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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MARCUS: THE YOUNG CENTURION ***

George Manville Fenn

"Marcus: the Young Centurion"

Chapter One.

Flies and Boys.

Hot as hot. Through the open window, where a couple of long shoots of one of the grapevines hung down, partially shading the room within, a broad, glowing ray of light, which made the shadows near look purply black, streamed right across the head of Marcus, a Roman lad of about eighteen, making his close, curly, brown hair glisten as if some of the threads were of gold, while the light twinkled on the tiny dew-like drops that stood out on the boy's brown forehead and by the sides of his slightly aquiline nose.

The side of his head was down upon the table and his hands outspread upon either side; a wax-covered tablet had escaped from his left, and a pointed stylus, with which he had been making a line of characters upon the wax, had slipped from his right fingers, for he was sleeping like a top.

All was wonderfully still in the Roman villa, and, from time to time, a slight puff of air which came cool from the mountains, but grew hot before it reached the house, sent one of the vine strands swinging to and fro like a pendulum, while the other, having secured itself to an outer shutter by one of its tendrils, remained motionless.

The one that swung to and fro kept up its motion the more easily from the fact that it was weighted by a closely-set bunch of grapes of a pearly green on one side, but on the other, facing the sun, beginning to be tinged with a soft purple hue. Upon one of these berries a great fly, which seemed to be clad in a coat of golden armour, sat with its face away from the sun as if listening to the sleeping boy, who every now and then uttered a low, buzzing sound which seemed to have attracted the fly from the outer sunshine to dart to the window with a similar kind of hum, buzz round for a few moments, and then settle upon the grape.

There was not much similarity in the two sounds, simply because the fly made his by the rapid motion of the wings, while Marcus produced his softly through his nose. In plain English, Marcus, the Roman boy, son of Cracis, the famous senator, tired out by the heat, had gone to sleep over his studies, snoring like an English lad of this year of grace, nearly two thousand years later on in the progress of the world.

So Marcus snored, not loudly and unpleasantly, but with a nice, soft, humming note; and the great, golden-green fly sat on the grape and seemed to watch him.

It was very still in the simple Roman villa on the steep slope of the hillside—a hill which looked like a young mountain, an offset of the beautiful spur that ran upward from the vineyard farms and villas of the campagna towards the purple shades of the great range far, far away.

But now and again other sounds floated into the shadowy room past the bright bar of golden light which crossed the boy as he slept.

There was the uneasy, querulous bleating of a goat, answered by the impatient cry of a kid, and now and again the satisfied grunting of pigs, though in those days they called them swine, of which there were several basking in the sunshine in the little farm attached to the villa, the little herd having shortly before returned from a muddy pool, dripping and thickly coated, after a satisfying wallow, to lay themselves down to dry and sleep in peace, the mud having dried into a crackling coat of armour which protected them from the flies.

All at once that fly sprang up from the grape, darted into the room, and circled round, humming loudly, one moment invisible in the dark, velvety shade, the next flashing bright and golden as it darted across the sunny bar of light, till, all at once, it dropped suddenly upon the boy's glistening nose, producing such a tickling sensation with its six brush-armed feet, that Marcus started impatiently, perfectly wide awake, and sent his disturber escaping from the window

by an angry stroke which, of course, missed, as he impatiently exclaimed in fine, old, sonorous, classic Latin:

“Bother the flies!”

The boy closed his eyes again, opened them sharply, and picked up his tablet and stylus, yawned, and carefully laid them down again, for his head felt very heavy. As he listened to the soft grunting of the swine, his eyelids dropped, and, in another moment, he would have been fast asleep once more, when from somewhere near at hand, as it seemed, there was a sharp crack as of the breaking of a piece of wood.

Marcus listened, fully awake once more, and, rising softly, he rose and approached the window, to peer between the vine leaves that encroached all down one side.

He was listening to a soft whispering which was followed by a laugh, a tearing noise, and another crack.

The boy stole back and stood for a few moments in his loose, woollen, open-fronted garment, not very much unlike a tweed Norfolk jacket without pockets or buttons, very short in the sleeves. His eyes were wandering about the room as if in search of something which was not there, and, not finding it, he stretched out his hands before him, looked at them with a satisfied smile, and doubled his fists. Then, stealing further back into the shadow, he passed through a door, made his way along a passage, across another room, and out into the open atrium, a simply-made, shady court with a central basin where a little jet of water played up, sparkling, and fell back in glistening drops.

The next minute the boy was out in a fairly extensive garden, stooping low as he glided among the trees towards the little trellised vineyard on the sunny slope, where, from the continued sounds, it was evident that a party of marauders were making a foray amongst the unripened grapes, which, trained to fir-poles secured to posts, formed an attractive pergola overhead.

Marcus approached as near as he could unseen, and then paused to reconnoitre, to find that the sounds proceeded from a party of six boys of somewhere about his own age, two of whom had destructively climbed up a couple of the poles to be seated astride amongst the spreading vines, where, after throwing down bunches to their four companions below, they were setting their glistening white teeth on edge with the sour grapes they had torn from the clinging strands.

They were talking in whispers, but that was the only sign of fear they displayed, for the villa stood alone, the nearest domicile, another villa farm, being a couple of hundred yards away lower down the slope, and, apparently perfectly convinced that the occupants of the place were right away, they feasted in perfect security and content.

A grim smile came upon the handsome young face of Marcus as he watched the destruction going on. His eyes sparkled, his sun-browned cheek grew deeper in its tint, and he looked round again for the something that was not to hand, that something being a good stout stick. Then, clenching his fists more tightly—nature’s own weapons—and without a sound, he suddenly made a dash for two of the boys who were standing with their backs towards him, and with a couple of springs came down upon them like fate, gripping them by the backs of their necks and sending them face downwards amongst the vine leaves and damaged bunches that had been torn from the vine, kneeling upon one and pressing the head of the other down into the soil, regardless of the shrieks and yells which made the two seated above drop down and follow the other two, who had taken to flight, while the noise that was made startled the sleeping swine outside to add their shrill squeals and heavy grunts to the turmoil of the cultivated ground within.

It was hard work to keep down the two young marauders, who joined to their struggling piteous appeals for mercy; but Right strengthened the hands of Marcus, and he was gaining a complete triumph, and calculating where he should secure his two prisoners until either his father or Serge came back, the latter probably from his tramp through the forest to see after the young acorn-eating pigs.

But the prisoners’ shouts reached and added wings to their flying friends’ heels for the moment, then checked them, and a feeling of comradeship prevailed. The young rascals stopped short after going some distance; then one looked back, and his example was followed by another and another, till all four were hesitating as to what they should do.

They were on the balance when a more pitiful yell than ever from their trapped companions sent the scale down in the latter’s favour. They looked at one another questioningly and then began to steal back to see what was happening, all the while fully on the alert to dash again through the trees which shaded their approach to the garden.

In this way, with their fellows’ bellowing ringing in their ears, they at last stole up to the palisading through which they had at first broken, and then, dropping on hands and knees, they crept cautiously up to the edge of the little vineyard and, sheltering themselves well, peered in.

The first and boldest got a good glimpse at once, and beckoned and made way for the others to see what was happening.

There was not much to see, only Marcus half kneeling half sitting upon the ragged back of one of his prisoners, and reaching over to grind the nose of the other a little more closely into the earth every time he squealed.

But that was enough for the return party, which clustered together on all fours with their faces approaching and eyes questioning, like so many quadrupeds.

They looked the more animal-like from their silence during the next few minutes, when the two prisoners made a concerted effort to get free—an effort which only resulted in making their position worse, for, as he mastered them, reducing them to obedience again, the boy jammed his knees fiercely into the ribs of the one upon whom he squatted, and lifted up and banged down again the head of the other.

The result was a piteous burst of shrieks which were too much for their friends and supplied them with the courage in which they were wanting, making them with one consent spring forward to their comrades' help, influenced, however, by the feeling that they were six to one.

So sudden and unexpected was the attack, which accompanied a loud shout—one which made the prisoners join in and heave themselves up to get free—that Marcus was jerked over, and, before he could gain his feet, found himself the centre of a combined attack in which he rapidly began to get the worst of it, for, while he fought bravely and pommelled and banged enemies in front, getting on so well that he succeeded in seizing two by the neck and hammering their heads together, two others leaped on him from behind in his weak rear, in spite of his splendid kicking powers, while two more attacked in front.

Marcus was a young Roman, and fought like the Romans of old; but then the six young roughs were Romans too, and they fought like the Romans of old, and six to one is rather long odds.

Breath began to come short, perspiration was streaming, and an unlucky blow on the nose set another stream flowing, while, all at once, a dab in the eye made the optic flinch, close its lid from intense pain, and refuse to open again, so that one-eyed like a regular old Cyclops, and panting like the same gentleman from the exertions of using his hammer—two in this case, and natural—Marcus fought on, grinding his teeth, rapidly weakening, but determined as ever, though he felt that he was being thoroughly worsted by his foes.

"I'm about done," he said to himself; but he did not utter a sound save his panting, while suddenly it began to grow dark; for, feeling that the day was their own, the enemy combined in a final rush, closed him in, hung on to him wherever they could get a hold, and were dragging him down to take vengeance for the past—for they were old enemies, Marcus and they—when, all at once, there was a fierce, deep, growling bark, a rush, a man's deep voice as if encouraging a dog, and Marcus was free, to stand there breathless and giddy, listening to the retreating steps of his foes and the shouts to the dog of Serge, who had come to his help in the nick of time.

Chapter Two.

Old Serge.

Marcus, son of Cracis, was a good deal hurt, but his injuries were of a temporary and superficial kind, and, as he stood listening, so little importance did he attach to his injuries that a broad grin began to gather upon his frank young face, and he uttered a low, chuckling laugh; for, as he stood wiping his brow and listening, he could hear the sounds of blows, yells and cries, the worrying growl of the dog, and the harsh encouraging voice of the man pretty close at hand, all of which taught him that the enemy had been checked in their retreat and were being horribly routed by the reinforcements—a cohort of dog and man.

"The young ruffians!" said Marcus, softly, as, unwillingly dragging himself from where he could have the satisfaction of hearing the punishment that was being awarded, he hurried back into the villa and stopped in the court, where he sank upon his knees by the cool, plashing fountain, whose clear waters he tinged as he bathed his face and swollen eye.

He had some intention of hurrying back to the scene of battle to look upon the damaged vines, and see if any prisoners had been made; but, while he was still occupied in his surgical effort to make his injured eye see as well as the other, he was startled into rising up and turning to face the owner of a deep, gruff voice, who had approached him unheard, to growl out:

"Well, you were a pretty fellow, boy! Why didn't you beat 'em?"

The speaker was a big, thick-set, grizzled man of fifty, his bare arms and legs brown-skinned, hairy and muscular, his chest open, and his little clothing consisting of a belted garment similar to that worn by the boy, at whom he gazed with a grim look of satisfaction which lit up his rugged face and fine eyes.

"Weren't running away, were you?"

"No!" shouted Marcus, angrily. "I kept at it till you came, Serge. But there were six."

"Yes, I know. You didn't go the right way to work. Were they at the grapes?"

"Yes. They woke me up; I had been writing, and I dropped asleep."

"Writing?" said the man contemptuously and with a deep grunt of scorn. "Enough to send anybody to sleep on a day like this. I say, lucky for you I came back!"

"Yes," said Marcus, giving his face a final wipe; "I was getting the worst of it."

"Course you were. That's reading and writing, that is. Now, if you had been taught to be a soldier instead of a volumer, you'd have known that when the enemy's many more than you, you ought to attack him in bits, not take him all at once and get yourself surrounded. Yes, it's lucky for you I came."

"Yes, and I hope you gave them something to remember it," said the boy, with his eyes fixed upon the stout crook upon which the new-comer leaned.

"Oh yes, I made them feel this," said the man, with a chuckle; "and old Lupus tickled them up a bit and made them squeak."

"That's right," cried Marcus; "but where is he?"

"On guard," said the man.

"On guard?"

"Yes," said the man, with a chuckle. "We took the whole six of them prisoners."

"Ah! Where are they then?"

"Shut up fast alone with the wine-press. They won't get out of there with Lupus looking on."

"Capital!" cried Marcus, forgetting all his sufferings in the triumphant news. "Here, Serge, what shall we do with them?"

"I'm not going to do anything with them," said the man, gruffly. "I've had my turn, and it's yours now. You've got to fight the lot."

"Yes," cried the boy, flushing, and his fists began to clench. "But I say, Serge, I should like to, but I'm a bit tired, and they're still six to one."

"Yes," said the man, "but that's what I want you to see. It won't hurt you to know how, even if you're never going to be a soldier. You come along o' me."

"What, to fight them?" cried Marcus.

"Yes. Aren't afraid, are you?"

"Not a bit," cried the boy, flushing angrily. "Come and see."

The man chuckled as he went off with his young companion to the lower side of the villa, where stood a low-roofed stone building with heavy chestnut plank doors, before which crouched a big, shaggy wolf-hound which pricked up its ears and uttered a deep growl as it lifted up its bushy tail, and rapped the earth in recognition of the new-comers, but did not take its eyes from the door beyond which were the prisoners it had been set to guard.

"Now, boy," said the man, "it was your doing that I taught you a bit of soldiering, and a nice row there'll be about it some day when he finds us out; so now I'm just going to show you, if you're not too tired, how one good Roman can fight six enemies and beat 'em, same as we've often done in the good old days when I wore my armour and brass helmet with its plume, not a straw hat and things like these. Ah, boy," said the man, drawing himself up and shouldering his crook as if it were a spear, "those were grand old times! I was a better man then than now."

"No, you weren't, Serge, not a bit," cried the boy. "You must have always been what you are now—a dear good old chap who'd do anything for me."

The fierce-looking old fellow smiled pleasantly, literally beaming upon the boy, whom he patted on the shoulder.

"Ah," he said, "but there was no you then. But never mind all that. Hark!" he continued, softly, as a whispering was heard beyond the door, "They know we are coming, and they're thinking about making a rush when I open the door. But they'd better not try; you'd pin some of them, wouldn't you, Lupe?"

The dog uttered a low, deep, thundering growl.

"That's right, boy. Now, Marcus, my lad, if you feel too tired, say so, and we'll keep them till the master comes."

"Oh, don't do that," cried the boy. "He'd only talk to them and scold them, and then let them go, after forgiving them for stealing the grapes."

"That's right, boy; so he would."

"And they'd all laugh," cried Marcus, "and come again."

"But they won't after the welting you are going to give them, boy—if you are not too tired."

"Of course I'm tired," cried the boy, impatiently, "after a fight like that; but then they are tired too, so it's all fair—only six to one?"

"Don't I tell you that I am going to show you how to fight them as a Roman should, and how we used to conquer in the good old times before we took to reading and writing and came into the country to keep pigs."

"And grow corn and grapes, and feed our goats in this beautiful farm villa; and if father liked to take to study instead of being a great Roman general and senator, it's not for you, Serge, to find fault with what it pleases him to do."

"Right, boy! Spoken like your father's son. It was only one of my growls. I don't mind. He's one of the finest men that ever stepped, and what he says is right. But you and me, we don't want him to let these young ragamuffins off without loosening their skins a bit to do them good, do we?"

"No!" cried the boy, joyously, as he showed his white teeth. "I say, Serge, I feel rested now, and I want to give it to them for knocking me about as they did. The rascally young plebs! The cowards! Six to one! I believe they'd have half killed me if they had got me down."

"That they would, Marcus, my boy," cried the old soldier, gazing at him proudly. "But come on, I'll show you the way, and Lupe and I will look on and see that they fight fair, while we guard you flank and rear. Old Lupe shall be ready to scatter their mothers, if they hear that we have the young rascals fast. No women will interfere if old Lupe begins to show his teeth."

The man and boy exchanged glances, and, as the former struck his staff down heavily upon the earth in advancing towards the great, rough door of the building, the latter's fists clenched involuntarily, and the dog pricked up his ears and uttered a low sigh.

The next minute a big, rough, hairy hand was raised to the cross-bar which secured the door, and, at the first touch, there was a low, rustling sound within the building.

Serge and Marcus exchanged glances again, while the dog crouched as if about to spring.

Directly after, the bar was loosened, and fell with a clang, the door was dragged open from within, and the prisoners made a simultaneous rush to escape, but only to fall back with a despairing yell, for the great dog bounded at them, and the old soldier and his young master closed in, to fill up the door and step forward.

"Stop outside, Lupe, my lad," said the old soldier, quietly; and the dog turned back to his former position and crouched once more, while the door was shut from the inside, the six boys backing to the far side, beyond the great stone hewn-out press, empty now, dry and clean, for the time of grape harvest was not yet.

"Now then, my fine fellows," growled Serge; "you want to fight, do you?"

"We want to go," half whimpered the one who acted as spokesman.

"Oh, yes, you want to go," said the old soldier; "of course. Well, you shall go soon, but you wanted to fight young Marcus here, and you didn't play fair."

"Never touched him till he came at us," cried another.

"So I suppose," said Serge. "Very hard on you! Six nice boys! Interfered, did he, when you were breaking down the vines and stealing the grapes?"

"They warn't ripe," whimpered another.

"Then they ought to have been, seeing that you wanted them," cried Serge, indignantly, while Marcus laughed. "But as they weren't ripe, of course, it made you cross, and you began to fight young Marcus here."

None of the boys spoke, but gazed longingly at the door.

"Ah! You see it ain't fastened inside," said Serge, mockingly; "but it is fastened outside with dog's teeth. I wouldn't advise you to try to get out, because our dog, Lupus, doesn't like boys, and he's hungry. Nothing he'd like better than to eat such a chap as one of you. But you know that, and you wouldn't have come, only you'd seen me go off to the forest with him to herd up the young swine. Didn't know that we should be back so soon. You see, the young swine were just at the edge."

"You'd better not touch us, old Serge," cried the biggest lad, in a whining tone. "You touch me and see if my father don't mark you!"

"I'm not going to touch you, boy," replied the herdsman. "I've done all I wanted to you for breaking down my grape poles that I cut and set up. I've got you here because you wanted to fight."

"I don't want to fight," cried the youngest of the party. "You'd better let us go."

"Yes, I'm going to as soon as you've fought young Marcus and beat him as you meant to."

"We don't want to fight," half sobbed another. "We want to go home."

"I don't believe it," growled Serge. "You want to whip young Marcus, and I'm going to see you do it; only old Lupe, our dog, and me's going to see fair."

"No, you ain't!" came in chorus. "You've got to call that dog off and let us go."

"Yes, when you've done," said the old soldier, with a grin. "Who's going to be the first to begin? For it's going to be a fair fight, not six all at once upon one. Now then, anyhow you like, only one at a time. What, you won't speak? They're nice boys, Marcus, my lad, so modest they don't like to step before one another; so you'll have to choose for yourself. Just which you like, but I should go or that big fellow first."

"I don't want to fight," whined the lad indicated, and he backed in among his companions and placed himself as far behind them as he could.

"Oh, come! This is wasting time. There, go and fetch him out into the middle, Marcus, my lad—or no, I'll do it."

Chapter Three.

An Old-Fashioned Fight.

Serge had been standing leaning over his crook, but now, taking it in both hands and holding it before him, he stepped quickly towards the big lad, who backed more and more away; but his effort to escape was in vain, for, quick as thought, Serge brought down his crook as if to strike the lad a violent blow, making him wince and bound aside, when, before he knew what was happening, he was hooked by the leg like an obstinate swine, and dragged, yelling and calling for help, out into the middle of the stone shed.

"Got you," said Serge, coolly. "There, it's no use to kick. Here, you other boys, close up and see fair."

Satisfied at once that they were outside the trouble, the other lads began to grin, and, obeying the old soldier, they closed in together, whispering to their companion who had just been hauled out, as they believed, to bear the brunt of the expected punishment.

Their whispers were ill received by the selected victim, who, as soon as his leg was released from the crook, made as if to back away again; but his companions put a stop to this and began urging him on, trying to incite him to begin, he reluctant and resisting all the time, till his ire was roused by Marcus, who, at a word from the old soldier, dashed in to make a beginning, using his fists upon his enemy so well that, at the end of two or three minutes, the latter threw himself down, howling dismally and covering his face with his arms.

"Here, you are not half done!" cried Serge, poking him in the ribs with the butt end of his crook. "Get up, will you, or I'll make the other fellows stand you in a corner to be thrashed."

"Oh, let him be, Serge," cried Marcus. "I did give it him well, and hit him as hard as I could."

"Oh, very well," said the old soldier, hooking the boy again and dragging him, resisting all he could, to the door.

"Just hold it open, Marcus, my lad. That'll do. No, no, Lupe, we don't want you. Now then, young fellow, off you go, and if ever I see you here again I'll set the dog at you, and if he once gets hold he won't let you off so easily as I do."

One minute the boy was resisting and tugging to get his leg free of the crook; the next, as soon as he realised that he was being set free, he dashed off, yelling threats of what he meant to do, till the dog sprang up with a growl, and the yells gave place to a shriek of fear, uttering which he disappeared from view.

"Oh, no, you don't!" cried Serge, as, taking advantage of the dog's back being turned, the others cautiously approached the door, and were about to make a dash for liberty.

As the old soldier spoke he thrust his crook across the doorway, and, as the boys fell back again, the dog resumed its watchful position and the door was closed.

Directly after, to Marcus' great enjoyment, there was a repetition of the previous proceedings, Serge selecting another victim with his crook from the five prisoners, dragging him out into the middle, where Marcus, who now thoroughly enjoyed his task, attacked him as Serge fell back, and, between him and the other lads, the second prisoner was forced to fight; but it was a sorry exhibition of cowardice, resulting in a certain amount of punishment, before he too lay down and howled, and was then set at liberty.

The proceedings were repeated till the other four had received a thrashing, and the last had clashed off, shamming terrible injury one minute till he was outside the door, and yelling defiance the next; and then, as the footsteps died out, Marcus threw himself upon the ground under the shady vines.

"Hallo!" cried Serge, anxiously. "Have they hurt you, boy?"

"No," was the reply; "but I hurt myself a good deal against their thick heads. But I say, Serge, do you think that was fair?"

"Fair? Of course it was!"

"But it seemed so one-sided, and as if I had it all my own way. They couldn't fight because they were afraid of you."

"Of you, you mean, boy, when it was man to man."

"No," said Marcus; "they'd have fought better if you and the dog hadn't been here."

"Yes, and they could all have come on you at once. A set of mongrel young hounds—half savages, that's what they are. You didn't thrash them half enough."

"Quite as much as I wanted to," cried the boy, "for my knuckles are as sore as sore. But oh, I say, Serge, it was comic!"

"They didn't think it was, my lad."

"I mean, to see you hooking them out one after another with your old crook, yelling and squealing like pigs."

"Humph!" grunted the old soldier, with his grim face relaxing. "Well, it has given them a pretty good scaring, and I don't suppose that they will come after our grapes again."

"Yah-h-ah!" came in a defiant chorus from a distance, where the young marauders had gathered together, and the dog sprang upon his feet, growling fiercely, before bursting into a deep, baying bark.

"Hear that?" cried Marcus.

"Hear it, yes! And it would not take much to make me set old Lupe after them. He'd soon catch them up, and then—"

"Yah-h-ah!"

"Fetch them down, boy!" shouted the old soldier, and, with a fierce roar, the dog dashed off in a series of tremendous bounds, but only to be checked by a shrill whistle from Marcus, which stopped the fierce beast and brought him trotting slowly back, to crouch down at his young master's feet.

"Why did you do that, lad?" cried the old soldier, staring.

"Because I didn't want Lupe to get amongst them, worrying and tearing. What would my father have said?"

The old soldier let his crook fall into the hollow of his left arm and pushed off his battered straw hat, to let it slide down between his shoulders, where it hung by its string, while, with his grim sun-tanned face as full of wrinkles as a walnut shell, he slowly swept the drops of moisture from his brow.

"Hah, yes," he said; "I didn't think of that. He wouldn't have liked it. He's got so soft and easy with people since he took to volumes and skins covered with writing. Why, his sword would be all rusty if it wasn't for me. It's all waste of time, for he'll never use it again, but I don't like to see a good blade such as his all covered with spots. Yes, boy," added the man, thoughtfully, "I'm glad you stopped old Lupe. Haw-haw-haw! I should rather liked to have seen him, though, nibbling their heels and making them run."

"Nibbling!" laughed Marcus. "Nibbling, Serge!" And the boy stooped down, raised the great dog's muzzle, and pulled up one of his lips to show the great, white fangs. "Not much of nibblers, these."

"Well, no, my lad," said the old soldier; "they don't look nibbly. Nibblers wouldn't do for him, would they, Lupe, old man? He wants good tools to tackle the wolves in winter. There, it's all over, and I don't feel so savage now. Here, you had better go and have a good wash while I see to the vine poles and put in a new un or two from the stack. I expect I shall have to prune a bit too, and tie, where those young ruffians have been at work. Let's get a bit tidy before the master comes back, though I don't suppose he'd take any notice if there wasn't a grape bunch left. But he'd see the dirt and scratches on your face first thing."

"Yes, of course," cried the boy, hastily, as he held up his knuckles, two of which were minus skin, and showing traces of dried blood. "But I say, Serge, look at my face. Is it much knocked about?"

"Well, pretty tidy, my lad. You look as if you had been in the wars. Nose is a little bit knocked on one side."

"Oh, Serge!" cried the boy, showing real excitement now.

"Left eye looks a bit sleepy, too."

"Serge!"

"Well, you asked me, my lad—and your bottom lip has been cut against your tooth."

"Oh, what will he say?" cried the boy, wildly.

"I dunno," growled the old soldier, grimly. "Yes, I do," and his eyes twinkled with satisfaction and pride in the prowess his young master had displayed.

"What will he say?" cried the boy, anxiously, and as if he placed full confidence in the old servant's words.

"Say you oughtn't to have been fighting, but been busy scratting about with your stylus and making marks on that wax."

"But I was busy, only it was so hot and one couldn't keep awake; and when I heard those fellows breaking down the vines—"

"Why, you went out and walloped them, of course," cried the man. "Quite nat'ral. What boy wouldn't who had got any stuff in him at all? There, don't you fret yourself about it, lad. The master will grumble at you a bit, of course, same as he does at me; but he's a right to, and it's only his way as he's got into now since he took to his books and writing. But there was a time—ah! And not so very long ago, my lad—when if he'd caught those ragged young cubs tearing down his vines, he'd have stood and laughed and enjoyed seeing you thrash 'em, and helped you with his stick. And done them good too, made men of them, knowing what was right. But there, those days have all passed away. No more marching in the legion with the men's plumes dancing in the sunshine, and every man's armour as bright and clean as hands can make it. Ah, Marcus, my boy, those were grand old days, when we marched out to conquer, and came back and made grand processions, and the prisoners carrying all the spoil. I did hope to have seen you as fine a young centurion, growing into a general, as your father was before you. But—but— There, don't stand staring at me with your eyes shining, your face red, and your mouth half open like that. Be off at once and have a good wash, and bathe those cuts and bruises till they look better."

"Yes! I had better go," said the boy, with a sigh. "It was a great bother for those boys to come. I meant when you came back for us to have some practice with the shield and spear, and then for you to show me again how to use the sword."

"Hah, yes," growled the old man, drawing a deep breath through his dilating nostrils, and unconsciously he whirled up his crook with one hand, and as he dropped into a picturesque attitude with one foot advanced and let the stout staff drop into his extended left hand, "that's the way," he cried. "Fancy, boy, a thousand spears presented all at

once like that to the coming barbarians, and then the advance slowly and steadily, driving them scattered back, while the trumpets sounded and the ground quivered like a coming earthquake beneath the army's tramp. That's how we conquered and made the fame of grand old Rome. Bah! What an old fool I am!" he cried, as he stamped the end of his crook down once more, "I forget I'm not a soldier now, boy, only Cracis' man who tends his farm and keeps his swine."

"Never mind, Serge; we are very nice and happy here. The place is so beautiful. Father likes you."

"Bah! Not he! He only looks upon me as a slave."

"That he doesn't!" cried the boy, indignantly. "Why, only the other day he was talking about you."

"About me?"

"Yes, and saying what a happy, peaceful place this was."

"Peaceful! Bah!"

"And that it didn't matter what came to pass, he had me with him."

"Of course! Spoken like a father."

"And you," continued the boy, "a true old friend in whom he could trust."

"What!" cried the old soldier. "What! Friend? Did he say that?"

"Of course. He often talks like that."

"A friend in whom he could trust!" muttered the old soldier. "And here have I been listening to you and doing what I know he'd hate."

He gripped the boy sharply by the wrist as he spoke.

"Why, Serge, what do you mean?" cried the boy, wonderingly.

"Mean! Why, what have I been doing? Doesn't he want you to grow up as one who hates fighting, and a lover of peace? And here have I been teaching you how to use the sword and spear and shield, making of you one who knows how to lead a phalanx to the fight—a man of war. What would he say if he knew?"

Marcus was silent.

"I have done wrong, boy," continued the old soldier, "and some day he'll find us out."

The boy was still silent for a few moments. Then quickly—

"I must tell him some day, Serge, that it was all my doing—that I wouldn't let you rest until you had taught me what I know."

"That's true, boy," said Serge, in a sombre tone, "and it all comes of letting you see me take so much care of his old armour and his sword and spear. Yes, like my own old arms and weapons, I have kept them all bright and ready for use, for it's always seemed to me as if the time might come and bring the order for us to march to tackle some of Rome's old enemies, or to make new conquests—perhaps to Gaul—and that we must be ready for that day. I oughtn't to have done it, boy, but I was an old soldier, one who loved to see his weapons ready for the fight, and somehow I did. There, off you go! It's no use to think now of what is done."

Chapter Four.

Caught.

It was the next day, under a brilliant blue Italian sky, that Marcus, after spending the morning with his father in the room he devoted to his studies, hurried out with a sense of relief to seek out the old soldier, whom he expected to find repairing damages amongst the vines. But the damages were repaired, and very few traces remained of the mischief that had been done; but several of the upright fir-poles looked new, and there were marks of knife and bill-hook upon some of the fresh cross-pieces that had been newly bound in their places. But a freshly tied-in cane and the careful distribution of the broad leaves pretty well hid the injured places, and Marcus walked away smiling as he thought of the encounter he had had, while passing his fingers daintily over bruise and cut, and feeling gently a place or two that were tender still. He walked down one path and up another of the garden, his eyes wandering about to see if Serge were busy there; but he was absent, and there was no sign of him in the farmyard, and none of the labourers whom he found at work could give any news of his whereabouts.

For quite half an hour the boy wandered about the well-kept little estate of his father before beginning to return towards the villa embowered in flowers that had been carefully trained over the stone walls, when, going round to the back, he heard a burring sound as if someone with a very unmusical voice were trying to sing; and, hurrying along a path, after muttering impatiently, the boy made for an open window, grasping the fact that he had had all his walk and search for nothing, and that, if he had gone round to the two rooms set apart for the old soldier's use before going out, he would have found him there.

Marcus dashed up to the window, and looked in.

"Why, Serge," he cried, "I've been hunting for you everywhere! Ah! What are you doing there?"

Without waiting for an answer, the boy drew sharply back, ran to an open doorway, entered and made his way at once into Serge's room, a rough museum in its way of the odds and ends of one who acted as herdsman, gardener, and general odd man to the master of the little country Roman villa.

"Why, I have just come in time!"

"Oh, here you are, then," said Serge, ignoring the boy's question. "Well, what did the master say about the broken vines?"

"Nothing," replied Marcus.

"Well, about your cuts and bruises?"

"Nothing," said the boy again.

"He must have said something, seeing how you're knocked about."

"No, he must not."

"What!"

"He was so quiet and thoughtful yesterday evening, and again this morning, that he hardly looked at me at breakfast time; and when we went into the study he took up the new volume he is reading, and hardly raised his head again."

"Then you haven't been scolded for fighting?"

"Not in the least."

"So much the better for you."

"But I say, what in the world is the meaning of all this?" cried the boy, as he stepped to the rough table, upon which, bright with polishing, was a complete suit of armour such as would have been worn by a Roman man-at-arms if he had joined the army when a mere youth.

There lay the curved, brazen helmet with its comb arching over and edged with its plume, the scaled cheek-straps that held it in its place, the leathern breast and back-piece moulded and hammered into the shape of the human form, brazen shoulder-pieces, ornamentations and strengthening, the curved, oblong shield and short sword with lion's head to its hilt and heavy sheath.

There were two more helmets and suits of armour hanging from the walls, the one rich and ornamental, such as an officer would have worn, the other plain, and every indication visible of the old soldier having had a general clean up, the result of his polishing being that every piece of metal glistened and was as bright as hands could make it.

"Come in time?" said Serge. "What for? I didn't want you here."

"No, but I wanted to come. How beautiful it all looks!"

These words softened the old soldier's next remarks. He uttered a satisfied grunt as he said:

"Yes, I have had a good turn at them; but it seems a pity, don't it?"

"What seems a pity?"

"To wrap all that tackle up and put it away so as it shan't be seen, till I think it wants cleaning again."

"Yes, of course. But you are not going to put mine away."

"Oh, yes, I am," said the old man. "I didn't sleep all last night for thinking about it. I don't mean for us to get into any trouble with the master, so remember that."

"Look here, Serge!" cried the boy, angrily, "you can put your armour and father's away, of course, but this is mine, and I didn't save up the money father gave me and let you buy what was wanted and pay those old workmen, the smith and armourer, to cut down and alter and make all these things to fit me, to have them all wrapped up and put away where I can't see them."

"But you must, boy. You are not going to fight."

"Never mind that. I am not going to have them put away."

"Why not?"

"Because I want to put them on sometimes."

"Bah! To go and strut about like a full-plumaged young cockerel in the spring, and look at yourself in a bit of glass!"

"No; I'm not so vain," said the boy; "but I've got that armour and those weapons, and you have been teaching me

how to use a sword and spear, and a lot more besides, and I mean to go on learning—so mind that.”

“Ho!” cried the old man. “And who’s going to teach you?”

“You are, till I’m perfect.”

“Can’t ever get perfect in using a sword and spear. It arn’t to be done, no matter how you practise.”

“Well, I mean to get as perfect as I can, and you are going on teaching me.”

“Nay,” said the old man; “once a fool don’t mean always a fool. I am going to put all these away, and you have got to forget it.”

“No!” cried the boy, angrily. “I shall never forget what you’ve taught me, Serge—never; and I’m not going to have my things put away. You shall keep them here, as you have since you fetched them home one after the other as they were made.”

“And all too big for you, so that you might fill up and grow into them,” said the old soldier, with a sigh of regret.

“And I have grown, ever so much, Serge.”

“You have, lad; and you’re big-boned, and you’ll make a big man one of these days. You were framing finely for a soldier, my boy. But that’s all over now.”

“No, it isn’t,” cried the boy, impatiently, “and you shall go on teaching me about all the fighting and the men’s shields being all linked together so that the enemy shouldn’t break through the serried ranks.”

“Nay, my lad,” sighed the old warrior; “that was all very grand, but I don’t know what I could have been thinking about to let you persuade me to teach you what I did, all going against the master’s orders as it was. I suppose I liked it, for it put me in mind of the old days; but I seem to have come to myself like and know better now. You tempted me, my lad, and I’m afraid I tempted you; but no more of it. I’m sorry for what’s done, and the best way to be sorry for it is to own up and never do so any more.”

“Then you mean that you’re to leave off teaching me?”

“Yes, my lad; that’s so.”

“And suppose I say, as your master: ‘you shall go on.’ What then?”

“I should say: ‘you’re not going to disobey your father’s orders any more, but to give all this soldiering up like a man.’”

“Serge!”

“That’s right, my lad, and I know you aren’t going to set your face against what the master says I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Yes, Serge,” said the boy, sadly; “but it seems very hard.”

“It do, boy, very, very hard; but orders are orders, and I forgot to teach you what is the first thing a soldier has to learn.”

“What’s that, Serge? How to use his sword and shield? You did teach me that.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. What a soldier has to learn first is to obey orders, and I want to teach you that now.”

Marcus was silent for a while, as he stood looking wistfully at the speaker, then at the bright soldierly accoutrements, back at the old man, and lastly, as if the bright weapons and armour fascinated him, he stood frowning fixedly down at everything that was spread out upon the rough table.

The boy’s looks and actions affected the old man, who said sadly:

“It do seem hard, lad, eh?”

“Yes, very, very hard, Serge,” replied Marcus.

“But it’s duty, boy, eh! What we ought to do?”

“Yes, Serge, and it must be done; but I wish we had never begun it all.”

“Ay, lad, so do I; but it’s of no use to wish. There, have one good look at it, and then I’ll put it all away in the big chestnut box.”

