacked him from three different angles. This was apparently their professional habit, a kind of tried-and-proven routine which they put into effect without words.

It was, for Faljan, a welcome diversion, a means of relieving the hot anxious tension pent up within him. A first villain went down with a broken neck, the second Faljan picked up and as if he were a flail proceeded to beat the third like stubborn wheat. And yet not so

stubborn—the moaning grain crumpled and presently lay still; Faljan tossed his fellow against a chunk of masonry and betook himself to the fire. He grasped the cooking basin. It contained lentil soup.

“Odd,” he said to himself, “and portentous—that tonight I should eat the same soup I ate my first night in Rome. It is the completion of the circle, a sign that I shall escape back into my former life.”

He devoured the soup and went on with a brisker step, but when he had traversed the dim narrow way between the Circus and the Palatine Hill, and had swung around to the right onto the Appian Way, his omen failed him. There were soldiers stationed at the Capenian Gate. Placed there, he could guess, for the purpose of intercepting him should he head south for open country. Nero, it seemed, was already at work.

Faljan retreated a little way, pondering the soldiers until he was certain they had been only recently established at their post, and then walking back to the forks of the road. There, behind a tree for concealment, he sat down. Facing the city. This was as good a place as any to wait for Lydia.

Yet she could not appear for some hours, and being weary from all that had happened, he slept.

III.

Toward dawn he awakened, all of his faculties alert, after the fashion of an animal, a peasant accustomed to out of doors. There was blood on his tunic, but his wounds gave him no more pain, and his head was clear and sharp. He recalled an old myth that Curtius Criba had told him on a rainy day when they could not work in the fields; the myth concerned a giant wrestler named Antaeus, whose great strength flowed direct from the earth, and who threw all challengers because of this never ceasing vitality. Then he came against Hercules, and Hercules cunningly held Antaeus high above the ground until his force ebbed from him and he succumbed to defeat.

Hercules against Antaeus, Rome against Faljan—but the gladiator luckier than the giant. Faljan was still alive; he had escaped the crushing stifling hug of his adversary and was once more back in contact with the strengthening earth. Never again to lose touch with her, never to let go his suckling grip on her breasts.

It was daylight now. He rose, took a look toward Rome. There were soldiers along the road, evidently patrolling it. The sight of them alarmed him, yet only for a moment—they were not manhunters, but guards supervising road cleaners, and women busy at hanging garlands on poles. Faljan remembered. The Emperor today journeyed to Antium; the thoroughfare was being made pleasant for him. The gladiator crept back into a clump of underbrush, where he need not be seen and still could keep the road in sight.

The preparations for Caesar quickened momentarily. The road having been raked and swept free of obstacles, it was sprinkled with perfumed water. Flowers were strewn along the course, musicians climbed into bowers to be ready to serenade the entourage when it appeared. Soldiers in formal attire took up positions at strategic intervals.

Suddenly Faljan saw a familiar figure, trudging out from the city. Mikrella. Alone.

He frowned in disappointment. She kept on toward the Capenian Gate, he slipped down to the road and tossed a pebble to attract her attention. The girl saw him instantly, threw a casual glance about to make certain she was not observed, and sprang into the bushes to join him.

“Where is your mother?”

“I do not know.”

“What!”

“The Jew fetched your message to Ershutif and Ershutif came to the house—that is to say, *his* house, where we have been living. But my mother did not return last night; she was not there when I left this morning.”

Faljan’s heart pounded with anxiety and anger,

“Is she in prison, do you think?”

“More likely she is seeking you somewhere.”

The gladiator gestured for Mikrella to follow him. They crept up the slope of the Aventine Hill, heading for the Temple of Diana, which would have no customers this early in the morning. At the foot of the steps leading up into the temple, they sat down. Faljan fixed his brooding eyes upon the road below,

“I cannot calculate what to do.”

“Do nothing,” answered the girl. “She may go home, and then Ershutif will tell her and she will come here.”

The road was filling with the vanguard of the court. Music sounded, a detachment of Numidian horse appeared, followed by a strong force of foot soldiery. A caravan of wagons creaked along under their

burdens of imperial furniture and special food supplies. Peasants gathered alongside the road, to applaud and thus reap alms and gifts. Caesar's personal slaves came next, then his pages and favorite entertainers, followed by litter after litter containing his friends and guests. Finally, as the very treasure of the gaudy procession, Nero himself, swaying in his golden litter and idly saluting the crowds lining the road.

"Then I heard aright, O Faljan!"

"Eh?"

"Namely," said Mikrella, "that Tigellinus does not journey to Antium today, but remains behind. He is not in the procession."

"For what purpose remaining in Rome?"

"You are thick witted. He stays here for the sake of catching you, of course. Not only have soldiers been stationed at all city gates, but the Sicilian is gathering an extra force to comb the streets for you. Tigellinus will not let himself have a holiday until he can take your head to Caesar. What a monster he is!"

"I thank you for your sympathy," said Faljan absently.

"Ffft! I do not hate him because he is your enemy, but because he is mine. Oh, if I could repay Tigellinus for the ill turn he did my mother, I'd rest content! But what chance have I against a villain unmeshed in so much power!"

Faljan paid no attention to her. The procession had by this time left the Appian Way and passed down a fork in the direction of Ostia, in a few minutes even its straggling livestock gone from sight. The gladiator said resolutely,

"I am returning to Rome to get your mother."

"What about the snare which Tigellinus is spreading?"

"It must be avoided."

"The silliest street loungee will recognize you for a gladiator. That close-cropped hair, your wounds, stature and size—it is written plain what you are. You will be arrested before you get halfway to Ershutif's house."

He rose to his feet,

"Do you see the Circus Maximus down yonder? It has storerooms stuffed full of costumes, for use in pageants. I will get myself a change of clothes from the Circus."

"A sensible plan," laughed the girl, "even if it was you who thought of it!"

They scrambled down the stony slope, Mikrella leading the way—but all at once Faljan reaching out and bringing her to a halt. He

pointed off to the left. There was a man sitting on the hillside, looking at the sky and yawning. A military officer of some kind.

"Who can that be?" Faljan muttered.

"He wears the helmet of the Palace Guard," said Mikrella, after a moment. "Probably a captain."

The gladiator remained suspicious,

"Yes, but what is he doing there!"

"Most likely he was accompanying Nero, and turned back because of sore feet. Or it could be that he is deserting."

"Um. Well, at any rate, he is not watching us. Keep behind rocks and bushes as we go on down; it would not do for him to see us."

They got to the bottom of the slope, crossed the road. The Captain was out of sight, and almost certainly had not observed them. Mikrella darted on to the huge structure constituting the Circus.

"Here is a door," she said; "but it is locked."

Faljan wrenched off the hasp and they went in. There was a stairway and after that a series of dark halls and corridors, yet by spying about and experimenting, Mikrella located a storeroom and the gladiator broke into it. He ransacked its contents, finding weapons and masks and painted canvas scenery, but no costume fit for him to wear. Mikrella ran to another door, and another, locating storerooms with the skill of an egg-hunting dog.

"Here!" she cried, at length. "Every sort of military costume! Get into one of them; it will be the best thing possible."

Faljan selected garments that would fit him, and was into his tunic and one sandal when they heard a sound.

"Now what!" exclaimed Mikrella.

"See what it is."

The girl hurried off, Faljan went on with his dressing. He tied his sandal strings firmly, buckled on a belt, chose a sword. Mikrella came racing back,

"It's that Captain!"

"Impossible!"

"Maybe so, but it is the Captain just the same. He is acting like a thief, trying doors and making too little noise to be honest."

"What—he is *here*, inside the building?"

"Two corridors down. Hark!"

They heard rapid footsteps. Faljan pulled Mikrella farther into the storeroom, but the footsteps were receding. The gladiator came back to the corridor, listening hard.

Then he twitched his nose, opening his nostrils like a horse investigating a scent,

"I smell smoke."

"The building is afire," Mikrella said quickly.

"Impossible!"

"You are full of impossibles, aren't you!" said Mikrella. "Some day you must buy a bag to keep them in."

They went carefully down the corridor, waited a moment at the head of the stairs. There was the sound of a door closing, and after that no more footsteps from the Captain of the Palace Guard. He had gone.

"Take caution," said Faljan, as he started on. "It may be that he is waiting for us outside."

"I think not."

Mikrella was right. They got down to the door, peeped out and saw the Captain hurrying off to the right, in the general direction of the road to Ostia. Quickly Faljan and the girl went out.

"He set the building afire!" said Mikrella excitedly. "Look!"

Smoke was wafting out of an upper window toward the river end of the building.

"Let us stay and watch it!" cried Mikrella. "Nothing is more diverting than a good rousing fire."

"Come along," said Faljan, and hurried off to the left, toward the city.

She came with him, but every few moments glanced back over her shoulder. Then she burst out,

"I have it now! It is Nero's doing!"

"You mean he ordered the fire to be set?"

"Certainly. It is well known that he loathed Rome for its narrow streets and crowded dingy tenements. Caesar wants the city destroyed, so that he can build a capital worthy of his pitiful divinity! The Captain, of course, was his instrument."

"You are silly," Faljan said. "It is only the Circus which is afire."

Mikrella laughed and pointed to the welter of shops and dwelling houses abutting upon the race course.

"The Circus is afire," she said, "but presently Rome itself will be blazing."

CHAPTER 29.

I.

THE gladiator thought about it, as they strode along together.

"Put foolishness out of you," he said finally. "The fire will soon be extinguished."

"You believe that?" Mikrella laughed, and she wet a finger and held it aloft. "With the wind from the south, as it is; and bearing directly onto the city? The south wind is an African wind, remember, and thus a malicious thing."

"Less malicious than you are," he retorted. "I do not understand such a creature—you do not resemble your mother at all."

Mikrella winced, in spite of all her bravado hurt by this judgment.

"No?" she said angrily.

"In not the slightest way. Your mother is decent and kind, a Christian woman."

"A Christian numskull, you mean. Why, she has completely lost her senses over that freak religion of hers! Instead of beating me, as she used to, she weeps and prays—not only for me, but for all the world and every living creature in it, even to the cats spitting under our window! And what does it gain us! Nothing, absolutely nothing. A rotten apple for your Christian prayers—I'll have none of them."

"Your loss," said Faljan, and after a little hesitation he added, "Christ saved me yesterday in the arena."

"Was he there?" she demanded. "I myself was not present, yet I heard no report of him."

The gladiator looked up. Several small wagons were rumbling noisily out from the direction of the city, by the sound their axles lacking grease since New Year's Day. In the first wagon rode a squad of Tarbuckets, carrying pails and hooked poles and hatchets, and straining their eyes toward the Circus. Mikrella gave a shrill catcall

of derision and stood aside to let them by. The second wagon lumbered past, but the third stopped. This one contained soldiers. Out sprang a centurion, confronting Faljan and the girl with a suspicious face,

"Whence do you come?"

"The Circus Maximus," said Faljan, "where fire has broken out—so you had best hurry."

"Your costume," frowned the officer; "it seems to me archaic, harking back to the days of Augustus. How is that?"

Faljan was startled. In his heedlessness, his ignorance of military intricacies, he must have donned something kept at the Circus for historical pageantry.

"The noble Tigellinus gave it to him," Mikrella put in quickly; "choosing my father here as a recruit to help search for that rascal of a Faljan, the escaped gladiator. The soldier outfit was to lend my father authority in his search."

Faljan held his breath, but it went down with the centurion,

"Go on, then—but in returning the costume, you need not bother to hunt up Tigellinus."

"Oh?" said Faljan.

"He is dead."

Mikrella looked at the centurion fiercely,

"Is this a jest?"

"Nay, it is fact. He ran afoul of Synistor the gladiator, and Synistor broke his neck between his hands. A private feud, I understand. Be on your way, now."

II.

Mikrella stared after the officer with incredulous eyes: the man climbed back into the wagon and the wagon rumbled off toward the Circus Maximus. She turned then, and gazed at Faljan, her voice a mere whisper,

"Do you believe it?"

"He had no reason to lie. Come along."

The girl walked a while in silence, then she began to laugh, wild and loud, her face contorting in a kind of delighted anguish,

"Did you hear that, Faljan! The horse handler is dead. Synistor broke his neck for him; by twisting it, I suppose. Oh, I wish I had asked the details! Perhaps the miller strangled him, or simply hit him a great blow in the face and that cracked the bones. But he is dead, which is the all-important thing, isn't it! O great joyous day, to have drawn lids over the Sicilian's yellow eyes, cool his flesh for the worms. They are probably devouring him at this very moment, don't you think? Faljan, I am so happy, so wonderfully happy! Kiss me, Faljan—!"

He fended her off, but she did not mind. She ran and picked up a garland which had been discarded along the route of Nero's passing, earlier in the day; she arranged it on her head, singsonging like a lunatic,

"Hail to the death of the horse breeder, my mother's first lover, the itch and torment of my childhood life! I—I—"

Mikrella fell on her face and began to sob, her hands balling up and striking the pavement until they were bruised and bloody. The gladiator watched her for a time, then he took her wrist and began to drag her on toward the city, saying nothing; he could not understand her tantrum. Women were sometimes hysterical, but never so violently as this—or certainly not in Faljan's experience were they so.

"Let go me," Mikrella said presently, in a flat small voice. "I am over it."

He released her, and she went on like a sensible creature. Except that she was still trembling. After a while she cast a look back at the burning Circus, laughed jerkily,

"The centurion, O Faljan, we must consider a test."

"In what way a test?"

"Well, when he stopped us, you no doubt prayed for a way out of his troublesome questions, and yet it was my wit which got us free. So now what do you think of my mother's Christ!"

"What I think," said Faljan, "is that you have the soul of a toad."

"I have no soul at all—that I know of. What is it like, this soul thing—can you pour it onto bread, as a substitute for olive oil?"

The gladiator walked on in rankled silence. They were circling the eastern butt of the Palatine Hill; it was not much farther to the Subura. He glanced around now and then, discerned black smoke on the horizon. The wind was toward Rome, and freshening.

There was no sign of alarm in the city. The Forum, as usual, was entertaining its hawkers and idlers, its pigeons. Occasionally someone called to a friend that there was fire to the south, but fires in Rome

were a common occurrence, nothing to warrant excitement—unless they happened to be in your own block.

“Where is Ershutif’s house?” Faljan asked the girl.

“The street has no name. I will show you.”

They turned into the Subura, bracing themselves against the pressure of the incessant crowd. A corner, a new street, this one narrow enough for a true alley. It was crooked like a ram’s horn, slippery stone steps leading up and around between tall tenements which hid all but a wedge of the heavens.

“Yonder is the Syrian’s place,” said Mikrella, then she halted and began to laugh noiselessly. “At his door ten soldiers, as you will observe! Waiting for a certain gladiator, or I am a dish of curdled milk.”

“Curdled milk, and never anything else,” said Faljan.

He studied the soldiers from a distance, uncomfortably aware of his military costume dating from the reign of Augustus, according to the centurion.

“We had better crab out of here,” said Mikrella.

“Your mother, when she failed to find me, probably returned to Ershutif’s house. She is likely inside; at any rate, I am going to find out, soldiers or not.”

“This is not an arena, my friend. You cannot slay all ten of them.”

He advanced as casually as he knew how, turned in at the door. A soldier stopped him,

“No entering.”

“I have been signed by Tigellinus,” explained the gladiator, “in the search for a Syrian named Ershutif.”

“This is his house; but why is he wanted?”

“Accused of deceiving the Empress in the matter of horoscopes.”

“He is not within.”

“I have instructions to search his belongings for incriminating documents.”

“As you like,” and the soldier stepped aside.

Mikrella skipped in behind Faljan, overtaking him on the stairs. She railed at him,

“No praying this time, Faljan? Wit, instead? You are learning! A little more and you will need to peer into an empty jug but twice in order to know that it is empty.”

“Get ahead, show me his apartment.”

She went lightly on up the stairs, sure as a bat, but Faljan groping, the way was so dark and tortuous. There were children asleep under-

foot, a deal of refuse which householders had been too indolent to heave out the window, and at the stair turnings boxes and kegs and miscellaneous rubbish. A third floor, Mikrella opening a door,

"This is his den."

Faljan walked in, disappointed to find the place deserted. There was a large room with a charcoal brazier still glowing from the morning's cooking, a pallet for bed; and in an alcove another cot where evidently Lydia and the girl were wont to sleep. Mikrella went to the window,

"I can see the fire very well from here! It is coming round the Palatine, like a tiger skirting a wall. The fire had followed us, O Faljan. I knew it would."

The gladiator lifted a tunic from a hook, made sure it would do, and got out of his soldier's costume. He donned the tunic, grumbling because Ershutif was a small man.