“But I shall want to look at it all sometimes, Serge.”

“Well, I don’t see no harm in that, my boy. Only no more fighting lessons.”

“No,” sighed Marcus; “no more fighting lessons. You are right, Serge, and I’m going to forget all about it if I can; but I shall always feel that I should have liked to be a Roman soldier.”

“Ah, you can’t help that, boy, of course.”

"No, I can't help that," sighed Marcus, and, stretching out his hands, he picked up the heavy brazen helmet, looked at it round and round before turning it with the back towards him, and then, slowly raising it, he balanced the heavy head-piece on high for a few moments before slowly lowering it down upon his head; the scaled cheek-straps fell into their places, and he drew himself up erect with his eyes flashing and face lighting up, as he gazed half defiantly at the old soldier.

"Hah!" cried the latter. "It do fit you well, boy, and you look nearly a man in it."

"Do I, Serge?" cried the boy, flushing, as he put off the helmet with a sigh, and set it aside; then, catching up the sword and belt, he went out on to the *Piazza* to buckle them on, his fingers trembling with excitement the while.

"Do you, boy? Yes, and a regular soldier too," said Serge, following.

Marcus threw his hand across and grasped the scabbard of the short sword blade with his left, the hilt with his right, and, the next moment, the keen, two-edged weapon flashed in the sunlight.

"Good! Brave boy!" cried the old soldier excitedly, and, forgetting all the words that had passed, he fetched the oblong, round-faced shield from the table and held it ready for Marcus to thrust his left arm through the loop and then grasp the hand-hold firmly, and draw the piece of defensive armour before his breast. "Well done! Now think that I'm going to cut you down."

In an instant Marcus had drawn back with all his weight upon his right foot, as he slightly raised the shield to cover his head and left breast, before throwing himself forward again, bringing up his right hand, sword-armed as it was, and delivering a thrust which, in the boy's excitement, lightly touched the folds of the thick woollen garment which crossed his breast, while the receiver smartly drew himself aside.

"Gently, boy!" he shouted. "I didn't mean you to do that!"

"Oh, Serge!" cried Marcus, flushing scarlet. "I didn't mean to touch you like that! I haven't hurt you, have I?" he cried.

"Well, no," said the old fellow, smiling grimly; "but it was very near, and the point of that sword's as sharp as I could grind it."

"I'm so sorry," cried Marcus. "I didn't think."

"Lucky for me I did," said Serge, with a laugh. "Did you think I was an enemy?"

"No," cried Marcus, hurriedly; "I thought—no, I didn't think."

"Of course you didn't, boy, but—"

"What is the meaning of this?" said a stern voice, and a bare-headed figure draped in the folds of a simple Roman toga stood looking wonderingly at the pair.

Chapter Five.

The Trouble Grows.

"There!" muttered Serge. "We've done it now!"

"My old arms and weapons! Yours, Serge! And these?—How came you to be possessed of those, my boy?"

The new-comer pointed, frowning the while, at the boy's weapons, and then turned his eyes upon Serge, who turned as red as the detected boy, and made signs for him to speak; but, instead of speaking out, Marcus signalled back for his companion to explain.

"I am waiting very patiently for one of you to give me some explanation, though I see plainly enough that I have been disobeyed by you, my son, as well as by my old servant, in whom I thought I could place confidence. Marcus, my son, do not disgrace yourself further by behaving like a coward. Speak out at once and confess."

"Yes, father," cried the boy, making a desperate effort to speak out frankly. "I want to tell you everything, but it is so hard to do."

"Hard to speak the truth, boy?"

"No, father, I did not mean that. I—I—"

"Well, sir?"

"I've done wrong, father, and I am ashamed of it."

"Hah! Come, that is more like my boy," cried Cracis, very sternly, but with the frown upon his brow less deeply marked. "There, go on."

"It was like this, father. One day I found Serge cleaning and burnishing the old armour that you and he used to wear."

"Why was this, sir?" cried Cracis sternly to his old servant. "Did I not tell you that I had given up a warrior's life for ever?"

"Yes, master."

"Did I place any tie upon you? Did I not tell you that you were free to remain in the legion?"

"Yes, master; but how was I to leave you? You know I could not."

"Well, sir, I gave you leave to stay here with me in my country house, but I told you to leave all traces of my former life behind."

"You did, master."

"Is this the way that you obey a master who has always been true to you in his dealings?"

"It's all bad, master," replied the man, "and I tried hard to do my duty, and so I brought the old armour and our swords, and something seemed to make me keep everything clean and bright, ready if it should be wanted."

"It never could be wanted by one who was rejected, humbled and disgraced as I was, man. You knew all that took place, and saw me cast down from my position."

"Yes, master, and my heart bled for you. That's why I came."

"Yes," said Cracis, more gently, "and in my heart, Serge, I thank you for your fidelity; but my orders were that all traces of our old position in the Roman army should be destroyed."

"Yes, master," said the man, humbly, "but they wouldn't destroy. I only kept them, and cleaned them up now and then when no one was looking; but you know what young Marcus is: he found me out."

"Yes, father," cried Marcus, excitedly; "don't blame Serge. I made him talk to me about the past, and he was obliged to tell me all about you being such a great friend of Caesar, and how, at last, you went against him and he—There, I won't say any more, father, because I can see from your face how it hurts you; but I got to know everything, and, when you were busy reading and writing of an evening, I used to come and sit by the fire in the winter's nights and make him tell me about the wars and what a great general you were; and so, from always loving to hear about rights, I loved to hear of the wars and conquests more and more, and—"

"Go on, my son, and keep nothing. I must hear everything now."

"Yes, father; I want to be frank. It was all my doing, for I persuaded and then I ordered Serge to get me sword and armour, and made the armourer alter a man's breast-plate and helmet to fit me, and—and paid for it all by degrees; and then I made Serge teach me how to wear the armour and use the sword and spear and shield; and it was all like that, father."

"And he has taught you all this?" said Cracis, sternly.

"Yes, father. I made him do it; but I did it all as a thoughtless boy."

"And did this old soldier do all as a thoughtless boy," said Cracis, bitterly, "or as my trusted servant?"

"He did it as my servant as well as yours, father," said the boy, proudly. "I told him it was his duty to obey me, his master's son, father, and, poor fellow, he obeyed unwillingly till to-day, when he felt and I felt, that we had been doing very wrong, that it was all worse than we had ever thought, and this was the last time the teaching was to go on. Everything was to be put aside, and I was going to work hard at my writing and reading, as you wished, and try to think no more about the army and the wars."

Cracis was silent for a few moments, during which he gazed searchingly at his son.

"Is this the very truth?" he said.

"Every word of it, master!" cried Serge, excitedly. "Tell him, Marcus boy, how it was all by chance you put on your helmet and drew your sword. I wish now, boy, it had gone through me and made an end of me, before I had to stand up like this and own all my fault."

"What do you mean by that—the sword gone through you, Serge?"

"Yes, father. In my eagerness I made a big thrust at him, and the point of my sword almost entered his breast."

"Dangerously close?" asked Cracis.

"Horribly close, father, and—there, I am glad you found it all out. I have no more to say, father, only that you must punish me, not Serge, and I will bear everything without saying a word."

Cracis was silent for a few minutes, and his voice sounded different when he spoke again.

"Where have these war-like implements been kept?" he said.

"In your big chest, master, made out of the planks cut from the big chestnut that was hewn down four years ago."

"Place them back there, Serge," said Cracis, gravely. "Fasten them in, and carry the chest and bestow it where it may stand beside my bed."

"But father—" began Marcus.

"Silence, sir!" said Cracis. "I wish to think of all this, and not judge hastily. Take off those unseemly weapons, which are far from suited for my student son. Let this be done at once, Serge. You, Marcus, will follow me to my room, and be there an hour hence. I have much to say to you, my boy, very much to say."

Cracis turned thoughtfully away, leaving his son with the old soldier, for them to gaze sadly at one another as the slow steps of the father and master died away.

"He'll never forgive us, Marcus, my lad."

"He will forgive us both, Serge," said Marcus quickly; "but what would I not give if it had never been done!"

"No," said Serge, grimly, "he'll never forgive us."

"Nonsense!" cried Marcus. "You don't know my father as I do."

"Better, a lot, boy. I've fought with him, starved with him, saved his life; and I'll be fair—he's saved mine more than once. But he's hard as bronze, boy, and when he says a thing he'll never go back."

"And I say he's as good and forgiving as can be, and when all the armour has been put away as he told you, he'll forget all this trouble, and we shall be as happy again as ever."

"You say that, boy, because you don't know him. I do, and there's nothing left for it but for me to make up my bundle and go off."

"What!" cried Marcus, laughing. "You pack up your bundle and go?"

"Yes, my lad; I can never get over this again. I have been a servant and herdsman here all these years because I felt your father respected me, but now he don't I feel as if I could never do another stroke of work, and I shall go."

"No, you won't, Serge; you are only saying that because you are cross."

"Oh no," said the man, shaking his head, "not cross, boy—wounded. Cut to the heart. I'm only a poor sort of labouring man here and servant, but I have been a soldier, and once a soldier always a soldier at heart, a man who thinks about his honour. Ah, you smile; and it does sound queer for a man dressed like this and handling a herdsman's crook to talk about his honour; but inside he's just the same man as wore the soldier's armour and plumed helmet and marched in the ranks, erect and proud, ready to follow his general wherever he led. You wouldn't think it strange for a proud-looking man like that to say his honour was touched."

"No," said Marcus, thoughtfully.

"Well, boy, I'm the same man still. I have lost your father's confidence, and as soon as I have done putting away of our armour and weapons, as he told me, in the big old chest, I shall pack up and go."

"Shall you take your sword and helmet with you, Serge?" asked the boy.

The man stared, and looked at him sharply, before remaining silent for quite a minute.

"No," he cried, angrily; "I shall take nothing that will bring up the past. I want to forget it all."

"But what do you mean to do?" said Marcus.

"I don't know yet, boy. Something will happen, I daresay; for we never know what's going to take place to-morrow, and I shall leave all that."

The man ceased speaking, and began almost caressingly to straighten and arrange the various pieces of military accoutrement that he had been burnishing, while Marcus sat leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, watching him sadly.

"I don't like it, Serge," he said at last.

"Nay, boy, and I don't like it," replied the man. "I said just now we never know what is going to take place to-morrow. Who would have thought yesterday that things could have been like this to-day? But here they are. Hah!" he cried passionately. "I wish I hadn't shrunk away."

"Shrunk away!" cried Marcus. "Why, you are bigger and stouter than ever you were."

"Pah!" ejaculated the man, angrily. "I don't mean that. I mean shrunk away as I did just now when you made that thrust at me with the sword."

"What!" cried Marcus. "Why, I should have killed you. That sword point is so horribly sharp. You don't know what a shudder ran through me when I saw what I had nearly done."

"Yes, you would have killed me, boy, and that's what I wish you had done."

"Serge, do you know what you are talking about?" cried Marcus. "Are you going mad?"

"Oh yes, I know what I'm talking about, and perhaps I am going mad. What else can you expect of a poor fellow who, all at once, finds himself dishonoured and disgraced?"

"You are not. I tell you I don't believe that my father will ever say another word when all the things are put away."

"Yes, because you don't know him, boy. There, it's no use to talk. I have made up my mind to go."

"What nonsense!" said Marcus. "When my father as good as said he was going to look over all the past."

"Ah, but that won't do for me, boy. I am dishonoured and disgraced, and I can never hold up my head again."

"Oh, Serge, this comes hard on me," cried the boy, passionately.

"Nay, boy; it's all on my unfortunate head."

"It isn't, Serge," cried Marcus, "for, as I told father, it was all my doing. It was my stupid vanity and pride. I took it into my head that I wanted to be a soldier the same as father and you had been, and it has brought all this down upon you. I shall never forgive myself as long as I live."

"Nay, but you will, boy, when I'm gone and forgotten."

"Gone and forgotten!" cried Marcus, angrily. "You are not going, and you couldn't be forgotten. I shall never forget you, Serge, as long as I live."

"Shan't you, boy?" said the man, smiling sadly. "Well, thank ye. I don't think you will. I like that, boy, for you never seemed like a young master to me. I'm old and ugly, while you're young and handsome, but somehow we have always seemed to be companions like, and whatever you wanted me to do I always did."

"Yes, that you did, Serge," cried Marcus, laughing.

"I don't see nothing to laugh at, boy," said the old soldier, bitterly, as he half drew Marcus' blade from its scabbard, and then thrust it fiercely back with a sharp snap.

"No, but I do," said Marcus, "sad as all this is. It seems so droll."

"What does?" cried the man, fiercely.

"For you to talk about being old and ugly—you, such a big, strong, manly fellow as you are. Why, you are everything that a man ought to be."

"What!" cried the old soldier, gazing wonderingly at the boy, a puzzled look in his eyes as if he was in doubt whether the words to which he listened were mocking him.

"Why, look at you! Look at your arms and legs, and the way in which you step out, and then your strength! The way in which you lift heavy things! Do you remember that day when you took hold of me by the belt and lifted me up, to hold me out at arm's length for ever so long when I was in a passion and tried to hit you, and the more I raged the more you held me out, and laughed, till I came round and thought how stupid I was to attack such a giant as you, when I was only a poor feeble boy?"

"Nay, nay, you were never a poor feeble boy, but always a fine, sturdy little chap, and strong for your years, from the very first. That was partly my training, that was, and the way I made you feed. Don't you remember how I told you that it was always a soldier's duty to be able to fast, to eat well when he had the chance, and go without well when he hadn't, and rest his teeth?"

"Oh, yes, I recollect you told me it was the way to grow up strong and hearty, and that some day I should be like you."

"Well, wasn't that true enough? Only it takes time. And so you thought I was quite a giant, did you?"

"Yes, and so I do now. Old and worn out! What stuff! Why, Serge, I have always longed and prayed that I might grow up into a big, strong, fine-looking man like you."

"Thank you, my lad," said the man, sadly, and with the beaming smile that had come upon his face dying out, to leave it cold and dull. "Then you won't forget me, boy, when—" He stopped short, with a suggestion of moisture softening his fierce, dark eyes.

"Forget you! You know I shan't. But what do you mean by 'when'?"

"When my well-picked, dry bones are lying out somewhere up the mountain side, scattered here and there."

"What!" cried Marcus, laughing merrily. "Who's going to pick them and scatter them to dry up in the mountains?"

"The wolves, boy, the wolves," said the man, bitterly, "for I suppose I shall come to that. You asked me what I was going to do. I'll tell you. I shall wander away somewhere right up among the mountains, for my soldiering days are over, and I can never serve another master now, and at last I shall lie down to die! The wolves will come, and," he added, with a sigh, "you know what will happen then."

"Oh yes," said Marcus, with mock seriousness. "The poor wolves! I shall be sorry for them. I know what will happen then. At the first bite you will jump up in a rage, catch them one at a time by the tail, give them one swing round, and knock their brains out against the stones. You wouldn't give them much chance to bite again."

A grim smile gradually dawned once more upon the old soldier's countenance, and, slowly raising one of his hands, he began to scratch the side of his thickly-grizzled head, his brow wrinkling up more deeply the while, as he gazed into the merry, mocking eyes that looked back so frankly into his.

"You are laughing at me, boy," he said, at last.

"Of course I am, Serge. Oh my! You are down in the dumps! I say, how many wolves do you think you could kill like that? But, oh nonsense! You wouldn't be alone. If old Lupe saw you going off with your bundle he'd spring at you, get it in his teeth, and follow you carrying it wherever you went."

"Hah! Good old Lupe!" said the man, thoughtfully. "I'd forgotten him. Yes, he'd be sure to follow me. You'd have to shut him up in the wine-press."

"And hear him howl to get out?" cried Marcus. "No, I shouldn't, because I shouldn't be there."

"Why, where would you be?" said Serge, wonderingly.

"Along with you, of course."

"Along o' me?"

"Yes. If you left home and went away for what was all my fault, do you think I should be such a miserable cur as to stop behind? No; I should go with you, Serge, and take my sword, and you and Lupe and I could pretty well tackle as many wolves as would be likely to come up at us on the mountain side."

"Ah," cried the man, "you are talking like a boy."

"And so are you, Serge, when you say such things as you did just now. Now, look here; you are going to do as father said, pack up all the armour in the old chest, and then you are going to speak out and tell him that you are sorry that you listened to me, and then it will be all over and we shall go on again just the same as before. You and I will think out something that we can learn or do, and talk of something else besides fighting. There, let's have no more talking about going away. Look sharp and get it over. I shan't be happy till I see you and father shaking hands again. Now promise me you will go and get it done."

"'Tis done, boy; I did speak and made myself humble, just as you want; but he wouldn't take it right, and you know what he said. I can't never forget it now. He wouldn't listen to me, and no words now, no shaking hands, will put it straight. I shall have to go."

"Oh!" cried Marcus. "What an obstinate old bull it is! Yes, I mean it, Serge; you are just like a human bull. Now, look here; do as I tell you. You have got to go and speak to father as I say."

"Nay, boy," said the man, solemnly, "not a word. I am going to do my bit of work, the last job I shall ever do here, and then it will be good-bye."

Marcus sprang up in a passion.

"I can't bring you to your senses," he said. "You are too stubborn and blunt. If you won't promise me you will go and speak to father, I shall go myself and tell him all you say."

"Do, boy; that's right! I like to hear you turn like that. Hit me and kick me if you will. It will all make it easier for me to go away."

Marcus stood up before him, looking at him fiercely, and he was about to flash out a torrent of angry words, but, feeling that he would say something of which he might afterwards repent, he dashed out of the room and made for his father's study.

Chapter Six.

Making the Best of it.

Cracis was deep in thought, seated by the open window, with the double roll of a volume in his hands, reading slowly line by line of the old papyrus Romano-Grecian writings of one of the philosophers, and, as he came to each line's end, it slowly disappeared beneath the upper roll, while the nether was opened out to leave the next line visible to the reader's eye.

Marcus dashed in loudly, but stopped short as he saw how his father was occupied, and waited for him to speak; but Cracis was deep in his studies and heard him not, so, bubbling over with impatience, the boy advanced and laid his hand upon the student's arm.

Cracis looked up, wonderingly, and seemed to be obliged to drag his attention from the book, smiling pleasantly in the flushed face of his son, and with every trace of anger missing from his own.

"Well, boy," he said, gently, "what is it? Something you can't make out?"

"Yes, father—old Serge."

"Ah, Serge!" said Cracis, with his brow clouding over. "I am sorry all that happened, but it was your fault, my boy. You regularly led the brave, old, honest fellow astray."

"Yes, father, I did," cried Marcus, eagerly, "and now he has taken all your angry words to heart."

"Oh, tut, tut, tut! Nonsense! I have forgiven it all, my boy; but he has not yet brought in the chest."

"No, father, I have left him packing it all now, and I have told him that all that is over, and that when we have time we must amuse ourselves in some other way than playing at soldiers and talking of war."

Cracis laid his hand upon his son's shoulder and, with his face growing sterner, looked proudly in the young, frank face.

"Thank you, my boy," he said. "That is very brave and right of you. It shows great respect for me. Well, there! The past is all forgiven and forgotten—nay, I will not say forgotten; that can never be. Let it always stand in your memory as a stone of warning. Well, that is all over now."

"But it isn't all over, father," cried the boy. "Old Serge says what you said has cut him to the heart, and that you didn't forgive him properly, and that he is dishonoured and disgraced as a soldier."

"Poor brave old Serge!" said Cracis, warmly.

"Hah!" cried Marcus, excitedly. "I wish he were here to hear you speak like that."

"Oh, nonsense, boy. Time is too valuable to waste by thinking over such troubles as that. He must understand that I have reproved him for a fault and forgiven him."

"But he won't understand, father. He's as obstinate as a bull."

"He is, and always was, Marcus," said Cracis, smiling; "but no man is perfect, and Serge's good qualities more than balance all his bad. But there, boy, what does he want me to do?"

"I don't know, father. He thinks what you have said can never be undone, that he can never be the same here again as he was, that he has lost your confidence and you won't trust him again, and—"

"Well, and what?" said Cracis, smiling tolerantly.

"Oh, it's too stupid to tell you, father."

"One has to hear stupid things in life, my boy, as well as wise, so tell me all the same. You see, poor Serge, with all his noble qualities, has never been a man to read and learn wisdom from the works of the great. Simple, matter-of-fact and straightforward, he is not one who reflects and balances his acts before he makes them live. I don't think Serge ever said to himself: 'shall I? Shall I not?' before he did a thing, and I suppose he has not been reflecting now. I am sorry I hurt his feelings, but I am the master. He is my servant, just as in old days I was his officer, he my legionary. It was his duty to obey. Now then, what is he doing?"

"Putting the armour together to go in the chest."

"Well, quite right."

"But it's what he's going to do next, father."

"And what is he going to do next?"

"Pack up his bundle, and then tramp up into the mountains to lie down and die, for the wolves to pick his bones."

It is impossible to put in words the young speaker's tones, mingled, as they were, of sadness, ridicule and mirth, while Cracis drew a deep, long breath and said, softly:

"Brave as a lion, strong beyond the limits of ordinary men; and yet, poor faithful Serge, what a child he is at heart! Don't tell him what I said, boy. That is a piece of confidence between ourselves."

"But it's all so real, father. If you are angry with me you scold me, and it's soon all over. I forget it all."

"Yes, too soon, my boy, sometimes."

"Oh, but I do try to go on right, father. But, you see, with poor old Serge it all sticks. He's regularly wounded."

"Yes, my boy, I know, and it's the sort of wound that will not heal. Well, of course, that's all absurd. He mustn't go."

"He will, father, if something isn't done."

"Yes, I am afraid he would; so something must be done. Who is in the wrong, boy—I or he?"

"It's this—I, father."

"Of course," said Cracis, laughing; "but I think I am in the right. The master, if right, cannot humble himself to his

man if he is in this position, Marcus. If he is in the wrong it is noble and brave to give way. Tell Serge to come to me at once. I will try to set him at one with me; the sooner this is set aside the better for us all."

"Thank you, father," cried the boy, excitedly; and hurrying out he made for the back of the villa, where he found Serge in his own particular den, hard at work packing the various accoutrements, but evidently finding it difficult to make them fit.

"Well, I've been and talked to father, Serge," cried Marcus, quickly.

"That's right, boy," said the old soldier, without turning his head.

"I told him you were packing up the armour."

"Yes? Hard work. The things don't lie easy one with another, and we mustn't have the helmets bruised. The shields don't lie so flat as I could wish, but—"

"Father wants you, Serge."

"What for, boy? What for?"

"To talk to you about you know what."

"Then you've told him I'm going away?"

"Of course."

"Then it's of no use for me to go and see him."

"But that's what he wishes to speak about."

"Yes, and I know how he can talk and get round a man. Why, if I went to his place yonder he'd talk me into stopping, and I'm not going to do that now."

"Nonsense! Father only wants to say a few words more. He has forgiven you—I mean, us—and, after he has spoken, everything will be as it was before. He says it's all nonsense about your going away."

Serge nodded.

"Yes, I knew he'd say that, my boy. Of course he would."

"Well," said Marcus, impatiently, "isn't that what you want?"

"No, not now, boy. Things can never be the same again."

"Why not?" cried Marcus.

"Because they can't, boy."

"Oh, Serge, don't be so obstinate!"

"No, my lad, not obstinate; only doing what's right. I can't help what's done, nor what's said."

"But don't stop talking, Serge. Father wants to see you at once."

The old soldier shook his head and went on packing with increased vigour.

"Well, why don't you go?" cried Marcus, impatiently.

"I daren't," said the man, frowning.

"Then that's because you feel you're in the wrong, Serge."

"Yes, boy, that's it; I'm in the wrong, and the master knows it, so it's of no use for me to go."

"Oh, Serge," cried Marcus, "you do make me so angry when you will keep on like this. Look here, Serge."

"No," said the man, sourly, "and it's of no use for you to talk, boy, because my mind's made up. You want to talk me round, same as your father, the master, would. I've done wrong, and I told him so. It's all because I tried to make a good soldier of you, as is what Nature meant you to be, and he can't forgive me for that. He couldn't even if he tried. There, that's better—you lie there, and that'll make more room for the boy's helmet. Yes, that'll do. Swords lie on each side under the shields and keep them steady," he continued, apostrophising the different portions of the military equipment, as he worked very rapidly now in spite of Marcus' words, till the whole of the war-like pieces were to his liking and the chest quite full, when he closed the lid and sat upon it as if to think, with his eyes fixed upon one corner of the place.

"There, now are you satisfied?" cried Marcus. "Fortunately, father is reading, and he will not notice how long you have been. You've made me horribly impatient. Now go in to him at once and get it over."

"I shall only want a little bundle and my staff," said Serge, as if to himself. "That is mine, for I cut it in the forest and shaped and trimmed it myself. Yes, that's all."

"Aren't you going to take the chest into father's room?" said Marcus, quietly.

"Eh? No, my lad."

"But he told you to."

"Yes, boy, but it was after all was over, and I can't face him again."

"Then you are going off without saying good-bye to him?"

The old soldier nodded.

"And you are not going in to see him after he has sent for you to come?"

"No, boy," said the old soldier, with a sigh. "It's the only way. I'm just going to take my bundle and my stick, and then I'm going off at once—*alone*," he added, meaningly.

"No, you're not, Serge, for someone else can be stubborn too."

"What do you mean?" cried the man, sharply.

"What I told you. I'm coming too."

"Nay, boy, you're not; your father would stop that, and you must obey him," cried Serge, angrily.

"No, I mustn't," said Marcus.

"What! Sons must obey their fathers."

"And soldiers must obey their officers."

"But he's not my officer now."

"Yes, he is," cried Marcus, angrily; "your officer as well as my father. If you go, Serge, I shall go, and I don't care where it is."

"He'd never forgive you," cried the old soldier, angrily.

"Well, I should take my chance of that. You know me, Serge. When I say I'll do a thing I do it; and I shall do this, for I don't mean to let you go away from here alone. Now what have you got to say?"

The old soldier got up from the shut-down lid of the chest, walked to the corner of the room, and took his crook-like staff, to which a rough bundle was already tied, and then he stepped back to where Marcus was seated upon the edge of the table which had so lately borne the armour carefully spread out.

"Good-bye, Marcus, boy," he said, holding out his hand.

The lad sprang from the table and made for the door.

"Won't you say good-bye, Marcus?" cried Serge, pitifully.

"No," was the short, sharp reply. "What's the good? But stop a moment. I'd better go and shut up Lupus, or he'll come bounding after us and we shan't get rid of him again."

"Oh!" roared the old soldier, angrily, and he dashed his bundle and staff across the room to the corner from which they had been taken. "You're both of you too much for me."

"Come on, Serge, old fellow," said Marcus, softly, as he took his old companion by the arm. "Shall I come in to father with you?"

"No!" growled Serge. "I'm going to be beat, and I'll go alone."

The next minute his steps were heard plodding heavily towards his master's study, and, as he listened Marcus burst out into a merry, silent laugh.

"Poor old Serge!" he said. "How father hurt his feelings! He'll never leave us while he lives, but I believe if he had gone away it would have broken his heart. Well, that's all over, and things will be all right again."

The boy stood thinking for a few minutes, and then he sighed.

"My poor old sword and shield," he said, half aloud; "and the helmet and armour too! Oh, how grand it was! When I had them on I used to feel as if I was marching with a successful army coming from the wars, and now it's all over and I must sit and read and write, and the days will seem so dull with nothing exciting, nothing bright, no war in the future—Yes, there will be," he cried; "there'll be those boys. They'll be coming on again as the grapes turn black. Yes," he went on, with a merry laugh, "and if they come I'll make some of them turn black. No war! I'll make war with them, with old Serge and Lupus for allies. And then the winter will come again, and there'll be the wolves. Why, there'll be plenty to think of, after all."

Chapter Seven.

Company Comes.

"I want to go out," said Marcus to himself, one morning, as he sat at the little table exclusively his.

There was a small volume, a double roll tied round by a band of silk, his tablets and stylus were before him, the latter quite blank, and the window was open, giving him a glorious view of the distant, sunlit mountains, while the air that was wafted in through the vine leaves was rich in delicious odours that came gratefully to his nostrils.

"But I can't go out," he said; "I have all that writing to do, and the first thing when father comes back will be to ask me how much I have done. And here have I been sitting for long enough and have not scratched a word. I wonder how soon he will come?"

The boy sat silently for a few minutes watching some twittering young birds that were playing in the garden trees, chasing one another from twig to twig in the full enjoyment of their life in the transparent atmosphere.

"I wish I were a bird!" sighed the boy, and then half passionately: "Oh, what a lazy dog I am! I am always longing to be or do something else than what I am. But look at that," he said, dropping into his dreamy way again. "How beautiful it must be to throw oneself off the very top of a tree and go floating and gliding about just where one likes, with no books to study, nothing to write, only play about in the sunshine, covered with clothes of the softest down; no bother about a house to live in or a bed, but just when the sun goes down sing a bit about how pleasant life is as one sits on a twig, and then tuck one's head under one's wing, stick one's feathers up till one looks like a ball, and go to sleep till the Sun rises again. Oh, how glorious to be a bird! Ha, ha, ha!" he cried, with a merry laugh, "Old Serge is right. He says I am a young fool, when he's in the grumps, and I suppose I am to think like that; but it seems a life so free from trouble to be a bird, till a cat comes, or a weasel, or perhaps a snake, and catches one on the ground, or a hawk when one's flying in the air, or one of the noisy old owls when one's roosting in the ivy at night. And then squeak—scrunch—and there's no more bird. Everything has to work, I suppose, and nothing is able to do just as it pleases. That's what father says, and, of course, it's true; but somehow I should like to go out this morning, but I can't; I have to stick here and write. There's father gone off, and old Serge too. I wonder where he's gone. Right away into the forest, of course, to look after the swine, or else into the fields to see whether something's growing properly, and mind that the men keep to work and are not lying snoozing somewhere in the shade. Oh, how beautiful it looks out of doors!"

Marcus sat gazing longingly out of the window, and then apparently, for no reason at all, raised his right hand and gave himself a sharp slap on the side of the head.

"Take that, you lazy brute!" he cried. "Of course you can't do your work if you sit staring out of the window. Turn your back to it, sir, and look inside where you will only see the wall. No wonder you can't work."

He jumped up quickly, raised his stool, and was in the act of turning it round, giving a final glance through the window before he began to work in earnest, when he stopped short and set down the stool again.

"There's somebody coming along the road," he said. "Who's he? Dressed just like father, in his long, white toga. Wonder where he's going, and who he is? Some traveller, I suppose, seeing the country and enjoying himself."

The boy stood watching the stranger for a few moments.

"Why, where can he be going?" he said. "That path only leads here and to our fields. He can't be coming here, because nobody ever comes to see us, and father doesn't seem to have any friends. Perhaps he wants to see Serge about buying some pigs or corn, or to sell some young goats? Yes, that's it, I should think. He wants to sell something. No; it can't be that; he doesn't look the sort of man. Look at that smooth-shaven face and short-cut hair. He seems quite a patrician, just like father. What can he want? Here, how stupid!" cried the boy, as he saw the stranger stop short a little distance from the villa front and begin to look about him as if admiring the beauty of the place and the distant scene. "I know; he's a traveller, and he's lost his way."

Excited by his new thought, Marcus hurried out and down the garden, catching the attention of the stranger at once, who smiled as he looked with the eyes of curiosity at the bright, frank lad, while he took out a handkerchief and stood wiping his dewy face.

"Lost your way?" cried Marcus.

"Well, not quite," was the reply; "but I know very little of these parts."

"I do," said Marcus, "laughing always, and have. I'll show you if you tell me where you want to go."

"Thank you," said the stranger, gravely and quietly; and the boy thought to himself once more that he was no dealer or trader, but some patrician on his travels, and he noted more particularly the clear skin, and clean-cut features of a man thoughtful and strong of brain, who spoke quietly, but in the tones of one accustomed to command.

"You have a beautiful place here, my boy," he continued, as he looked round and seemed to take in everything; "fields, woodlands, garden. Fruit too—vines and figs. An attractive house too. The calm and quiet of the country—a tired man could live very happily here."

"Yes, of course," cried Marcus and with a merry laugh, "a boy too!"

"Hah! Yes," said the stranger, smiling also, as he gazed searchingly in the boy's clear eyes. "So you lead a very

happy life here, do you?"

"Oh yes!"

"But not alone?" said the stranger.

"Oh no, of course not," cried Marcus. "There's father, and old Serge, and the labourers and servants."

"Yes, a very pleasant place," said the stranger, as he once more wiped his dewy face.

"You look hot," said the boy. "Come in and sit down for a while and rest. It's nice and shady in my room, and you get the cool breeze from the mountains."

"Thank you, my boy, I will," said the stranger, and he followed Marcus through the shady garden and into the lately vacated room, where the boy placed a chair, and his visitor sank into it with a sigh of relief.

"Have you walked far?" he asked.

"Yes, some distance," was the reply; "but the country is very beautiful, especially through the woodlands, and very pleasant to one who is fresh from the hot and crowded city."

"The city!" cried Marcus, eagerly. "You don't mean Rome?"

"I do mean Rome," said the visitor, leaning back smiling, and with his eyes half closed, but keenly reading the boy the while. "Have you ever been there?"

"Oh no," said Marcus, quickly, "but I know all about it. My father often used to tell me about Rome."

"Your father? May I ask who your father is?"

"Cracis," said the boy, drawing himself up proudly, as if he felt it an honour to speak of such a man. "He used to live in Rome. You've come from there. Did you ever hear of him?"

"Cracis? Cracis? Yes, I have heard the name. Is he at home?"

"No; he went out this morning; but I daresay he will be back soon. Serge is out too."

"Serge?" said the stranger.

"Yes; our man who superintends the farm. He was an old soldier, and knew Rome well. He was in the wars."

"Ha!" said the stranger. "And they are both away?"

"Yes; but you are tired, sir, and look faint. I'll come back directly."

Marcus hurried from the room, but returned almost immediately, laden with a cake of bread, a flask and cup, and a bunch or two of grapes lying in an open basket.

"Ha, ha!" said the visitor, smiling. "Then you mean to play the host to a tired stranger?"

"Of course," said the boy. "That is what father would do if he were at home."

"And the son follows his father's teaching, eh?"

Marcus smiled, and busied himself in pouring out a cup of wine and breaking the bread, which he pressed upon his guest, who partook of both sparingly, keenly watching the boy the while.

"The rest is good," he said, as he caught the boy's eye, "the room cool and pleasant, and these most refreshing. You will let me rest myself awhile? I might like to see your father when he comes."

"Oh, of course," cried the boy. "Father will be very glad, I am sure. We so seldom have anyone to see us here."

Quite unconsciously the boy went on chatting, little realising that he was literally answering his visitor's questions and giving him a full account of their life at the villa and farm.

He noted how sparingly his visitor ate and drank, and pressed him hospitably to partake of more, but, after a few minutes, the guest responded by smilingly waving the bread and wine aside.

"*Quantum sufficit*, my boy," he said; "but I will eat a few of your grapes."

He broke off a tiny bunch, and went on talking as he glanced around.

"Your studies?" he said, pointing to the tablets and stylus. "And you read?"

"Oh yes," said the boy. "My father teaches me. He is a great student."

"Indeed?" said the guest. "And are you a great student too?"

"No," cried Marcus, merrily; "only a great stupid boy!"

"Very," said the visitor, sarcastically. "Well, and what are you going to be when you grow up?"

"Oh, a student too, and a farmer, I suppose."

"Indeed! Why, a big, healthy, young lad like you ought to be a soldier, and learn to fight for his country, like a true son of Rome."

"Hah!" cried Marcus, flushing up and frowning, while the visitor watched him intently.

"I knew just such a boy as you who grew up to be a general, a great soldier as well as a student who could use his pen."

"Ah, that's what I should like to be," cried the boy, springing from his seat with his eyes flashing, as his imagination seemed fired. "That's what Serge says."

"What does Serge say?" asked the visitor.

"Just what you do," cried the boy, boldly; "that I might grow up to be a great soldier, and still read and use my pen."

"Well, why not?" said the guest, as he slowly broke off and ate a grape.

The boy frowned and shook his head.

"It is a man's duty to be ready to draw his sword for his country like a brave citizen, and that country's son," continued the guest, warmly, while the boy watched him eagerly, and leaned forward with one hand resting upon the table as if he was drinking in every word that fell from the other's lips.

"Yes, that's what Serge says," he cried, "and that it is a great and noble thing for a man to be ready to die for his country if there is any need."

"But it is pleasanter to live, my boy," said the visitor, smiling, "and to be happy with those we love, with those whom we are ready to defend against the enemy. You must be a soldier, then—a defender of your land."

"No," said the boy, quickly, and he gave his head a quick shake. "It can never be."

"Why?"

"Because my father says 'no.'"

The visitor raised his brows a little, and then, leaning forward slightly to gaze into the boy's eyes, he said, softly:

"Why does your father say that?"

"Because people are ungrateful and jealous and hard, and would ill-use me, the same as they did him and drove him away from Rome."

The visitor tightened his lips and was silent, sitting gazing past the boy and through the window, so full of thought that he broke off another grape, raised it to his lips, and then threw it through the opening into a tuft of flowers beyond.

"Ah!" he said, at last, as his eyes were turned again towards the boy. "And so you are going to live here then, and only be a student?"

"Of course," said the boy, proudly. "It is my father's wish."

"And you know nothing, then, about a soldier's life?"

"Oh, yes, I do," cried the boy, with his face lighting up.

"Hah! Then your father has taught you to be a soldier and man?"

"Oh, no; he has taught me to read and write. It was some one else who taught me how to use a sword and spear."

"Hah!" cried the visitor, quickly. "Then you are not all a student?"

"Oh, no."

"You know how to use a sword?"

"Yes," said Marcus, laughing, "and a spear and shield as well," and, warming up, the boy began to talk quickly about all he had learned, ending, to his visitor's great interest, with a full account of his training in secret and his father's discovery and ending of his pursuits.

"Well, boy," said the guest, at last, "it seems a pity."

"For me to tell you all this?" cried Marcus, whose face was still flushed with excitement. "Yes, I oughtn't to have spoken and said so much, but somehow you questioned me and seemed to make me talk."

"Did I?" said the visitor. "Well, I suppose I did; but what I meant was that it seems a pity that so promising a lad should only be kept to his books. But there, a good son is obedient to his father, and his duty is to follow out his

commands.”

“Yes,” said the boy, stoutly, “and that’s what Serge says.”

“Then he doesn’t want you to be a soldier now?”

“No,” cried the boy. “He says one of the first things a soldier learns is to obey.”

“Ah!” said the visitor, looking at the boy with his quiet smile. “I should like to know this old soldier, Serge.”

“You soon can,” said the boy, laughing. “Here he comes!” For at that moment there was the deep bark of a dog.

“The dog?” said the visitor.

“Oh, that’s our wolf-hound, Lupe. It means that Serge is coming back.”

The boy had hardly spoken when the man’s step was heard outside, and, directly after, as Marcus’ guest sat watching the door, it was thrust open, and the old soldier entered, saying: “Has the master come back, my lad?” and started back, staring at the sight of the stranger.

“Not yet, Serge. This is a gentleman, a traveller from Rome, who is sitting down to rest.”

Serge drew himself up with a soldierly salute, which was received with dignity, and, as eyes met, the stranger looked the old warrior through and through, while Serge seemed puzzled and suspicious, as he slowly raised his hand and rubbed his head.

“Yes,” said the visitor, “your young master has been playing the kindly host to a weary man. Why do you look at me so hard? You know my face?”

“No,” said Serge, gruffly; “no. But I think I have seen someone like you before.”

“And I,” said the visitor, “have seen many such like you, but few who bear such a character as your young master gives.”

“Eh?” cried Serge, sharply. “Why, what’s he been saying about me?”

“Told me what a brave old soldier you have been.”

“Oh! Oh! Stuff!” growled Serge, sourly.

“And of how carefully you have taught him the duties of a soldier, and told him all about the war.”

“There!” cried Serge, angrily, stepping forward to bring his big, hairy fist down upon the table with a thump. “I don’t know you, or who you are, but you have come here tired, and been given refreshment and rest, and, instead of being thankful, you have been putting all sorts of things in this boy’s head again that he ought to have forgot.”

“Serge! Serge!” cried Marcus, excitedly. “Mind what you are saying! This is a stranger, and a noble gentleman from Rome.”

“I don’t care who he is,” replied the old soldier, fiercely. “He’s no business to be coming here and talking like this. Now, look here, sir,” he continued, turning upon the visitor, who sat smiling coldly with his eyes half closed, “this lad’s father, my old officer—and a better never stepped or led men against Rome’s enemies—gave me his commands, and they were these: that young Marcus here was to give up all thoughts of soldiering and war, and those commands, as his old follower, I am going to carry out. So, as you have eaten and are rested, the sooner you go on your journey the better, and leave us here at peace.”

“Serge!” cried Marcus, firmly; and he drew himself up with his father’s angry look, “you mean well, and wish to do your duty, but this is not the way to speak to a stranger and my father’s guest.”

“He’s not your father’s guest, my lad, but yours, and he’s taken upon himself to say to you what he shouldn’t say, and set you against your father’s commands.”

“Even if he has, Serge, he must be treated as a guest—I don’t know your name, sir,” continued the boy, turning to the visitor, “but in my father’s name I ask you to forgive his true old servant’s blunt, honest speech.”

The visitor rose, grave and stern.

“It is forgiven, my boy,” he said; “for after hearing what he has said I can only respect him for his straightforward honesty. My man, I am an old soldier too. I regret that I have spoken as I did, and I respect you more and more. Rome lost a brave soldier when you left her ranks. Will you shake hands?”

Serge drew back a little, and looked puzzled.

“Yes, give me your hand,” said the visitor. “I am rested and refreshed, but I am not yet going away. I am going to stay and see Cracis, who was once my dear old friend.”

“You knew my master?” cried Serge, with the puzzled look deepening in his eyes.

“Thoroughly,” was the reply, “and we have fought together in the past. He will forgive me what I have said, as I do

you, and I shall tell him when he comes how glad I am to see that he has such a son and is so bravely served."

For answer the old soldier hesitatingly took the proffered hand, and then gladly made his retreat, the pair following him slowly out into the shady piazza, where they stood watching till he disappeared, when the visitor, after glancing round, gathered his toga round him, and sank down into a stone seat, beside one of the shadow-flecked pillars, frowning heavily the while.

"He means well, sir," said Marcus, hastily; "but I'm sure my father would have been sorry if he had heard. I am glad, though, that I asked you in."

"Why?" said the visitor, with a peculiar look in his eyes.

"Because you say you are an old friend of his, and, of course, I didn't know. It was only out of civility that I did so."

"Yes, so I suppose," was the reply. "Poor fellow! Your man meant well," continued the visitor, with his whole manner changed, and he spoke in a half-mocking, cynical way which puzzled and annoyed the boy. "A poor, weak, foolish fellow, though, who hardly understands what he meant. Don't you think he was very weak, bull-headed and absurd?"

"Well—no," said the boy, quickly, and his face began to flush, and grew the deeper in tint as he noticed a supercilious, mocking smile playing upon the visitor's lips. "Serge is a very true, honest fellow, and thought he was doing right."

"Yes, of course," said the other, "but some people in meaning to do right often commit themselves and do great wrong."

"But you knew my father well?" said Marcus, hastily, to change the conversation. "I never heard him mention you."

"No, I suppose not," said the visitor, thoughtfully, but with a mocking smile upon his lip growing more marked as he went on. "I don't suppose he would ever mention me. A very good, true fellow, Cracis, and, as I said, we were once great friends. But a weak and foolish man who got into very great trouble with the Senate and with me. There was great trouble at the time, and I had to defend him."

"You had to defend my father?" said Marcus, turning pale, and with a strange sensation rising in his breast. "What for?"

"Why, there was that charge of cowardice—the retreat he headed from the Gaulish troops," continued the visitor, watching the boy intently all the while. "He was charged with being a coward, and—"

"It was a lie!" cried the boy, fiercely. "You know it was a lie. My father is the bravest, truest man that ever lived, and you who speak so can be no friend of his. Old Serge was right, for he saw at once what kind of man you are. How dare you speak to me like that! Go, sir! Leave this house at once."

"Go, boy?" said the visitor, coldly, and with a look of suppressed anger gathering in his eyes. "And suppose that I refuse to go at the bidding of such a boy as you?"

"Refuse?" cried Marcus, fiercely. "You dare to refuse?"

"Yes, boy, I refuse. And what then?"

"This!" cried the boy, overcome with rage, and, raising his hand, he made a dash as if about to strike, just as a step was heard, and, calmly and thoughtfully, Cracis walked out into the piazza.

Chapter Eight.

That Great Man.

For a few moments there was utter silence, Cracis looking as if stunned, and a slight colour beginning to appear in the visitor's pallid cheeks as he stood gazing at Marcus' father, waiting for him to speak, while Cracis after catching his son's wrist and snatching him back, and without taking his eyes from their visitor, found words at last to speak.

"Are you mad, boy?" he exclaimed, hoarsely. "Do you know who this is?"

"No, father," cried the boy, passionately, "only that he is a man who has dared to speak ill of you."

"Ah!" said Cracis, slowly, and with his face softening, as he pressed the boy's arm; and then, in a voice full of dignity and pride: "May I ask why Caius Julius has condescended to visit my humble home?"

"I have come as a friend, Cracis," was the reply.

"To continue your old enmity, and in mine absence revile me to my son?"

"Revile? Nonsense!" cried his visitor. "It was by accident. I came, and found you away, and reviled you?—no! I was but speaking to try your brave and spirited boy. I never for a moment thought that he would fire up as he did with all his father's spirit and readiness to resent a wrong."

"Indeed?" said Cracis, coldly.

"Indeed," replied the visitor. "Only a few minutes ago I was telling your boy how that once we were the greatest of friends. Did I not?" he said quickly, turning to Marcus.

"Yes, father, that is right," cried Marcus. "He praised you very highly at first, and said he was your friend."

"My friend!" said Cracis, bitterly. "My greatest enemy, he meant."

"I was, Cracis, in the past. In my ignorance and pride it was only after we had parted that I learned all that I had lost in my separation from my bravest colleague, my truest and wisest counsellor."

"And now," said Cracis, coldly, "you have found out the truth and have tracked me to my home to accuse me with some base invention to my son."

"Believe me, no!" cried Julius, warmly, and he held out his hand. "Cracis, after much thought and battling with my pride, the pride that has come with the position to which I have climbed, I have mastered self so as to come humbly to my oldest and best friend."

"Why?" said Cracis.

"Because you are the only man I know whose counsel I can respect, and in whom I could fully trust."

"My greatest enemy comes to me to utter words like these, in the presence of my son?"

"Yes, and I am proud that he should hear them, so that he may fully understand that, when I spoke to him lightly as I did, it was but to test him, to try his spirit, to see whether he was fully worthy to bear his great father's name."

Cracis was silent for a few moments, gazing searchingly into his visitor's eyes, which met his frankly and without blenching.

"Is this the truth?" said Cracis, sternly.

"The simple truth. Cracis, we were great friends once, and later the greatest enemies; but in all those troubles of the past did we ever doubt each other's words?"

"Never," said Cracis, proudly. "But there is a reason for all this—something more than a late repentance for the injuries you have done me in the years that have gone. I ask you again—why have you come?"

"For our country's sake. I have climbed high since we parted, but only to stand more and more alone, till now, perhaps at the most critical period of my life, I have been forced to look around me for help, for a man in whom I can place implicit trust, who will give me his counsel in the State, and stand beside me in the perils that lie ahead. Cracis, there is only one man in whom I could trust like that, one only who would bare his sword and fight bravely by my side, and you are he."

Cracis was silent as he shook his head slowly and turned his eyes away from his visitor, to let them rest upon his son's upturned face, as the boy gazed at him in wonder and astonishment at what he heard.

"You do not believe me," cried Julius. "You think that something is underlying all this," and he spoke with deep earnestness, his voice broken and changed.

"Yes," said Cracis; "I cannot do otherwise. I do believe you—every word."

"Then why do you speak so coldly and calmly, when I come to you penitent, to humble myself to you and ask your help?"

"I speak coldly like this," said Cracis, "because I am fighting hard to beat down the feelings of pride and triumph that the time has come when he who drove me from my high position in Rome has sought me out to make so brave and manly an appeal, for, knowing you as I do to the very core, I can feel the battle that you must have had with self before you stooped—you, great general as you are—to come and tell me that you need my help."

"Stooped!" cried the other. "No, Cracis, that is an ill-chosen word. It is that I have mastered self and cast away all pride and weakness so that I might come to you and say: 'For the sake of the old times, help me in this bitter pass, so fraught with peril as it is'; and say, 'I forgive the by-gones, and be to me as my brother once again.'"

Cracis was silent, and stood drawing his son closer to him so that he could rest his arm upon the boy's shoulder, while his visitor stood before him with his white robe gathered up so as to leave free his extended arm.

For a few minutes neither spoke, and from the garden there came loud and clear the joyous trilling of the birds.

"You do not take my hand," said Caius Julius, passionately.

"No, not yet," said Cracis; "but do not mistake me. There is no bitterness or pride left in my breast. That died out years ago. I am only thinking."

"Ha!" cried his visitor, with a sigh of relief, "and forgetting the courtesy due to a long-estranged friend."

"Caius Julius, sit down. You are welcome to my simple, humble home. Marcus, my boy, you can believe that all our visitor said was to try his old friend's son to see of what metal he was made. He is a man who, for years past, has found the necessity of testing those he would have to trust, of placing them in the balance to try their worthiness and weight. Boy, we are honoured to-day by the presence of Rome's greatest son, your father's oldest friend, then his

greatest enemy, and now, in the fulness of time, his brother once again."

As he spoke he took a step forward with extended hands, which the future conqueror of the world clasped at once in his own, and once more there was silence in the room.

A minute later Cracis drew back and motioned to his son, who, earnest and alert, stepped forward, to find himself clasped to their visitor's breast, before he was released, to draw back wondering whether he liked or hated this man of whose prowess he had heard so much, and stood gazing at him wonderingly, as Julius, the Caesar yet to be, sank back, quivering with emotion, in the nearest seat.

A few minutes later Marcus stood trying to catch his father's eye, for he too had sunk into a chair and sat back gazing away through the open window at the sunlit hills.

At last he turned his eye upon his son and read the question in his speaking face.

"Yes, boy," he said, "you may leave us now. My old friend has much to say, and I too have much to think. Go and see that proper preparations are made for our guest. You will honour us—No," he continued, with a pleasant smile, as he turned to his guest, "we are very simple here, but you will be welcome and stay here to-night."

"Gladly," cried Julius, eagerly. "Believe me, I shall be proud, for I have gained my ends."

"Not yet," said Cracis, gravely. "It means so much, and I must have the night to think. There, Marcus, boy, you know what should be done. Leave us for a while."

The boy hurried away, to seek the servants, and then to make for Serge, but checked himself before he was half way to his old companion's room.

"Not yet," he said. "How do I know that I ought to speak?" And he drew back with a feeling of relief on seeing that the old soldier was right away crossing one of the fields. "It would not have been right without speaking to my father first," thought Marcus. "I wonder what they are saying now?"

Chapter Nine.

The Old Armour.

When Marcus went to bed his habit was to drop his head upon his pillow, close his eyes in the darkness, and, as it seemed to him, open them the next minute to find it was broad daylight, and spring out of bed; but, almost for the first time in his life, he, that night, lay tossing about, thinking how hot it was, getting in and out of bed to open the window wider or to close it again, changing from side to side, and trying as hard as he possibly could to go off to sleep; and, even when at last he succeeded, it seemed that he had suddenly plunged into a new state of wakefulness in which he was listening to Caius Julius and then quarrelling with him.

Then his father seemed mixed up with his dream, and all kinds of the wildest imaginings came forming processions through his fevered brain. Armies of barbarians were marching to attack Rome. His father was a great warrior and general once again, fighting to save his country. Then he was the quiet student once more in his white toga, chiding him for his love of arms and armour; and, directly after, Serge seemed to come upon the scene, to catch their strange visitor by the ankle with his crook and threaten to thrash him for breaking down the fir-poles and stealing the grapes.

From dreams peopled in this incongruous way the boy woke up again and again, making up his mind that he would not go to sleep any more to be worried by what he termed such a horrible muddle.

The night, which generally passed so quickly, seemed as if it would never end, and when at last he did start up from perhaps the worst and most exciting dream of all, to find that the sun was just about to rise, he sprang off his bed with a sigh of relief, dressed, and went out into the garden to have what he called a good rest.

His intention was to go round to the back and rouse up Serge, not to make any confidence, but just to have a talk about the coming of the visitor and the surly reception the old soldier had given to his father's friend; but, before he had gone many yards, a gleam of something white amongst the trees caught his attention, and he found himself face to face with his father.

"You out so soon?" he cried, in astonishment.

"Yes, boy; it has been no time for sleep. I have had too much to think about."

"But, father—" began the boy.

Cracis held up his hand.

"Wait," he said. "Our visitor, Marcus, seems to have been as sleepless as I; here he comes." For at the same moment they caught sight of Caius Julius leaving the doorway; and, upon seeing them, he came quickly to join them, with extended hand.

The rest of that morning seemed afterwards one whirl of confusion to Marcus, in which he could recall his father's words to their visitor, and his quiet, grave declaration of how much it meant to him to have to give up his calm and peaceful home and its surroundings to plunge at once into the toil, excitement and care of public life.

Marcus recalled too how, divining how they seemed to wish to be alone, he had left them pacing up and down beneath the shading vines, talking earnestly, while he consoled himself by joining Serge, who was in as great a state of excitement as himself and literally pelted him with questions which he could not answer, making the old soldier turn from him fiercely after telling him that he might speak out if he liked, instead of being so obstinate and refusing to trust him with what he knew.

Serge went off in high dudgeon, while, hardly giving him a thought, Marcus strolled back towards the garden in the hope that his father would take some notice of him and call him to his side.

It was then approaching mid-day, and this time he was not disappointed, for, as soon as the boy appeared, Cracis signed to him to approach.

"Come here, Marcus," he said; and the boy noticed that their visitor smiled at him in a satisfied way.

"I am going away, my boy," he said, "to leave our quiet little home, on very serious business."

"Soon, father?" cried Marcus, excitedly, as his father stopped short.

"Very soon, boy—now—at once. That is, as soon as I can make my preparations."

Marcus drew a deep breath.

"You are going to follow—him?"

"I am going with my old friend Caius Julius."

"And you'll take me with you, father?"

Cracis was silent for a few moments, and he sighed deeply as he laid his hand upon his son's head.

"No, my boy; I must leave you behind. I am going to take part in a great struggle."

"A great struggle, father? You don't mean a war?"

"Yes, my boy, I do mean a war."

"Oh!" exclaimed Marcus, and he turned sharply upon their visitor, looking the question he longed to put, while Caius Julius met his eyes and bowed in silence.

"You are too young," said Cracis, slowly; "and now I want you to help me for the short time I am here making my preparations."

"Yes, father," cried the boy, in a choking voice; "but I should like for you to—"

"Yes," said Cracis, interrupting him and speaking very firmly, "I know what you would say—take you with me—but it cannot be. Now, Marcus, you are only a boy, but I want you to let my old friend see that you can act like a man. Do you understand?"

"Yes, father."

"Then look here, my boy. I reproved you and Serge rather harshly the other day for what you had done—Serge especially, for treasuring up and keeping in order my old war-like gear; but Marcus, one never knows what Fate has in store for us. I could not foresee, neither, for that matter, could he, what was so soon to come, but he did quite right. Now then," he continued, sharply, "away with you at once, and get out all the arms that I shall want, for I cannot leave here as student, but as a soldier once again. You understand?"

Marcus nodded, quickly. He could not trust himself to speak.

"Go to my room then, at once, to the big, old chest. Stop!" he cried, when Marcus was half way to the door. "Serge knows better than you. Call him and take him with you to help you lay out what I shall require. That will do. At once."

His brain whirling with excitement, his heart sinking with disappointment and despair, Marcus ran into the house, striving to make duty conquer all, his first effort being to drag his thoughts from self and condense them upon the task he had in hand.

"Where shall I find Serge?" he muttered. "He'll be gone off somewhere in the fields. Which way had I better go?"

The question had hardly formed itself in his brain as he was hurrying across the little court where the fountain played, when the big, burly figure of the old soldier stopped his way.

"Want me, boy?" he cried, hoarsely.

"Yes, Serge. Father is going away at once."

"With that Caius Julius?" cried the old soldier. "I know him now. It seemed to come to me like this morning when I woke. What does it mean then? The master a prisoner?"

"No, Serge; he's going with him to the war. But come, quickly!" he added, as the man stood staring at him as if struck speechless with wonderment. "Don't talk—don't ask me questions. Father wants his weapons and his armour

at once. Come on. You are to help me get them ready.”

The old soldier was standing before him with his herdsman’s staff in his hand as if ready to go off round the farm, and, drawing himself up, he grasped the stout crook in both his hands, bent down, placed one knee against it, and, with one effort of his great strength, snapped it across his knee as if it were a twig and threw the pieces from him with a gesture of contempt.

“Hah!” he cried, with a deep expiration of his breath. “At last, boy! The master is going to be himself again. There, don’t talk to me! I know! I have lain awake, boy, cursing that Caius Julius for coming here to disturb the master’s quiet life. He was his enemy always, and I could see nothing in it but ill—blind fool that I was! I can bless him now. Come on, boy! I know! Who was right now in keeping the swords sharp and the armour bright?”

The next minute the great chest had been dragged out into the middle of Cracis’ room and the old soldier was down upon his knees joyously unpacking the war-like equipments that he had so sadly stowed away so short a time before.

They were all mingled together so as to make them fit and the great chest contain them all, and as, taking the lead, Serge worked on, it was with a rapid touch that he sorted the three suits, giving each its place, his own armour and weapons, the more handsomely furnished appertaining to his master, and those of the boy, which had been fitted in.

The two former portions he laid to right and left, and, as he drew them forth, he sent pang after pang through the breast of Marcus, for it seemed to him that Serge laid his father’s offensive and defensive pieces of accoutrement together with almost reverent care, banging his own together heavily, while, as he dislodged those portions that had been prepared and fitted with such pride to suit the youth who wore them, they were pitched carelessly upon the bed to clash and jingle as if in protest at being looked upon now, when reality ruled the occasion, as toys and of no account.

“Ah!” cried the old soldier, as, when he had nearly finished, he drew out from the bottom of the chest the smallest of the shields and pitched it so that it fell upon Cracis’ pillow, suggesting to Marcus that the man meant that it should lie there in his master’s absence and sleep; but Serge saw nothing of Marcus’ agitated countenance, for he was gazing into the future.

“Here we are,” he cried, as he lifted out his own and Cracis’ shields together, to stand them up on edge so that he could separate them, for the loops and handles were tightly wedged together so that they seemed loth to come apart. “How soon will he be coming here for me to gird him up?”

“Directly, he said, Serge,” replied the boy.

“Then you look sharp, my lad, and put those things of yours back into the chest out of the way. I shall be wanting him to sit there while I fasten some of his buckles and straps. To think of its coming to this again!” he cried, joyously. “Why, how many years is it since I did it last? Why, you were a little toddling boy, and here you are getting on to be a man—man enough, Marcus, to help me and buckle on and hitch together some of the slides and studs when I dress myself.”

Marcus nodded, with a look of despair and envy in his eyes, while the old soldier bent down, caught up his old legionary helmet from the floor, gave it a slap with one hand, and then placed it upon his head, to draw himself up proudly before the boy, and give his foot a stamp, as he struck an attitude and cried:

“Burn my old straw hat, Marcus, when I am gone. This fits me again like a shell does one of the old white snails, and makes me feel like a soldier and a man again, instead of a herdsman and a serf.”

He had hardly finished speaking when the door was thrown open, and as if imbued by his old follower’s feelings, Cracis, no longer in his movements the calm, grave student, but the general and leader of men once more, strode quickly into the room and stopped short as the old soldier drew himself up motionless in his helmet, stiffly awaiting his officer’s next command.

It seemed to Marcus, too, no longer his calm, grave father who, the next moment, spoke as he raised one hand and pointed at the helmet his man had donned.

“What is the meaning of this, Serge?” he said, sternly.

“Only the thought of old times, general,” cried Serge, sharply, and to Marcus the man’s manner struck him as being completely changed, for he spoke shortly and bluntly, standing up as stiff and erect as before, and then in his misery and disappointment there was something very near akin to malicious triumph as his father said, sternly:

“Tut, man! Take that off! Did you think you were going too?”

Serge’s jaw dropped.

Chapter Ten.

Left behind.

“Not going too, master?” cried Serge, as soon as he could recover himself from a verbal blow which had, for the moment, seemed to crush him down; and, as Marcus heard the hopeless despair in the poor fellow’s tones, the feeling of malicious triumph in his breast died away.

"No," said Cracis, firmly; "your duty lies here."

"Lies here, master?" stammered Serge.

"Yes, man, here. Whom am I to leave in charge of my home? Who is to protect my son if I take you with me?"

"Home—Son?" faltered Serge. "But you, master—who is to protect you if your old follower is left behind?"

"I must protect myself, Serge," said Cracis, and his voice lost for the moment the hard, firm sternness of the soldier. "Your duty is here, Serge, and I look to you to carry it out. I leave you a greater charge than that of following and trying to shield me."

"No, no, master, no!" cried the old soldier, passionately. "I was with you always. I followed you through the wars, and I've stood by you like a man in peace. Once my master always my master while you could trust me, and it must be so still."

"No, Serge," cried Cracis, sternly. "I have told you your duty and now give you your orders. Protect my property; watch over my son till my return, if I ever do return," he added, sadly; "and if I fall, your place is still here to stand by my son and follow him as you have followed me."

"But you will not let me follow you, master!" cried Serge, passionately. "Oh, master, master! Young Marcus isn't a suckling; he's big and strong enough to fend himself. I've been waiting all these years for you to take your place as a soldier and a general once again! Don't—pray don't leave me behind!"

"Serge," said Cracis, sternly, "you have led these years of peace, but recollect that you are a soldier still. Man, your officer has given you your orders—Obey!"

As Marcus gazed at their old follower he seemed to have suddenly grown old. His face was wrinkled, and the skin appeared to hang, while a piteous look of despair filled his eyes as, throwing out his hands towards one who seemed to him to be delivering his death sentence, he fell heavily upon his knees and poured forth:

"There, there, master, here's your sword, keener and brighter than ever. Draw it and put me out of my misery at once. I won't say a word, only give you a last look like that of a faithful hound who has died in your service. Kill me at once, and let that be the end, but now that you are coming to your rights again after all these weary years of waiting, and are going to fight for brave old Rome, don't throw me over as if I was a helpless log. Think what it means to an old soldier who never turned his back upon an enemy in his life. Use your sword on me, master, if you feel that I'm not the man to draw my own again; but don't—pray don't leave me behind!"

Marcus felt ready to join his petition to that of the old soldier, but he could not speak, only stand and listen to his father's words, as he stepped forward to lay his hand upon the man's shoulder.

"Serge," he said, in a voice full of emotion—"brave old follower—true old friend, I could sternly order you to obey my commands, but I can only beg of you as you do of me. Rise up, man, and hear me. I would gladly take you with me and have you always at my back, but we cannot do everything we would. In my absence, Serge, your place is here to protect my boy. It is your duty, and perhaps the last command I shall ever give you, for the Gauls are stout warriors and it is no child's play that takes me from my home. I beg, then, as well as order. Stay and protect my son."

"But you don't know, master, how you may be surrounded by enemies ready to strike at you."

"No," said Cracis, firmly, and there was a ring of command in his tones. "Neither do I know how closely my boy may be hemmed in, and I want to leave here with the peaceful feeling that, whatever happens, my son has one beside him that I can always trust. Your duty, Serge, is here, and I leave Marcus in your charge. Now, no more save this: Rise up like my trusted servant. Duty calls me away, not only as a counsellor, but also as one of my country's generals. Now help me with my armour, for I go forth to fight. There have been words enough. Take the example of my son. He feels the bitterness of being left behind as much as you. Now, quick! We have lost too much time already. Caius Julius awaits my coming, and my heart is burning to be free from all this suffering and mental pain. Marcus, my boy, help him. It is the first time I ever asked you to arm me as a soldier. Quick, boy, and let us get it done."

Marcus sprang to his father's side, while, heavy and slow, Serge, as he rose, tottered here and there as he busied himself over a task that had not fallen to him for many long years, while a faint groan of misery escaped his lips from time to time before the last metal loop had been forced over its stud and then drawn into its place, the last buckle drawn tight, and the armed cheek-straps of the great Robin helmet passed beneath the general's chin.

These final preparations made, Cracis stood, grave and thoughtful, asking himself whether there was anything more he wished to do, anything in the way of orders to give his servant and his son before he left his home.

"Leave me now, Marcus," he said. "I wish to be alone for a while. Well," he continued, as the boy stood frowning and looking at him wistfully, "why do you stay? You want to ask me something before I go?"

These words stirred the boy into action, and he started to his father's side; but, though his lips parted, no words came.

"The time is gliding away, Marcus, my boy," said Cracis, sadly. "Come, speak out. You want to ask some favour before I go?"

"Yes, father, but after what you have said I hardly dare," cried the boy, hoarsely.

"Speak out, my son, boldly and bravely," said Cracis. "What is it you wish to say?"

"That there is yet time, father, before you go."

"Time for what?" said Cracis, frowning as if he grasped what his son was about to say.

"Time for you to withdraw your command," cried the boy, desperately. "Father, I can't help it; I could not stay behind here with you leaving home for the wars. You must take me with you after all."

Cracis frowned heavily.

"Is this my son speaking?" he said, harshly. "After the commands I have given you—after the way in which I have arranged for you to represent me here, and take my place in all things? Where are all my teachings about duty—have all flown to the winds?"

"No, no, father," cried the boy, passionately; "but you cannot tell how I feel. You do not know what it is to be left alone, and for me to see you go."

"You are wrong, my boy; I do know," cried Cracis; "and I may answer you and say, neither do you know what it is for me to give up my happy home and all belonging to me, to go hence never to return."

"Oh, I do, I do, father! I can feel that it must be terrible," cried the boy, excitedly; "but there is no need for you to go alone. I know how young I am, but I could be of great help to you. I am sure I could. So pray, pray don't leave me behind."

"Is that all you have to say, Marcus?" said Cracis, sternly.

"Ye-e-es, father," faltered the boy, in a despairing tone, for he could read plainly enough in his father's eyes that his appeal had been in vain.

"Then leave me now, boy, and do not make my task harder by speaking like this again. I have my duty to do towards my country and my home. My duty to my country is to follow Caius Julius in the great venture he is about to attempt; my duty to my home and son is to leave you here and not expose you, at your age, to the horrors of this war."

"But father!" cried the boy, wildly.

"Silence, boy!" said Cracis, firmly. "Obey me. I will hear no more. Go!"

Marcus' lips parted to make one more appeal, but, as his eyes met his father's where Cracis stood pointing towards the door, his own fell again, and feeling mastered, crushed in his despair, he moved slowly towards the door, his heart seeming to rise to his throat to strangle him in the intense emotion from which he suffered; but, as soon as he was outside, his elastic young spirit seemed to spring up again, and he hurried to his room, to stand there thinking, with the resolve to make one more strong effort to move his father's determination.

"He does not—he cannot know what I feel," he said to himself with energy. "I did not half try. I should have thrown myself at his feet and prayed to him. No, no," said the boy, mournfully, as he felt more and more the hopelessness of his cause. "It would have been no good. Father is like iron in his will; he is so strong, I am so weak—He a great man—I only a poor, feeble boy to be left behind to mind the house, as if I were a girl! Oh, it's of no use; I must stay—I must stay!" he half groaned, in his despair. "When perhaps I might help him so, I and Serge, when he was in the fight, or—oh, if he were wounded! Suppose he were cut down and bleeding, perhaps dying, and I not there to help him! Oh, it's of no use to despair; I must—I will go. I know! I'll appeal to Caius Julius; he will hear me, I feel sure."

Full of enthusiasm once more, he hurried out of his room to seek for the visitor, who had wrought such a change in their quiet home; but, as he caught sight of him pacing slowly up and down the little inner court close to the fountain, the boy's heart failed him again, for he recalled the angry passage that had taken place between them the previous day—their visitor's half-mocking words, and his own burst of passion, which had roused him into forgetting the sacred rites of hospitality and raising his hand to strike.

"I can't ask him; I dare not beg him to intercede," thought Marcus. "He would only jeer at me for being a boy, and put me out of temper again. But I must," he said. "It is for father's sake. Yes, I will. Why should I mind? Let him laugh at me if he likes."

Raising his courage he was on his way to their visitor's side when Caius Julius turned and caught sight of the approaching boy.

"Ah, Marcus," he said; "is your father nearly ready to go?"

"Yes," cried the boy, "but—"

He stopped short, for the words refused to come.

"Well, what were you about to say?" said Julius, frowning.

"Your father is not going to repent?"

"Repent? About me?" cried the boy, excitedly.

"About you, boy? Why should he repent about you?"

"And let me go with him," cried Marcus, excitedly, as, forgetting all his dislike, he caught his father's visitor by the robe and spoke eagerly and well. "I want to go with him to the war."

"You? To fight?"

"Yes; I know I am young and weak—Yes, I know, only a boy, but I shall grow strong, and it is not only to fight. I want to be there to help him. He might be sick or wounded. He says I must stay at home here, but I appeal to you. You can tell him how useful I could be. You will tell him, sir, for I feel that I ought not—that I cannot stay here and let him go alone."

"Well spoken, my brave boy!" cried Caius Julius. "Spoken like a man! So you, young as you are, would go with us?"

"Yes, yes, of course," cried Marcus, in his wild excitement, as he listened to this encouraging reception of his appeal. "I think I could fight; but even if I could not there is so much that I could do."

"And you would not feel afraid?" cried Julius, catching the boy by the arm.

"No—yes—no—I do not know," said the boy, colouring. "I hope not."

"You do not know the horrors of a battlefield, boy," said Julius, fixing Marcus with his keen eyes.

"No," said Marcus, thoughtfully; "it must be very terrible, but I do not think I should shrink. I should be thinking so much of my father."

"Well, honestly and modestly spoken, boy," said Julius. "Why, you make me feel full of confidence in your becoming as brave and great a man as your father."

"Oh no, sir," replied Marcus, sadly. "No one could be so great and brave a man as he."

"But you would follow us into the middle of the battle's horrors?"

"Yes, sir, I would indeed; indeed I would," cried Marcus, eagerly.

"I believe you, my boy, and all the more for your simple honesty of speech."

"And you will prevail upon my father to let me go?" cried Marcus, appealingly.

"I do not know," said Julius, thoughtfully. "You say that you have begged hard and your father says that you must stay?"

"Yes," cried Marcus, "but you have the power, sir, and you will speak to him and tell him that he must take me?" cried Marcus.

Julius shook his head.

"Let me see," he said; "you told me that you would try to be brave."

Marcus felt that his hopes were vain, but he spoke out desperately:

"Yes, I would indeed try to be as brave and firm as I could."

"I know you would, boy, but remember this: it is very brave to be obedient to those who are in authority over you," said Julius. "A good son obeys his father, and Cracis has given you his commands to stay here, has he not?"

"Yes," cried Marcus, desperately; "but I was sure that I could be of the greatest help."

"I believe that you would try to be," said Julius, gravely; "but, my boy, I cannot fight for you in this and oppose your father's commands. Be brave and do your duty here. Put up with the disappointment and wait. Time flies fast, boy, and you will be a man sooner than you expect—too soon perhaps for the golden days of youth. No, my boy, I cannot interfere. You must obey your father's commands."

"Oh," cried Marcus, passionately, "and suppose he is stricken down, to lie helpless on the field?"

Julius shrugged his shoulders, and at that moment the voice of Cracis was heard summoning the boy, who turned away hanging his head in his despair. Marcus turned to meet his father, who looked at him wondering to see him there, and bringing the colour to the boy's cheeks, so guilty did he feel, as, with his cloak over his arm, Cracis drew his son to him to press him to his mailed breast, held out his hand to Serge, and then strode forward with heavy tread to join his old military companion, who was now slowly bending over the side of the fountain, into whose clear surface he kept on lowering the white tips of his fingers so that one or the other of the little fish that glided about within the depths might dart at them and apply its lips in the belief that something was offered to it fit for food.

Caius Julius rose up slowly as he heard the heavy tramp of his friend's armoured feet upon the paved floor, and took in his appearance with a smile of satisfaction.

"You are ready, then?" he said.

"Yes," was the laconic reply.

"Then nothing remains but for you to take your farewell of my brave young friend, your defender when I ventured to try his faith."

"That is done," said Cracis, gravely; "and as Rome awaits my coming, lead the way."

"But I have not said my valediction to your son, Cracis, and it is this: Wait, Marcus, my brave boy. Some day perhaps I may come to you as I have come to your father to ask your help. Better still, send him, full of the honours he has won, to bring his son to Rome. Till then, farewell."