"Rome will burn, but who will suffer for it?" Mikrella was chuckling at the window. "Someone must play scapegoat, you know that, don't you, Faljan! The Jews, probably. They have so oft been scapegoats. Ershutif once told me that in Africa, among certain tribes, when a child is borning people fetch a black hen to the bedside. Are you listening to me? The black hen is for magic. You see, the womb is wide open at this period, and upon the issue of the child it is too tired to close up again promptly, so that an evil spirit can run and jump in—if it is about, as it generally is, of course. Well, then, once inside a woman, the evil spirit can make her life miserable—so while the child is kicking its way into this wretched life of ours, and the evil spirit is awaiting its chance, magicians chant in order to persuade the spirit that the black hen is the woman, and if it falls for such a ruse and enters the hen, the sin-and-evil-spirit-laden fowl is hurried to the Jewish quarter and turned loose. The point is, naturally, that a little more meanness among Jews makes no difference—the same as if they were Christians."

Faljan heard nothing of her harangue. He had gone into the alcove and picked up a garment that Lydia had worn, lifting it from where it hung disturbingly lifeless on a peg, and putting it to his nostrils. The gladiator smelled her smell in it, and felt better. He kept turning the thing over and over in his hands, as if perhaps Lydia might suddenly materialize inside it.

"I imagine Christ was likewise a scapegoat," Mikrella continued blithely. "My mad mother claims he died for the sins of the world—

but more likely they made him a scapegoat to take people's minds off their taxes or something of the sort. What are you doing?"

"None of your affair."

"Leave off with your mooning! A woman's love is water in a basket, running out and leaving you nothing but dampness to give you rheumatism."

"Keep watching out the window. She may return and run into the soldiers. Yes, that's true! We had better go down and wait for her in the street."

"Too late," said the girl, craning out the window; "the soldiers have apparently grown suspicious of you. There is a new one with them, seemingly one of those ironed fellows we passed on the road into town, riding the cart. Here they come!"

The gladiator ran to the window. There was only one soldier left at the door, but the sound of many thumping feet on the stairs.

"Is there another way out of here?" he demanded.

"Do you suppose," she retorted, "that Ershutif would trust himself to a hole with only one entrance! Follow me, O son of Christ."

III.

She took him out the door and into a black passageway leading toward the rear of the building. To the end of a corridor, up a wooden cleated ladder to another floor, and then through such a maze of rooms and cubbyholes, dens and halls and cluttered niches, that the gladiator was bewildered. They crawled past people slumped on stools, people eating and sleeping, Faljan and the girl passing without asking leave and without arousing a word of remonstrance. In and out, upon one occasion stepping over a bed where a woman lay gray with death, and finally into a room where broken furniture was piled like a forest.

"We have lost our precious soldiers," Mikrella grinned. "They will issue from the house as empty as pea hulls. This way."

She lifted a trap door and squirmed up through it. It brought them, Faljan discovered, out onto the more or less flat roof of the tenement building, high above the street. Off at the low railing, overlooking the south of Rome, there were people watching the fire, which by now had angled round the Palatine and was climbing the Caelian Hill,

leaping the road where Faljan and Mikrella had so lately walked, and then softly mewling up the slope past the Claudian Aqueduct.

"If the aqueduct is destroyed," muttered a householder gloomily, "there will be no water for cooking. It is the source of all our fountains at this time of year."

"Let the fire burn," said Ershutif, from among the watching tenement dwellers. "Such a fine spectacle makes me forget July's heat."

Faljan took the Syrian by the arm and led him back to where they could speak privately.

"What are you doing here!" exclaimed Ershutif. "And with my robe, too!"

"I needed it. Be still."

"You will have to pay me for it."

"Did you pay the Jew I sent to you with a message?"

"Pay a Jew? You are out of your senses!"

"Then you get no money for the tunic. Come, stop this. Where is Lydia?"

The Syrian spread his hands,

"Would I know that! After the games, she went looking for you, I suppose. Likely she is still searching—either that, or she has laid up with some man or other."

"I am going down to the street to look for her. As for you, O Syrian with a dirty tongue, you will be wise to stay away from your apartment—it is harboring soldiers."

"In which case I shall go with you and Mikrella," said Ershutif hastily. "O ye gods, how hard it is to live in peace these days!"

They crossed to a neighboring roof by means of a plank bridge, found their way down ladders and rickety staircases to the ground. Faljan looked about, said to the Syrian,

"What street is this—yours?"

"No, my house fronts on another. We must cut back to the right."

Easy to say, difficult to do. The smell of the smoke was drifting through the alleys of the Subura as up a flue, the blue heavens had gone brassy and dull. A look of anxiety showed in people's faces; Rome, they realized, was a gigantic firetrap, and already the conflagration had drawn near enough for worry. It had passed the ridge of the Caelian Hill and was eating at a huge marble structure which was evidently a temple. There was left but one more hill between the flames and the Subura. People were getting ready to leave their homes, women carrying out bits of prized bedding, others hurled braziers and furniture from windows, the stuff bumping from side

to side down between the walls of the tenements to land on the heads of the crowd. An old crone stood on a balcony screeching for somebody to take her potted plants, but no one answered her.

Ershutif felt nervously at his wallet,

"I think I shall go on ahead and cash my order, before there is possibly a riot, or the bank closes its doors."

"Your fifty thousand sesterces?"

"The order is payable today. I am not to blame that Lydia is missing."

"Who said you were! Go collect your money; I am not holding you back."

Ershutif went off into the crowd, fighting and elbowing his way along. A peddler crushed against Mikrella; she expertly extracted two pears from his bag, tucked one down her front and fell to munching the other. Faljan wormed a path on along the street, the girl following him. There was no longer space for a man to put his foot, unless he first shoved someone else aside.

To make matters worse, a litter attended by slaves was attempting to force its way up the narrow street. It was a patrician, dwelling on the Esquiline and ordinarily reaching his villa by another route, but since this was now under threat of fire, he came up the Subura.

"Make room!" chanted his slaves, and swung their sticks threateningly. "Make room for the senator Dossenius!"

The crowd refused to give way; indeed, it could not, the press of people behind it was so great. The Senator scolded, his slaves belabored the heads in front of them,

"Let the Senator pass! This is official business, important imperial business! Make way!"

"A pest upon his imperial business!" cried a vendor who had lost his trays in the crush. "We will not give way!"

Mikrella said to the gladiator,

"I think we should turn back. It would be easier to milk a mosquito than to penetrate this mob."

"Nay, I must find your mother. Keep looking for her. Hold to my tunic, and do not let go."

"Your tunic! I can take care of myself."

The litter had stopped, a little island swaying above a human sea. The Senator was berating the crowd, and certain resentful persons were retorting. They began to throw vegetables at him, garbage, anything that came to hand. Mikrella hurled her pear core, struck him in the eye with it; the Senator yelled for his slaves to bludgeon a

way through. The litter bearers tried to scrape past a pole which had the function of supporting the upper stories of a rickety tenement—there was a creak, yells of alarm—the base of the pole loosened, the building collapsed in a thunderous cloud of rubble. The Senator was seen no more; he was covered up slick as a cutworm under a spadeful of earth.

“Retribution!” screeched a woman, shaking her fist. “May all senators perish in a like end!”

“He had no official business,” said another, scornfully. “He was seeking his jewels and his mistress, to remove them from the path of the fire.”

The rubble was settling a little, people already clambering over it like ants, some intent upon ascending the street, others wanting to go down it to the Corso. Faljan, blinking and coughing against the dust, suddenly caught sight of Lydia; she was farther along down the street, a slender figure buffeted to and fro by the struggling crowd.

“I will come to you!” he shouted, and when she looked wildly about, and finally saw him, he gestured that she was to keep back, “Stay there! Stay there!”

Mikrella snickered,

“Stay there, you tell her! Since she is jammed like one of a multitude of dried squid in a marketman’s cask, what else could she do!”

The fallen building was a jungle of timbers and holes and chunks of plaster, tripping Faljan’s feet as he scrambled across it. He fell and got up, somebody hit him for what reason the gladiator did not bother to discover. Lydia was endeavoring to stay where he had told her, but the heaving crowd now swept her off her footing. She went down in a tangle of legs and arms and cursing mouths, Faljan made a last desperate lunge and reached the spot. He began to fling people right and left, until he felt her warm groping hand, and then it was only a matter of an eyewink until he had lifted her out of the melee and was dragging, half carrying her into a sheltering doorway.

IV.

She was in his arms, her body shuddering convulsively and her face wet with tears. Mikrella sniffed angrily,

“A woman’s tears and April rains are short lasting, but both a nuisance.”

“They are tears of joy,” Lydia answered tremulously; “joy and gratitude that Christ has given him back to me.”

“We can’t stay here,” Mikrella said. “The street will soon be a cemetery, if I read signs aright.”

“Faljan, where can we go?” asked Lydia, and strove to conceal her anxiety. “All the gates of the city are watched against your passing.”