Marcus felt the touch of their visitor's hands and heard his words, but he could not speak, only stand side by side with Serge, who looked older and more bent than when he first learned the truth that he was to stay behind; but the boy had no thought at the moment but of the father who was going away to face peril as well as to strike for glory and his country's welfare.

He could only follow the pair of Rome's great men as, side by side, they passed out of the open court where the fountain played and the water that sparkled like diamonds in the bright sunshine fell back into the basin with a musical splashing sound.

A minute later and Cracis with his companion passed out through the porched entry into the tree-shaded road, the grave, white-robed leader and the well-armed general with his shield, which flashed and turned off a shower of keen darts which came from on high, as he turned once to wave his hand to his son.

At that moment there was a low, deep bay, and the great wolf-dog, which had caught sight of his master, bounded from the shadow where he had crouched to avoid the flies, and, seeing the two strangers, as they seemed to him, he leaped forward, but crouched at his master's feet as he recognised his face and voice.

"Good dog!" cried Cracis. "No, go back and guard all here till I return."

If the dog did not grasp the words, he did the tone and gesture, replying by throwing up his muzzle and giving vent to a piteous howl full of protest, as he turned and walked slowly back to join Marcus and Serge, dropping at the former's feet just as the departing pair disappeared at a turn of the road.

Then there was a pause for a time, before the dog slunk off to his kennel; Serge hung his head and moved away in silence towards the back of the villa and the room that Marcus playfully called his den, while the boy, feeling that all was over and hope dead and buried in his breast, went slowly and sadly to his seat in the study, where his stylus and waxen tablets lay, to slowly scratch upon the smooth surface the words:

"Gone. Left behind."

Chapter Eleven.

Good-bye, Old Home.

There was a strange solemnity about the Roman villa as soon as Marcus was left alone. All seemed to have grown painfully still. It was fancy, no doubt, but, to the boy, the birds had ceased to sing and chirp among the trees, the sounds from the farm were distant, and though more than once Marcus listened intently he did not hear Serge go to or from his room, nor his step anywhere about the road.

"Poor old Serge," thought Marcus; "he is as miserable as I am—no, not quite, because he does not feel so guilty nor ready to disobey. He heard what my father said, bowed his head, and went away."

And how slowly the time glided away. The hottest part of the afternoon came, when, as a rule, the boy felt drowsy and ready to have a restful sleep till the sun began to get low; but this day Marcus felt so alert and excited that he never once thought of sleep, though he more than once longed to see the sun go down so that it might be darkness such as would agree with the misery and despair which kept him shut in his room hating the very sight of day.

Marcus took up his stylus to write a dozen times over, but he did not add a word to those which he had written as soon as he was alone, and he threw the pointed implement down each time with a feeling of disgust.

"I feel as if I shall never write again," he said, bitterly. "Oh, it is too hard to bear!"

He buried his face in his hands, resting his elbows upon his knees, feeling at times almost stunned by his misery, quite ignorant of the lapse of time, and so wretched that he did not even wonder how far his father and the great Roman general had got by this time upon their journey to Rome.

"Is it never going to be night?" groaned the boy at last, and then he started violently, for something cold and moist touched one of his hands.

"You, Lupe?" he said, with a sigh, as he realised his disturber, and he looked gently at the great dog, whose eyes were fixed enquiringly and wistfully on his. "He's gone, old boy—gone—gone—gone—and, yes, the place does seem lonely and sad."

The dog whined softly, and then looked sharply in his face again, before turning to the door, forcing it open and passing through.

"Who'd ever have thought a dog would feel it so?" thought Marcus. "But he does. He missed him directly, and he has gone to hunt for him."

"What, can't you find him, Lupe?" cried Marcus, as there came a scratching at the door, which was forced open, and

the dog came in again, to utter a piteous whimper which increased into a howl.

"Poor old Lupe!" sighed Marcus. "Can't you find him, boy? No, and you never will. I dare say he will never come back here again. Good old dog!" he continued, taking hold of his ears and drawing the head into his lap, to keep on caressing him and talking to him the while. "What mistakes one makes! I used to think you such a surly, savage old fellow, and here you are as miserable as I am, Lupe. Oh, he might have let me go!"

The dog whined softly as it gazed wistfully in his eyes, and whined again.

"Where's old Serge, Lupe? You haven't seen him since father went."

The dog growled.

"Oh, don't be cross with him, Lupe. I dare say he's as disappointed as I am; but he will have to stay," continued the boy, bitterly, as he uttered a mocking laugh, "and take care of the house and the servants and all the things about the farm; and you will have to stay and help him too. Just as if all these things were of any consequence at all. There, get away; I can't make a fuss over you now. I feel half wild and savage. I can't bear it, Lupe. It's too much—too much."

He thrust the dog's head roughly away, and Lupe stood up before him and shook himself violently so that his ears rattled. Then, trotting towards the door, he was stopped short, for the latch was in its place and he tried to drag it open with his claws, but tried for some moments in vain. Then showing plenty of intelligence, he trotted back to the middle of the room, looked up anxiously in his young master's face, and barked angrily.

"Oh, look here," cried Marcus, "I can't bear this. Be off!"

The dog trotted back to the door and scratched at it with his head turned towards the boy the while; but Marcus was too full of his own troubles to grasp the great animal's meaning, and, finding that he was not understood, Lupe trotted to Marcus' side, lifted one leg, and pawed at him.

"Get away, I tell you!" cried the boy, and the dog barked a little, and stood barking in the middle of the room for a few moments, before turning and making for the window, where he crouched a little, and then, with one effort, sprang right out into the garden, while Marcus subsided into his old attitude with his face buried in his hands.

No one disturbed him, and at last the night began to fall, the shadows in the room darkened and grew darker still, till at last the boy seemed to wake out of a deep sleep, though he had never closed his eyes.

Springing up, he went to the window, looked out at the dark and silent garden, and then uttering a low, deep sigh he crossed to the door, passed through, and made for his father's study, to find there that all was darker still. But he knew what he wanted, and with outstretched hands made for his father's bed, when they came in contact at once with what he wanted.

Then there arose from the place where his father rested night after night a short, sharp, clinking noise as of metal against metal, while the boy quickly and carefully gathered together the various portions of his armour and accoutrements which had been placed there by old Serge when he unpacked and sorted out the portions of the three suits.

It did not take long to clear the bed, and then, hugging everything tightly to him, Marcus crept softly out through the darkness, listening carefully the while before every movement, his acts suggesting that he was playing the part of a robber; and he thought so and laughed to himself, as he said softly, as if answering his conscience, "Yes, but I am only stealing my own," and then made his way to his own sleeping chamber, a narrow little closet of a place which opened upon the court, where the musical tinkling of the water as it fell back into the basin could be plainly heard.

In the darkness everything was wonderfully still, save that the music of the water sometimes sounded loud, and when the boy rather roughly freed himself from his burden that he carried by casting the armour and weapons upon his own bed, he was half startled by the resulting crash, and turned back quickly into the court to stand and listen.

As he did this the low murmur of voices came to his ear, making him step cautiously across the little square court and go round to the spot from which the sounds came.

There he stood listening for a few moments, to satisfy himself that it was only his father's servants talking together, their subject being their master's going away.

"Oh," he said, impatiently, "they don't think about me, any more than old Serge does. But he might have given me a thought and come and said a word or two to show that he was sorry for my disappointment.

"But no; he wouldn't," continued the boy, with a sigh. "I suppose people in trouble are always selfish, and he thinks his trouble a bigger one than mine. Never mind. I won't be selfish. I'll go and speak to him, just a few kind words to let him see that I am sorry for him, and then—Oh, it's very miserable work, and what a difference father could have made if he would have listened to me—and that Julius too.

"Caius Julius! Yes, of course, I have heard about him, but it never troubled me—in fact I hardly knew there was such a man in the world—the greatest man in Rome, a mighty soldier and conqueror, old Serge said more than once; but I never took any notice, for it seemed nothing to do with me. Oh, who could have thought that in a few short hours there could be such a change as this!"

The boy turned off, crossed the court again, and made his way to Serge's den, where all was still and dark as the part of the building he had just quitted.

"You here, Serge?" he cried, cheerily, thrusting open the door. "Where are you? What have you been doing all this time?"

Marcus' words sounded hollow and strange, coming back to him, as it were, and startling him for the moment.

"Are you asleep?" he shouted, loudly, as if to encourage himself, for an uncomfortable feeling thrilled him through and through.

"Oh, what nonsense!" he muttered. "Not likely that he would be asleep; he'd have heard me directly and sprung up. Where can he be?"

The boy thought for a few moments, and then hurried out towards the farm buildings and sheds, but stopped short as another thought struck him, and he made at once for the dark building with its stone cistern where the grapes were trodden.

The door was ajar, and he stepped in at once.

"You here, Serge?" he cried; and this time there was an answer, but it was made by the dog, which approached him fawningly and uttered a low, whining, discontented howl.

"Oh, get out! I don't want you," cried Marcus, angrily; and he turned to leave the place, but his conscience smote him and he stooped down and began patting the great beast's head.

"Yes, I do," he said, gently. "Poor old Lupe! I mustn't be surly to my friends. Good old dog, then! But where's Serge? Do you know where he is, boy?"

The dog growled, and pressed up against Marcus' leg.

"No, you don't know, old fellow. If you did you'd be with him. There, go and lie down. I daresay he's gone into the woods to sulk and walk it off."

The dog whined softly, and then, in obedience to his master's commands, let himself subside upon the stones, while Marcus strolled off, stopped once or twice to think and listen, and then said, half aloud:

"There, it's of no use, and perhaps it's all for the best, for I'm so weak and stupid, and I daresay I shouldn't have been able to talk to him and say what I meant without breaking down."

He drew himself up firmly, then stood breathing hard for a few moments, as he turned and gazed through the darkness in different directions, and then made straight for his little cubicle, entered at once, and, breathing hard the while as if he had been running far, he cast off his loose every-day garment and began rapidly to put on the armour in which he had had such pride.

Practice with old Serge had made him perfect, and, in spite of the darkness, his fingers obeyed him well, so that it was not long before he stood girded and buckled up, fully accoutred, with nothing more to be done than to crown his preparations by placing his heavy helmet upon his head.

Before he began, his spirits were down to the lowest ebb, but exertion and excitement, joined with something in the touch of the war-like garb and the thoughts this last engendered, so that as he went on he gradually grew brighter, adventurous thoughts encouraged him; and, at last, taking the helmet in both hands, he placed it upon his head, drew the armed strap beneath his chin, and readjusted the hang of his short broadsword, before standing in the darkness absolutely motionless.

"Why, it makes me feel ten years older," he said, "even if I am but a boy! And here was I, before I began, shrinking and feeling that I should repent and be afraid to go. And now I am like this!"

He lifted his shield from where it lay upon the bed, took the short spear which he had leaned in a corner of the wall, and then, stiffened by his armour and far more by the spirit that seemed to thrill through every nerve and tendon, he stepped out into the court, to bend down and place his lips to the clear water in the fountain basin, drink deeply, and then stand up in the darkness to look round.

"Good-bye, old home!" he said, aloud, and his voice broke a little; but it hardened again the next moment, as he said, quickly:

"No, it isn't home now that he has gone away. I am coming, father, and you must forgive me when we meet, for I cannot—I dare not stay."

There was the quick, sharp tramp of the boy's feet as he crossed the stone-paved court, with the arms he wore, and those he carried, making a slight crackling and clinking noise, while his bronze protected feet made his steps sound heavier than of old.

The next minute he was fighting against the desire to turn and look back, and, conquering, for he felt that it would be weak, he strode off with quickened pace away along the track that had been taken by his father and Caius Julius hours before.

Chapter Twelve.

Real War.

It was all one blur of mystery to Marcus as he tramped through the forest, following the slightly beaten road. Time seemed to be no more, and distance not to count. Everything was dreamy and strange, over-ruled by the one great thought that he was going to reach his father somewhere, somehow, in the future, when he would reprove him bitterly and forgive him, but he would never turn him back; and, governed by these thoughts, he went on, almost unconscious of everything else.

The way was sometimes desolate, sometimes grand, with mountain and forest, over which and through which the roughly beaten track always led, for it was not one of the carefully constructed military roads that his great people afterwards formed through the length and breadth of their land.

The rocks amongst the mountains afforded resting places; beneath the grand trees of the forest there was mossy carpet, upon which he slept; there were trickling rills and natural basins where crystal water gave him drink, or places where he could bathe his hot and tired feet, while now and again he came upon the rude hut of some goat-herd or Pagan who, for a small coin, gladly supplied him with coarse black bread and a bowl of freshly-drawn goat's milk.

And this went on, as he could recall when he thought, day after day, night after night, if he tried to think; but that was rarely, for he had no time. The one great thought of finding his father mastered all else, as, still in what continued a strange, blurred, adventurous dream, he went on and on, seeming to grow more vigorous and stronger every hour, feeling too, at heart, that he was on the right way, with Rome in the distance, the goal for which he was bound; and once there—ah!

All was blank and confused again, but it was a confusion full of excitement, where flashes of greatness played up on the great city of which he had heard so much, and his father and the army were there.

There was nothing to hinder his progress, for the weather was glorious, and, each morning when he awakened from his sleep, it was with his heart throbbing with joy and desire as he sprang up refreshed and eager with nothing to stay his way, till, on the morning of the third—the fourth—the fifth—he could not tell what day—all he knew was that it was during his journey—he came suddenly in a dense part of a forest, upon a big, armed figure marching before him far down the track, evidently going the same way as he, turning neither to the right nor left, but striding steadily on, and Marcus suffered a new emotion near akin to fear and dread, not of this armed man, but of what he might do. For the boy reasoned that, if he overtook this man, he might question him, find out who he was, and turn him back.

Marcus stopped short, after stepping aside to shelter himself partly behind a tree-trunk, to watch the soldier, whose helmet glistened in the sun-rays which played through the leaves, while the head of his spear flashed at times as if it were a blade of fire.

It was not fear alone that troubled the boy, for the sight of this warrior, who was evidently on the march to join the army, sent a thrill through his breast, and the war-like ardour of old fostered by old Serge, came back stronger than ever, as he said to himself that there was nothing to mind, for they were both, this big, grand-looking warrior and he, upon the same mission.

"He'll make me welcome," thought Marcus, "and we can march on together and talk about the wars, the same as Serge and I used to before father found us out.

"I wonder whether this man knew my father? He'll be sure to know Caius Julius, and I can talk about him and his coming to my home."

But Marcus did not hurry on, for the dread came, and with it the horror of being ignominiously forced to retrace his steps, while the Roman warrior seemed to increase and grow large, till he disappeared among the trees, came into sight again farther on, and, after a time, as Marcus still hesitated, he finally passed out of sight, making the boy breathe more freely.

"What a coward I am!" he cried, aloud. "It's because I'm doing wrong in leaving home as I did after receiving my father's commands. But I couldn't help it. Something forced me to come away, and it was only because I felt that I ought to be at father's side.

"Perhaps it wasn't cowardice," he muttered, after a pause. "It may have been prudence—the desire to make sure of reaching the army without being turned back. And I'm such a boy that this great warrior would have laughed at me and perhaps have looked at me mockingly as he felt my arms. I've done quite right, and I'll keep to myself and join nobody till I get to the army, where I shall be safe."

After a time Marcus started off again, keeping a sharp look-out along the road as he proceeded, till, some time later, he saw afar off a flash of light, then another, which proved that the first had come from the marching warrior's helmet, and once more Marcus slackened his pace.

He saw no more of the man that day, but, as the evening was closing in, upon the slope of a wooded mountain the boy caught sight of a goat-herd's hut, where he obtained bread and milk, and the peasant who lived there asked him if he was a companion of the big warrior who had been there a short time before.

Marcus shook his head, and soon after continued his journey, keeping a stricter watch than ever, but seeing no more of the man. But he turned aside into the forest as soon as he found a suitable place offering shelter and a soft, dry couch, and was soon after plunged in a restful sleep which lasted till the grey dawn, when he suddenly started into wakefulness, disturbed, as he was, by the rattling of armour.

Marcus shrank back among the undergrowth which had been his shelter, waking fully to the fact that he had lain down to sleep not above a dozen yards from where the man had made his couch, while, in all probability, had he continued his journey for those few paces the night before, he would have stumbled upon him he sought to avoid.

There was nothing for it but to wait for a while so as to give his fellow-traveller time to get some distance ahead, and, when he thought that he might start, Marcus went on again slowly, with the result that, during that day, he caught sight of the man twice over steadily plodding on, but never once looking back or hesitating as to his path.

When night closed in again, the country had become far more hilly, and, as Marcus was descending a steep slope at the bottom of which a stream gurgled and rippled along, the boy awoke to the fact that the man had been resting and bathing in the bottom of the tiny valley, and was now ascending the opposite slope, where, in full sight of his fellow-traveller, he stopped beneath a tree, divested himself of a portion of his armour, and then lay down to rest.

To have gone on and passed him would have been the most sensible thing to do, but to do this the boy would have had to creep along a rugged path close beside the sleeper's halting place, at the great risk of dislodging stones and awakening him if he were asleep, while, if he were yet awake, to pass without being seen was impossible.

It was not the spot where Marcus would have chosen his resting place, but there was no option, and, carefully keeping among the trees, he dropped down at the most suitable place, and then lay for some time vainly trying to sleep, till at last he lost consciousness, resting and preparing for his next day's journey, waking at sunrise in the hope that if he could not lose sight of his unwelcome fellow-traveller, the next night would find him so near to Rome that another day's march would, at least, bring him so close that there would be no more such anxious travel.

But matters turn out in daily life very often in a different way from what is expected, and so it was here. Marcus waited and watched till he saw the warrior rise bare-headed, but not to go on at once after donning his helmet, but to come back in his direction.

"He must have seen me," thought the boy excitedly, and he began to creep carefully away through the low bushes; but, at the end of a minute, upon glancing back, he found that the man was not following him, but had made his way down to the little stream to drink and wash.

Relieved by this, Marcus reseated himself to watch unseen every action of the soldier, who had left his helmet, shield and weapons at the foot of the tree where he had slept; and, after bathing his face and hands, he was on his way back, when, to Marcus' horror, he caught sight of a glint of something bright, and, directly after, made out first one and then another rough-looking, armed man, till he saw there were no less than six creeping towards the spot where the Roman soldier had left his weapons.

Marcus thought no more of himself at this, but was about to issue from his hiding place when he grasped the fact that the soldier had realised his danger, and, springing forward with a shout, he made a dash to reach his resting place first.

The strange men were evidently shaken by his bold action, but only for a few moments, and turned to meet the soldier, knife in hand; but their hesitation gave the warrior time to reach shield and sword, when, without waiting to be attacked, the men advanced upon him at once.

Such an encounter as this was quite new to Marcus, and he stood there hidden from all concerned for quite a minute, with his heart beating rapidly, trembling with excitement, and taking the position of a spectator, gazing with starting eyes at the party of strangers as if the fight were no concern of his.

Strangers? Yes, they were all strangers—enemies perhaps; and then, like a flash, it struck him that these rough-looking, knife-armed men were robbers intent upon spoiling the warrior and perhaps taking his life.

This flash of intelligence opened the way for another, making him see the cowardice of six attacking one while that one was brave as brave could be.

For a few moments, as he watched the encounter in the bright morning light, Marcus was full of admiration for the brave and clever way in which, hemmed in though he was, the big warrior interposed his shield and turned off blow after blow. But all the same it was very evident that numbers would gain the day and some desperate thrust lay the poor fellow low.

Marcus' thoughts passed very quickly in his excitement, and now another came like a question: You are in armour, with a good shield, a sharp sword and spear. You have taken upon yourself the part of a Roman soldier, and you stand there doing nothing but look on.

That thought seemed to smite Marcus right in the face, and the next moment he was running hard, spear in hand, down the steep hill slope, to leap the rivulet and, with lowered spear, charge up the other side towards the contending party, a loud shout ringing out upon the morning air.

So fully were the attacking party taken up by their work of escaping the single swordsman's blows and trying to get in a thrust, that they paid no heed to the shout of the boy, and were not even conscious of his presence till he was close at hand.

But his approach was noted by the brave soldier, just as an attack from behind was delivered simultaneously with one in front, and it gave him strength to make a last effort which enabled him to lay one of his assailants low; but at the same moment another enemy sprang upon his back, and he went down, his foes hurling themselves upon him with a shout of triumph, which turned into a yell of dismay as the boy literally leaped amongst them as if to join in the mastery over the fallen man.

But though Marcus sprang quickly into their midst, his spear moved far more quickly than his feet, and he darted in to right and left two of the thrusts that he had learned from Serge in one of his mock combats at home when his spear had been only a short, light pole, cut and trimmed by the old soldier for the purpose in hand.

All that was sham, but this was startlingly real to the boy, as, at each thrust, he saw blood start, and heard the yells of pain given by the receivers of the point.

Those cries were auxiliaries, for they pierced the ears of those who attacked, making them turn in their surprise to find amongst them a fully-armed warrior whose arms flashed in the morning sun, as, advancing his shield ready for a blow, he darted his spear forward at another, who avoided the thrust by a backward leap, and, once started, dashed away as hard as they could go. Fighting men are prone to follow their leader, sometimes to victory, sometimes in panic flight. This latter was the case here. Marcus' next thrust, delivered with all his might, coming too late, for it was at a flying foe, three men running swiftly, one limping away, another running more slowly, nursing his right arm, and the sixth, who had been struck down by the Roman soldier's sword, crawling along towards the rivulet, by which he stopped to bathe his wound.

It was a matter of very few moments, and Marcus had hardly realised the fact that his daring surprise had completely turned the tables, for his first thought was, "They couldn't have seen what a boy I am," when his next led him to turn back to see how the beaten-down soldier had fared, just in time to meet him face to face, as, half stunned, he struggled to his knees and pressing his sword upon one of the stones hard by, used it as a staff to enable him to gain his feet.

The next moment he was afoot, passing his sword into his shield-bearing hand so that he might raise his big helmet, which, in the struggle, had been driven down over his eyes. Then it was that he stared at his deliverer, and his deliverer stared at him.

"Thank you, whoever you are—" began the soldier, and then his jaw dropped and he was silent. Not so Marcus, whose countenance lit up with delight, as he shouted:

"Why, Serge! Can this be you?"

Chapter Thirteen.

Turning the Tables.

"Marcus, boy!" came back the next instant, as the old soldier dashed down his shield and his sword upon it with a clattering noise, before catching his deliverer in his arms and holding him to his breast.

"Well done!" he cried. "Well done, boy! Well done! Hah! Hurrah! Think of it! Six on 'em! And you set 'em running. Hah!" he panted, breathlessly, as he freed the boy, took a couple of steps backward, planted his great fists upon his hips, gazed at him proudly, and then gave a sweeping look round as if addressing a circle of lookers-on instead of blocks of stone and trees; "Hah!" he exclaimed. "I taught him to fight like that!"

"Yes, Serge, you did—you did!" cried Marcus. "But you are covered with blood, and you are badly hurt. Those wretches must have stabbed you with their knives."

"Eh?" growled the old soldier, beginning to feel himself all over. "Yes, how nasty! All over my breast. It's a long time since I have been in a mess like this. I felt a dig in the front, and another in my back, and another—" Serge ceased speaking as his hands were busy feeling for his wounds, and then he exclaimed: "Yes, it's blood, sure enough, but 'tain't mine, boy. Their knives didn't go through. I am all right, only out of breath. But you? Did you get touched?"

"Oh no," cried Marcus. "I escaped."

"But you made your marks on them, boy. My marks, I call 'em."

"Pick up your sword and shield, Serge," cried Marcus, excitedly. "They'll be coming back directly perhaps."

"Well, yes, it would be wise, boy," said the old soldier, taking his advice. "Look yonder; that's the fellow I cut down," and he pointed with his sword to the man who had been bathing his wound and, after crossing the rivulet, was also in full retreat. "No, he's had enough of it, and if the others came back it wouldn't be six to one, but five to two—two well-armed warriors, you and me," said the old man, proudly, as he made Marcus' shield clatter loudly as he tapped it with his sword. "You and me, boy," he repeated. "Tchah! They won't come on again. Why, back to back, you and me—why, we are ready for a dozen of them if they came. Here, I had my wash, but I must go now and have another while you keep guard over me. Think of it!—While you keep guard over me, boy! No, I won't call you boy no more, for I have made you a fighting man, and here's been the proof of it this morning. There's only one thing wanted to make all this complete. Boy! Tchah! I can't call you a boy: you are a young Roman warrior."

"Oh, nonsense, Serge!" cried the boy, flushing.

"Nonsense, eh? Look at you and the way you handled that spear. Why, you are better with your sword, if you have to draw it, as I well know. Do you remember how you nearly did for me?"

"Oh yes, I remember," replied Marcus.

"Yes, I had to jump that time; and lucky I did, or I shouldn't have been here for you to fight like this. But, as I was saying, it only wanted one thing, and that was for your father, who has come to his senses at last, to have been here to see, and—"

The old soldier stopped short, his big, massive jaw dropped, and he stood staring as he took off his heavy helmet and wiped his brow with the back of his hand.

"But I say," he cried, at last, staring at the boy with the puzzled expression upon his features growing more and more intense, "what are you doing here?"

Marcus' sun-browed face turned scarlet, and he stood silent, staring in reply, beginning almost to cower—he, the brave, young, growing warrior—before the old servant's stern eyes, and ready to shiver at the pricking of the conscience that was now hard at work.

"Look here," cried Serge, extending his shield and raising his short broadsword to punctuate his words with the taps he gave upon this armour of defence, "your father said that you were not to use that armour any more, and I left it, being busy getting his for him to go off to the war, lying upon his bed. It wasn't yours any longer. It was his'n. You have been in and stole it; that's what you have done. Do you hear me?" continued the old soldier, fiercely. "You've been and stole it and put it on, when he said you warn't to. That's what you've done."

"Yes, Serge," said the boy, meekly.

"Hah!" cried the old soldier, gathering strength.

"And your father said you were to stop at home and take care of his house and servants, and the swine and cattle, and his lands, and, as soon as he's gone, you begin kicking up your heels and playing your wicked young pranks. That's what you've done, and been pretty quick about it too. Now then, out with it. Let's have the truth—the truth, and no excuses. Let's have the truth."

It was no longer punctuation, but a series of heavy musical bangs upon the shield, and once more, very meekly indeed, Marcus said, almost beneath his breath:

"Yes, Serge; that's quite right. Everything is as you say."

"Ah, well," growled the old soldier, a little mollified by his young master's frankness, "that don't make it quite so bad. Now then, just you answer right out. Where were you a-going to go?"

"To join father at the war."

"Hah! I thought as much," cried the old soldier, triumphantly, and looking as though he credited himself with a grand discovery. "And now you see what comes of not doing what you are told. I've just caught you on the hop, and it's lucky for you it's me and not the master himself. So, now then, it's clear enough what I've got to do."

"To do?" cried Marcus, quickly. "What do you mean, Serge?"

"What do I mean? Why, to make you take off that coat of armour on the spot. Well, no, I can't do that, because you aren't got nothing else to wear. Well, never mind; you must go as you are."

"Oh yes, Serge, never mind about the armour; I'll go as I am. But gather your things together—that bundle of yours."

"How did you know I'd got a bundle?" said the old soldier, suspiciously.

"I have seen you carrying it day after day."

"What! You've seen me day after day?"

"Oh yes. I don't know how long it's been, but I have often seen you right in front."

"Worse and worse!" cried the old soldier, angrily. "That shows what a bad heart you've got, boy. You've come sneaking along after me to find the way, and never dared to show your face."

"I did dare!" cried the boy, indignantly. "But I only saw your back. I didn't know it was you."

"Oh, you didn't know it was me?" growled Serge. "Well, that don't make it quite so bad. But you knew it was me that you came to help?"

"No."

"Oh! Then I might have been a stranger?"

"Yes, of course. I saw six men attacking one, and—"

"Oh, come, he ain't got such a bad heart as I thought," said the old soldier. "And you did behave very well. I did feel a bit proud of you. But never mind that; we have got something else to talk about," said Serge, as he rearranged his armour and picked up his wallet and spear. "Now then, let's get back at once, and mind this, if you attempt to give me the slip—"

"Give you the slip! Get back!" cried Marcus, excitedly. "What do you mean by get back at once?"

"Why, get back home to your books and that there wax scratcher to do as your father said. This is a pretty game, upon my word!"

"But I am not going back, Serge," cried the boy, firmly. "I am going to join my father."

"You are not going to join your father," said the old soldier, sturdily. "You've run away like one of them village ragged-jacks, and I am ashamed of you, that's what I am. But 'shamed or no 'shamed, I've caught you and I am

going to take you back.”

“No!” cried Marcus, fiercely.

“Nay, boy, it’s yes, so make no more bones about it.”

“I am going to join my father, sir, and answer to him, not to his servant.”

“You are going back home to your books and to take care of your father’s house.”

“And suppose I refuse?” cried Marcus.

“Won’t make a bit of difference, boy, for I shall make you.”

“Indeed!” cried Marcus.

“Now then, none of that! None of your ruffling up like a young cockerel and sticking your hackles out because you think your spurs have grown, when you are not much more than fledged, because that won’t do with me. I tell you this: you come easy and it will be all the better for you, for if you behave well perhaps I won’t tell the master, after all. So make up your mind to be a good boy at once.”

“A good boy!” cried Marcus, scornfully. “Why, you called me a brave young warrior just now.”

“Yes, I am rather an old fool sometimes,” growled Serge; “but you needn’t pitch that in my teeth. Now then, no more words, and let’s waste no more time. I want to get back.”

“But Serge—” cried the boy.

“That’ll do. You know what your father said, and you’ve got to obey him, or I shall make you. Aren’t you sorry for doing wrong?”

“Yes—no,” cried Marcus.

“Yes—no? What do you mean by that, sir?”

“I don’t know,” cried Marcus, desperately. “Look here, Serge: it is too late now. I’ve taken this step, and I must go on and join my father now.”

“Taken this step? Yes, of course you have,” cried the old soldier, sarcastically, “and a nice step it is! What’s it led to? Your having to take a lot more steps back again. I know; but you didn’t, being such a young callow bit of a fellow. Soon as you do anything wrong you have to do a lot more bad things to cover it up. Lucky for you I caught you; so now then, come on.”

“But Serge,” cried Marcus, passionately, “you can’t understand how I felt—how it seemed as if I must go after my father, to be with him in case he wanted help. He might be wounded, you know.”

“Well, if he is there’ll be plenty to help him. Soldiers are always comrades, and help one another. If he is wounded he won’t want a boy like you, so stop all that. I’m not going to stand here and let you argue me into a rage. You’ve got to come back and obey your father’s commands, instead of breaking his orders. I wonder at you, boy, that I do. Did this come out of your reading and writing?”

“Serge!” cried the boy. “I did try hard—so hard, you don’t know; but I couldn’t stay. I was obliged to come.”

“Won’t do, boy,” growled the old soldier, frowning. “Orders are orders, and one has to obey them whether one likes ‘em or whether one don’t. Ready?”

“No, Serge, no, I’m not ready,” pleaded the boy. “It is too late. I can’t go back.”

“Too late? Not a bit. Now then: come on.”

“I cannot, Serge. I must—I will go on now.”

“You mustn’t, sir, and you will not,” cried the old soldier, sternly. “Now then, no nonsense; come on.”

“No, no, Serge. Pray, pray take my side. It is to be with my father; can’t you see?”

“No, boy; I’m blind when it comes to orders.”

“Oh, Serge, have you no mercy?” cried Marcus, piteously.

“Not a bit, boy. Now then, once more, come on.”

“I cannot,” cried Marcus, passionately.

“Then I’m going to make you.”

“What!”

“I’m going to carry you, heavy as you’ll be, and long as it will make the road. But I’ve got it to do, and, if it takes me a month, I’m going to make you obey your father’s orders, sir, and stop at home.”

As he spoke Serge swung his shield between his shoulders, pressed his sheathed sword a little more round to his side, and with a sharp dig made his spear stand up in the earth.

"Now then," he cried, and he caught Marcus by the wrists, and a struggle seemed to be imminent.

"Serge!" cried Marcus, angrily.

"Your orders were to stay at home, sir, and home you go," cried the old soldier. "If you will be carried back like a scrap of a little child, why, carried you shall be. So give up. I'm twice as strong as you, and it's your father's commands."

"Hah!" cried Marcus, ceasing his struggles on the instant, and leaving his wrists tightly clasped in the old soldier's hands.

"Well, what are you 'hah-ing' about?" cried Serge, as he noted the suddenly triumphant tones of the boy's voice.

"I was thinking about my father's orders," cried Marcus, in a state of wild excitement now.

"Good boy; and quite time. Pity you didn't think more of 'em and much sooner. Then you're going to mind me without more fuss, and come home like a good boy now?"

"No," cried Marcus, fiercely. "I am going on to my father. I will not stir a step backward now."

"What!" cried Serge, as fiercely now, for the old man was roused by the boy's obstinacy. "You won't obey?"

"No," cried Marcus, catching his companion by the top of his breast armour. "It's my turn now. Look here, sir; you talk about my father's commands."

"Yes, boy, I do," roared the old soldier, looking as fierce now as one of the campagna bulls, whose bellow he seemed to emulate, "and I'll make you obey them too."

"Commands—obey—when I'm only going to join him?"

"Yes, that's it, my lad. So now then!"

"Yes," cried Marcus, giving his companion a fierce thrust which forced him a little back so that he caught his heels against a projecting stone, and as he tried to recover himself was brought down by Marcus upon his knees. "Hah!" he cried. "I've got you! What have you got to say about my father's orders? What are you doing here?"

Chapter Fourteen.

Coming to Terms.

Serge was in the act of gathering himself together so as to spring up and catch his prisoner by the arms, but, as the boy questioned him sharply he sank a little lower upon his knees, and, as if all the strength had been suddenly discharged from within him, he said in quite a different tone of voice:

"What am I doing here?"

"Yes, sir," cried Marcus, forcing him a little more back, and fixing him with his eyes, "what are *you* doing here?"

"Well, I—er—I—I'm here to take you back."

"You old shuffler!" cried Marcus, in a rage. "I can see through you. My father's orders, indeed! What were his orders to *you*, sir? Weren't they to stop and take care of his house and belongings, and of me?"

"Well, they was something like that," growled the man, softly; "but don't drive your knuckles into my throat like that, my lad. You hurt."

"Hurt! Yes, and you deserve it," cried Marcus, growing stronger in his attack upon the old servant as the latter grew more confused and weak. "So this is the way you obey my father's commands. You took upon yourself to go into his room and help yourself to the armour you have on. Confess, you did; didn't you?"

"Well, if it comes to that, Master Marcus," grumbled the man, "it was my armour, and wouldn't fit no one else."

"That's shuffling again, Serge, and it's no good. You took the armour, unknown to my father?"

"Course I did, my lad," cried the man, recovering himself a little. "He wasn't there, was he?"

"Pah!" ejaculated Marcus. "More shuffling. Now then, confess: you took the armour and disobeyed the orders given you. What is more, you forsook me and left me to myself. Speak out; you did, didn't you?"

"Well, I s'pose it's o' no use to deny it, Master Marcus. I s'pose I did."

"And in direct opposition to my father's orders you were going to follow him to the war?"

"That's right, Master Marcus, but how could I help it? Could I let him, as I'd followed into many a fight, go off to meet

those savage Gauls without me at his back to stand by him as I've done many and many a time before?"

"You disobeyed him, sir," cried Marcus.

"Well, boy, I own up," growled the man; "but I meant to do it for the best. How could I stop at home nussing you like a baby and thinking all the while that my old master was going about with swords and spears offering at his throat? How could I do it, Master Marcus? Don't be so hard on a man. It wasn't to be done."

"And yet you were as hard as iron to me, sir," cried Marcus.

"Well, didn't your father order me to be in the way of taking care of you? It was my duty."

"Was it?" cried Marcus. "Then now I'm going to do my duty to you, sir."

"What are you going to do, Master Marcus?" said Serge, quite humbled now.

"Make you go back to the old home and take care of it."

"Master never gave you orders to do that," cried the old soldier, triumphantly; "and now I'm started to follow him and fight for him, nobody shan't make me go; so there!"

Marcus and Serge remained gazing in one another's eyes, till at last the latter spoke.

"Look here, Master Marcus, I meant it for the best. Aren't you being a bit hard on me?"

"Look here, Serge," replied Marcus, "I meant it for the best. Weren't you a bit hard upon me?"

"I think not, Master Marcus, boy."

"And that's what I think, Serge."

"I couldn't see my dear old master go away alone into danger."

"And I couldn't see my dear old father go away alone into danger."

"Of course you couldn't, Master Marcus. I say, my lad, you know what I used to tell you about enemies doing when they come to a check like—what they settled was best."