“Watched gates can be outwitted,” he replied stoutly. “The center of the city is still free from fire. We must make our way west, and cross the Tiber.”

CHAPTER 30.

I.

THEY got down out of the canyon of the Subura, only to find themselves in a heavier jam. Ordinarily a broad and roomy thoroughfare, the Corso had become a helpless tangle of traffic: swarms of chariots and litters and wagons and carts struggling, not only against one another, but as well against the tide of pedestrians flowing into the street from the hills to the east of the city. Everyone was frightened by this time. Smoke billowed up from the south and southeast, flames darting in it like the tongues of voracious beasts. Near the Temple of Jupiter, the fire raced up a group of cypress trees, consuming them on the way and then dropping brands down upon the structure itself.

"What a god is our Jupiter!" laughed Mikrella; "he is unable to protect even his own temple!"

"Hush," said Lydia.

Faljan cast a hurried glance at Jupiter's temple, the Forum, and the shops and public buildings attendant upon it. The offices of the bankers were ablaze; Ershutif, if he succeeded in penetrating to them, must surely find his order for fifty thousand sesterces worthless paper. And himself in need of a salamander skin, if he persisted in trying to collect. A smile touched the gladiator's face, then he put the Syrian out of mind, and began to search the Corso for a chance to cross.

"Let us make a try," he said presently. "The traffic grows no less; it is actually getting thicker, the same as stew in a cooking pot. Give me your hand, Lydia."

He cautioned Mikrella to stay close, and stepped off the curb. They began to dodge wheels and push against the crowd of foot people. A team of chariot horses reared in terror, Faljan jerked Lydia out of the way and got himself a hoof blow on the leg; he turned dizzy for a moment but kept on, angling left or right, according as the press

opened up for a brief time. Just ahead was a priest of some kind of mystic cult, bearing a grotesque little image of his god and mumbling help-me supplications to it. A vendor was still shouting his wares, no doubt from habit not easily put aside. Suddenly a huge snake thrust its head into view; Faljan observed that it was accompanying the Egyptian he had seen long ago on a Tiber bridge, save that now the charmer was using the thing to frighten people out of his path.

"Away with your caterpillar!" Mikrella cried, and kicked the Egyptian in the shins.

A final struggle and they made the other side of the street, disheveled, their clothing torn, skin rubbed off knees and elbows. Mikrella pointed to the big bronze bust of Faljan, decorating the edge of the curb,

"Why not take it with us, O gladiator! It would come in useful to break people's heads, if they do not let us pass."

"Come, we must go on as fast as possible," Faljan answered. "This affair grows more dangerous. People are going to be trampled to death, before the hour is much older."

He led them round a traffic jam and off in the direction of the Velabrum, at which Lydia protested,

"We are heading into a district crowded even in usual times, O Faljan! The streets so narrow, and all."

"True, but it is the shortest way to the Tiber."

"The wind is changing," observed Mikrella grimly. "I knew it would."

The gladiator looked back. The wind had been blowing from the south, now it had shifted around and was sweeping west, directly off the Alban Hills. It was a piece of bad luck, for the fire was already in fierce possession of the Esquiline Hill, the Subura hidden by smoke and the narrow spur of the Viminal under immediate siege. The switch in the wind meant that the flames would shortly reach full upon the major part of the city.

"Coming at our very heels," muttered the gladiator.

"No matter," said Lydia. "We can outrun it."

"Ah, but can we outcrawl it!" exclaimed Mikrella. "There will be no running in Rome until the fire is over and wolves come out of the hills to devour the corpses."

Faljan braced himself against a file of women and children carrying furniture out of a tenement; he got his party round a corner, nodding in relief,

"I know this street. It will take us past the arena, which is the direction we want to go."

Their progress was slower and slower. The smoke had transformed day into a premature twilight, an ominous gloom in which the outlines of fugitive people appeared as shades from the underworld. Cursing and hysterical laughter rose in the air, mingled with coughing from the smoke, and shouted appeals or directions to lost friends. A shop-keeper was locking his establishment, grimacing at the burning city,

"I regret only one thing, which is that Nero is safe on his galley, cool and comfortable with a goblet of wine in his hand. If only he were here and getting his hair singed, I should not mind losing my little shop! But there is no justice, no justice ever!"

"You regret your property, I regret that I have bunions," rejoined a passer-by, limping along angrily. "This mob is treading them into pain that not even Prometheus could match."

"Hark!" said Lydia.

Out of the smoky street ahead of them issued yells of consternation, the scamper of fleeing feet. Faljan jerked his women to one side, as cries resounded,

"The beasts have broken loose! The wild animals of the arena are in the streets!"

II.

Mikrella, for once, had no light sarcastic comment; she had turned white as patrician linen. As for Lydia, she was praying. Faljan swallowed slowly, his hand touching his belt to make certain that he had his dagger by him.

"It may be false rumor," he said, but even as he spoke, they heard the blare of elephants trumpeting, followed almost immediately by the roar of a tiger. The gladiator clasped Lydia by the arm and stood stock-still, pondering what to do. The beast calls faded and then came nearer; it was as if the creatures were only seeking, like the human wretches themselves, some means of escape from the disaster of a burning city.

"How could they break out of the arena?" Lydia whispered.

"The fire has terrified them into uncommon strength. Well, our

way is straight ahead, nevertheless we must bear off to the right, keep out of their path."

They faced about and began to hunt for an alley or side street. In the gloom behind them appeared a huge dark body, lumbering along on shaking legs, with a serpentine trunk swinging from side to side. Faljan and the girls huddled in a doorway and the elephant shambled past, a thin little bubble of terror issuing from its mouth. The gladiator felt his way along a tenement wall to a cross street, and after that they had easier traveling.

"Get back!" he cried all at once, and drew his dagger.

A pair of malignant eyes had confronted them. A leopard, crouched low against the ground, rhythmically lashing its tail, fangs bared. Faljan drew back with slow caution,

"We shall try another street, then."

They did, bearing still further to the right, but continuing to hear the cries of the unhappy wild beasts. The street hereabouts was littered with furniture and bags of food and even jewelry, all these things cast down by people frightened of the marauding animals escaped from their dens under the arena.

And again Faljan halted. Not more than a slingshot away, a dozen lions were attacking a water buffalo, whining and clawing at it in their eagerness for meat, or perhaps merely wanting surcease from the terror of fire. Once more the gladiator led off on a detour, presently ran into a band of hyenas, savage revolting creatures that chased Faljan scrambling up the side of a rickety tenement, his strong arms dragging Lydia and Mikrella along behind him. The hyenas prowled underneath, barking and waiting, and then in a caprice went skulking off.

Faljan and his companions climbed back down to the street and ran. They no longer knew which way they were going; they were satisfied to be fleeing. A rhinoceros appeared, but it was under attack from a pack of Hispanian dogs, and went quickly past.

Finally there were no more beasts, to be either seen or heard. Or any sun to judge direction by, Faljan noted uneasily. Black smoke rolled everywhere, plunging the city into a dusk which would soon be heavy impenetrable darkness.

"We have come out of our way," said the gladiator; "probably farther from the Tiber than when we first fled from the beasts. I think actually we are now going north."

They came, in a little while, to the Baths of Agrippa, whereupon

the gladiator got his bearings and turned west and a trifle south. Lydia was dragging her feet, not complaining, but obviously weary. Then Mikrella piped up,

"Yonder is the portico of the Theater of Pompey. I have been there many times, hunting copper coins lost under the seats by the audiences."

Faljan likewise knew the place. It was an extensive covered area, once the promenade for well-dressed people interluding from theatrical entertainment, strolling and flirting and exchanging opinions on the current play, or whatever it was. This evening, however, the portico was packed with refugees, some of them trying to sleep, others eating scraps of food which they drew from their wallets, or simply huddling against the marble columns in silence.

"It is a handy landmark," said the gladiator. "Let us stay here until morning, then we can go on with some idea of where a Tiber bridge may be."

Lydia sank down without a word; she was exhausted.

"Will you pray?" Mikrella demanded in a strange tone. "You always do when there is trouble."

The mother closed her eyes, her lips moving. Mikrella turned away, but after a time sat down by herself and fell asleep. The gladiator lifted Lydia against the base of a column, so that she might be more comfortable; then he took his place beside her.

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

"Nay," she said, and drew his arm about her, so that his hand came up under her breast. "Do you feel how calmly my heart is beating?"

"Yes."

"That is because I fear not, but only trust to what awaits us on the morrow. God in His mercy has brought us out of one great trouble; He has not done this for the sake of destroying us."

"Rome is in the grasp of a catastrophe," Faljan said. "The soldiers of Tigellinus have neither time nor stomach to hunt me further. There is only this fire to grapple with."

"We shall come through it, my dearest."

Faljan tightened his arm a little. Under his hand beat her quiet steady heart; just above it, firm and warm, he felt her breast. Odd that he should be content to sit like this, when it was a man's way to seize such a breast whenever the occasion offered! The gladiator could not understand it, except that as he sat there, thinking upon it, it seemed to him that his desire for Lydia had changed. Not lessened.

On the contrary, it had deepened. Not so much bruising lust in it, more of serene possession. If they were destined to come through this holocaust of Roman fire, if they won to safety and peace, then he would have her for all the remainder of his days, lying with her in passion, filling her with children, but likewise wanting other things of her. Wanting to sit eating the food she cooked, laughing with her at incidents amusing and ridiculous, tilling a field together, dreading in sickness and rejoicing in health; all good things which a man could encompass only with his appointed wife, not a slut in a brothel.

"Tonight," he said slowly, "I have begun to love you. Before, it was—it was something different."

She pressed his hand,

"I understand that."

He fell silent, content to have her beside him. It was only respite, sitting here like this, but respite was something. A good deal, in fact. Faljan was content; when he listened and stared into the dark it was more a matter of curiosity than alarm. Night had fallen upon the city, an uneasy unwholesome darkness of acrid smoke and no moon or stars, but only the intermittent blaze of red flames to the east. Now and then a building crashed down with a hollow shock of a roar, followed by the cries of angry people. Yet for the most part there was no anger, but only fear and apprehension, lamentations uttered in a dozen tongues as the homeless went wandering about. The cries of wild beasts were to be heard occasionally, yet always far off, muted and melancholy. He looked down at Lydia,

"Can you sleep now?"

"I think so. Kiss me, Faljan."

The gladiator touched her lips and she lay back against his arm, relaxing, breathing more and more gently. He shifted himself to an easier position. Somewhere to the east, too far off to be seen, a pine tree was burning; it recalled to Faljan cook fires which he was wont to build on the Campagna, after he had killed game and needed to eat.

"A good omen," he decided; "signifying that I am soon finished with Rome, and with all that it has been to me."

Mikrella was talking in her sleep. He listened but could not understand what she said. A pity he had to understand her when she was awake. The gladiator, stung by her slurs against her mother's religion, had defended it; he had declared that Christ had saved him in the arena.

Yet was this true? Now that the monstrous business was over, run

through and plopped down into memory's bag, to be fetched up again piecemeal in the fashion of a bullock chewing one chunk of cud at a time, tasting and estimating it at leisure, Faljan was far from certain. All the while that he was slamming Synistor bloody with his shield, the gladiator had believed Christ about to stop the combat; and when the herald did actually sound for it to halt, Faljan was convinced that this signified a divine intervention.

Ah, but then Nero! Scabrous inviolable Caesar taking the place of the defeated Synistor, Faljan thereby so enraged that he cast off the claims of Lydia and Christ, and not only declared he would slay Nero, but so intended! The mob interfering at this point, was that again the working of the Christian god? Difficult to credit. The whole sequential affair hard to understand. Granted, Faljan had seized his successive boons and announced that he believed in Lydia's god; he had asserted to Mikrella that Christ had saved him—but actually was this anything more than a rush of emotion, gratitude tossed at Jesus merely for lack of a handier target?

The gladiator turned these matters over and over in his despondent brain, sighing deeply. He loved the woman beside him tonight, and she believed in the all-power and all-glory of a Christian Jesus, but Faljan feared that he could never share her confidence, and on this account he was troubled. For he realized that if ever she became aware of his doubts she would be unhappy. Yes, and she would certainly find it out. Women were like birds prowling the eaves of a granary; there was no keeping them from your inner secret guarded trove; they always got in, one way or another penetrated to it. Especially when you loved them, and you yourself unwittingly connived at their entering.

Certain cries and moanings had been sounding a little way from where Faljan sat. It was a woman in labor, the advent of the child hastened by the wrenching ordeal of the fire consuming Rome. He listened to her noises, and after a long time heard them die down; he caught the thankful gasp which signified that the child was born and now she had only to tie the cord and relax in blessed rest. She was fortunate. All women were fortunate. Sharp though their pain might be, a child could not delay beyond the designated number of months, and by means of charcoal marks or a tally stick you could keep track and know with certainty that it would be over at such and such a time. Whereas with the burden heaving sick and unruly inside Faljan, there was no assurance of ease by calendar. It should out, but would it—now or presently or ever! He saw no way of accomplishing this end, for the more he sighed and twisted and pondered it—

"Thinking solves nothing," he decided at length, and to avoid doing any more of it, he deliberately yielded to his fatigue, and slept. Until Mikrella awakened him with her loud cries of terror.

III.

He sprang to his feet in alarm. She was still asleep but screaming shrilly, her face contorted and her hands clawing at the air, as if a beast were at her. Lydia sat up hastily, much less disturbed than the gladiator,

"What is it, Mikrella?"

The child awakened, her eyes wide with horror. She saw where she was, and immediately quieted, a kind of mask coming over her face. Lydia nodded reassuringly; it was evident that the mother was used to these night seizures.

"It is nothing," said the child, seeing that Faljan was puzzled. "I am hungry, that is all."

"Perhaps we can get some food," said the gladiator, and took a countryman's long shrewd look at the sky. It was dark with smoke and drifting ash, yet something told him that it was near morning. "Anyhow, we must be on our way. The fire is drawing steadily nearer."

They found water at a fountain just outside the portico, had a good drink, and set out. There was a street here, running straight from the Pantheon on south toward the Theater of Balbus. From the theater it would be only a brief distance to the river.

More light crept into the eastern sky, some of it a natural dawn, the rest provided by the fire. Crowds of people milled about, but they were less noisy and violent than yesterday. Fear had given way to apathy, a despair which in many cases approached actual indifference. Householders went carrying bedding and personal belongings on their backs, their children trudging silently at their heels on the trek away from the advancing fire. Litter choked the streets: tables and benches, reed mats and broken cooking pots, odds and ends of clothing, and even the carcass of a lion which had got burned and then run this far to die.

"That would be food," said Mikrella; "but I prefer something else."

There were shops ahead, and a great clamor going on in front of them. Looters at work, inflaming wine in their bellies and clubs and stones in their hands, as they broke open doors and knocked owners aside. The contents of vegetable and wine booths were seized, flour and raw meat and bread trampled into the mire of the gutters. Mikrella darted into the fracas and returned with a dirty loaf of bread, handed it to her mother,

“Take it—bread is bread!”

Lydia broke off a chunk, fell to munching hungrily. She kept staring at a drunken looter across the street. He was bending over a woman who lay prone on the cobblestones; he hacked at her finger, for the sake of severing it and getting her ring. The marauder had presumed her dead, but at the pain of the knife she came to with a shriek, jumped up and ran. Yet she was far gone toward death, and presently she fell and lay quiet. The looter came slinking back to her, went on with his task.

“We have bread,” said Mikrella abruptly, “and there ahead is wine, ready and waiting for us! I shall get you some, my mother!”

The proprietor of a wineshop was defending himself against a gang of looters, whacking them with a cudgel, yelling curses and appealing to the gods for help. All in vain: an iron pike took him alongside the head. Mikrella picked up an abandoned drinking gourd, but Faljan said sternly,

“Stay back! You will get your face smashed, mixing with ruffians.”

“I have mixed with ruffians all my life!” she retorted, nevertheless she obeyed him.

They went past the wineshop at a quick pace, lest the brawlers interfere with their progress, attack them as dangerous witnesses. Then when Faljan had led his companions well beyond, Mikrella glanced back and gave a whoop of triumph. In tumbling various casks of wine out of the shop, the looters had let one escape; it was rolling this way down the street. Mikrella dashed off to meet it; Faljan shouted for her to come back, but she cried gaily over her shoulder,

“How can I refuse its invitation, when it is seeking me out!”

All of a sudden she paused. There was enough incline to the street for the cask to achieve a certain momentum; it was bumping and careening along at a threatening rate. The girl tried to get out of its way, but too late. It struck her and knocked her flat, passed over her. She made an effort to rise, fell back onto the cobblestones. Lydia

and the gladiator darted up, the mother kneeling beside her child with loud broken cries,

“Mikrella—get up—oh, my God!”

The girl opened her eyes; they were dull with pain. A trickle of blood came out of her mouth.

“Hush,” she said.