"What, made a truce?" said Marcus.

"Yes, my lad. I should like one now, for that bruise you've made with your knuckles in my throat's quite big enough. It'll be black to-morrow."

"Get up, Serge," said Marcus, letting his hand fall.

"Thankye, my lad. I say, boy, I didn't think you were so strong."

"Didn't you, Serge?"

"No, boy. My word, it's just as if getting into your armour had stiffened you all over. My word, I wouldn't ha' believed that you could fight like you did this morning!"

"I felt hot and excited, Serge, and as if I could do anything."

"Didn't feel a bit scared like, though there was six of them?"

"No," said Marcus, thoughtfully; "I never thought anything about their numbers, only of saving you."

"Thinking all the time it was someone else, sir?"

"Yes, Serge; that was it."

"And you fought fine, sir. Seems to me it's a pity for a youngster like you to be stopping at home unrolling volumes and making scratches with a stylus."

"Does it, Serge?"

"Yes, sir, it do; and likewise it seems a pity that such a man as me, who can do his share of fighting, should be doing nothing better than driving the swine into the acorn woods."

"And looking after and protecting me, Serge," said Marcus, drily.

"Oh, yes, of course; there was that, of course, Master Marcus; but I say, sir, don't you think we've both talked enough for the present; I tackled you and you tackled me in a pretty tidy argument, and both on us had the best of it in turn. I'm beginning to think that there's good clear water coming down from the mountain yonder."

"Yes, Serge; it makes me feel thirsty after getting so hot."

"Then, too, I've got a nice loaf in my wallet and a tidy bit o' meat as I got from a little way back. What do you say to our making a bit o' breakfast together same as we've done before now in the woods?"

"And settle afterwards about whether we should go back, Serge?" said Marcus.

"Yes, my lad; that'll be the sensiblest thing to do."

"Yes," said Marcus, "you've talked about it, and it has made me feel very hungry now."

"Well, look here," said Serge, "we are about even, aren't we?"

"Even!" said Marcus, staring at the man. "Do you mean about both being hungry?"

"Nay-y-y-ay! About being wicked uns. You've done wrong, you know, and disobeyed orders."

"Yes," said Marcus, with a sigh.

"So have I. Well, we are both in disgrace, and that makes us even; so, of course, I can't bully you any more and you can't say ugly things to me. Fair play's the thing, isn't it?"

"Of course," cried Marcus.

"Well, then, as you've behaved uncommon fine in tackling those rough ones, and saved my life—"

"Oh no," said Marcus, modestly.

"But I say, oh yes. Don't you talk to me. They'd have killed me dead, stripped off everything that was worth taking, and then left my body to the wolves."

Marcus recalled the words of the speaker of his wandering away up the mountains to lie down and die, and he felt ready to say: "Well, that would have suited you;" but he thought it better not, and held his tongue.

"As I said before, you have behaved uncommonly well over that, so I'll forgive you for running away, and shake hands, if you'll agree to say nothing more about it to me."

"Oh, very well," cried Marcus. "I don't feel that I can say any more to you."

"Then I won't to you, my lad, and there's my hand on it. Only mind this," cried Serge, as they stood with their hands clasped, "this is only me, you know. I lose my place of looking after you, according to the master's orders, by forsaking my post and going after him, so I aren't no longer holding your rein, as you may say. What I mean is this—I forgive you, but I am not going to answer for what your father will say."

"Oh, of course not," cried Marcus. "We have both got to face that."

"Yes, my lad," said the old soldier, sourly, "and a nice hard time it's going to be. I daren't think about it, but keep on putting it off till it comes. That'll be time enough. So now then, you and me's going to be friends, and try to help one another out of the mud. That is, unless you think we'd better go back home together."

"Oh, no, no," cried Marcus. "Impossible! We must go on now."

"Yes," said Serge, bluntly. "Then it's vittles."

"Vittles?" said Marcus, staring.

"Yes. Don't you know what vittles are? Didn't you say you was hungry?"

"Oh!" cried Marcus.

"Have you got anything?"

"Scarcely anything," replied Marcus.

"Yah! And after all the pains I took with you! Didn't I always say that an army on the march must always look well after its foraging? No commander can expect his men to behave better than a bottle."

"Look here, Serge," cried Marcus, laughing, "why don't you speak out plainly what you mean? What have men got to do with bottles?"

"Oh, a good deal sometimes," said the man, chuckling. "But that's only my way. You can't hold a bottle up, no matter whether it's a goat-skin or one of them big jars made of clay, and expect to pour something out of it if you haven't first put something in?"

"No, of course not," said Marcus, who was busy polishing the point of his spear with a tuft of dried grass.

"Well, men's the same as bottles; if you don't give them plenty to eat and drink you can't get plenty of fighting out of them. Always see to your foraging when you are on the march. I always do, and I have got something ready for us both now. But look here, my lad, this isn't at home, and I'm not going to drive out the swine, and you are not going to your wax table. We are soldiering now, and whether it's two thousand or only two, things are just the same. We have got to keep a sharp look-out for the enemy."

"You didn't," said Marcus, quickly, "or you would have seen me following you."

"That's right," said Serge, "and it was because I could think of nothing else but about being such a bad un as I was and forsaking my post. I dursen't look back either, for fear that I should see someone following me. But that's all over now; you and me's joined forces, and we must go on straight. I don't think it's necessary, but we will just take a look round for danger before we sit down to enjoy our breakfast."

"Enjoy?" said Marcus, dubiously.

"Yes, that's right. We shall both have company over it. It's been precious dull to me, being all alone. So now then; take the lead, captain, and give the orders to advance for a scout all round before we sit down to our meal."

"Very well, then," cried Marcus. "Forward! This way first."

"Yes, but that's too much of it," said the old soldier. "A commanding officer don't make speeches to his men 'cept when he's going into action, and not always then. What you ought to have said was just 'forward!' and then advanced with your troops to follow you."

Marcus nodded and smiled, and, side by side and spear in hand, they climbed to the highest ground, carefully surveying their surroundings of wood and rock—every place, in fact, likely to give harbour to an enemy, till all at once Marcus threw out his left arm across his companion's breast, and, stopping short, stood pointing with his spear to something half hidden behind a patch of bushes upon the other side of the stream.

Serge sheltered his eyes on the instant, and gave a satisfied nod.

"Right, captain," he whispered; "but your force isn't strong enough to surround the enemy. You must advance in line. It's an ambuscade."

The half-concealed figure was nearly a hundred yards away, and, by the time they had covered half the distance, Marcus' keen young eyes sent a message to his brain, and he whispered to his companion in an awe-stricken voice:

"It's that wounded man. He has lain down to die."

The old soldier uttered a low grunt, and sheltered his eyes again.

"Looks like it," he said, "but we had best make sure. Tell your men to level their spears and advance at a run. Dead men are dangerous sometimes."

Recalling the lesson he had just received, Marcus lowered his spear and uttered the one word:

"Advance!"

They broke into a sharp trot, straight for the horrible-looking, stiffened figure which lay crouched together in an unnatural attitude just behind a bush; but, before they were half way, there was a quick movement, a sharp rustling of leaves, and the dead man had sprung up and was running as swiftly as a deer.

Marcus stared in astonishment, looking so surprised that Serge lowered the butt of his spear and rested upon its shaft in his familiar home attitude when the staff he carried was terminated by a crook instead of a keenly-pointed blade.

"There, you see, my lad. That's the sort of dead man you have got to beware of after a fight. They are a very dangerous sort; like that fellow, they are crippled a bit, but they won't stop to be buried. They don't like the idea. What they do is to play sham till their enemy has marched by 'em, thinking they are real, and then when some poor fellow is looking forward, one of them dead barbarians lets him have it in the back. There, we will go and sit up on the top there, and I'll lean up against your back, and you shall lean up against mine while we eat our breakfast and are busy with our teeth, and leave our four eyes to play watchful sentry till we've done."

Marcus felt quite willing now that the excitement caused by the flying foe was at an end, and, soon after, Serge's little store was drawn upon, and, quite happy and contented, the two old companions made what Marcus thought was the most appetising breakfast he had ever had in his life.

"Hah!" cried Serge, as they rose at last. "Now let's go down to the stream for a drink. Always camp, my lad, beside a river or a lake; and if you can't—" He stopped short.

"Well, if you can't?" said Marcus.

"Why, then you must go thirsty, same as you must go hungry too sometimes. Didn't I always teach you that a soldier's first duty was to learn how to fast?"

"Oh, yes, I remember," said Marcus, as he lay down to drink, while his companion watched, and then drank in turn, rising to say, as he drew a long, deep breath:

"There, that's as much as I want now. Nice clear water, and we've left plenty for the next as comes. But a deal of trouble I used to have in the face of plenty to make you believe it was a soldier's duty to learn how to fast. You always were the hungriest boy I ever knew."

Marcus laughed, and looked wonderingly at his companion, who now stood up stiffly with his hands resting upon his spear.

"Well, Serge, what now?" cried Marcus.

"Only waiting, captain. Orders to advance."

"Forward!" cried Marcus; and, the next minute, with eyes eagerly scanning the track in front, they were marching together side by side on the way to Rome.

Chapter Fifteen.

Wearing Armour.

It was some hours afterwards, when the sun was beating down hotly, that Serge suggested that they should have half an hour's rest in the shade of a clump of huge, spiral-barked chestnuts, whose dark, glossy-green leaves were spread over a bend of the track which had evidently been slightly diverted so that those who followed it might take advantage of the shade.

The trees were approached cautiously, and the pair scouted round the clump to make sure it was untenanted before they stretched themselves amongst the mossy, radiating roots that spread far and wide.

"There seem to have been plenty of people here," said Marcus, pointing to where the soft, moist earth was full of imprints. "There have been wheeled carriages here."

"Yes," grunted Serge. "Those are ox waggons. See?"

"Yes," said Marcus. "But those others are different."

"Yes," said Serge. "Chariot wheels, those."

"How do you know?" said Marcus, sharply.

"Look at 'em," grunted the old soldier. "Can't you see they are light? They are made to gallop. Those others were made to crawl. Why, it's printed all about that they were chariot wheels. Look at the marks of the horses' hoofs."

"Oh yes, I see," cried Marcus. "The waggons show nothing but the feet of oxen. But how come there to be chariot wheels about here?"

"How did that Roman general, Caius Julius, come to the farm?"

"I don't know," said Marcus, starting. "I never thought of that."

"I did," said Serge, with a grunt which might have been copied from one of the swine he had so often driven.

"How did he come?" cried Marcus.

"Same way as he went back to Rome."

"Of course," cried the boy, impatiently. "But how was that?"

"With chariots and horsemen."

"Are you sure? I saw none."

"Didn't go down to the village to look?"

"No; I had too much to think of."

"So had I," said Serge; "but I went and looked all the same. There was a grand chariot and a lot of horsemen, and it was in that chariot that, after walking down to the village, the master went away."

"Oh, then they must be far ahead," cried Marcus.

"Yes; at Rome before now."

"And I have been expecting that we might come upon them at any moment," said Marcus, with a sigh of relief. "Then we shan't see them till we get there?"

"And like enough not then," said Serge, with a grim smile; "so you may make yourself comfortable about this scolding that's got to come, for it won't be yet."

"But we shall see my father as soon as we get to the army."

"Some time perhaps," said Serge; "but the army will be miles long perhaps on the march, and it's hard work, boy, to find one in a hundred thousand men."

"Then we may not find him!" cried Marcus, in an agonised tone.

"Well, no, my lad, but you may make your mind happy about that. One man's not bound to find his general, but his general's pretty sure to find him, or the legion he is in. There, don't you fidget about that. If you and me hadn't done any harm we should be pretty safe, but so sure as one does what one ought not to do, one may make up one's mind that he'll be found out."

The rest was pleasant, but Marcus did not feel so satisfied in his own mind when they started once again on the tramp.

It was on the evening of a hot and wearying day that Marcus sat in a shady grove, gladly resting, while Serge was relieving him of his armour and carefully hanging it piece by piece from, one or other of the branches by which they were surrounded.

“Grand thing, armour,” said the old soldier, as he watched the tired boy from the corners of his eyes.

Marcus started from a waking dream of Rome and its glories as he pictured it in his own mind.

“Oh yes,” he said, hastily; “glorious!”

“Nice and bright and shining, and makes a man seem worth looking at when it’s on, eh?”

“Yes,” said Marcus, with a faint sigh.

“How proud you felt when you’d got yours; eh, my lad?”

“Yes, very,” said Marcus.

“Nice dress to walk in.”

“But it’s rather heavy in this hot weather,” ventured Marcus.

“Heavy, boy? Why, of course it is. If it wasn’t heavy the barbarians’ swords and spears would go through it as if it was sheep skin. But yours fits you beautifully, and will for ever so long yet—if you don’t grow,” added the man, slyly.

Marcus turned upon him peevishly.

“Well, I can’t help growing, can I?” he cried.

“Oh no, boy; course you can’t till you’ve done growing, and then you won’t grow any more.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” snapped out the boy.

“No. Oh no; but what’s the matter with your shoulder?”

“Nothing much,” said Marcus, sourly. “Those shoulder straps rub that one, and the back part frets my neck.”

“Does it? That’s bad; but I’ll put that right when you put it on in the morning. Don’t you mind about that: after a bit your skin’ll get hard, and what feels to worry and rub you will be soft as a duck’s breast.”

“Nonsense! How can bronze and brass get to be soft as feathers, Serge?”

“Oh, I dunno, my lad,” replied the old soldier, slowly, “but it do. I suppose,” he added, mockingly, “you get so much glory on your shoulders that it pads you out and makes your armour fit like wax. It is heavy, though, at first. Mine worried me the first day, because I hadn’t worn it for years; but it sits lovely now, and I could run and jump and do anything. Helmet too did feel a bit lumpy; but I felt it more in my toes than on my head.”

“Are you laughing at me, Serge?” cried Marcus, turning upon the man, sharply.

“Can’t you see I’m not, boy? Why, I’m as serious as a centurion with a new command.”

“But do you think I’m going to believe that you felt your heavy helmet in your toes?”

“Of course I do, boy,” said the man, chuckling. “If it’s heavy, don’t the weight go right down to the bottom and drive your toes hard to the very end of your sandals?”

“I didn’t think of that, Serge,” said the boy, a trifle less irritably.

“S’pose not, boy. You haven’t got to the end of everything that there is to know. Besides, your helmet is light.”

“Light?” cried Marcus, bitterly.

“Well, of course it aren’t as light as a straw hat as you can tilt off every time you come into the shade, and let it hang between your shoulders, same as you do your shield.”

“And I suppose that is?” said Marcus, sharply.

“What, as a straw hat, boy? Well, I don’t say that,” said Serge, drily, “because it do weigh a tidy bit. But that helmet of yours, as I took care should be just right for a boy, is too light altogether.”

“Bah!” cried Marcus. “Why, it has made my forehead and the back just behind my ears as sore as sore.”

“Pooh! That isn’t because the helmet’s too heavy; it’s on account of your head being so soft and green. It’ll be hard enough before the end of this war. Why, if it were lighter, every crack you got in your first fight would make it give way like an eggshell; and then where would you be, my lad? Come, come, cheer up! You’re a bit tired with this tramp—the first big one you’ve had. You’ll be better in the morning, and before this time to-morrow night I dare say we shall be in sight of Rome and its hills and the Tiber, and, take my word for it, you won’t feel tired then.”

“Think not. Serge?”

“Sure of it, boy. Man who’s a bit worn out feels as if everything’s wrong, and the flies that come buzzing about seem to be as big as crows; but after a good sleep when the sun rises again to make everything look bright, he sees clearer; the flies don’t seem to buzz, only hum pleasant like, and what there is of them is golden-green and shiny, and not a bit bigger than a fly should be.”

“But I’m disappointed, Serge. I hoped to see my father as soon as I reached Rome, and get this trouble off my mind.”

“Instead of which it has to wait. Well, never mind, lad. It will be easier perhaps then. Now then, you do as I say: lie down at once close up there to that dry, sandy bit, and sleep as hard as you can till morning. Then we’ll set off and get to Rome as soon as we can, and hear about the army and which way it has gone.”

“Perhaps it will not have started yet?” said Marcus, eagerly.

“Like as not, my lad, but, if it has, we can follow it up. Now then, be sharp, for I want to lie down too. We shall be fresh as the field flowers in the morning, for no one is likely to disturb us here.”

Marcus said nothing, for he knew that the old soldier’s words were meant to encourage him, and he thought so more than ever, as, free now from his heavy armour, he lay looking upward, listening to the faint hum of beetles and seeing the glint of the stars through the trees, while he thought of their journey and the disappointment he felt over Serge’s words, while it seemed to him all a part of his thinking instead of a dream—a confused dream when he fancied himself back at the old house seeking for Serge and finding the dog crouched down in the shed where the great stone cistern stood, and in the harvest time the grapes were trodden, those grown in their little vineyard and those from the neighbouring farms where there was no convenience of the kind.

But as he was about to turn away and fasten the door, it seemed strange that the place should be lit up by sunshine coming aslant through the trees, when it was late in the evening and dark. But so it was, with Lupe couching down, making no attempt to follow or pass him as he closed the door, but resting his long, fierce-looking jaws upon his extended paws, till, after trying hard to puzzle out why it was so, Marcus came fully to his waking senses and sat up suddenly, while Lupe followed his example, to burst out into a deep, joyous bark.

“What!” now came in a deep voice from behind Marcus. “Why, Lupe, dog, have you found your way here?”

Chapter Sixteen.

The New Recruit.

The dog had been lying for hours watching the sleepers, who had lain perfectly unconscious of the presence of such a sentry and guardian, while he had crouched there with his muzzle almost touching Marcus’ breast, pricking up his ears at the slightest sound made by some nocturnal food-seeking creature, and uttering a low sigh of content as he settled himself down again.

Several times over he had heard some sound which he could not understand, and upon these occasions he sprang up, smothering the low growl that tried for exit, and seeming to understand the necessity for caution, he began to reconnoitre in the direction from which the suspicious noise had come.

Had anybody been there to watch the dog, what they had seen would have excited wonder at the amount of reason that the animal displayed; not that Lupe, big wolf-hound, one of the kind kept by the peasantry in the far-back past for the protection of their flocks, was anything exceptional, for plenty of dogs at the present time are ready to display an instinct that is almost human.

Point out some very human act, and there are plenty who will tell you either that it is the result of teaching, or that it has come naturally from the dog’s long continued intercourse with man. One ventures to think that it is something more than teaching that makes a shut-out dog wait till he sees what he considers to be a suitable stranger whom he has never seen before, and then trot up to him and begin to gambol and lead him on till the gate or door is reached, stopping short then and saying as plainly as a dog can speak in barks—not the most expressive language in the world—Open it and let me in.

Lupe was evidently a dog that could reason in his way, and attributing two of these interruptions of the night to the presence of wolves that had come prowling down from the hills, he set off cautiously, with the thick, dense hair bristling up about his neck, his armour against his deadly enemy’s teeth, and his black gums retiring to display his trap-like jaws full of glistening ivory teeth. And all the time, in spite of his efforts, there was a low, deep sound like young thunder rumbling somewhere in his chest.

But in each case, before he had gone far, Lupe’s reason told him that his natural enemies did not come prowling down from the mountains during the soft summer nights, but waited till their hunger was sharpened by the frosts of winter, and that he was over-anxious regarding the safety of those he had come so far to find, judging rightly that the sounds he had heard and magnified were only caused by some innocent little animal which did not smell in the least like a wolf. So he trotted slowly back, making sounds suggestive of mutterings against his own stupidity, and dropped quietly down once more to watch.

“Why, Serge,” cried Marcus, “how could that dog manage to find us all this distance from home?”

“I dunno,” said the old soldier, stooping down to caress the savage-looking beast in his customary way, which was to bang him heavily on both shoulders with his great, horny hand, the blows given being such as would have made an

ordinary dog howl; but their effect upon Lupe was to make him half close his eyes, open his wide jaws, and loll out his long, lambent tongue, which curled up at the end; and, as it quivered in the fresh morning light, he rolled over upon his back and began patting playfully at Serge's hand.

"Don't knock him about like that, Serge," cried Marcus.

"Knock him about?" cried the old soldier. "Why, he likes it; it loosens his skin and makes it fit easy, and knocks out the dust. How did he manage to find his way here? Ask him. I dunno. I left him at home, yelping about and uneasy like, looking as if he'd like to go at the general and tear his toga off his back."

"I left him," cried Marcus, "hunting all over the place to find you. He came twice over into my room, whining and asking me where you were."

"Did he?" cried Serge. "Good old dog!" And he gave the animal a few more of his tender caresses, with the result that the dog wriggled himself along snake-like fashion upon his spine, and then made a playful dab at his friend's hand.

"I found him at last," continued Marcus, "in the press-house, and when I came away I shut him up."

"What, to starve?"

"No, no; I thought he would howl till someone came and let him out; but I didn't want him to follow me. Someone must have let him out in the morning."

"Oh, I don't know," said Serge, who began replacing his armour. "He'd have got out somehow, through the window or roof."

"He couldn't," cried Marcus.

"Think not? Then he'd have scratched a way for himself under the door."

"Well, but then?"

"Oh, then—he'd have stood and smelt about till he'd got hold of our scent, and then come on."

"What, all this way and all this time? The scent couldn't have lain so long."

"It never seems to me that there's any scent at all," said Serge, "but old Lupe there somehow seems to do it. He *is* a dog, and no mistake. Why, he's lost himself time after time going after the wolves when I have been out hunting, and it has seemed to me that I should never find him again. Why, you know, he's been away sometimes for days, but he's always found his way back. Well, now then, give yourself your orders to get ready to march, and let's get on to Rome."

"Yes, of course," cried Marcus.

"But how do you feel, lad? You seemed ready to knock up last night, tired out."

"Did I?" cried Marcus, flushing slightly.

"Did yer? Why, you seemed sore all over, whining about your armour and your helmet."

"Oh, nonsense!" cried the boy, as he hastily followed his companion's lead, handily buckling and securing his defensive armour the while. "We had had a very long march, and it was as hot as could be. I feel quite fresh this morning."

"Ready for anything, eh? Well, what about this chap?"

"Lupe?"

"Yes; we don't want him. The general won't want him to join."

"No-o," said Marcus, thoughtfully, as he stooped to pat the dog's head, a favour which Lupe responded to by leaning himself as hard as he could against his young master's legs. "I should like to have him with us, Serge."

"So should I, boy, if it comes to that. He'd have been splendid with us, and saved us scouting when those rough uns were hanging round. Why, if I had had him with me when those six came on they would have been no worse than three, and I shouldn't have wanted you."

"Yes," said Marcus, thoughtfully, "I should like to keep him with us, but I'm afraid we shall have to send him away."

"Send him away!" cried Serge. "You may try to send, but he won't go. We can't take him with us," continued the man, drily, "and it looks to me as if we shall have to make an end of him and hang him on the nearest tree."

"What!" cried Marcus with a look of horror. "You wouldn't be such a brute?"

"No," said Serge, slowly, "I suppose I wouldn't; but what are we to do? The first captain that we speak to when we get to the army and ask him to let us join his lot will shake his head at us if we bring a dog."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Marcus, thoughtfully.

"But look here, we wouldn't bring him. We didn't bring him. He came. The country's free for all, and if he chooses to follow us we are not to blame."

"Well, that's right. Are you nearly ready?"

"Yes," said Marcus, taking his helmet from where it rested in the fork of a young tree, and lowering it slowly upon his head.

"Does it hurt?" said Serge.

"Oh no, it feels quite comfortable now. Why?"

"Because you put it on as if it were red hot. But give the word 'forward,' captain, and let's march. The first farm or house we come to we must halt and forage. My wallet's empty, and we want something very much better than water for our next meal."

"Forward, then!" cried Marcus, and the dog responded with a volley of his deep barking, and bounded off before them, old Serge smiling grimly the while.

"Got his nose straight for Rome," he said, with a laugh. "Why, if I was a general, Master Marcus, and going to lead our armies against the barbarians as won't let us alone but keep on attacking and wanting to come to plunder the riches of the place, and carry the Roman people off as slaves, do you know what I'd do?"

"Beat them and drive them back, and make them slaves instead," replied Marcus.

"Ah, but besides that, my lad, I'd get together an army of dogs like our Lupe, and set them to work to tear 'em down and chase 'em away."

"Oh, barbarous!" cried Marcus, laughing.

"Barbarous! Aren't they barbarians? Why, I don't believe you could manage it in a better way."

Chapter Seventeen.

Too Late.

It was the beginning of a tramp that lasted days.

Rome had been soon reached, but they were too late to witness the turmoil of excitement that had preceded and accompanied the departure of the last division of the army which, Marcus and his companion gathered from a group of invalided soldiers left behind, had been tarrying and awaiting the return of Caius Julius to assume the supreme command. He, they were told, had been away upon a mission to claim the assistance of some great general who was supposed to be an old friend full of wisdom; and he, they told Serge, had been brought in triumph to the city, to place himself with Julius at the head of the waiting men.

"You should have been here then," said one old man, "and seen the welcome they had from our gallant boys and the women who crowded the streets waiting to see them go. Ah, it made the tears come into my old eyes to think that I should be left behind."

"Then why were you left behind?" growled Serge. "You are not an older man than I."

"No," said the old soldier, laughing softly, "but you have two legs to march on. I have only one and this stick."

Marcus glanced sharply down at the speaker, and, seeing the boy's intention, the old fellow laughed again.

"Oh, yes, you are thinking I lie. There's two of them, my lad, and one's as good a leg as ever stepped; but as for the other, it's years ago now, when I was with Julius, and I got a swoop from a Gallic sword; the savage ducked down as I struck at him, and brought his blade round to catch me just above the heel. But he never made another blow," continued the old man, grimly. "My short, sharp sword took him in the chest, and he never hurt a Roman again."

"But you got over your wound?" cried Marcus, eagerly.

"It soon healed up, my lad, but he had cut through the tendon, and I was never fit to march again, or I shouldn't be talking to you here. But look here, old fellow, you were ready enough to twit me about not being with the army. Why are you not there?"

"Can't you see we are too late?" growled Serge, angrily.

"Oh yes, that's plain enough," said the old man, maliciously, as he rested upon his staff, "and some great fighting men who win great battles with their tongues are always too late to strike a blow. How is it you are late like that?"

"Oh, that's what you want to know, is it?" said Serge, surlily.

"Yes," said the old man. "A man with legs like yours ought to have been there."

"Well, I'll tell you," said Serge. "It was like this. My chariot had gone to have new wheels. But perhaps I might have made the old ones do. But both my chariot horses were down with a sort of fever. Then the driver had gone away to

get married and couldn't be found, and so I had to walk. And now you know."

"Bah!" cried the old man. "Look at your rough hands! You have been like me. You never had a chariot or horses of your own. You're only a working man. All lies."

"Every word of it," said Serge, grinning, "'cept that it's true about me and the youngster here having to walk like our dog. But we want to get there, brother, as soon as we can, so put us on our way to overtake the army, or by a short track to cut it off."

"Do you mean it?" said the old soldier.

"Mean it? Of course!" cried Marcus, excitedly. "The division, mind, that's led by Caius Julius."

"Ho, ho, my young cockerel!" cried the old man. "Then nothing will do for you but the best?"

"Nothing," cried Marcus, eagerly. "We want to be where that great general is that Julius went to seek. Now put us on the way."

"That's easily done," cried the old man. "There's a troop of horse that sets off to-night to follow the rear-guard, and they'll have chariots with them too. Go and see if you can get along with them. You've no horses, but you might run beside the chariots, and their drivers, as soon as they see there's stuff in you and that you want to fight, will give you a lift from time to time."

"Run beside the chariots, eh?" said Serge, with a laugh, as he glanced at Marcus. "Running would suit you better, my lad, than it would me. I've got a deal more flesh to carry than you have, and running is not good in armour with a big helmet on your head. You'd have something to grumble at about feeling sore, or I'm mistaken. But never mind; we want to get there, don't we?"

"Oh yes, we must get on," cried Marcus, "and if we can't run we can walk."

"What I was going to say," cried Serge, "so put us on the right way, old comrade," he continued, to the old cripple, "and you shan't want for something to pay for to-morrow; eh, Marcus, my lad?"

"Oh no," cried the boy, thrusting his hand into his pouch; but Serge clapped a hand upon his arm.

"Wait a bit, boy," he said. "Don't pay for your work until it is done."

A short time before, weary with their long tramp, the disappointment of finding that they were quite left behind had made the future look blank and dismal. But the old cripple's words seemed to bring the sun out again, and he hobbled along by their side through street after street, chattering volubly about his old experiences with the army and his disappointment now in seeing the sturdy warriors march off, legion after legion, leaving him behind.

"Ah," he said, "it's lucky to be you, able to go, and luckier still for you to have met me who can lead you to the place where the last party are camping."

"Where's that?" said Marcus, sharply, for the man seemed to be taking them a very devious course.

"Just outside the gate, over yonder. There, you can see the wall, and in a few minutes we shall be there."

The old soldier's words proved to be quite true, as, at the end of a few minutes, he led them to the little camp, all astir with the soldiery preparing to start—horsemen, chariots, baggage, horses and camp followers, all were there, with the leaders fuming and fretting about making the last preparations, and eager to make the start.

The old soldier gave his new friends a nudge of the elbow and a very knowing look.

"I know what to do," he said. "You leave it to me. I wasn't in a marching army for years without learning something. Yonder is a big captain, there by that standard. Nothing like going to the top at once. Come along."

The old cripple drew himself up as well as he could, and, thumping his stick heavily down, led the way to the fierce-looking captain, whose face looked scarlet with anger and excitement.

"Here, captain," cried the old man.

The officer turned upon him angrily.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" he roared.

The old man pointed to Marcus and Serge.

"Two brave fighting men," he cried; "volunteers, well-armed and trained, who want to join."

"Oh, I've all I want," cried the captain, roughly, "and—" He stopped short, for, as he spoke, he ran his eyes over the two strangers, resting them longest upon Serge, and he hesitated.

"Here, you," he said, as he noted the way in which Marcus' companion was caparisoned, "you've been in the army before?"

"Years, captain," cried Serge, with military promptness. "I served with Cracis and Julius in the old war."

"Hah! You'll do," cried the captain. "But I don't want boys."

Marcus' spirits had been rising to the highest point, but the contemptuous tone in which these words were uttered dashed his hopes to the ground, and he listened despairingly as in imagination he saw himself rudely separated from his companion and left behind.

The thoughts were instantaneous, and he was consoling himself with the reflection that Serge would not forsake him, and anticipating the old soldier's words, as Serge turned sharply upon his new commander.

"Boys grow into men, captain," he said, sharply, "and I've trained this one myself. He can handle a sword and spear better than I."

"Hah!" cried the captain, as he looked critically at Marcus, examining him from top to toe, whilst, as if for no reason whatever, he slowly drew his sword, while Marcus, who stood spear in hand and shield before him, in the attitude he had been taught by Serge, quivered beneath the captain's searching eye.

"Trained him yourself, have you?"

"Yes, captain—well."

"He can use his weapons?"

"Yes, captain."

To the astonishment of both Serge and Marcus, and as if without the slightest reason, the big, burly, war-like captain made one step forward and with it like lightning he struck a blow with his sword right at the comb of Marcus' helmet, such a one as would have, had it been intended, brought the boy to his knees.

But Serge had spoken truth when he said that he trained Marcus well, for, quicker in his action than the deliverer of the blow, Marcus had thrown up his shield-bearing left arm, there was a loud clang upon its metal guards as he received the sword blow, and, the next moment, the captain drew back as sharply as he had advanced, to avoid the boy's short spear, directed at his throat.

"Good!" he cried. "Well done, boy!" And he began to sheath his sword. "Your teacher, an old hand, no doubt, could not have done better. Why, boy," he continued, "you are a soldier, every inch," and he grasped the lad by both arms. "But this won't do; you must lay on muscle here, and thicken and deepen in the chest. That helmet's too heavy for you too. Yes, you are quite a boy—a brave one, no doubt, and well-trained; but you are too young and slight to stand the hardships of a rough campaign. I should like to take you, but I want men—strong men like your companion here—and I should be wronging your parents if I took you. Whose son are you, boy?"

"My father is Cracis, sir, a friend of Caius Julius, and he is at the front."

"Ha!" cried the officer, looking at him searchingly. "Then why are you at the rear?"

Marcus' spirits had been rising again, and his eyes were sparkling, lit up as they were by hope; but at that question down they went directly to the lowest point.

He tried hard to look firmly in the captain's face, but his eyes would blench. He tried to speak, but he could not answer, and he stood quivering in every nerve, shamefaced and humbled, while his trouble increased and he turned his eyes upon Serge, looking appealingly at him for help, as the big officer suddenly exclaimed, as he caught him by the shoulder:

"Why, you young dog, it's all written in your face! You've run away! Ha-ha! I don't mean from the fight, but to it. Let me see. Am I right? You being a trained young soldier, wanted to go with your father to the war, and he told you to stay at home. You've run away to follow him. Am I right?"

Marcus looked at him firmly now. There was no shrinking in his eyes, for he was uttering the truth.

"Yes, sir," he said, huskily; "quite right."

"Well, but I say, captain," growled Serge, "that's all true enough, every word. But the boy aren't a bit worse than me. The master said I was to stop at home and mind him and the swine and things about the farm; but I couldn't do it with the smell of battle in the air, being an old soldier, don't you see, and the master gone to lead. I felt like the boy did, ashamed to stop and let one's armour rust when Rome's enemies were waiting to be beaten. I felt obliged to come, and so did young Marcus here. A brave boy, captain, so don't be hard."

"Hah!" cried the captain, frowning severely. "A nice pair, both of you! It isn't likely, but how could I meet Cracis or Julius by and by if I took you into my following?"

"Oh, we'd keep out of sight, captain," growled Serge.

The captain pointed mockingly at Marcus.

"He doesn't look much like a boy who'd keep out of sight, old warrior," he said. "Far more likely to thrust himself into the front with all the unbalanced rashness of a boy. A nice pair indeed! But I should like to have a thousand of you, all the same. No, I don't think I ought to take you, boy," he continued, slowly, with a very severe frown gathering on his forehead. "But look here; I don't like to stand in the light of one of Rome's brave sons, however young, at a time when our country needs their help. But tell me, boy; if I say to you, go back home and wait a year or two till you have

grown more of a man, you will go back at once, will you not?"

"Shall you tell Serge to go back too?" replied Marcus, sharply.

"Most certainly not," said the captain, laughing. "He has offered his services, and I have taken him. You will have to go home alone. Tell me, will you obey my orders?"

"No," said Marcus, firmly. "I am not going to forsake old Serge."

"You are a pretty fellow for a volunteer," cried the captain, merrily. "Ask me to take you into my following, and, at the first command I give you, tell me flat to my nose that you won't obey!"

"I'll do anything else you tell me, captain, but that," cried Marcus, quickly.

"Well, boy," said the captain. "But stop. What shall you do now?"

"Find my way to the army alone," said Marcus, quickly.

"You'd never do that, boy. The country ahead is in a state of war, and swarms with ruffians hanging about the heels of the army like wolves following a drove of sheep—worse, these, than the enemy. Boy, before many days had passed you'd be stripped of all your bravery, robbed for the sake of your weapons, and left dead or dying somewhere in the forest."

"I can fight, sir," said Marcus, proudly, "and my sword and spear are sharp."

"Yes, boy, and I should be sorry for the one or two who tried to stop your way. But wolves hunt in packs, and can pull the bravest down. Are you heeding what I say?"

Marcus nodded. He could not speak, but stood gazing at Serge, who had taken off his helmet and with a face full of perplexity was vigorously scratching at his grizzled head.

"Well, boy," continued the captain, "I have thought it over and I must do my duty, which is to send you back."

"Oh!" cried Marcus, and throwing his spear sharply into his left hand he held out his right to Serge.

"But if I do that duty," continued the captain, "it will be to expose you to greater risks amongst the marauders gathering everywhere now than if I take you with me."

"And you will let me come?" cried Marcus.

"I am obliged to, boy," said the captain, smiling, "for I can't help feeling that Cracis, if we meet, would blame me more for doing my duty than for letting you come. Here, old man, you shall not tramp after our horse to come in weary and distressed at every halt. I'll put the boy, as he is Cracis' son, in one of the chariots, one of the light ones drawn by Thracian horses. There are several with their drivers yonder that I have not yet manned. You as his spearman may accompany him, of course. There, boy, no thanks," continued the captain, sternly. "I have no time for more. Off with you to your place. One of my officers will see that all is right. What is that man? Away with you!" he shouted to the old crippled soldier, who had heard all and now hobbled forward to speak. But a couple of soldiers placed their spear shafts before him and drove him back.