Faljan picked her up to carry her to shelter, some private niche where she could die decently, but the pressure of his arms hurt her. She moaned and he put her down again. The gourd was still clasped in her hand.

“I thought to fetch wine for my mother,” she mumbled; “but even at so small a task I fail her.”

“Nay,” whispered Lydia; “wine is nothing. Do you not speak of it.”

Mikrella turned her eyes upon the gladiator, attempted to jeer in her old way,

“You are hateful, Faljan—you never took me driving in your chariot, with the four grand horses.”

“Besidus has probably stolen them and is halfway to Numentum by this time,” said Faljan, “but if I ever have any more—”

“You lie,” she said, then her head jerked round toward her mother. “Tigellinus is dead.”

Lydia looked quickly at Faljan. She knew from his face that it was true, whereupon she put her arms about Mikrella and began to weep and to kiss her.

“Why do you kiss me, Mother? You never did before.”

“Don’t say that I never kissed you, my baby! I used to, often—before we became so unhappy.”

A show of blood appeared at the corner of Mikrella’s mouth. Faljan reached down and wiped it away. She shuddered a little,

“An eye for an eye!”

Lydia said, distractedly,

“What, my baby? What, Mikrella?”

“I heard Peter the fisherman tell you that. I remembered it, because it is true. I aided Synistor to find the Sicilian, so that he might perhaps slay him. I did not really believe he could get at the monster, but it was a chance and I seized it. Tigellinus died of the encounter—and for that, I am myself consigned to death—to pay for it. An eye for an eye. Oh, I know a good deal about your Christian sayings, Mother. I often followed you when you went beyond the

Tiber to talk to Peter; I listened from behind walls and doors, and I was very angry—because it was none of it for me.”

“But it *was* for you, my little girl—it *was*! I tried so many times to make you see that—but you always scoffed.”

“I craved to see Tigellinus dead, and if I had not scoffed and repulsed you, I should have weakened in my hate for him. I could not do otherwise. And now—well, now it is too late.”

“No, it is not too late. With Christ it is never too late. Mikrella, open your eyes!”

The eyes had fluttered shut, and now for the last time they fluttered open again. How strange! They were no longer dull; they shone clear as pools of pure blue water. Mikrella smiled a little.

“Pray for me,” she whispered.

Lydia reached up to loosen her long hair; she took the ends of it in her hands and bent over to wipe the child’s small face free of smudge and falling ash. A building crashed down not too far away, smoke puffed out toward the three on the cobblestones.

“We must go,” whispered the gladiator.

“I cannot leave her here,” Lydia wept. “I cannot!”

“We shall take her with us,” said Faljan; “and beyond the river, where there will surely be peace, we can bury her.”

He picked Mikrella up in his arms, and this time she did not cry out in pain, as she had done before.

IV.

They resumed their way, Faljan carrying the dead girl, and Lydia clinging to his arm,

“Oh, that she had not aided the miller to find Tigellinus! I also in my time suffered from the Sicilian, yet revenge was not the remedy—if indeed there was a remedy.”

“Mikrella was too wild and fierce,” rejoined the gladiator. “It was as if she reveled in vice.”

“Nay, you did not understand her. She suffered much, and in her wretchedness sought to find satisfaction in being wicked. Mikrella was not so in her heart. By night she was sweet and innocent and ahunger for love—unless she was in nightmare, and then she was tormented, as by day. Faljan!”

“What?”

"I failed her, thinking too strongly on my own misery to attend to hers. I should have kissed her oftener, shown her more affection. Perhaps if I had done that, I . . ."

Her voice trailed off hopelessly, she began to cough against the smoke. An ember lighted on her arm; she brushed it absently away.

"Is it much farther?" she asked flatly.

"No. That must be the Theater of Balbus to our right, so that the bridge is almost straight ahead."

They could smell the river now, even though its waters were hidden by a pall. Near here the river widened, and had an island in its middle, one bridge crossing to the island, a second continuing on to the far bank. This was surely the right road, for a steady stream of refugees was flowing to the spot. Faljan and Lydia got amongst them and went on, but near the preliminary bridge were halted by cries and the sound of blows. There were people trying to cross back into Rome from beyond the Tiber, for the sake of sharing in the loot; these people were obstructing all westward passage. The fight raged stubbornly, men killed and trampled, the way across the bridge utterly blocked.

The gladiator gazed back toward the city. The wind was still strong, smoke obscuring the heavens as a vast banner of death, now and then flashes of fire breaking through in fury. He signed for Lydia to follow him,

"We shall never get across this bridge, but luckily there is another one a little lower down river."

The lower bridge was likewise choked with traffic struggling to go two ways at the same time. Lydia despaired, but Faljan had heard an inspiring sound in the dusk off to his left. The bawling of cattle. From the Roman livestock market that he knew well. And suddenly he remembered his dream. Fog, a bullock's tail, safety through to clearer light! He had been led here by his omen, and he would accept its promise.

"Take Mikrella a moment. Fear not; we shall get across the river."

He caught up a stick and ran to the cattle pens, flung open a gate and drove out a dozen bullocks. They scattered bawling in fright, but he molded them down to the river, where they pushed in between barges and ships and began to drink thirstily.

"Now, then," he said, taking up Mikrella again, "seize one of those tails you see yonder and the bullock will tow you across. I will seize another."

"But Mikrella!"

"The Tiber is not so strong, nor I so weak, that I cannot carry her. Quick, the cattle are moving!"

She hesitated no longer, but took hold of a bullock's tail—Faljan struck the beast with his stick and forced it moaning into the water. He got a second bullock for himself, exchanging stick for tail and encouraging the beast with the old familiar cries he had used as a drover. Mikrella hung limp on his left arm, her hair streaming in the water. Lydia was already out of sight, vanished under smoke.

"A—rup!" Faljan kept saying to the bullocks. "A—rup, go now, a—rup, a—rup!"

V.

Clever at dancing, and brave in the spirit of her Christ, this Lydia with whose destiny the gladiator had interwoven his own; but clumsy in handling cattle. She was not twenty feet from shore before she cried out that she had lost her grip, the bullock somehow gone from her.

"Then seize another!" Faljan shouted. "Quick, or you are lost!"

By some quirk of luck or chance she succeeded in doing this, Faljan breathed easier. Her ox was swimming on his right hand, upstream from him, so that in case she again lost her hold he could perhaps catch her as she drifted and take her on to safety.

He was beginning to hear a strange sound, a certain rhythmic pounding, coming from up the river, approaching steadily and none too slowly. It was a kind of whacking sound, striking a cord of remembered knowledge in the gladiator's brain, and yet eluding his understanding. Whack whack, whack whack, like a dance or a work song. Aye, a work song! The beating of a boatswain's hammer, pacing the rowers in a galley! The rearing bulk of the vessel appeared out of the murk, bearing downstream in its own effort to escape the burning city.

"Lydia!" he shouted. "Lydia!"

"I hear you!"

"There is a galley coming. Take care!"

"Oh, Faljan!" she screamed.

"You are farther ahead than I am—you will make it—it should pass between us. Hold fast to your bullock!"

She called once more, but he could not distinguish the words. Faljan tightened his grasp on his bullock's tail, staring upstream. The prow of the galley lifted and lifted, a kind of bird of prey, a griffon seeking him out to destroy him. He cried at it in anger, but it kept coming on, the boatswain whacking with his hammer, the oars rustling steadily. The gladiator yanked at his bullock's tail, trying to slow the beast down so that the galley would pass ahead of him; but the animal was frantic and kept on its way. Then with blinding force the prow of the galley struck Faljan, flung him back in a swirl of water, Mikrella slipping from his grasp.

Dark jabbing pain swirled in upon him—he fought automatically to swim, seize Mikrella back again. He was aware of galley oars scraping him, beating him down. Then the vessel passed on its way.

He spat out water and called to Lydia, but there was no reply. Desperately he turned upstream, swimming as best he could, but not well, because of his hurt. A floating plank hit him squarely in the neck, and he went under. Strength oozed out of him as if he were a sieve; he felt himself drowning, and at that he was filled with rage. He would not die; he had surmounted a mountain of danger in the Roman arena—he escaped it and was thereby entitled to live. In despair, he lifted his voice again,

“Mother Tiber, help! Save me, let me have my woman back! Mother Tiber—Mother Tiber—”

A solid thing came drifting against him from upstream. He seized it. It was a dead body, floating peacefully under its coverlet of twisting smoke. Faljan felt it over with his hands, holding onto it long enough to make sure it was not Lydia. Then he released it.