But Marcus had seen, and sprang after him, dived under the spears and pressed a few coins into his hand before he was hurried away, babbling his thanks.

"I'd about given it up, Marcus, boy," said Serge just then. "Here, come along; here's a young captain waiting to show us where to go, and my word, talk about a piece of luck! I thought I was going to be taken away, never to see you again, and here we are. A chariot and pair with our own driver, and me to sit behind you and do nothing but tell you how to fight. Here, come along. Talk about a piece of luck! How old are you? Eighteen. Why, you'll be a general at the end of another week!"

Chapter Eighteen.

The Charioteer.

"I shall never be able to do it, Serge," said Marcus, nervously, as he stood with his old companion looking admiringly at a pair of fiery-looking little steeds harnessed to a low chariot just big enough to afford room for three.

The little pair were being held, stamping and covering their sides with the foam they champed from their bits, by a short, broad-shouldered, swarthy driver, who had his work to restrain the impatient little animals.

They were less in size than what would now be termed cobs, almost ponies, but beautifully formed, arched-necked and heavily maned and tailed, a pair that had excited admiration in the boy's eyes as soon as he saw the chariot to which he had been led. But they were almost wild, and ready to resent the buffets given by their driver with teeth and hoofs.

"A chariot to be proud of," Serge had growled in the boy's ear. "Why, a captain needn't wish for better. I don't know what the master will say when he sees you."

"Oh, don't talk about the meeting, Serge. I feel so excited," replied the boy, and then he added the words which head

this chapter.

“Never be able to do what?” cried the old soldier.

“Manage the chariot. It seems too much for me.”

“Tchah!” cried Serge. “Don’t want no managing. You’ve got your driver to take you where you tell him right at the enemy, when you get your orders to advance, and cut them up. You’ll stand there in front with your spear or javelin, and I shall sit behind ready with spare ones for you to throw when you are amongst the enemy, and stop anyone who tries to come up behind if he’s foolish enough. But I don’t hold with throwing javelins. It wants a lot of practice, and those who have practised most, when they are going at full gallop, are pretty well sure to miss. I should like for you to use your spear, and keep it tightly in your hand. It means closer quarters, but your thrusts are surer, and you do better work. Besides, you don’t lose your weapon.”

“But I feel it’s almost too much for me.”

“Then don’t feel at all,” said the old soldier. “Go and do what you’ve got to do along with the cavalry when you have got your orders, and don’t think at all. What you have got to do is to skirmish and drive the enemy, and what I have got to do is to mind they don’t skirmish and drive you. There, jump in boldly, and look as big as you can.”

“Nonsense! How am I to look big?”

“By opening your mouth, boy, and speaking loud. You are not afraid?”

“Oh no, I am not afraid,” cried Marcus.

“Then don’t let that little driver chap think you are,” whispered Serge. “Act like a captain. That little fellow is only your slave, but if you put on a scared look he’ll try to play the master. Unlucky for him if he does, for, if he don’t do what he’s told, I’ll crack him like I would a nut.”

There was no time for more conversation, for the little detachment under the captain’s command had already begun to advance; an order was brought to the cavalry, and the chariot driver appealed to Serge to come and stand at the horses’ heads for a moment while he took the reins.

Serge changed places with him directly, while the driver assumed the reins, the slight touch upon the ponies’ withers making them snort and plunge as much as Serge’s strong arms at their bits would allow.

Then a trumpet rang out, Serge joined his young master in the chariot, and in a few minutes the ponies had settled down into a steady progress at the rear of the column.

Exciting days followed, during which Marcus began to learn lessons of what it meant to advance into an enemy’s country, the necessity of being constantly on the alert, where everyone was unfriendly, and to loiter behind the main body meant being cut off, leaving the loiterer’s place in the column empty.

It was all new to Marcus, as those days passed on, and his captain followed exactly in the track of the army that had gone before, working his men hard, practising various evolutions, keeping them on the alert and ready for action at a moment’s notice.

It was on one of these occasions, many days after their start, that towards evening a halt was called just after the column had moved out from a narrow mountain ravine, such a place as had presented plenty of opportunities for the enemy, had they been near, to descend from one of the side gorges and attack, to the cutting off of the column.

And all this had necessitated careful scouting and watchfulness on the part of the leader. But at last it seemed as if they had ridden out into safety, a wide, open plain stretching before them, suitable for forming camp for the night, where there was no risk of ambush or surprise.

A murmur of satisfaction ran through the column as posts were set, fires lit, and the men began settling down. Marcus’ horses had given up a good deal of their wildness and begun to form a kind of friendship with Lupe, who had narrowly escaped execution, consequent upon the effect that he had had upon Marcus’ chariot pair, who, whenever he came near, had exhibited a frantic determination to tear off at full speed, and this generally where the ground was of the very roughest character and the destruction of the chariot would have been certain.

It had been a difficulty, but, like other difficulties better or worse, it had been mastered, and, instead of meeting his death, the constant training, through which the chariots and horsemen had passed, resulted in the above-named friendly feeling, and now, at an advance, the dog took his place just in front of the fiery little steeds and trotted before them, while when they halted, he took it as a matter of course that one or other of the beautiful little animals should stretch out its arched neck, nuzzle among his bristly hairs, and at times close its teeth upon the back of the dog’s neck and attempt to raise him from the ground.

“I should never have thought he would have stood it, my lad,” said Serge; “but he has found out it means friendly, or else he’d bark and let them have his teeth in turn.”

This was said as the sturdy driver was freeing the pair from their place on each side of the chariot pole and twisting up their traces, for night was falling fast, and the men’s fires were beginning to twinkle here and there.

“Tired, boy?” said the old soldier, who was carefully removing the dust from his armour.

“Horribly,” replied Marcus. “I want to lie down and sleep. Oh, how I can sleep to-night!”

The words had hardly passed his lips when there was the blare of a trumpet, followed by another and another, with the result that it seemed as if a nest of hornets had been disturbed, for a loud buzzing filled the darkening air, leaders' voices rose giving orders, and there was a murmur punctuated, so to speak, by the clinking of armour, the rattle of weapons against shields, and the whinnying and squealing of horses, accompanied by angry cries from those who were harnessing them again.

"And I was so tired, Serge," said Marcus, as he finished hurrying on his armour. "What does it mean?"

"An alarm or an advance; I can't say which, boy. But be smart. We may get our orders at any moment."

"I shall be ready directly. There, he has done harnessing the horses. Down, Lupe! Quiet! Keep away from their heads."

The dog crouched in front, just beyond the reach of one of the horses, waiting patiently for what was next to come.

"Ah, you are the best off, after all," said Marcus, "You just get up on all four legs, give yourself a shake, and you are ready for anything."

The dog looked up, gave the speaker a friendly growl, and then let his head rest again upon his extended paws, while Marcus walked to the side of his chariot horses to pat and caress their arched necks, friendly advances which were now accepted by the savage little animals without any attempts to bite, while he could pass behind them now without having to beware of a lightning-like kick.

"All ready?" growled Serge, who had just loosened the throwing spears he had laid in the bottom of the chariot.

"Oh yes, I am ready; but can't I lie down and sleep till the order comes to advance?"

"No, you can't," growled Serge. "A soldier shouldn't want to sleep when he is waiting for the trumpet to sound."

"Oh, I don't know," said Marcus, peevishly. "I should have thought he ought to snatch a little sleep whenever he could."

"That's right," said the old soldier, grumpily. "But he can't now."

"Why?" said Marcus, with a yawn.

"Because the foot soldiers are starting now, and the horse went scouting on ten minutes ago. I wonder we haven't got our orders before this."

"Why, we shouldn't have been ready if they had come," said Marcus.

"No," growled Serge. "We with the chariots are horribly slow. It's all through having to depend upon these driver fellows and our horses having to drag a clumsy car at their heels. Now look here, I am beginning to think that the enemy's afoot coming down to surprise us, and, if so, we with the chariots shall have our turn."

"What makes you think that?" cried Marcus, shaking off his drowsiness at these words.

"I don't know, boy, only I do. In with you. Now we are off."

The driver was already in his place as Marcus sprang into the chariot, and seized one of the throwing spears, to be followed directly by Serge; for an order rang out, there was a peculiar sound as the horses started at the first shaking of their reins and the guttural cries of their drivers, and then, in a fairly well-kept line, some twenty of the war-like cars, drawn by their snorting horses, advanced in line over the moderately smooth plain in the direction already taken by the foot and horse. But as they nearly came within touch, the mounted figure of the captain was seen facing them in front, where he sat ready to give a fresh order, when the line of chariots broke, as it were, in two, half passing him to left, the other half to right, to take up position on the flanks of the infantry, which was about a couple of hundred yards in advance.

The next minute from out of the darkness ahead there came faintly the sound of shouts, accompanied by the beating of hoofs, and a horseman tore up to the captain, to make some communication which caused him to set spurs to his horse and gallop forward, while Marcus, as his chariot rolled on, rested his hand on the front and peered forward over his horses' heads into the bank of gloom which now grew more and more alive with sound.

There was the heavy tramp, tramp of armed men, followed by the sudden rush and thunder of hoofs, while where he stood there was the rattle of the chariot wheels and the cries of the drivers as they urged their horses on.

"How are you, boy?" said Serge, hoarsely, with his lips close to his young master's ear.

"Oh, I'm well enough," was the reply, "but I can't see. I want to know what we are going to do."

"Don't you want to lie down and have a sleep?" said Serge, grimly.

"Sleep? No! I want to understand what's going on."

"What for?" growled Serge. "What's it got to do with you?"

"What has it got to do with me?" cried Marcus, without turning his head.

"Yes; what's it got to do with you? That's the captain's business. We are advancing slowly, and by and by when the

enemy has passed through our cavalry, and delivered its attack upon our foot, and they are coming on—I can hear them hurrah, boy! This isn't a false alarm. Hear that shouting?"

"Hear it, yes!"

"That's the enemy, and they are very strong too."

"How do you know?"

"I can hear them, boy."

"Oh, then why don't we gallop forward and attack?" cried Marcus, excitedly.

"Because it isn't our time. There! Hear that?"

"Yes; what does it mean?" cried Marcus, as a dull, low, clattering sound was heard.

"Why, you ought to know by now. That's our foot-men joining shields together to receive the enemy's horse, which must have scattered ours. They are driven back, and they will come round behind us if I am not mistaken."

"What, have they run away?" cried Marcus.

"Oh no, boy. Bent back to right and left. They were taken by surprise, I should say, and gave way. That's the art of war. And now! Hark at them! The enemy's coming down with a rush upon our infantry to cut them up and sweep us all away."

"What!" cried Marcus, wildly. "And we in the chariots are ambling on like this! Oh, if I could only see something besides that line in front!"

"See with your ears, boy, as I do," growled Serge. "This is the first bit of real work I have been in for many a year, but it's all going right. We have got a captain over us who knows what he is about. There! What did I say? Hear that?"

It was plain enough to hear: a confused rush of galloping hoofs away in front beyond the line of infantry, another thunder of galloping horses panting and snorting as they rushed by in the darkness close at hand, and another body away to Marcus' left, beyond the second half of the line of chariots. This ceased directly afterwards, and, as the boy glanced back, he could see a mass of horsemen forming up behind the cars, while, at the same moment from away in front, there was a terrific burst of savage yells, answered by shouts of defiance and the clatter of spears and shields, mingled with a confused clash as the enemy's horsemen charged home upon the infantry.

Marcus' ears rang with the confusion of sounds which followed—cries of agony, shouts of triumph, and the trampling of horses, and then a roar, above which rang out somewhere near at hand the shrill note of a clarion, whose effect was to make the chariot horses burst into a gallop.

"Now we are off," shouted Serge into the boy's ear. "Your spear, lad. Throw when you get a chance; I have another ready for you. But don't waste your stroke."

Marcus heard, but he did not heed, for his heart was beating violently, his head swimming with excitement, and he felt half stunned, half maddened, as he was borne onward, his chariot about the middle of the little line so close together that, moment by moment, it seemed as if the wheels of the cars on either side must come into collision.

But the collision was not to be there, for as, excited by the yells of their drivers, the little pairs tore on, there suddenly seemed to spring up out of the darkness ahead a confused crowd of mounted men; and then there was a shock, and Marcus felt his car leap forward on its wheels, rising on one side as if to overturn, but coming down level directly and bounding on again at the heels of his excited steeds.

He could not see to right or left, but he was conscious that there were other chariots tearing on beside him, and there was another shock, and another, mingled with yells and cries, and then they were racing on again apparently being hunted by a body of horse, and it seemed to the boy as if his and his fellow chariots were in full flight.

But just then there were the faint notes of a trumpet, and, as they tore on, the line of chariots swung round as upon a pivot and began to tear back.

And now it seemed to Marcus that the horsemen who had been pursuing them were taking flight in turn, and, as he realised this, the boy shouted to his driver to drive more swiftly.

"No, no!" yelled Serge, furiously. "Steady! Steady! And keep in line."

"But they will get away!" cried the boy, mad now with excitement.

"Bah! You don't understand," cried Serge. "Those are our horsemen."

Another trumpet brayed out and the cavalry in front of the chariots swung round to right and left, making an opening through which they passed, slackening their speed, but careering on till Marcus made out a solid body of infantry on his right front.

A minute later the chariots had wheeled round again in the infantry's rear, and in the distance there was, dying away, the sound of hoofs.

"Well, boy, what do you think of that?" said a voice in Marcus' ear.

"I—I don't know," panted Marcus, as short of breath as if he had been running hard. "I don't think I understand."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Serge, hoarsely. "I don't suppose you do. I don't quite myself, but I should think that was a big body of the Gallic horse who came down thinking to surprise us and to snuff us out. But they found out their mistake."

"And where are they now?" panted Marcus.

"Oh, far away. You can just hear them in the distance. They have gone off beaten, with their tails between their legs. Couldn't you feel how we cut them up?"

"Cut them up!" said Marcus.

"Yes. Don't you remember how we tore through them, crash into their midst, after they were broken from their charge upon our infantry, which stood together like a rock? It was splendid, boy, though it was almost too dark to see."

"Oh yes, I recollect something of it; but it was all wild and confused and strange. I couldn't see anything clearly."

"No more could anyone else, boy. We, who do the fighting, never see."

"Because it was so dark to-night."

"It would be just the same by day. But, hallo! Where's your spear?"

"I don't know," said Marcus, staring. "Oh, I think I remember, I threw it at a horseman, just before we went crash upon him and the chariot was nearly overturned. But there, don't ask me. It seemed to be all one wild struggle and noise, and my head's all whirling now."

"Well, what did you expect it to be?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Marcus. "But tell me, Serge, have we won?"

"Won? Of course! We Romans always do. This was through our leader's skill, training against an undisciplined horde of horsemen, twice our number I should think. They are in full retreat, and I expect we shall find they have left half their number upon the field."

"Hark!" cried Marcus, excitedly. "Here they come again!"

"No, boy; not at a gentle trot like that. Those you hear are the best portion of our horsemen who have been pursuing and scattering the enemy far and wide. Rather exciting all this, my lad, eh?"

"Exciting? Yes! Only I couldn't understand."

"But your captain could, my boy, and won the fight. Here, catch hold of this; and next time you throw your spear, pick up another, sharp."

"But oughtn't you to have given me one directly? You taught me something of the kind."

"So I did, boy; but you see I have been out of practice for many years, and forgot my duty in the hurry of the fight; but I won't do so again."

Chapter Nineteen.

Old Serge muses.

"Sure you are not hurt, boy?" said Serge, as they stood waiting by the chariot for further orders, their sturdy little driver taking advantage of the opportunity to carefully attend to his steeds.

"Hurt? No!" cried Marcus. "I only feel hot and excited."

"Of course you do; but I don't suppose we shall move now for some time, till the captain's scouts that he must have sent out bring back news of the enemy, and then he will camp for the rest of the night. He ought to. I should, so as to give the men a rest ready for when the enemy attacks again in the morning."

"But you said that the enemy were beaten and driven away."

"So they were, boy, but in a war like this they will only make for the mountains and collect together again ready for a fresh attack as soon as they get the chance."

"But will they keep on doing that?" cried Marcus.

"Of course they will whenever they feel strong enough; and when they are weak they will give up."

"Oh, I don't understand it a bit," cried Marcus.

"Well, you don't want to understand it," said Serge. "That's for the generals and big captains to do. All that they want

of us is to fight.”

“But why is this war?” said Marcus, impatiently.

“Oh, I suppose it’s because some of the tribes have been attacking and plundering and carrying off cattle and goods of the country people, till the chiefs say: This sort of thing must be stopped, and they collect an army, talk it over with the peaceful tribes who are ready to be friends, and then with their help march into the enemy’s country, conquer it, and bring them to their senses. That’s what we do, and used to do—bring all these nations round about under the rule of Rome. These we are fighting with now are the peoples off to the north and west. They have got all sorts of names, but I suppose they are all Gauls. But now look here: a bit ago you were so tired out with your long march that you wanted to sleep. Half the night hasn’t gone, so the best thing you can do is to curl yourself up and sleep till sunrise as hard as you can.”

“Sleep!” cried Marcus, mockingly. “Who’s to sleep at a time like this?”

“A soldier, of course, and be glad to when he gets the chance.”

“Oh, I couldn’t sleep,” cried Marcus. “I feel all bubbling over with excitement, and if I were to lie down I should seem to be galloping over the fields again.”

“Nonsense! You lie down and have a sleep. You always used to mind what I said when I tried to teach you. Do so now, and get some rest.”

“But suppose they come back and attack us again?”

“Well, we shall have warning. There are scouts and sentries out in all directions, and you would have plenty of time to get up into the chariot, I dare say. There, lie down.”

“Don’t you order me, Serge,” said the boy, peevishly. “You are not my officer.”

“No, we are only comrades, and I am not ordering, only telling you for the best. There, get a sleep, boy, while you can.”

“Well, I’ll lie down, but I can’t sleep, Serge. I shall be thinking about the war, and the tribes that are coming to attack us, all the night.”

“Very well, boy, think about them, then, as you are so anxious to understand all about the war. I’d be sure and call you when you are wanted. I am not greedy about having all the fighting to myself. You shall have your share.”

“Very well,” said Marcus, and selecting a place that seemed a little less hard than the stony ground in their close neighbourhood, and where he was not likely to be trampled upon by any of the chariot horses, he threw himself down, but started up again in alarm with his hand seeking his sword, for a big lump of stone dimly-seen in the darkness suddenly seemed endowed with life, springing up to give itself a rough shake, and assuming the form of a big dog.

“Why, Lupe, you here?” cried Marcus, laughing. “Look here, Serge; he was lying here curled up, asleep. Where’s he been all the time?”

“Taking care of himself and waiting for us to come back, I suppose. There, do you want a lesson in campaigning, boy?”

“No, not to-night, thank you. You said I was to go to sleep.”

“Of course; and here’s your lesson all the same. Make Lupe lie down, and use him for a warm, dry pillow. Not a bad thing at a time like this. A deal better than a horse, for it isn’t always you can get them to lie down, and a horse’s hoofs are rather bad company if he gets restless in the night.”

Half irritably in his exalted state Marcus turned away with a gesture of annoyance.

“Down, Lupe! Lie down!” growled the old soldier; and as the dog obediently subsided on the rough ground, the boy thought better of it, sank upon his knees, and then awkwardly in his armour adjusted himself so that he could lay his face with his cheek in the rough hair about the dog’s neck.

There was something comforting and friendly in the deep, satisfied sigh Lupe gave, holding quite rigid as he stretched himself out, while Marcus said to himself:

“Oh, this is stupid! I shall never go to sleep like this;” and he lay staring right before him at the indistinctly seen chariot with its pair of horses standing together, one or the other every now and then giving an impatient stamp or whinnying softly.

Beyond them and their driver all was dark confusion, out of which came murmurs of voices, the jingling of armour, and a suggestion of people passing to and fro.

And then the darkness seemed to lighten and horses were tearing along at full gallop with the enemy in front, and Marcus gave a sudden start, his sharp movement producing a low remonstrant growl from his pillow.

“What was that?” thought Marcus. “Why, I must have been asleep. Ah, there it is again!” For from somewhere out of the darkness there came a low agonised cry which made the boy sit up and listen.

"Are you there, Serge?" he said, softly.

"Yes. What is it, boy?" came from the back of the chariot, where the old soldier had seated himself; and he rose at once and crossed the few yards which lay between him and his young companion's resting place.

"Did you hear that?" asked Marcus.

"Oh, yes, I heard it, boy."

"What was it?"

"A wounded man. They have been carrying some in from over yonder."

"How horrible!" whispered the boy. "Let's go and help him."

"No, go to sleep. You can do nothing there."

"Sleep!" cried the boy, reproachfully. "Who can sleep with anyone suffering like that?"

"You," said Serge, quietly. "You have been asleep an hour, and of course there have been plenty of poor fellows carried by, enemies and friends."

"But—" began Marcus.

"Go to sleep again, boy. You can do nothing there. We'd go together if we could help."

Marcus was silent as he lay resting on one hand, listening and thinking what it was his duty to do, but listening in vain, for no such sound again broke the silence of the night, while after standing by him a few minutes, Serge walked away into the darkness and then returned to his seat in the chariot, where he too, utterly devoid of all inclination to sleep, sat and thought about their position there and asked himself whether it was yet too late to reverse their plans, and seeking the first opportunity to hurry his young companion away from the scenes of carnage and the dangers by which they were surrounded.

"I have done wrong all along," he muttered to himself. "I went against my orders, and some day I shall have to face the master and answer for myself. Yes," he muttered, "I must take him back." And with the full intention, as he sat there leaning his left shoulder against the side of the chariot, of leaving the little rear-guard of the army as soon as he could, Serge changed his position to the other side of the chariot to rest his right side, and as he subsided against the hard iron-bound wood, listening for danger, the galloping-in of scouts, or some other warning of another night attack, a fresh current of thoughts began to chase each other through his brain.

"No," he said, "I won't go, and if I would he'd say again that he wouldn't come. He's a soldier's son, and it comes natural to him. What am I growling at myself for? I didn't set him to run away. He came of himself, and if I hadn't done the same he'd have been here all alone without me to watch over him, take his part, and help him, same as he did me when I was attacked. Why, after all, everything's gone right and happened as it should. We are in for it, and must go on. But this won't do; I mustn't go to sleep." And springing up, the old soldier took a few steps up and down like a sentry, before stopping short and going down on one knee, steadying himself the while by means of his spear, and bending over Marcus, who was sleeping heavily, his breath coming regularly as he lay there deaf to everything that was going on around, while the dog uttered a low whine and lifted his heavy tail slowly, to beat with it softly upon the ground.

"He's all right," said Serge, and he backed away again, to march up to the horses, pat them, and then say a word or two to their driver, who was lying upon his back just in front, sleeping heavily and quite unconscious of Serge's presence.

The latter took another turn or two up and down, thinking deeply the while.

"Yes," he said softly, "what I told the boy's about right, and I can tell him some more to-morrow, for out here in the darkness and silence all my old soldiering seems to be coming back. We are a sort of rear-guard, that's what we are, and it's our job to keep some miles behind the main army, to prevent the enemy from closing in and harassing our troops, besides seeing that they carry out the general's orders and bring up the food and forage they as a conquered people are ordered to supply. Conquered people!" he said, with a contemptuous ejaculation. "Why, it's like digging a channel through a bed of dry sand. I know what this country is. If we go on like this for a few days we shall be right in amongst the mountains, full of holes and hiding-places where the enemy can lurk, and as fast as they are driven off they will be like dry sand, as I said, and come running back again."

Serge went and bent over Marcus again to satisfy himself that the boy was sleeping deeply, and uttered a low grunt that might have been learned of the swine he tended at the farm.

"Do him no end of good," he muttered—"strengthen his legs." And he began to walk up and down again, pausing once or twice to pat the horses and growl at the driver, who was sleeping hard with his mouth wide open.

"Yes," muttered the old soldier, "a good sleep will do the boy good—harden his legs. I said my old soldiering was coming back; I wish my old legs would come back and be the same as they used to when I could walk for weeks, instead of aching like this when I haven't had to walk, but have been riding all day. Hah!" he sighed, as he lowered himself down into the back of the chariot to lean against the side once more. "I can keep watch over him just as well sitting down as standing up. I don't see that I need watch at all when the boy's got a pillow with a set of teeth like a rat trap that will take fast hold of anyone who came to interfere with him. But there's the master. We have got to meet some day, and I shall have to give an account of myself. 'What were you doing away from the farm?' he'll say.

‘Watching over your boy, master,’ says I. That will have him on the hip. That’s my only chance, the only thing that will save me.”

Serge’s grim face relaxed, and he rolled about in his seat, chuckling softly.

“It will get me off,” he said; “it will get me off with the master. He won’t be very hard on me after that. It aren’t quite honest, for I never thought a bit about the boy when I went away. But I did mean to take him back, and I’d have done it too, and stopped with him, only he was too much for me. Ah, he’s a clever one. He’s only a boy, but he’s got a lot of man in him, and when he gets ripe, you mark my words,” he said, softly, staring hard at the dimly-seen driver the while, “he’ll be as big a man as his father. I don’t mean as to size; like as not he’ll be bigger. I mean as to his head. It aren’t quite fair, and maybe it’s a bit like deceiving the master to answer him like that when he says, ‘What are you doing there?’ and I says, ‘Watching over your boy, master,’ But I am going to watch over him, and I’ll stick to him, and I’ll die for him if I’m obliged; and you can’t say that arn’t honest.”

Serge bent forward and literally glared at the sleeping driver, who muttered something in reply.

“Ah, you may say what you like,” muttered Serge, “but that will be honest; and if you put that in one side of the balance, and my forsaking the old place when I was told to stay, in the other, they’ll weigh pretty much alike. Yes, I’ll watch over him, master, like a man, just as I would have done if he had been my own, for somehow I always seemed to like him, and I suppose I should have felt just about the same if he had been mine. It’s precious dark and quiet enough now. I don’t suppose we shall be disturbed before daylight, for the enemy got more than they expected, so I may just as well sit and rest. I can watch over him just the same, and—” Serge’s next utterance was not understandable if treated as words, but perfectly plain if considered as a snore, for he had sunk sideways till his head rested on the hard edge of the car, while at regular intervals he gave vent to a series of deep gruff tones which sounded as if his neck were bent at such a severe angle that there was not room for his breath to pass comfortably round the corner.

It was not comfortable for him, for though he was sleeping very soundly, his rest was uneasy, consequent upon which he began to dream in a troubled way about being at home; and his busy brain put its own interpretation upon the sounds that rose from his chest and interfered with the soundness of his sleep, so that, half awakened, he lay back listening to his own snoring and attributed it to something else, gradually awakening more and more the while.

“Hark at that!” he muttered. “And after all the trouble I took to mend that bit of fence! Talk about sheep always following one another through a gap, why they are nothing to swine! They want a gap, too, for the leader to go through, but an old boar big with that snout of his and them tusks, he’ll bore and bore and bore till he makes a little hole a big un, and once he gets his snout in he drives on till he gets right through. Now, I’ve mended that hole so as you’d have thought it was quite safe; but hark at that! He’s got right through into the garden, and the old sow and the young uns has followed him. But just wait a bit till I get my staff, and I’ll make such music as will bring Master Marcus out to ask me if I am killing a pig. There’s no room about the place to please them, no miles of acorn and chestnut forest so that they can fill themselves as full as sacks, but they must come into my garden and raven there! Nothing will do for them but my melons and cucumbers! Well, we’ll just see about that.”

Serge rose from his seat, after taking hold of the spear that he had rested against the side of the chariot, and with his eyes closely shut took a couple of steps forward, and then stopped short with his eyes wide open, as he stared wildly round in an absolute state of confusion and strove hard to make out where he was.

For some moments his mind was a complete blank, and the darkness seemed impenetrable, while his mind absolutely refused to answer the mental question—Where am I?

Then he knew, and there was fierce anger in the low tones of his voice, which formed the self-accusatory words:

“Why, I’ve been asleep!”

He struck a sharp blow with the staff of his spear; but it was not at the imaginary patriarch of the home herd, but at his own head, which was saved from harm by his helmet, the stroke causing a sharp sound sufficiently loud to make Lupe utter an ominous growl, and the horses where they were tethered start and stamp.

“And sarve you right too!” growled Serge, removing his helmet, which he had knocked on one side, and softly rubbing one spot that had felt the bottom edge keenly. “And here have I been going on about being honest and keeping a true watch over that boy! Here, I’m proud of myself, I am! If I go to sleep again it shall be standing up, anyhow.” And pulling himself together he shouldered his spear and commenced pacing up and down, to keep it up steadily hour after hour, only pausing to listen from time to time, to hear nothing more suspicious than the regular night sounds of a camp surrounded by sentries and scouts and on the watch for an enemy known to be near at hand.

Marcus slept well till daybreak, when the first warning of the enemy’s movements was given, and he sprang to his feet, to find himself face to face with Serge.

“What was that?” he cried.

“Trumpet, boy. Make ready. The enemy’s going to stir us up again.”

Chapter Twenty.

In the Snowy Pass.

Serge’s announcement was quite correct, for while the Romans rested, the enemy had been gathering together again

among the hills, and were coming on in force to attack the camp; but what they had failed to do by their night attack proved doubly difficult in the light of day. The little Roman force, though vastly outnumbered and surrounded, was well commanded by a skilful officer, who was able, by keeping his well-disciplined men together, to roll back the desultory attacks delivered on all sides, till, quite disheartened, the enemy retreated in all directions and the march was resumed again.

That day's tramp and the many that followed were a succession of marches through an enemy's country, with the foe always on the watch to harass the little force, and cut it off from joining the main invading body far ahead.

Every day brought its skirmishes, with victory constantly on the Roman side.

There was no want of bravery on the enemy's part, but the discipline of the little civilised division with its strong coherence was too much for the loose dashes, ambushes, and traps that were laid.

The consequence was a slow, steady advance that nothing could impede, through the fertile plains of the South and ever onward, with the snow-capped mountains growing nearer and nearer, till the great pass was at hand that had been traversed by the main army, and no difficulty was then experienced as to the route, for its passage was marked plainly enough by the traces of the many encounters and the ruin and destruction that indicated its way.

"Shall we never overtake them?" said Marcus, one evening.

"Well, if we keep on I suppose we shall," replied the old soldier. "But what's your hurry? Are you tired out?"

"Oh, no," cried the boy; "we don't go fast enough for that; but I am anxious to join father once again."

"Humph!" grunted Serge. "I don't feel so much in a hurry myself. Perhaps we shan't overtake him at all."

"But we are going to join the army."

"We are going just where our captain takes us, boy. He's doing his work splendidly, and so are we."

"What, keeping on with these little petty skirmishes?"

"Of course, boy. Don't you see how we are keeping the enemy from closing in about the army's rear, and saving them from destroying and burning every homestead and village whose supplies are wanted for our men?"

"Oh, I don't quite understand," cried Marcus, impatiently.

"Leave it to your leader, then, boy. That's what a good soldier ought to do. But what's the matter with you? Cold?"

"Yes, horribly. Why, it was as hot as could be in the valley this morning."

"Well, no wonder," said Serge, with a grim smile. "We were all amongst the trees and pleasant grass down there, and now on each side and straight before you—"

"Yes," said Marcus, as he glanced around him. "It looks all very bleak and bare down here."

"Up here, boy. We have been steadily rising all the day. Look at the ice and snow up yonder and straight before us. This time to-morrow we shall be shivering amongst the snow."

"But we can't get the horses and the baggage right over that mountain in front." And he pointed at the jagged peaks and hollows which were glistening like gold in the last rays of the setting sun.

"No, boy, but we can go on along this rugged valley, which leads right through, and then when we get to the top of the pass begins to go down again, when we shall find it getting warmer every hour till we are once more in the plains amongst the green fields and forests of the enemy's country. Look there at that stream," and the old soldier pointed to the dingy-coloured rushing waters which flowed by the side of the level which their leader had chosen as the site of that night's camp.

"Yes, I see; and it isn't fit to drink," said Marcus.

"Snow water," said the old man, shortly. "Well, which way does it run?"

"Why, towards us, of course."

"Well, by this time to-morrow, if it's like one that I tramped by with your father years ago, we shall have found it coming out from underneath a bed of ice, left it behind, and on the other side of the hill come upon another flowing right away to the north and west; and alongside of that road will be our road, right into the enemy's country, and the enemy posted every here and there to stop us from reaching the plain—that is, if Julius and your father have not driven them right away. But most likely they have, and all our troubles now will come from the rear."

Serge's remarks, based upon old experience, proved to be pretty correct, for the troubles of the little force began to come thick and fast. Up to the time of that last halt the attacks had been made by the little parties, each under its own leader, and they came from front, rear, and flanks, in all directions, for the rush made by one portion of a tribe would act as the signal for others to follow suit, and it frequently happened that the Roman soldiers were completely surrounded. But now as they moved on towards the north and west, the pass they had entered and which wound or zig-zagged its way more into the mountain chain which divided the land of the Gauls from the Roman dominions, closed in more and more, beginning as a beautiful open valley and gradually changing its nature as it rose till it assumed the nature of a gorge or rift. The sides were no longer soft grassy slopes broken by little vales which

afforded shelter for the enemy, and from which they made their fiercest rushes, coming down like furious torrents from the hills and often in company with the streams by whose sides they made their way, but hour by hour grew steeper till they assumed the nature of rugged walls, impassable to any but climbers or the goats that browsed their sterile paths in herds. The mountains here towered up higher and higher in their stern frowning majesty, scantily furnished with growth, save here and there the earth that had been washed down from above afforded sustenance to a patch of spear-like pines with their dark, sombre, blackish green needles. The roughest of rough stony tracks was now the detachment's path, and it became hard work, approaching to climbing, for the heavily-armed foot soldiers, difficult for the cavalry—whose horses needed the sure-footedness of mules to get along, their riders having to dismount and lead their steeds—while for the little train of chariots the difficulties were almost insurmountable. The pony-like pairs that drew them were safer footed and got on better than the heavier animals that bore the Roman mounted men, but the chariots were always in need of help. Sometimes one wheel would be high in the air, sometimes the other, while often the drivers and riders had to make a rush to help drag or push the low, heavy vehicles over some more rugged spot.

For there was no regular road now that they were beyond the Roman dominions, where directly a country was conquered the new owners set themselves to form a level military road, but simply a rough, rock-encumbered track.

"Yes, it's bad going," Serge said, "but it would want a far worse way than this to keep back a Roman army. Our men with all their baggage have been along here, as you see, so of course we can follow; and it's splendid for us in the way of safety."

"Yes," agreed Marcus; "every attack must come now from the front or rear. These mountain walls make splendid allies to guard our flanks."

"Front—rear—flanks! Well done!" cried Serge. "I like that. You're getting quite the soldier, my boy."

Matters proved to be better still as they moved higher up the pass, not in the way of the road improving, but respecting the difficulties with the enemy, for after the latter had made a brave stand in one spot where the pass widened out for a space, and fought stubbornly for a while, the little Roman force cut their way through and into the narrow portion where the walls of the gorge closed quite up on either side, leaving only room for the grey muddy stream and the road track along which Marcus and his friends made their way, completely freed from all attack save from the rear, where a fierce pursuit was kept up, fresh parties of the enemy giving up and retreating after delivering their attack and being rolled back.

The fighting was sharp, the brunt of it being borne by the foot soldiers, who protected the rear, while the chariots were forced over the many difficulties and the horses helped along, a portion of the foot being far in advance, ready for any body of the enemy which might be blocking their way in ambush.

It had been rough work that day, and the men, after the amount of fighting they had gone through, were beginning to look dispirited and feel disheartened, for in addition to the length of the struggle, the supplies had run short, and everyone knew that no more food could be obtained until they had forced their way through the desolate pass, over the summit, and down the other side to the cultivated and inhabited regions below.

But their leader was well suited to his task, and he seemed to be everywhere, with a word or two of encouragement and praise, stopping to help the men with the baggage animals, heading a party sent forward to lever the great blocks of stone that impeded progress, and ready directly after to urge his trembling horse back among the rocks the moment the echoes of the shouts behind warned him that there was a fresh attack in the rear. There were two of these, one directly after the start at sunrise, and a second high up the pass at mid-day, when as he bade the horsemen and the chariots pass on, he laughingly in Marcus' hearing told his soldiery to make use of the loose rocks to form a rough breastwork behind which they could fight, and all the better for the cavalry being out of their way.

That fight was bitter and long sustained, and as the turmoil came echoing up the gorge to where Marcus and Serge were striving hard to master the difficulties before them and urge their willing little chariot horses on, the latter frowned as he rubbed his blue nose and responded to something Marcus had said.

"No, my lad," he replied; "they're not getting the better of our men, and they will not. We hear so much of what is going on because the sound comes up as if through a trumpet."

"Comes up, Serge?"

"Yes, my lad; we're a couple of thousand feet higher than they are below yonder, and the reason the fight lasts so long is because the enemy keep on bringing up fresh men."

"Think so?" said Marcus.

"I'm sure of it, my lad. Yesterday and before there were thousands of them scattered in droves all about us; now the pass is so narrow that they are all squeezed up together; and so much the better for us."

"Why?" asked Marcus.

"Because we've got such a narrow front to defend. Why, you know what a scrap of road there was where the captain halted his men."

"Yes," said Marcus; "just like a gash cut through the rock."

"That's right," said the old soldier. "Well, a line of twenty men would have been sufficient to guard that bit."

"More than enough," said Marcus.

"Right, boy. Well, he has got six or seven hundred there, and no army that the enemy can bring up can drive our men from that stronghold. There are only two things that can master them."

"What are they?" said Marcus, anxiously.

"Cold and hunger."

"Ah!" sighed Marcus.

"There, don't groan like that, boy," cried the old soldier, sharply. "It sounded as if you hadn't had anything to eat for a week, and I'm sure you're not cold."

"Then you're wrong," cried Marcus, "for I am bitterly cold."

"That shows you haven't worked hard enough. Come on and let's get behind the chariot and help the horses with a push."

"Yes, presently," said Marcus, as he glanced at the brave little beasts, which looked hot in spite of the fact that a chilly wind was blowing down the gorge, and that they were standing up to their knees in snow. "I'm a bit out of breath too."

"Don't talk, then, boy," growled Serge. "Save your wind."

"But I want to talk," continued Marcus. "You've been over this pass before?"

"Nay, not this one, boy, but one like it farther east."

"Like this? But was it so strange?"

"What do you mean by strange, my lad?"

"Why, for us to be going to rest last night with the country all round seeming to be in summer, while as we've come along to-day we've got into autumn, and now we're going right into the depth of winter."

"Yes, my lad, but it's summer all the same. It's only because we're so high up, same as you used to see it at home when you looked up towards the mountains and saw them covered with snow."

"But this doesn't look like snow, Serge," said the boy, kicking up the icy particles. "It is more like piled-up heaps of hail after a heavy storm. Ugh! It does look winterly! Ice and snow everywhere, and not a green thing to be seen."

"All the more reason, boy, why we should push on, get over the highest bit, and then every step we take will be for the better."

"Shall we be out of this cutting icy wind that comes roaring up between these two great walls of rock?"

"To be sure we shall," said Serge, cheerfully; "and it'll be something to talk about when we've done it and are down below in the warm sunshine to-morrow morning, eating new bread and drinking milk."

"I don't want to talk about it, Serge," said Marcus, beginning to talk in a dull, drowsy way. "I shall want to sleep and rest. I feel as if I could do so now."

"Do you? Then you mustn't; and we must stop anyone who tries to. Why, it reminds me, boy, of old times when we crossed that other pass. Some of our men would lie down to sleep, but they never got up again."

"Why?" cried Marcus, in a horrified tone.

"Frozen stiff, boy. Once you're up amongst the snow you can't stop, only to get breath; you must push on; and I wish someone would give me orders to go on now."

Marcus was silent for a few moments, as if thinking deeply.

"Don't feel more sleepy, boy, do you?" said Serge, sharply.

"No; that seems to have woke me up," was the reply; and taking a few steps forward with difficulty, for his feet sank right in at every step, Marcus leaned over into the car and caught Lupe by the ear where he lay curled up with his rough coat on end.

The boy's movement was quickly and excitedly performed, a feeling of dread having attacked him that the dog might have been frozen stiff; but at the touch the animal gave a cheery bark, bounded out of the car, and began to plough his way through the snow, at first after the fashion of a pig, and then by throwing himself down first on one side and then upon the other.

"I was half afraid, Serge," said Marcus.

"You needn't have been, boy," replied the old soldier. "You see, Nature's given him a warm, thick coat, and he makes it thicker whenever he likes by setting his bristles up on end."

"But that would make it more open and thinner, Serge."

"Nay, but it don't, boy. Somehow it keeps warm all inside between the hairs, and the cold can't get through."

"I don't understand why that should be, Serge," said Marcus, thoughtfully.

"I don't neither," said the man, "but it is so. It's one of those funny things in Nature. Why, look at the birds. What do they do when a snow storm comes down from the mountains in winter? They don't squeeze their feathers down tight, do they?"

"No," said Marcus, thoughtfully; "they seem to set them all up on end, just as they do when they go to roost, and they look twice as big."

"To be sure they do, boy. You don't feel sleepy now?"

"No, not a bit. But I say, Serge, will there be more snow higher up the pass?"

"Most likely, boy; and I want to get at the job of fighting our way through it. We ought to be going on. Hallo! Hear that?"

"Yes. What does it mean?"

"It's the reason why we with the horses are not pushed on. That's what I was afraid of."

"Afraid?"

"There, don't take a man up short that way," growled Serge. "I didn't mean afraid; I meant expected. The enemy have attacked our men right up yonder in the front, and they've got us between them. Well, all the better. Something for us to do, and keep us warm."

"But I was hoping that we might be pushed on now."

"So was I, boy, but it won't be yet," growled Serge. "I say, don't let your mouth get watering for the new bread and warm milk just yet."

"No," groaned Marcus, rather piteously.

"But it will be all the nicer and sweeter when it comes, boy. I say, there was only one thing that could possibly have happened to make us worse off."

"What, having to fight in this snow, Serge?"

"Nay, that would have warmed us, lad. I meant, come on to snow."

"Snow at this time of year?" cried Marcus.

"It snows up in the mountains at all times of the year, boy," growled Serge. "Down below in the plains it only rains, but up here it snows; and here it comes, and someone else too. I expect things are going wrong in the rear, or else he has heard the attack in front, and has come to see."

For a blinding and dense squall of snow came raging through the pass, leaving horsemen and chariots as white as their chief, whose horse came churning its way through the hail-like coating that stood half way up the wheels, close to which its rider reined in.

"Find it cold, my lads?" he cried cheerily, and was answered by a chorus of assent.

"Well, I've brought you up news to warm you. The men below are holding the enemy in check, and they have begun to retire, which means to support us and drive those back who are trying to stop us at the head of the pass. Make ready. Ah, my boy, you there? Well, are you tired of seeking your father?"

Marcus shook his head.

"Well," said the captain, "tired or not there is no going back, for you could not cut through two or three thousand of the enemy alone. There, we shall soon be through this frozen pass, and making our way down into the sunny plains. Winter now, and summer this time to-morrow. Ready there, advance!"

As their chief spoke loudly, Marcus caught sight through the haze of snow which seemed to hold the darkness of night above, the head of a column of the foot soldiers making a steady advance, looking as if they were wearing a fresh form of decoration, every man's helmet plume being increased in size by a trimming of the purest, whitest swans-down or filmy, flocculent silver itself.

But there was no time for studying appearances; all now was stern, earnest work. At the first order given by the chief, Lupe seemed to take it that he was concerned, and set up a hoarse barking, which seemed to animate the chariot horses, notably his friends attached to Marcus' chariot, which began to stamp and paw up the snow beneath their feet, while when their driver took his place by their heads they plunged forward, tugging the heavy vehicle out of the ruts into which the wheels had cut for themselves. Then with the snow squall driving on before them leaving the trampled snow ahead freshly smoothed, and lighting the darkness of the night, there was a dull, grinding, creaking sound of wheels and yielding snow as it was trampled down into a better road, and good progress was made, for the slope in advance was more gradual, and the hollows and pitfalls between the rugged stones that strewn the way were levelled down.

It was a strange and weird procession, as Marcus tramped on step by step with Serge, behind the chariot, into which Lupe had suddenly leaped to stand with his paws planted upon the front of the vehicle, which now looked as if it had been turned into silver. And there were moments when the boy felt that it must all be part of a dream.

But there was nothing dream-like in the sounds that came downward between the great snowy walls, for they were those of desperate fighting—the shouts of defiance of the Roman soldiers mingled with the barbarous cries of the Gauls, who had gathered together again in the great gateway from which they had been driven by the troops of Caius Julius, and were now striving to prevent the descent of the Roman rear-guard into their fruitful plains, and if possible entrap these new troops between their own forces, which were holding them shut in the deep, long, wintry gorge.

Chapter Twenty One.

A Good Companion.

It was a curious sound, that made by the snow which lay so thickly beneath sandal, hoof and wheel. As it was pressed together it literally squeaked as if it possessed feeling and remonstrated at being crushed down from light feathery snow into solid ice.

The sounds it gave forth were at times quite loud, and were repeated back from the towering rocks on either side. Farther on it would be a soft crunch, crunch, mingled with the bumping of wheels and the plunging of a horse as it struggled to drag its hoofs out of some depression into which they had sunk, while, animated by the presence of their leader, the horsemen cheered on the animals they led, and the charioteers helped their pairs to drag the heavy cars over the snow-covered track.

The pass grew more and more like some huge rift in the mountain which seemed to have been split open by lightning, whose form the deep way had in some degree assumed.

For a few hundred yards the train would be going straight, till an acute angle was reached, when for a distance the line would be forced to almost double back to another point and double back again. It was a savage kind of zig-zag which always led higher and higher, while as they neared the top, the snow grew deeper and the walls on either side closer, while these were not only perpendicular but in many cases actually overhanging.

The horses' hoofs and the chariot wheels at last sank in so far, in spite of their being unburdened, that the leader commanded a halt for rest, and as this order was obeyed, Marcus, from where he stood panting, with one hand that had been used to push forward the chariot resting now upon its back, felt awe-stricken at the strange silence that for a moment or two dwelt deep down in the jagged furrow, before it was broken by the peculiar panting of exhausted men and steeds who were striving to regain their wind, while a mist formed by the breath rendered everything indistinct along the line, as it rose visibly on high.

For plainly now from the front came the sound of contending warriors, apparently close at hand, though far enough away as yet, but increased in power by being condensed into a narrow space, as it reverberated along the pass from wall to wall.

But not alone from the front; fainter, but minute by minute gathering strength, similar sounds came from the rear, telling plainly enough of the fight that was going on where the foot-men were holding back the advancing enemy during a steady retiring movement that could hardly be called a retreat.

"I don't like this, boy," whispered Serge, who was resting against the other side of the chariot.

"Are we being beaten, Serge?" asked Marcus.

"Oh, no, boy; they can't beat us. But they have got us in this narrow gully where only a few men back and front can fight at once. Why, you know for yourself here are all our mounted troops and us with the chariots doing nothing but struggle through the snow, and never getting a spear thrust at anyone. That's why I say I don't like it. I want to be doing something, and when I say that it's just what everyone feels as it makes his blood hot. I say, boy, you don't feel cold now?"

"Cold?" cried Marcus. "Oh, no; I only want to keep going on."

"Wait a bit, boy, and you shall have enough of that. Our captain isn't letting us rest just to amuse ourselves. It will be forward directly, and quite soon enough for the horses, for it's hard work for them; and I say," continued the old soldier, jocosely, "this is a bit of a change for you, my boy. You never thought there was a place like this so near to Rome, where the people are lying grumbling now because it is so hot that they cannot sleep, and panting just like old Lupe there."

For the dog was just between them, sitting up in the back of the car, sometimes turning his head towards one, sometimes towards the other, lolling out his vibrating tongue and sending out puffs of visible vapour-like steam from Vesuvius.

"He's making believe that he's been working very hard," said Marcus, laughing, "when he's been riding all the time. But all this does seem very strange, Serge. I couldn't have believed this was possible at the end of summer."

"Suppose not," growled the old soldier. "You see, you don't know everything yet, my boy. There's a deal to learn, as I found out years ago when I first went to the war with the master. But it's all doing you good, and you will like it by-and-by when you look back and think of it all, for there isn't much time to think just now. I say, have you got your

wind again?"

"Oh, yes, I am ready, and the horses are beginning to leave off panting. I shall be glad when we make a fresh start. I want to get to the top."

"That's what we all want, boy—to get to the top of everything—but the sooner we get to the end of this narrow crack and can expect that it will begin to open out and give us room to swing our arms, the better we shall all like it. The chief ought to be thinking of starting up afresh, for there's a deal of fighting going on back and front."

The sounds that came floating to their ears, echoed from the snowy walls, made this all plain enough, while the shouting from the rear grew nearer and nearer; and then it seemed that the rear-guard was coming more rapidly on, just as the order to move forward came from the front and passed along the line.

With a couple of halts for rest the troops plodded on and the horses struggled for another hour, and then, to the great delight of all, the word came back from the front that the height of the pass had been reached, that the head of the column was beginning to descend, and that not far in front their comrades were holding the enemy in check.

This intelligence was like an invigorating breath of air to the little force. The men stepped out and dragged and pushed, and the cries of the drivers had a cheering sound, as they called upon their horses in a tone of voice which made the struggling beasts exert themselves more than ever.

It was still terribly hard work, but there was no upward drag; the great strain was gone, for the descent was steep, and a great portion of the weight the chariot horses had to draw seemed to have been taken off.

The pass was still walled in by towering heights, but it was rapidly opening out, and at the end of another hour the advance force, which had contented themselves with holding one of the narrowest portions of the way, had been strengthened, and pressed back the enemy.

There was another halt of the chariots, to enable a portion of the troops from the rear to close up and pass through to the front to join the advance, a manoeuvre which the panting men, as they struggled over the beaten snow, obeyed with alacrity, eager to get into action and bring to an end the hours of suspense through which they had passed in comparative inaction while listening to the echoes of the fighting going on in front and rear.

"There, boy," said Serge, cheerfully, as they found time now to talk as well as rest; "this don't look like being beaten, does it?"

"I don't know," said Marcus, dubiously. "We seem as much shut up as ever."

"Nay, not us! Why, the walls are ever so much farther back, and we have got more room to breathe."

"But it's horribly dark still," said Marcus, rather wearily, "and the snow seems as deep."

"Not it," cried Serge. "And see how it's trampled down. Then it isn't so cold."

"Not so cold!" cried Marcus. "Why, it's terrible!"

"Not it! Why, since we have been coming down a bit we have got more into shelter, and that cutting wind that came up the pass isn't whistling about one's ears."

"Well, no," said Marcus. "That is better."

"Better, yes; and so's everything else. It won't be long now before the pass widens ever so much, and we shall begin to leave the snow behind; and then as soon as we get on to level ground the captain will get his horse to work to drive the barbarians back towards the plains below, and then—you'll see that our turn will come."

"To fight, Serge?"

"Yes, boy. He'll be letting loose his chariots then, and when he does, the fighting will be over for to-day."

"For to-day!" said Marcus, with a faint laugh.

"Well, yes, it must be getting towards morning, and before many hours we shall be seeing the sun again, and if we are lucky have made a jump out of winter into spring. But there, keep up your spirits, boy. I can see a good breakfast ahead, and a long sleep in the sunshine waiting for us down below when we have cleared these flies out of our path. They are a worry now, but you'll see before long."

Marcus was destined to see more than his old companion anticipated during the next few hours, and events began to crowd rapidly one upon another's heels.

Their advance was no sooner strengthened by the foot-men who had been so long inactive while crossing the pass, than changes began to occur, foremost among which was the progress forward, the little force now pressing steadily on downward.

It was wintry and dark and the fighting was still going on with the enemy, who were slowly giving way, while to balance this the attack on the rear was still kept up. But the pass was opening more and more, and during the next few hours the progress of the little force had been slow but steady, the first rays of the sun shining upon the jaded men and horses halted in a sterile amphitheatre surrounded by rocks which afforded a fair amount of protection, Nature having formed the hollow with but one entrance and one exit, her instrument for carving out the depression

having probably been a huge river of ice descending from the heights behind towards the plains below, of which glimpses now began to appear.

Rest was imperative, and evidently feeling that his position was far from safe, their leader had set a portion of his men to strengthen the opening front and rear by means of the ample supply of scattered rocks, many of which only needed a few well-directed thrusts to partly block up the rugged track and form an adequate defence.

This done and his foot-men disposed to the best advantage for the protection of the still crippled mounted force, it was expected by all that a few hours' rest might be obtained.

The position was bad, and their leader had intended to have pressed on downward to the plains; but the enemy in the rear had advanced so swiftly, their allies given way so stubbornly, that he was forced to seize upon the hollow which offered itself as being a natural stronghold, here to breathe his men and recruit for a few hours before making a final dash.

Chapter Twenty Two.

The Chief.

Marcus woke up that same evening to find himself lying back in the chariot with Lupe sitting watching him intently.

"Hallo, Lupe," said the boy, thickly; "what's the matter?"

The dog's answer was given with his tail—just one sharp rap on the floor of the vehicle, nothing more. So Marcus looked round him, feeling confused, and wondering what it all meant, for after so much exertion and excitement his brain had taken a thorough rest from which the boy's body was now awakened, but not his thinking powers.

"I don't quite understand it," he said to himself, as he caught sight of clusters of armed men, whose spears glittered in the evening sunshine, gathered together upon the mountain slopes around, and he soon satisfied himself that they were not Romans or any of the mercenaries whose appearance he knew.

It was easy to see, for nearer to him were his own people, one here and there perched upon some eminence, evidently on the look-out, and by running his eye along the edge of the rough amphitheatre he could trace nearly all the sentries, and at the same time note that beyond them in every ravine running downward there were hundreds of those who he at once concluded were the enemy.

"There are a great many of them," said Marcus to himself coolly, for he was not yet fully awake to his position, "and they seem to be very near; but our men appear to be ready for them, and the cavalry are standing with their horses waiting, I suppose, for orders, while—yes, the chariots! The horses are harnessed in. Are mine? Yes, and the driver ready."

Marcus had raised himself to look over the front of his chariot—a movement which excited the dog, who began to whine, and then watched his master eagerly as if to see what he would do next.

"It looks as if we are going to make a fresh start," thought Marcus; "and a good thing too, for it is chilly and cheerless; but we can't get away from here without fighting."

This last thought came with a look of excitement, for the boy's brain was growing clearer and he was rapidly grasping the fact that they were surrounded by a vast number of the enemy.

"What has become of Serge?" he said, half aloud.

The old soldier came into sight almost as he asked the question, carrying a vessel of water in one hand and something that looked like a cake of bread in the other.

"Awake, boy?" he said, as he came out. "I thought you'd be hungry when you did open your eyes, and so I managed to get this, but I've nigh had it snatched away three times as I came back, for our fellows are getting savage for want of food. Not that it matters much, for they'll fight all the better to get down to the plains and plunder."

"Then we're going to fight, Serge?" cried Marcus, eagerly.

"Not much doubt about that, boy."

"And start downward for the plains?"

"Ah, there's a deal of doubt about that, my lad. I dare say the chief would like to, but we're regularly shut up in this rocky hole."

"But he ought not to have let the enemy shut us up, ought he?"

"It was a case of can't help it, my boy," growled Serge. "From the time we halted this morning the barbarians have been gathering round and streaming down from the mountains, till there they are, thousands upon thousands of them, hanging on the hills and running down the hollows till they look like human rivers. We were obliged to have a rest and refresh, for a man can't go on fighting and marching for ever, even if he be a Roman; and ever since we've been resting the enemy has been collecting, till they are like you see. Well, why don't you look round?"

"I did," cried Marcus, "and saw all this before you came. Then we're in a sore strait, Serge?"

"Yes, a very sore one, boy; but eat your bread."

"Not now," said Marcus, quickly. "Let me have a drink of water."

He took hold of the vessel and had a long, deep draught, one which seemed to clear away the last mental cobweb from his brain.

"Now eat a bit," said Serge, offering the cake; but the boy shook his head and swept the surroundings with anxious eyes.

"Very well," said the old soldier. "You'll be hungry by-and-by." And slipping the cake into his wallet, he looked sternly at the boy, who turned to him directly.

"Then you think that we shall not be able to cut our way out, Serge?" he said.

"Sure of it, boy. They're too many for us."

"Then what is to be done?"

"What the chief likes, boy; but if I were he I should stand fast and let the enemy hammer at us till he grows tired of losing men."

"Then you think we can beat them off?"

"Yes, boy, for a time; but we've got no stores to speak of, and even Romans can't, as I said before, or something like it, go on fighting for ever. But we shall do our best."

"Yes," said Marcus, with a sigh, as he looked thoughtfully round, unconsciously playing with the dog's ears the while, to that animal's great satisfaction. "But I don't like it, Serge."

"You don't? Well, you're a queer sort of a boy, then," growled the old soldier. "I never met a boy before who said that he didn't like fighting."

"I did not say so," cried Marcus, sharply. "I was talking about our position here."

"Oh, I see!" growled Serge. "What about it? Strong enough for anything."

"Perhaps so, but here we are shut in amongst all these rocks, with no room for the horsemen or the chariots to be of any use. How could we gallop along here, or how could the cavalry attack?"

Serge took off his great helmet, wiped his brow with the back of his hand, and stared hard at his young companion for some moments, till the boy noticed the heavy, fierce look, and coloured.

"Why do you look at me like that?" he asked.

"Cause you make me, boy?"

"How? What do you mean?"

"Who taught you to talk like that, boy? Anyone would think you were a young general."

"Nonsense, Serge!" cried Marcus, with the tint upon his face growing deeper. "I spoke like that because you taught me and made me understand about the uses and movements of horse and foot. I'm sorry I was not right, but you need not laugh at me."

"What, boy?" cried the old soldier, warmly. "Laugh at you! Why, if I grinned it was because I was pleased and proud to see what a clever fellow you are growing up to be. Why, a well-trained old soldier could not have spoken better. You're as right as right, and it is unfortunate that our chief should be surrounded here in a place where he can't use the best part of his troops. But there, we won't argue about it. 'Tarn't a common soldier's duty to talk over what his general does. What he, a fighting man, has to do is to fight and do in all things what he is told. Do you see?"

"Yes, Serge, I see, but—"

Marcus ended by making a sign intended to mean, Hold your tongue.

But Serge did not interpret it rightly.

"Yes, I see what you mean, and it's of no use to say 'but' to me. Our chief is a thoroughly good commander of men, and if he has got us into this hole of a place, where we are all shut up tightly without a chance to get out, why it's—"

Serge stopped short, to draw himself up tightly, for all at once he understood the true meaning of Marcus' sign, having suddenly become aware of the fact that their captain had in going from post to post stopped close to his elbow, and had heard nearly every word that had been spoken, while it was evident that he was thinking of something else at the same time, for he finished the old soldier's sentence for him in the way he interpreted it.

"Why, it is his duty to get us out of it, eh, my man? That is what you were going to say, is it not?"

"Well, something like it, captain," faltered the veteran; "but I didn't mean no harm."

"Of course you did not, but you were teaching this boy to criticise his superiors. Well, my man, you as an old soldier can see that we are in a very dangerous position."

"Yes, captain."

"And that if I try to cut my way out with the force I have at my command I may succeed."

"You will succeed, captain."

"Well, yes, I believe I should," said the captain, quickly; "but it would only be with the loss of a great number of men that could not be spared, and my division would afterwards be of little value to the main force."

"Yes, captain; that's right," growled Serge.

"Spoken like a good old fighting man," said the chief. "Now, then, speaking with your experience, what is best for me to do?"

"Set the men to build up rough walls with the stones, twice as strong as you have already."

"Good! Go on," cried the chief, while Marcus stood listening with his lips apart, and quivering with excitement the while.

"Then sit fast and wait."

"Without supplies?"

"Plenty of water from the spring yonder," growled Serge.

"Food?" said the chief, sharply.

"Foraging parties," continued Serge.

"Not to be depended upon in this high desert, man."

"Capture the enemy's provisions," said Serge.

"Doubtful, my man," cried the captain. "Can you propose nothing else?"

"Send off messenger at once on to the generals in front, telling how you are fixed, and asking for help at once."

"Hah!" cried the captain. "That is what I was waiting for you to say. Now for the messenger I must send to Julius and Cracis."

"Someone who knows the country."

"There is no one," said the captain, sharply. "Whoever goes must find his way by the traces left by the generals."

"Yes, that's right, captain," said Serge.

"Well, man, whom am I to send?"

"Me!" cried Marcus, excitedly. "I'll find my father and take your message."

"You shall, boy," said the captain, catching Marcus by the arm. "It is what I planned, for I am going to send to Cracis, who will be directing the forces and the arrangements of the campaign, while Caius Julius leads the men. You, boy, have one of the best chariots and the swiftest horses in the force. There is no need for me to write if you tell your father that you come from me. Tell him everything you know, and that I am going to hold out to the last, even if I have to butcher the horses that the men may live. Tell him I am in a perilous strait, and that help must come to save me and give the enemy a lesson that they will not forget."

"Yes—yes," cried Marcus; "and I start at once?"

"Not yet, only be quite ready to dash off yonder by the lower track which you can see leading downward through those hills. I say dash off, but only if the enemy make for you. If you are not followed hasten slowly for your horses' sake. Remember that he who goes softly goes far, and I want sureness more than speed."

"But he can't get out yonder, captain," growled Serge, fiercely. "You are going to kill the boy."

"Well," said the captain, with a peculiar smile, "could I honour the son of great Cracis more than by letting him die for the sake of his country?"

"That's all very grand in sound, captain," cried Serge, grasping Marcus' other arm, "but he's my boy as much as his father's, and I won't stand by and see him go alone to sudden death."

"Serge!" cried Marcus, fiercely. "How dare you! Captain, don't heed him; I am ready to go the moment you say the word, and—and—"

"Well, boy?"

"If I am killed," continued Marcus, struggling hard with his emotion, "and you ever see my father again, tell him, sir,

that I went to my death doing my duty, as he taught me, and praying that he will forgive me for disobeying his commands.”

“I will, boy,” cried the chief, warmly; “but it shall not come to that, for you will reach your father, I feel sure, and bring me the help I need.”

“He can’t, captain, I tell you,” cried Serge, fiercely. “Yes, you may punish me, a common soldier, for speaking as I do, but I tell you once again that I will not stand by and see my dear old master’s son butchered, for it’s nothing else. A boy like him, brave as he is, ought not to be sent, even if it is for his country’s sake, when there are plenty of stout, strong men who could do the work as well or better, because they are hard and tough.”

“Be silent, Serge,” cried Marcus, passionately. “Don’t punish him, captain; he means well, but he is half mad to speak to you like that.”

“You need not appeal, my boy,” said the captain, smiling. “I should punish no man for being brave and true to those he has served.”

“But I tell you, captain,” raged out Serge, “that it would be like murder to send the boy like that.”

“Silence, old madman,” cried the captain. “Why, I should be as mad as you even to think of doing such a thing. Listen, boy; be ready, and when the rest of the chariots are moved off towards the upper part of the track along with the rest of the force, you will keep back amongst the rocks. I shall lead the men myself and make a feigned attack as if I were going to retreat back by the way we came; and in the excitement and confusion, when the enemy yonder have drawn off to go to their companions’ assistance and take me in the rear, you will watch your chance and escape.”

“Yes, I see,” cried Marcus, excitedly; and the captain went on:

“The chances are that if you are noticed no one will try to stop you. It will be thought that you are deserting and seeking your safety in flight.”

“Yes, yes,” cried Marcus; “and now I shall be sure to succeed.”

“Yes, captain, that’s better,” growled Serge, in his deepest tones. “I like that.”

“Then take good heed to his safety, man,” cried the captain, warmly, “and die for him if there is need, for I would rather lose a hundred men such as you than one like him.”

“But—but—” stammered Serge, “you don’t mean—”

“I don’t mean!” cried the captain. “Why, the boy is right: you are an old madman to think that I would send that brave boy alone when he has such a faithful old follower as you at his side. No, no; go with him, and bring him back safely to me, along with the help I ask, or never see my face again.”

Before he had finished, rough old Serge, with the big tears standing in his eyes, was down upon one knee catching at the leader’s hand and carrying it to his lips.

“There, there, there,” cried the captain, “time is precious. No more of this. Boy, you have the safety of this force in your hands. Old veteran, I give you charge as bodyguard of this, my young despatch bearer. I do not tell you to do your duty, both of you; I only say, remember Rome. Farewell.”

The captain turned quickly away to join a knot of his chiefs who were anxiously awaiting his return, and the next minute, fixed in their positions, neither feeling as if he had the power to stir, Marcus and Serge were alone.

Chapter Twenty Three.

The Fight begun.

Marcus was the first to break the silence.

“Serge,” he panted, “isn’t he grand!”

“Grand!” cried the old soldier, excitedly. “Grand arn’t half big enough. He’s a hero, that’s what he is; and only think of me with a head like the old bull at home. Just as thick and stupid. Why, if he hadn’t been such a great, wise, clever general as he is, he’d have knocked me down with the hilt of his sword. But it’s all right after all, and look here, boy, you’ve got to do it.”

“We’ve got to do it, Serge,” cried Marcus. “Why, the idea is splendid; but I say—Lupe?”

“What about him?”

“What are we to do with him?”

“Nothing,” said Serge, promptly; “he’ll do for himself. Why, if you made up your mind to leave him behind he’d come.”

“I suppose so, Serge. There’s no press-house here in which to shut him up.”

"No, and there's no other way of getting rid of him but cutting off his head," said the old soldier, grimly; "and you wouldn't like to do that."

"Serge!" cried Marcus, taking for the moment his companion's words as being meant seriously.

"Ah, I thought you wouldn't, boy," said the old fellow, smiling. "He'll hop into the chariot, of course, and when the way's clear we can let him down for a run, and do him good. But no more talking; we've got to get ready."

"No," said Marcus; "we're soldiers, and all ready now. I can see nothing to do but wait till we see that it is time to go."

"And that isn't far away," said Serge, "for here comes back one of the captains. Why, Marcus, boy, I feel happy enough to begin to dance. Just think of it: here we are off on quite a holiday, straight away for the Roman camp, to get to your father at once, and—Oh, my thick head! I never thought of that!"

"Thought of what?" said Marcus.

"What we're going to do: both of us going straight to face the lion and put our heads into his mouth."

"You mean my father?"

"Of course."

"Nonsense! He will have no time to think of punishing us."

"Won't he?" growled Serge. "Trust the master for ever forgetting anything. We shall have it, and sharply too, after him and Julius have come and done what they've got to do in the way they know how."

"Pst! Don't talk," whispered Marcus. "Look, this officer is giving his orders to the leaders of the chariots, and here he comes to us."

The boy was right, for a few minutes later the officer came quickly to him, and his words were very short.

"You have your orders from the chief, young man?" he said. "Stand fast there among these rocks till the line of chariots has moved off, and then go down to the lower camp where the foot soldiers are as soon as they have changed their station."

He turned away directly, and as their driver sprang up, quite on the alert as he saw that something was on the way, Marcus went to one pony, Serge to the other, to see that every portion of the harness was in proper trim; and Lupe leaped out of the chariot and then back to the front, to raise himself upon his hind legs and plant his paws on the front as if he were in command and issuing his orders, which took the form of a deep bay.

Directly after a sub-officer, who was in command of the line, gave an order, each chariot was manned, and following one another in file they began rattling and bumping in and out amongst the rocks and hollows, slowly and noisily in the direction of the highest point of the pass from which the way had been fought so short a time before.

"Look yonder, Serge," cried Marcus, as he gazed beyond the outposts in the direction of the hills that were dotted with the enemy.

"Was looking, boy," growled the old soldier, "it's running all round us wherever the enemy can see. Why, it's like putting a stick into a wasp's nest and giving it a stir round."

"Yes, look, look, look!" cried Marcus. "What an excitement! Does it mean that they are going to attack at once? Because if they are we shan't get off."

"Nay, they are only getting ready. You'll see them settle down again directly to watch our men and make sure what we are going to do."

The chariots moved on, one following the other till the rough line was all in motion, only one standing fast, and that one calling for the help of both Marcus and Serge, who at a word from the driver ran to the heads of the ponies to assist in controlling them. For as the last chariot started off they made a desperate plunge forward to follow, so taking the driver by surprise that the pair went on a few yards before they were stopped by Marcus and Serge hanging on to their bits and backing them to the place from which they had started.

"Don't like being left behind," growled Serge.

"Steady, boy, steady!" said Marcus, caressingly, as he patted the arching neck and smoothed down the wild, thick mane of the fiery little steed he held. "Wait a bit and we won't check you. You shall go, and as fast as you like, if we can only get clear ground."

The swarthy little driver grasped the boy's words, and nodded and showed his teeth, while in a few minutes the spirited animals were quieted down where they stood now with their heads turned from the slowly advancing line.

"He ought to have been on the look-out," growled Serge. "Hullo! How the chief must have been arranging all this!" And then he stood silently with his young companion, watching the changes that were beginning to take place in their little force.

The spot on which they stood was sufficiently elevated to give the pair of spectators a pretty good view of the little beleaguered camp. All at once the line of chariots was halted, while a fresh agitation commenced where the cavalry had been posted. There was a quick change where horses and men were massed together, and the light played and

flashed from helmet and shield, while the men's spears glittered like so many points of light, as they sprang on to the backs of their horses and soon after were in motion, forming into another line which moved to the front of the chariots and were stopped in due time a little in advance.

"Why, he's making quite a show of it," growled Serge, "and the little army looks as if it were slowly going into action just for us to see."

"Yes," said Marcus, eagerly, "but look out yonder too. The enemy are advancing. They are gradually coming down that deep little valley, trickling like a stream."

"To be sure they are," said Serge, "and they are doing the same over yonder too."

"Well, doesn't that mean that they are going to attack at once?"

"No, boy; I fancy it only means to close us in and sweep us before them right up into the narrow of the pass again. They are beginning to take it."

"Take what?"

"Take what? Why, what our general means. I am not going to call him a captain any more. He's acting like a general, and a good one too. The enemy don't mean to attack—not yet, because you see they have got no head man to make a big plan for them all to work together. You see, they are all little bodies and tribes and bits of tribes, each under its own leader, and everyone thinks himself a general and acts just as he likes, and that's where they often get in a muddle, good fighters as they are. Look at them now. There's another lot yonder going slowly down from that hill into the hollow and coming creeping towards us."

"Yes, and right away from that opposite hill there's another tribe coming down," cried Marcus, whose voice was husky with excitement.

"That's right," growled Serge, "and don't you see, not one lot has moved towards the upper pass. Why have they left that way open?"

"I don't know," said Marcus. "Perhaps some of the enemy will move towards it soon."

"Not they," growled Serge, with a deep, low chuckle. "Our general's laid a trap for them, and they are walking in. They know that we must be running short of provisions, and they think that we are going to retreat. It looks like it, don't it? There goes an advance guard of the foot, marching to the front of the horse. Well done, brave boys! There are some fine men amongst them to step together like that! Yes, there they go, about a third of them straight for the upper pass, and the whole of our little army will soon be under weigh as if in full retreat."

"And then the enemy will attack," cried Marcus.

"Perhaps not yet. They know what it's like up yonder amongst the snows, and they think that, tired and half starved, our poor fellows will be marching to their death, leaving their enemies very little work to do beside cutting down the stragglers. Ah, depend upon it, all these little petty generals think they have a great victory within their hands without any cost to themselves, and that none of our poor fellows will get across the pass alive."

"Oh, don't talk, Serge," cried Marcus, excitedly. "Look at the enemy! There's more and more of them getting into motion. They are beginning to come from all round."

"Yes, as I said before, like a nest of stingers stirred up with a stick; but we are getting all in motion too," continued Serge. "Every captain has had his orders, and he's beginning to head his men as it comes to his turn. Look how the infantry are tramping along to lead the way! Now the horse are getting ready to start! Take it coolly, my lads. You ought to be leading those horses over that stony ground; but I suppose the general wants to make a show and let it seem as if we were in full retreat."

"Will the chariots go next?" asked Marcus.

"Yes, boy, of course, with the baggage behind them, and all the strength of the infantry to form the rear-guard. You can see that for yourself, for the foot-men haven't moved."

"No," said Marcus, "but the enemy are moving more and more into two great parties, advancing so as to meet where the pass begins to narrow. Why, Serge, if they get there first they'll cut our retreating line in two."

"They would," said the old soldier, with a chuckle, "if they could, but our general will be too smart for that. He's got it all carefully planned out, and when those two great streams of men come together out yonder they will be well in the rear. But now look at them. You can see right round the camp from here. What are the enemy doing? Trying to surround us?"

"No," said Marcus, after a long inspection; "they are all gradually turning in the same direction and getting into motion, as if to drive us back into the pass."

"Yes, and it looks pretty and bright up yonder with the sun shining on the snow. To see it from here, boy, no one would think it meant bitter winds and a cold that cuts through you and turns men drowsy so that they want to lie down and die."