There was mud under his feet, and this gave him courage. Mother Tiber had done that; she had fetched him into shallow water. Half swimming and half wading he staggered ashore,

“Lydia—Lydia—”

No answer. He sank down to rest a moment, get his breath; then he rose and began to wander upstream. Presently he stumbled over a little clot of people, huddled whimpering at the river's edge.

“Have you seen a woman?” he said. “A woman just crossed from the other side?”

The refugees stared back without answering. Faljan went on in despair,

“Lydia—in the name of Jesus Christ!”

Then he saw her. She was lying half awash in the river, her hair floating like gentle seaweed, white face upturned and her eyes closed.

The gladiator knelt beside her, shook her. She opened her eyes, and at that his strength came back. He picked her up and carried her back away from the Tiber, put her down in a dry spot.

"And Mikrella?" she whispered.

"Gone."

"Oh, God!"

"It was that accursed galley, striking me like Vulcan at his forge. She went from my grasp despite me."

"Perhaps better so," Lydia whispered.

"She will go down to the sea, and rest there."

"Yes," said Lydia, and spoke of it no more.

Nevertheless she wept, and for a long time would take no comfort. The gladiator crouched beside her, stroking her damp hair and staring moodily down the river. The fire had begun in the Circus Maximus and spread north along the eastern slope of the Palatine, but since then it had worked its way to the west of the Palatine as well, thence to the warehouses of the Tiber bank and across the river. Now a wall of smoke and fire blocked the whole southern end of the trans-tiber region, cutting Faljan off from his native Campagna.

CHAPTER 31.

I.

THEY made their plodding way north along the bank of the river, keeping well back from it, because of the warehouses and shops and tenements burning there. Now and then refugees passed them, cutting west toward the high slopes of the Janiculan Hill. A good place to evade the fire, up yonder, but Lydia was too weak to climb so arduous a route. She was suffering from chill, and no doubt also from grief over her child.

"Are you hungry?" Faljan asked.

"Nay, but I must lie down. Just a little while."

He found a sheltered spot, and they spent the day and the night there, so that Lydia could rest. She had a little money in her purse, and the following morning the gladiator took this and wandered down toward the river to get food. There were still looters slinking about, among them many slaves violently celebrating their new-found freedom; one of these was dancing grotesquely to and fro to the accompanying clank of the chains he had been unable to get off, but did not seem to mind. This slave had pillaged a Jewish shop, the owner still lamenting bitterly when Faljan walked in.

"Here," said the gladiator, and having given over a coin, he chose what he wanted for food: a melon and a handful of dried figs and a piece of bread.

The Jew paid no attention, but only went on with his lamentations, after the custom of his unhappy people. Faljan strode out with his provisions, got back to Lydia to find her still pale and weak. She felt too wretched to taste even the melon.

"Bear with me," she whispered. "I shall soon be better."

"You do not intend to die, do you?" he asked solemnly. "You would not leave me now, after all that we have endured?"

"Nay, Faljan," and she smiled faintly. "It is only a passing weakness."

That afternoon she was able to walk, and accordingly they resumed their march to the north. Loud crashing sounds reverberated to them from beyond the river. The fire was still making headway, and from the racket it appeared that soldiers were using battering rams, and the ballistas which hurled big stones, in order to knock down buildings in the path of the fire, and thus keep it from spreading. To no good end, so far as Faljan could observe. Rome was ablaze as far north as the old wall bordering the northern slope of the Quirinal. Beyond this area there ran an aqueduct, fetching water from the mountains; refugees had clambered up on top of the structure and were traipsing back along its course to higher country; but some of them sat down on the aqueduct, comfortable with bedding and food, while they gazed at the flaming city, as if it were a spectacle which Nero had staged for their entertainment.

"My villa!" Faljan cried, and pointed it out to her. It was afire, burning rapidly.

"Do you regret losing it?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Let it burn," said the gladiator cheerfully. "It is a phoenix, necessarily consumed before a better house for us can be born."

Lydia looked at him,

"Where are we going, my dearest?"

"To a land which must be happier, because it will be far from this one. Are you willing?"

"I shall go where you go, Faljan."

"And will you be content?"

"Yes; you know that."

"It is my intention to leave Italy," he said slowly, "pass over the Alps and into a certain region of many forests and few people. Where we can raise wheat, as yellow as your hair and tall as your tresses are long. Besides, living in that land will enable me to do penance—for Vortinax."

Lydia was puzzled. She had never heard the name.

"Vortinax?" she asked.

"He was my friend," said Faljan, averting his face so that she might not see his emotion; "the first and only one I ever had among men. They matched us in the arena, and I was forced to slay him."

"Oh, Faljan, that Rome could permit such things!"

"He died, yet when our glances met for the last time," said the gladiator somberly; "I saw in his eyes something which could never

perish or rot to the worms. It was a look, not of death, but of life beginning. I am certain that his spirit lifted out of the arena and returned safe to his forest home, and is happy there."

"As Mikrella is happy now."

"Perhaps so. In her eyes, when she died, there was something of the same look that Vortinax had. I do not have the words to put to it, yet both the barbarian Vortinax and Mikrella seemed at their death to be escaping to something better."

"To immortality, Faljan. The good eternal life beyond the grave."

He did not answer. Lydia cast him an inquiring glance, and when he still did not speak she took his arm and halted him, pulling him gently about so as to see him face to face,

"You believe in that life, do you not, my dearest?"

"For others, yes. That is, for certain others."

"And not for yourself, not for everyone?"

"I do not know," he said resentfully.

Faljan gazed out over her head, avoiding the anxious supplicating look she bent upon him. There was the sound of faint faraway singing, which he was glad to attend to, as a means of diverting her.

"Hark!" he said, and nodded toward the sound.

It came from a spot near the upper end of the Janiculum Hill, where there was a waste area and in the middle of it an old quarry. The singing stopped, and after a little while people began to climb out of the quarry and scatter slowly in various directions.

"What is it?" Faljan asked.

"A gathering place for Christians."

"How do you know?"

"Because I have been there."

"So?" he said in surprise. "For what purpose?"

"To take part in their services, to sing and pray and listen to wise words from Peter the fisherman. There he is, just coming out."

Peter had paused and was talking to two or three friends. He was a short man, not much taller than Ershutif the Syrian, although of heavier build. Not young. Stooped shoulders and a long beard, very little hair left on his head. In his hand a long staff resembling a shepherd's crook. A glow of happiness came upon Lydia as she watched him,

"Let us go to him, Faljan. He can marry us."

The gladiator opened his mouth to say something not altogether pleasant, but Lydia was already striding forward.

"Come," she said eagerly. "Come, Faljan!"

He followed behind her, grudging but silent. The fisherman had taken leave of his friends and was starting off to the north, until Lydia called out and then he saw her and halted. She quickened her pace, went up to Peter and sank onto her knees, to Faljan's astonishment kissing the apostle's hand. The gladiator approached with an unfriendly face, but Peter read him at once, and said quietly,

"Be not troubled, my son. She does not kneel to me, but to the Christ I serve."

A clever answer, leaving Faljan stumped for what to say. Peter touched the girl's head, and like a puppet she rose to her feet. The apostle smiled upon her,

"Then your gladiator has come safe through his ordeal!"

"Yes, thanks to God. And through the fire, as well. Why is Rome being destroyed, Peter—it is in punishment for its great wickedness, is it not?"

"Nay," said Peter. "The fire yonder is a visitation of God's wrath, nevertheless destruction is not its purpose."

The gladiator scowled, disliking Peter and yet glad of their meeting. It was going to be possible to say things to this bearded old man which Faljan shrank from saying to Lydia directly. Concerning the high powers and virtues which she attributed to Christianity. Um; except that the thing must be come upon without apparent intent, lest she see what had long since formed in his mind.

"Let the city be consumed," said Faljan; "and with it all Romans. It will be a fine riddance."

The apostle shook his head reprovingly,

"You are revengeful, my son."

"Which is natural."

"Which is not good," Peter insisted. "Rome has become corrupt, but that is understandable. Her people are a practical race, skilled in law and war, road and bridge building, all such matters. They have amassed great wealth, and, as is always the case when people have bodies but no soaring imagination, no ideal of spirit, the Romans have used their riches to pander to the flesh, perverting and elaborating sensual appetite. Still, my son, Rome is not to perish; she is to be humbled, cleansed, brought to pure ways and means."

"Of course," murmured the girl, and tried to catch Faljan's eye.

He ignored her, looking at Peter, instead. The fisherman was a gnarled calloused man, burnt by sun and wind, with the smell of soil and work about him. Apparently a man who had labored for

his bread, and yet become a glib talker. Faljan stiffened against him,

"All that to be done by Christianity?"

"Yes," said Peter, and signed that he would walk with them a little way. "Rome has dominated the world for some centuries now, but she cannot continue to do this unless she accepts the laws and standards of our Lord Jesus Christ."

They were walking slowly on to the north, Peter between Lydia and the gladiator. Faljan did not like the apostle to be in the middle, like the key ox in a plough team. He said in a hostile voice,

"I am an Italian, not a Roman; nevertheless I suppose I, too, must give in to Christ!"

"Not give in, accept."

"I cannot. I am a countryman, a peasant. In spite of all argument and wish, I believe in omens, the gods of wood and field and stream. Why, even when we were crossing the river, down lower from here, fighting our way across and a galley striking me and I about to perish, even then I did not think to call upon your god but by instinct raised my voice to the divinity of the river—Mother Tiber!"

"Mere habit," said Peter calmly, and touched Lydia's arm to keep her still. "Old habits endure until new ones form, that is human nature, my son."

"Yet to become a Christian," Faljan scoffed, "I must love my enemies—even though they seek to slay me! I must speak no evil, covet no man's better estate, look upon even those who are corrupt as my brothers—"

"Forget, for the time, that all men are your brothers; be content, until you grow in Christian principle, to regard God as your Father. The rest will come to you in due course."

"I wonder!"

"Oh, it will, it will," Lydia whispered.

The gladiator looked across at her with gloomy rebellious eyes,

"You say that because you wish it to be so, not because you know it will be. There is more to this thing than wishing, I suspect."

Peter said patiently,

"Try to please God, my son. That is the beginning."

"And beyond such a beginning," cried Faljan, "great obstacles and many mountains to be traversed, snarled trails and a morass at every turning!"

"Truly spoken," returned the apostle, with a note of grimness in

his voice. "A religion, O Faljan, is nothing to be caught up and held by mere word of mouth. It is the most difficult and radical experience in a man's life. He who would become a Christian must expect a revolution within himself, comparable to the cataclysmic battles which destroy cities and nations, that they may be born again. Attitudes, plans, ideals, even a man's instincts must be made over."

"That would be overly hard," muttered the gladiator. "I quail before such a prospect, the difficulty of what you are demanding."

"Aye," said Peter, "but it is like unto the pendulum of such a machine as is used to raise irrigation water. If ever the machine paused to reflect upon how many swingings faced it in a lifetime, it would doubtless lose heart and stop altogether, out of sheer discouragement. Yet it need not, since it is asked to swing only once at a time—once at a time, no more."

"And when will it have swung enough?"

Peter lay a reasoning hand upon the gladiator's arm,

"You have said that you are a countryman. Then you know the ways of birds and fowls. How many days are required to hatch a pigeon's egg?"

"Why, seventeen, naturally!"

"And a hen's egg?"

"Twenty-one."

"Each species of bird to its own necessary time. No one beyond the shell of the egg being able to change its period of incubation, no one foolish enough to claim that a pigeon must hatch in fifteen days or a chicken in twenty. If any impatient hand opens the egg before its time, it is immature and the creature dies, is that not true?"

"True," said Faljan, with a frown.

"You yourself being similarly an egg," said the apostle smilingly, "you will hatch into Christian faith when your inner development has been completed."

The gladiator was abashed. He walked on in slow thoughtfulness, aware in a kind of panic that all his resentment, his uneasy touchy defenses, all such shields were slipping from his grasp, leaving him exposed to the arrows discharged upon him by the apostle, this old Peter with the horned labor-roughened hands and grave voice. Then abruptly, like a man of sense who sees no further use in struggling, the gladiator grew calm. His brow unfurrowed,

"I understand that. Well, I considered that you were speaking in

delphic words beyond my skill to unravel, but what you have just told me is not riddle but clear soundness. I accept it."

"Good," said Peter heartily, and he stopped and turned to the gladiator, clasping his hand in a strong firm grip.

Lydia was radiant, but there was an embarrassed contrition in Faljan's face. He said to Peter in a halting voice,

"You must, if you can, overlook my brusqueness. I am not a good man like you. I wish I—"

The apostle was all at once somber,

"Do not envy me, neither ascribe to me virtues which I do not possess. I was a rude ignorant fisherman when Jesus found me. He took me to himself, and was patient and forbearing in all our dealings; but I doubted him and in the terrible end denied him when most he needed me. I have learned faith with difficulty, O Faljan; even as most men must learn."

"Learn," said Faljan slowly; "and what shall *I* have to learn?"

"Firstly, that the world needs such as you, wherever you may go."

"We go beyond the Alps," said Lydia. "Yet before that—"

She hesitated, looked at Faljan. He said sturdily,

"We want to be married."

Peter gazed at Faljan, and then at the girl; and seeing that they were in accord in the matter, he bade them kneel. They got down onto their knees in front of him, and at his direction clasped hands; the apostle pronounced the holy words, declaring them joined in Christ and from this day forward man and wife, never to part until death. Afterward he blessed them and they rose, Faljan pressing Peter's hand, and Lydia clinging to the apostle as if unwilling to leave him,

"And you, Peter, will you not come with us? Surely you could do wonderful work in the new land beyond the Alps, where the world is clean and empty, and a fresh beginning in all good things to be made!"

"That is undeniable," he answered, "yet at this stage, such a region requires men like Faljan, rather than me. Men who are simple peasants, their feet solidly upon the earth and their hearts attuned to the essentials of life in whatever form manifesting itself. I send you forth to that land, my children, to live your lives as a bulwark to the new Christianity."

"But you!"

"I am needed here. The Master forgave me my doubting, and in consequence I have in humility consecrated myself to doing His will wherever I am sent. He sent me to Rome, and in Rome I remain. This hill near by, the Vatican, I shall not wander far from it in the years remaining to me, if they be years. Here I shall build a church, and do God's commands as best I may."

Faljan nodded,

"So be it; yet before we depart, will you not counsel us further, for our better guidance?"

"There is little more to be said," replied the apostle. "Nothing is clearer than the teachings of Christ; indeed, the great wonder of it is that His principles were not discovered by the world much earlier, of its own accord. For all that Christ teaches is patently workable and helpful to mankind, making for purity and strength, and consequently for legitimate happiness. Truth, honesty, justice, patience in the face of adversity or grief or persecution, the capacity for love and forgiveness, tolerance, freedom from envy and greed in whatever form—these are Christianity. Any thoughtful honest man must, in reflecting upon paganism and upon the teachings of Christ, inevitably prefer the latter as practical doctrine. All this, my children, yet above everything else, kindness. Be ye kind to one another, be kind."

"Thank you, Peter," said Lydia softly.

"And now farewell," he answered. "May Christ attend you in your new land and life."

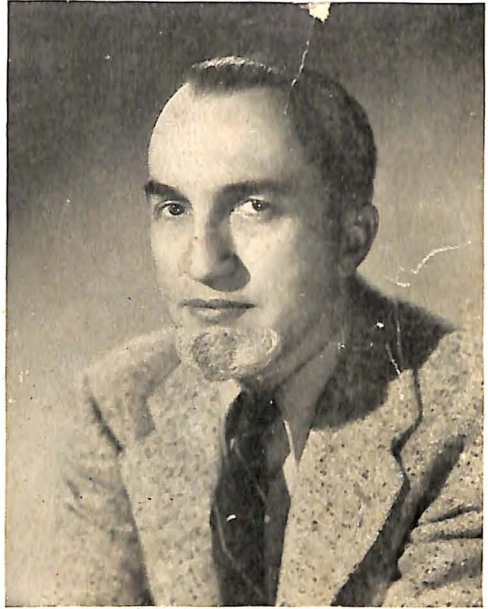
"Farewell," said the gladiator, and once more he clasped the apostle's hand.

Peter made the sign of the cross over them, and then they turned and went on their way, putting out of mind the smoke and fire and sorrowful bitter remembrance of burning Rome, and fixing their eyes upon the bright sky ahead.

Thames Williamson

the author of

THE GLADIATOR
HUNKY
SAD INDIAN
STRIDE OF MAN



Photograph by Roman Freulich

Thames Williamson got the idea of doing a novel on a Roman gladiator from a moonlight visit to the Colosseum in 1933. The story became his pet, the author working on it intermittently for the next fourteen years, during which time he made two trips back to Rome for research material. Mr. Williamson, well known as a linguist, discovered that such Romance languages as Italian, French, and Spanish sprang less from the formal literary language known today as Latin than from a colloquial Latin spoken even in Nero's day, and carried by colonizing Romans into outlying parts of the Empire. The racy idiom of *The Gladiator* is the direct outgrowth of Thames Williamson's long study of this informal lively Latin of ancient times.