"No," said Marcus, with a slight shudder. "Ah!" he added, excitedly. "Our big rear-guard is beginning to stir, and the enemy are still moving on. Why, in a short time the lower part of the camp will have none of them beyond it."

"That's right," cried Serge, as he shaded his eyes and gazed long and fixedly towards the lower part of the amphitheatre far beyond which, looking green and beautiful, stretched away the sunny plains of Gaul; "and that means, boy, that things will be just as our general intended that they should, clear of the enemy and ready for us to creep cautiously down like a pack of deserters trying to save our skins."

"Yes, but I want to be moving," cried Marcus, who was ready to stamp with impatience. "I want to be leading the horses down through this wilderness of rocks so as to get away to the open land, where we can send them off at a gallop with the wind whistling about their ears. I want to see their manes and tails flying, Serge, and feel the chariot rock as the wheels spin round and bump over the hillocks and stones. Then on and on as fast as we can go, straight for the main army, to tear up to the guards with my message and bring them back. Oh, how slowly they move! Why doesn't the chief hurry the men, and why doesn't the enemy follow them at a rush? I want to be stirring; I want to go."

"Well done, young hurry-me-up!" chuckled Serge. "That's all very pretty. You want this and you want that, and you want to be racing the ponies along and making the chariot rock and the wheels spin round, till bump, crash, one of the wheels flies off or drops to pieces, over goes the car, sending you yesterday and me to-morrow, and the driving boy with his head knocked off, while the poor ponies stand staring and broken-winded, and no message taken to the master."

"What are you talking about, Serge?" cried Marcus, angrily.

"You, boy, and what you want to do," growled the old man. "That's not the way to carry a despatch, and if we are going to get where we want, it will have to be slow and sure. It will be all very well going to the heads of the ponies as soon as the way's clear and leading them in and out amongst the rocks, so that if any of the enemy sees us he'll think we are sneaking away; but when that's done and we are clear of the enemy, what then?"

"Why, we must gallop off," cried Marcus, excitedly. "This is not a time for your slow and sure."

"Oh, arn't it?" grumbled Serge. "Then you want to gallop right away at once, do you?"

"Of course."

"Which way? What way? And how?"

"What are you talking about?" cried Marcus.

"You know, and yet you don't know. Where's our army? Haven't we got to find the track they left?"

"Of course."

"Yes, of course, boy, but where's the beginning of it?" growled Serge, as he made a comprehensive motion, sweeping round one hand. "There will be no one to ask, for the country will be cleared—all the fighting men gone to the wars, all the women and children and old folk hiding among the mountains. Our army will have made a clean sweep of everything, and we have got to eat. It all sounds very nice, my boy, but to go off at a gallop such as you speak of means riding to nowhere, and the army never found."

"Oh, Serge, don't talk like that."

"Must, boy. We will gallop when we can, but lots of the time we shall pretty well have to crawl."

"Oh!" groaned Marcus, as he felt the truth of the old soldier's words.

"There, don't make a noise like that, but look round here and see what's going on. It's a sight, boy, such as you may never see again."

"I can't stand and look at sights," cried the boy, angrily.

"But you must. It's part of the work you have on hand. You must watch for the time that is best for our start. You can't say anything to that."

"No," sighed Marcus, "that's right; but see what a time we have been waiting now. It must be hours since the general came and gave me his command."

"Well, not hours, but it's a long time, boy, and it will be longer yet before we shall dare to stir. Why, there are thousands of men below there, and hundreds more coming into sight just along the part we shall have to go, and we must wait till they have all marched off right and left to join the rest before we shall dare to start."

"But you are making the worst of it, Serge," cried Marcus, eagerly, as he glanced round from his post of observation at the magnificent sight of men in motion, glittering arms, trampling horse, and all framed in by the sterile rocks, the snow-capped hills, and the dazzling blue sky above.

"Perhaps I am, boy, and all the better for us; but it's much the best to look troubles straight in the face and not to come to grief from being too hopeful."

And as to time, so it proved, for after about another two hours had elapsed, with the boy bubbling over with impatience, they were able to feel that they might venture downward through the lower part of the amphitheatre, where they would be getting more into the shelter of rock and valley, and beyond the ken of the two trampling multitudes urging their way on after the little army now in full motion higher up the pass, the leading foot showing

still clearly and nearly as distinctly as if close at hand, though quite a couple of miles from where the chariot stood.

"Ah," cried Serge, at last, "now I think we will start."

"Yes, come on," cried Marcus. "But why did you say that?" he added, hastily.

"Because the fight's begun, boy."

"Where? How?" cried Marcus.

"Look yonder towards that patch of grey rock which glitters in the sun. That's where our stout rear-guard is. If you look hard you will be just able to see something moving slowly and something like a dark cloud just behind. That's the enemy's, front just coming into action, driving our men on. Hark! Do you hear how the hum of the enemy's troops' sounds changed?"

"Yes, I think so. It comes echoing along the rocks."

"Well, that's the barbarians cheering the others on."

"Oh," cried Marcus, "the attack begun, when we haven't even stirred to fetch the help! Serge, shall we reach the army to-night?"

"Nay, nor to-morrow night either, boy."

"And the fight begun!" cried Marcus. "Why, before we can get to my father and Caius Julius our little force will be destroyed."

"Bah! Don't you get setting up for a prophet like that. Do you think our men are going to sit down and let themselves be swallowed up without striking a blow? What are you thinking of, boy? Isn't our general marching his men into the narrow gorge again where he will be safely walled in, with only a little front to defend? You let him alone. He will stop and turn as soon as he has found a spot he likes, one that he can easily hold; and there he'll be with his rear open for men to go over the pass and forage for food. He knows what he's about, and we know what we have got to do."

"Yes," said Marcus, with a sigh; "we know, but—"

"But you needn't watch the going on of the fight, boy, for at this distance it's nearly all guess work and little see, and here as far as I can make out no one can notice us if we begin to move, so now's the time to start."

"Ah!" cried Marcus, triumphantly, as he turned to the horse's head on his side.

Serge made for the other, and the great dog reared himself up with his paws upon the front of the chariot and his jaws parted, to send forth one of his deep, barking volleys.

But at a cry from Marcus he sank down as if abashed, and the only sounds that were heard above the deep, low hum of the trampling army of barbarians, were the soft rattling of the chariot wheels, and the beat of the horses' hoofs upon the stony ground, as they began cautiously to make for the end of the amphitheatre and its labyrinth of rocks.

Chapter Twenty Four.

First Check.

It was a glorious change from the terrible inactivity of waiting to energetic action, and the feeling was shared by all.

Lupe leaped out of the chariot, the driver involuntarily shook the reins to urge the ponies forward forgetful of the fact that they were held on either side, and the beautiful little animals tried to plunge onward, but feeling the check upon their bits, snorted and began to rear while both Marcus and Serge had to make a struggle to control the desire within their breasts which urged them to break forward into a run.

But the knowledge of the need of caution prevailed, and glancing to right and left in search of watching enemies, they had the satisfaction of seeing the chaos of rocks rising above their heads and quite concealing them, though on the other hand their progress became more painful, their way more burdened with stones.

But it was glorious work to Marcus. These masses of rock were only difficulties in the way waiting to be mastered. It was quite refreshing to leave the leading of the horses to the driver and add their strength in pulling, pushing, and now and then seizing the spokes to hoist a wheel over some stony bar.

Their progress was slow towards the far end of the amphitheatre, but every score of yards was something gained, and all worked eagerly till at last the lower end of the amphitheatre was reached, where the rocks closed in again and a small ravine was before them, whose bottom was the bed of a mountain torrent along which a shallow stream hurried, hardly above the soles of the adventurers' sandals, though the smooth rocks of the bed and sides showed plainly enough that there were times when a furious flood dashed along, laden with smaller stones and gravel, whose effects were to polish the bigger rocks in their way.

"Better not talk," growled Serge, as they began to make quicker progress. "I don't suppose anyone is here; they'll all have gone to the front; but you never know, and every bad word is picked up by the rocks and sent flying far away till it drops plump into somebody's ear. Steady's the word, boy. Keep your little chap still. I don't suppose this bit of a streamlet keeps like this. I expect the narrow bed opens out soon, for the hills seem to grow smaller and smaller

here, and I am hoping that we shall come upon level ground so that we may get a gallop to stretch the ponies' legs."

"Ah, I hope so," cried Marcus, eagerly. "Now you are beginning to talk, Serge, like a man."

"And that means, boy, that I was talking a bit ago like some old woman, I suppose. Well, part of a soldier's duty is to take care. Steady you, sir, and don't splash the water up like that," the old soldier continued softly to the pony whose head he held. "It's all very nice for you, and I dare say the water feels nice and pleasant to your hoofs; but keep quiet. You don't have to polish the rust off your armour—I do. I wish to goodness we could get on good dry ground."

Like the rest of mountain torrents, the one whose bed they were following zig-zagged in all directions, so that even from their old point of vantage they had been able to see but a very little way along, and were quite content with the knowledge that the rocks rose up some fifteen or twenty feet above their heads, amply sufficient to shelter them from the sight of the enemy who lay away on either side, while now as they journeyed along the rocky bed, with the rattle of the wheels multiplied by the echoes, nothing was visible a hundred yards ahead, and as fast as one angle was turned there lay another a short distance in front.

But they were descending towards the plains; the splashing stream as it hurried along taught them that, and at the end of about a quarter of a mile of little interrupted progress they were cheered on by the fact that the rocks on either side grew lower, rapidly ceasing to afford them protection, and before long hardly rising to their shoulders.

There was another turn, and then another, and then Marcus cried eagerly:

"The hills are seeming to get farther away, Serge, and we must soon be out in the plain. I wonder what's beyond that turning."

"Open ground, I should say, my lad," said the old soldier, gravely; "but we must take care. We want the open ground for the horses, but not for ourselves."

"I don't understand you," cried Marcus, sharply.

"I spoke plainly enough, boy. I meant this: no shelter for us, don't you see, and if the enemy look back some of them may turn and come in pursuit."

"Ah, of course," cried Marcus. "Well, if they do, and catch us, you will have to fight, Serge, and drive them back."

"That's right, my boy, and I'll do my best: but if I do, and get the worst of it, you never mind but go right on."

"Yes," said Marcus, drily, "when you are ready to come too."

Serge grunted with satisfaction, and then, possibly from the solemnity of the desolate place along which they travelled, they tramped silently along over the rocky bed, their footsteps and those of the horses being the only sounds as they neared the sharp angle where the stream bed seemed to open out.

Marcus said afterwards that Serge should have been more cautious, and Serge retorted that Marcus was captain and ought to have sent on a scout in front. But as it was, the scout who acted, sent on himself, and that scout was Lupe, who, attracted by the openness of the rocks in front, suddenly bounded forward with a cheery bark, sending the water flying, and exciting the ponies into starting forward at a canter.

Almost involuntarily the holders of their reins let go and, acting as if on one impulse, caught at the sides of the chariot and sprang in, steadying themselves in their position as the heavy vehicle dashed on along the shallow bed, which was now wonderfully free of stones, while the driver participating in the dog's excitement, uttered a low cry and shook his reins, so that a minute later the chariot swung round the angle into where the ravine suddenly came to an end and a low level valley opened out. Right at the edge of the stream, and not far in front, a cluster of rough camp shelters seemed to spring up before them, and from out of the huts where they had been sheltering from the sun, a body of about two score spear-armed men suddenly appeared.

Chapter Twenty Five.

A Narrow Escape.

To have the horses turned, and gallop back along the narrow river bed for their lives, was Marcus' first thought. His second, braver and better, was to shout to the driver at his elbow to urge the horses on at their greatest speed.

The man hardly needed telling, for as the first words of command were buzzing in his ear he was shaking the reins and calling upon the brave little beasts to exert themselves to the utmost.

"Forward, my beauties," he yelled, "or the barbarians will have you, and before to-morrow you will be roasted and eaten. Gallop—gallop away!"

There was no time for Serge to talk, but he acted, and acted well. Picking up instantly two of the spears which hung at the chariot side in loops, he thrust one into Marcus' hand, retained the other, and stood ready to thrust. Marcus followed his example. Neither thought of using their shields, but stood fierce and staring of aspect, watching the party of men barring their way and shouting to them to stop.

It seemed like the next moment that the enemy, who fully expected the strangers in the chariot to surrender, found that to give up was the last thought in their expected prisoners' breasts, and thereupon some dropped their spears,

others were in the act of turning to fly, when with a dull, strange sound the chariot horses were upon them. Literally upon them, for the gallant little beasts obeyed their natural instinct, as they galloped and rose to leap the pale of human obstacles and spears in front, but only to come down quite short, trampling and spurning down the enemy, over whom the chariot rolled, bumping, leaping and splashing, and directly after, untouched by the long spears held by the uninjured, the driver turned the horses slightly, and their next bounds were upon dry land, rough and rugged enough, but free from any great impediments. Then away and away as hard as they could go, while the more active of those who were not hurt, recovering themselves a little from the shock and scare, came after the charioteers in chase with levelled spears.

"Splendid, Marcus, boy!" cried Serge. "Bah! You need not look back; they'll give up running directly. You did not think they would catch us up?"

"No," replied Marcus, breathing hard, "but stop! Stop! Lupe is fighting with them, and they'll spear him if we don't go to his help."

"Eh? Go back, boy? To certain death!" cried the old soldier, fiercely. "It couldn't be done if it was to save the finest dog in the world."

"Oh, Serge!" cried Marcus, wildly.

"The message to Julius and your father, boy. We must not think of either ourselves or the dog at a time like this."

"You are right, Serge," said Marcus, bitterly. "But poor old Lupe!" he continued, as he held on to the side of the chariot with his left hand and gazed back. "He'll kill no more wolves when they come down from the mountains over the wintry snow."

"Why not?" growled Serge.

"Because the enemy are spearing him."

"I haven't heard him yelp," cried the old soldier, "but I can hear somebody shouting as if Lupe was spearing him."

"Do you think so?" cried Marcus.

"Ay, that I do, boy. It wouldn't be an easy job to stick a long-handled spear into old Lupe when he is bounding about attacking legs, and waiting his chance to tackle throats. Like as not we shall find him coming after us, scratched and bleeding perhaps, but not hurt more than I can doctor him and set him right again, same as I've done more than once when he has had a turn with the wolves."

"Ah, look, look!" shouted Marcus, joyously. "Why, here he comes!"

For all at once Lupe, who had been lost to sight, hidden as he was by those of the enemy who had not taken up the pursuit, and who had resented the dog's attacks by endeavouring to pin him to the earth with their long spears, now dashed into sight, proving that he was uninjured by the bounds and springs he kept on making, barking furiously the while at those who were keeping up their pursuit of the chariot, but whose attention was now diverted so that they turned the points of their spears to repulse the dog's attack.

"Yah! Just like him!" cried Serge, angrily. "You ugly old idiot, you! Whether it's men or wolves, you always would have the last bite. Come away, stupid! Come here!" he roared again, quite oblivious of the fact that even if the distance had not prevented the dog from hearing, the noise of the horses' beating hoofs would have effectually drowned Serge's voice.

"Ought we not to stop and help him, Serge?" cried Marcus.

"No, boy; you know we ought not. We've got to get on with that message, and we must think of nothing else now we are clear. We must not even slacken while the path is so good; so keep on. You wanted a big gallop, so take it and be content, for the horses are going fast enough to satisfy anyone."

"Yes," sighed Marcus. "But poor old Lupe!"

"He must take care of himself, boy," growled Serge. "Look at him, charging at the enemy as he is, when he is doing no good and running the risks for nothing."

"He has stopped the pursuit," said Marcus.

"Yes; but why can't he be content now he has done it, and come on, instead of asking them as plainly as a dog can speak, to thrust a spear through his ribs?"

"But he knows no better," pleaded Marcus, who was watching all that was going on, and feeling proud of the dog's bravery in charging the enemy furiously from time to time, and escaping every thrust as if by a miracle. "I don't want to lose time, Serge," cried Marcus, raising his voice so that his companion could hear, "but I am going to check the horses for a few moments so that I can shout to Lupe. If he hears my voice calling him he will come."

"He's coming without, boy," cried Serge, angrily. "Oh! Poor old fellow! But it's his own fault. I knew he'd get it at last, and he has. That thrust has been too much for him. Look!"

Marcus was already looking sharply enough to have seen, at the same moment as his companion, Lupe make a rush at the halting enemy, whose spears flashed in the bright light; and then the dog rushed away again, to stand

apparently barking furiously at his enemies, before dashing off after the chariot for about a hundred yards, and then stopping short to roll over and over.

"Killed!" cried Marcus, in a voice full of anguish.

"No," said Serge, hoarsely; "he's up again and tearing after us."

But the next minute the dog had dropped again, and as far as those in the chariot could make out in the increasing distance, was busily engaged in licking his flank, and Marcus said so.

"Not sure," cried Serge, "but I'm afraid he has got an ugly dig. Is he going to lie down and die?"

"Surely not!" cried Marcus, excitedly. "No, he is up again, and here he comes."

"Then perhaps it is not so bad as I thought, boy. Yes, here he comes as hard as he can pelt. He can't be very bad, unless this is his last struggle to get to your side."

"And yours, Serge," said Marcus, mournfully.

"No, boy; it's you that he wants to reach," said the old soldier, with a grim smile. "He likes me, but you need not talk—he loves you; and if he's very badly hurt he is putting all the strength he has left in him to get here to you."

"Oh, Serge," cried Marcus, as the ponies tore on, with the dog in full pursuit, "it can't be so bad as you think!"

"Well, boy, I'm beginning to think you're right. He can't be so very bad, or he wouldn't be able to stretch himself out like that and come over the ground faster than the horses are going, and that isn't slow. Look at the brave old fellow; that's just the stride he takes—"

"Stride!" cried Marcus, proudly. "He's coming on in bounds."

"So he is, boy, and as I was going to say, that's just his way when he wants to overtake a pack of ravaging wolves who have been after our sheep. Well done, dog! Talk about muscles in his legs! I don't call them muscles; he has legs like springs."

The chariot horses still tore on at a fast gallop, the sturdy little driver guiding them with admirable skill as they neared obstructions; but fast as they swept over the open ground, with the heavy chariot leaping and bounding behind, their speed was far out-paced by the great dog which stretched out like a greyhound of modern times, and lessened the distance between them more and more, till he was so near that Marcus uttered a cry of horror upon making out as he did that the dog's flank was marked by a great patch of blood.

"Yes," said Serge, gravely, "I see, boy, and I could find it in my heart to stop the ponies and take him into the chariot; but there is no need for it. Can't be a serious wound, and he'll be close up to us in another minute."

"To reach us exhausted," cried Marcus, bitterly; "and I shall always feel that we might have saved his life."

Serge made no reply, but, frowning heavily, he watched the final efforts the gallant animal was making. For gathering himself together for every spring and putting all his strength in his efforts, Lupe bounded on till he was close behind the chariot, and Marcus uttered an encouraging shout as he went down on one knee, while the next minute Lupe made a tremendous spring, from which he landed in the middle of the rapidly-going vehicle, and then couched down, bent his head over as he let himself fall over on his left side, and began licking his wound as calmly as if nothing had happened more than the receiving of a big scratch.

"Why, Lupe, Lupe, old dog!" cried Marcus, as he knelt beside the wounded animal hard at work over his natural surgery.

Upon hearing the boy's voice the dog ceased his task, looked up in Marcus' face with his big intelligent eyes, beat the floor of the chariot a few times heavily with his tail, and then went on again with his dressing of his wound.

"There," cried Serge, after looking back at the distant Gauls, "they're not likely to pursue us, so make him ease the ponies down a little. We must not wear them out at the start. That's better," he continued, as Marcus touched the driver on the shoulder and signed to him to moderate their speed.

This done, Serge placed his spear in the loops and Marcus' beside it, before sinking down upon his knees on the other side of the wounded dog.

"Now then," he said, "let's see whether it's very bad or not," and he laid his great hand upon the dog's head.

Lupe ceased the licking upon the instant, and raised his head to gaze intelligently in the old soldier's eyes.

"Good dog!" said the latter, speaking with gruff gentleness. "I won't hurt you more than I can help."

As if he comprehended the old soldier's words and placed full confidence in his knowledge and power, Lupe stretched himself out fully upon his left side, extended his head, and, half closing his eyes, lay perfectly still as if dead.

"Poor old Lupe!" said Marcus, softly, and he took hold of the dog's right forepaw, with the result that the poor animal winced, but only whined a little and did not try to withdraw his leg, but at the same time began again to beat the floor of the chariot with his tail, keeping up the latter, as Serge carefully examined the injury.

"Nasty place!" growled Serge.

"Not dangerous?" cried Marcus, anxiously.

"Dangerous? No, not it. He had got himself into the right position when the spear thrust was made. It's bad enough, of course—"

"Oh, Serge!" cried Marcus.

"But there's no likelihood of its being dangerous. The spear caught him on the flank and went right in alongside his ribs, from the thick hair above his shoulder right away to the front of his hind jumper."

"Deep in the flesh, Serge?"

"No, no; only just under the loose skin."

"Has it bled much?" said Marcus, anxiously.

"Plenty, my lad, but he won't die of it. Do you hear, Lupe, old boy? Your doctor says he is not going to do anything in the way of tying you up, for this is the sort of wound that has done bleeding and will heal up without any more help than you can give it with your tongue; so go on and do what you like to it, just the same as you began when you were stopped."

The dog ceased beating the floor of the chariot as Serge went on talking to him, and as soon as the old soldier had given him a final pat or two he resumed the application of Nature's remedy, paying no heed to those in the chariot, which was now rolling steadily on and leaving the scene of the late encounter farther and farther behind.

Chapter Twenty Six.

In the Track of an Army.

It was not easy to quiet down the half wild steeds. They had been going through a long period of inaction since the fierce charge made on the night of the encounter before crossing the snowy pass, and once their driver had, to use the horsey phrase, given them their heads, and urged them on to their top speed, their hot, wild blood had been bubbling through their veins, making them snort and tear along heedless of rock, rut, and the roughest ground. Marcus had told the driver to check them twice over, but as soon as Lupe was in the chariot and both Marcus and Serge busy seeing to his wound, the speed began to increase, till the chariot was bumping over the open plain faster than ever; and though the charioteer strove his best it was some time before he managed to get his little pair into hand again so that the pace grew moderate and the progress was made at a gentle canter, instead of a wild gallop which threatened wreck over some projecting stone.

"They were half mad with excitement," cried Marcus, who was breathing hard.

"Yes," grunted Serge. "I thought we were going to be upset over and over again. Feel a bit frightened, boy?"

"Frightened?" said Marcus, looking wonderingly at his companion. "No! I liked it. Why, it was glorious to rush over the plain like that."

"Wouldn't have been very glorious if one wheel had come bump against a stone, flown all to pieces, and we two had gone flying one way and the chariot the other."

"No," said Marcus, laughing; "but that wheel did not, and we are all as right as can be, with the enemy left behind."

"Yes, that's all very true, boy," said Serge, who was pressing his helmet a little farther back and holding it there so that he could get a good uninterrupted look all round.

"You didn't like it, then?" said Marcus, smiling at his companion's perplexed expression.

"Course I didn't," growled Serge.

"Lupe did. Just look at him. He has curled himself up to go to sleep. That's a good sign, isn't it, that he is not badly hurt?"

"Yes, he's not going to be bad," said Serge, without so much as a glance at the sleeping animal. "Dogs always do curl up when they are hurt;" and he kept on staring anxiously ahead.

"What are you looking for, Serge? More enemies?" asked Marcus.

"No," replied the old soldier, though it was more like a grunt than a reply.

"What are you watching for, then? Not stones? It's getting smoother, and we're going on at a nice steady rate now."

"Yes, boy, we're going along at a nice steady rate, but I want to know where to?"

"Where to?" cried Marcus, quickly. "Why, to find the main army, and deliver the message."

"Yes, boy," growled the old soldier; "but where is the main army?"

Marcus stared at his companion for a few moments in complete astonishment, before gazing straight in front

between the tossing manes of the cantering ponies, and then looked to right and left.

"I don't know," he said, at last. "Somewhere in front, I suppose."

"Somewhere in front, you suppose!" grumbled Serge. "But where's that? Nowhere, I say. We shall never come up with them if we go on like this. We may be getting farther away at every stride."

"Oh, Serge!" cried the boy, excitedly.

"And it's O, Marcus!" growled the old fellow, sourly.

"What's to be done Serge?" cried the boy, despairingly. "Why, we may be losing time."

"Most likely," said Serge.

"And I was thinking that in flying along as we have been we were getting nearer and nearer to the army. Now, then, what is to be done?"

Serge was silent for a few moments, and then said slowly:

"Well, boy, it seems to me that the best thing we can do is to bear off to the right."

"But that may take us wrong," said Marcus, excitedly. "Why not go to the left?"

"Humph!" grunted Serge. "Because that may take us wrong, boy. You see, there's a lot of chance in it, and we must use our brains."

"Of course. That's what I'm trying to do, Serge."

"Don't seem like it, boy. We've got to track the army, haven't we?"

"Yes," cried Marcus, "but they've left no traces."

"Not that we have found as yet, boy, but they must have left some wounded men, or sick, belonging to the army or the enemy. If they're fighting their way, as is most likely, we may be sure that a good many men have fallen."

"Yes, that's reasonable enough, Serge, but we have seen no signs of one."

"Not one," said the old soldier. "So as there have been no traces, we must go by guesswork, mustn't we?"

"Yes, of course," cried Marcus. "Well, you guessed and I guessed, and I think my guess will be the better one."

"I know you do; but I don't, boy."

"Why?"

"Because there's no reason in yours and there is in mine."

"I can't see that," said Marcus, stubbornly. "Show me how your way can be better than mine."

"That's soon done, boy," said Serge. "Caius Julius will have a big army with him, won't he?"

"Yes, of course; a very large one."

"With plenty of mounted soldiers and chariots."

"Yes," said Marcus.

"Well, would he pick out the roughest part of the country all among the rocks, like you have, or the lower and more even way like mine?"

"You are right and I'm wrong, Serge," cried Marcus, frankly. "Let's go your way."

The old soldier nodded, the order was given, and the driver turned his horses' heads more to the right; but before they had gone far Marcus caught his companion by the arm.

"But suppose, Serge, that the army did not come this way at all? We do not know that it did."

"How's that?" asked the old soldier.

"Why, it might have gone by some other way."

"Which?" growled Serge.

"Oh, I don't know," replied the boy. "There must be plenty of ways through the mountains by which an army could go."

"No, there mustn't, and there arn't, without you go a long journey round, and that a general is not likely to do. Passes through the mountains are a long way apart; and besides, of course our new captain knew the way that Caius Julius was going, and this is the way he meant to follow if he had come on."

"Are you sure?" said the boy, doubtfully.

"Certain, my lad, or I wouldn't go this way."

Serge had struck for the right, and he proved to be right indeed, for before an hour had passed the adventurers had good proof, the old soldier suddenly giving vent to a grunt of satisfaction.

"What is it, Serge?" cried Marcus, eagerly, seeing that the old man was smiling.

"I'm right," he said.

"What! Can you see anything?"

"Yes; look yonder, boy."

Marcus gazed in the direction the old man pointed, carefully scanning the distance, but seeing nothing save the undulating stony plain with here and there a stunted tree, and in one part a depression like an old river bed.

"Well," he said; at last; "I can see nothing."

"Not looking right," said Serge.

"I've looked right and left, and down that hollow too," said Marcus.

"That's what I say. You haven't looked right up. Look up."

"Up?" cried Marcus, who felt puzzled. "I do wish you would speak. There is nothing to see there but those crows circling slowly round and round."

"That's right," grunted Serge; "you have seen what I mean."

"What, the crows?"

Serge grunted, and Marcus stared.

"I don't know a bit what you mean," said Marcus, irritably. "Don't, pray don't, waste time."

"I'm not wasting time. I say we're on the right track, boy. Look at the crows."

"What for?" cried Marcus, angrily.

"What for?" growled Serge. "S'pose you and me was at home and were out among the pastures and up the lowest slopes of the mountains where we drive the goats."

"Well, what then?" cried Marcus, impatiently.

"And suppose we saw crows flying round and round. What would you say then?"

"That there was a dead lamb or a kid lying somewhere about, or that the wolves had been down and killed a sheep."

"Well?" said Serge, with a dry look on his wrinkled face.

Marcus was silent for a few moments, and then, "Oh, Serge," he cried, with a look of horror, "you don't think—"

"Yes, I do, boy. Nay, I feel sure. There's been a big fight yonder where those crows are flying about."

"Yes: I see," cried Marcus. "But—but which side has won?"

"Ah, that we are going to see, my boy, and before long too. Turn a bit more to the right, my man," he continued, laying his hand upon the driver's shoulder, and their direction was a trifle altered, with the result that before long they were passing by the side of a portion of the plain where it was evident that a desperate encounter had taken place from the large number of ghastly relics of the engagement that lay scattered about, spread over the space of quite a mile.

The scene was passed in silence, Marcus pressing their driver to urge on the ponies till they were well ahead, after grasping the fact that a stubborn stand must have been made, and that the action had been continued onward to where they stood.

"Well," said Serge, "you see all clearly enough now, don't you, boy?"

"I'm not quite sure," said Marcus, thoughtfully, "though I think our army must have won the day."

"There's no doubt about that, boy, and in such a fight as it has been they could not help losing heavily; but I haven't seen the body and arms of a single Roman soldier, and that is a sure sign that they won the day, and then stopped to carry away their wounded and bury their dead."

Marcus shuddered, and they rode on for a time in silence, passing here and there a little mound, and as soon as they had cleared one the old soldier swept the distance with his eyes in search of another.

Marcus looked at him questioningly.

"Yes, boy," said the old fellow, softly; "an ugly way of tracking our road, but a sure. Those hillocks show where they've laid some of our poor fellows who fell out to lie down and die, and there their comrades found them."

"War is very horrible," said Marcus, after a pause.

"Well, yes," replied Serge, "I suppose it is; but soldiers think it's very glorious, and as a man's officers say it is, why, I suppose they're right. But there; that's not for us to think about. It's not horrible for our Roman soldiers to stop and bury their slain, and their doing this has made it easy for us to follow the track of the army."

"Yes," said Marcus, who was gazing straight before him; "and look there."

Serge shaded his eyes, and gazed in the direction pointed out.

"Yes," he said, "that's another sign-post to show us our way, and I dare say we shall come upon some more, ready to prove that we are on the right track. The crows seem to have been pretty busy there, boy."

"The crows and the ants," said Marcus.

"Yes, and maybe the wolves have been down from the mountains to have their turn."

"Whoever would think, Serge, that those scattered white bones had once formed a beautiful horse, just such a one as these we have in the chariot?"

"Ah, who indeed?" replied the old soldier. "But I don't know that we want to think about it, boy. Let's think about your message and getting on to deliver it. We must make the best of our way while the light lasts, so as to get on as far as we can, as we know now that we're going right. I should like to get down to some hilly or mountainous hit."

"What for, Serge?"

"To climb up when it's dark."

"Because you think it will be safe to sleep there?"

"No, boy; I was not thinking of sleeping till we get our message delivered. I was wondering whether we should be lucky enough to get so far that after dark, if we climbed up high enough, we might be able to see our people's watch fires twinkling like stars in the distance."

"Oh, Serge, that would be capital!" cried Marcus, excitedly. "Do you think we shall be so fortunate?"

"Don't know, boy," growled the old soldier; "but hurry the ponies along while we can see that we are on the right track. There's no reason why we shouldn't be fortunate."

"Oh, we must be, Serge," cried Marcus. "It's horrible to think of our general and all his men shut up in that bitter snowy pass, fighting hard for life, and always watching for the help that does not come. Forward!" shouted the boy, and at his word the driver seemed to make the horses fly.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Marcus' Plan.

"Steady, steady!" cried Serge to the driver. "Mind that great block."

For as they tore on, with more and more traces of an engagement teaching them that they were going right, the driver seemed to be sending the fiery little pair he drove straight for a low mass of stone, contact with which must have meant wreck.

Startled by the old soldier's angry shout, the driver drew one rein sharply, making the ponies swerve right for another far more dangerous obstacle and but for Marcus' readiness in snatching at the other rein, a worse mishap would have occurred.

They were saved from this, but the shouts had scared the fiery little steeds, sending them dashing frantically off in quite a fresh direction, while to Marcus' horror, he saw that it was into another danger in the shape of a vast body of the enemy who, as the flying ponies drew near, sprang to their feet from where they were lying behind a ridge.

Getting the ponies once more well in hand, the driver, who saw nothing but death for himself if they were taken, wrenched the heads of the pair round once more, just when they seemed about to plunge into the thick ranks of the enemy, along whose front they tore in the intent of sweeping round their line.

But the hope was vain, for another body of men came into sight, rising from the earth where they had been lying, to form up at right angles to the first body, and once more the direction of the chariot had to be changed, then altered again and again, for to Marcus' horror foes sprang up in every direction they took, the country seeming alive with the enemy, and all prospect of getting through them and continuing their dash for the Roman army at an end.

"What's to be done, Serge?" cried the boy, at last.

"Steady the ponies and let them get their wind again."

This was done, the gallop being turned into a gentle trot and from that into a walk, while the fugitives watched the slow, steady advance of the barbarians, who in their way, in spite of the name they received, appeared to be nearly as civilised as the Romans themselves.

Their intent now seemed to be to make sure of the capture of the chariot and its occupants as they kept on closing up and gradually narrowing the extent of the open plain about which the galloping evolutions had taken place.

"It's just as if they knew that we were the bearers of an important message, Serge," said Marcus.

"Seems like it, boy, but it is not," was the reply. "We're enemies and invaders on their lands, and they mean to take us at all costs. It looks bad too."

"What does?" said Marcus, sharply.

"The country being up like this. It looks bad for our army, boy. I'm beginning to think that Julius has had to fight every step of the way he has come, and if our message was not what it is I should say it was our soldierly duty to give up attempting to get through with it."

"What!" cried Marcus, with a look of horror, as he turned from watching the approaching enemy spreading out more and more over the open plain.

"I said if it wasn't what it is," said Serge, quietly.

"But you wouldn't give up, Serge, come what may?"

"Do I look the sort of man to give up when I have work to do?"

"No, no," cried Marcus, warmly. "It was wrong of me to think it even for a moment. But now, Serge, our way lies away to the left."

"No, boy; I've been watching every turn we took, and if we kept on as we are now we should about be in the line our army took."

"Then we must make a brave dash now and with lowered spears gallop right through them."

"And come down before we were half through their line, boy."

"Oh, don't oppose what seems to be the only plan, Serge!" cried the boy, appealingly.

"I oppose it because it means being killed or taken prisoners."

"Then what can we do?" cried Marcus.

"I'll tell you what's best, boy," said the old soldier, thoughtfully. "They're a long way off us, both in front and on the left."

"Ah, try and trick them?" cried Marcus. "I know!"

"That's right, then, boy," said Serge, with a smile. "How would you do it?"

"Why like this," cried Marcus, excitedly—"Pull up!" he cried to the driver.

The man obeyed, and the ponies stopped short, looking full of go, but with their sides marked heavily with sweat and foam.

"Now," cried Marcus, laying down his spear and leaping out of the chariot, "out with you both. Lie down, Lupe! Quiet, sir!"

The driver and Serge sprang from their places and followed Marcus to the heads of their steeds, to begin patting and caressing them in the full sight of the army.

"Now," continued Marcus, "you get back into the car," and the driver stepped into his place.

"Take hold of the reins and hold them ready, but sit down as if your work was done. You, Serge, lead one pony; I'll lead the other, and we'll walk them slowly towards the enemy away here to the left."

"So as to let them think we have given up trying to escape, and are going to surrender?" said Serge, quickly. "Well done, boy! That's just about what I was going to say."

"Then," continued Marcus, "when we have slowly walked the ponies as near to the enemy as we dare, resting them all the while, I'll give the word to gallop off, and as the ponies are turned we two spring into the chariot as it passes, and we'll tear away for liberty. No stopping this time, but use our spears."

"That's right," said Serge, rubbing his hands softly; "and I think they will be so taken by surprise that we shall get through; and if we don't—"

"Well, Serge, finish what you were going to say," said Marcus, sadly.

"It will be because it couldn't be done."

"But it must be done."

Just then a faint burst of cheering came to the adventurers' ears and began to run along the line upon their left, towards which they now began to move at a walk.

The next instant it was taken up in front to their right and rear.

"They think we've surrendered, Marcus, boy," said Serge, with a chuckle. "Here, do as I do; take off your helmet and pitch it into the chariot. It will look better."

Marcus followed his companion's example, and leading the ponies, the adventurers advanced slowly towards the enemy on their left, still about a quarter of a mile away, and Marcus had the satisfaction of seeing that the men had all halted, and those on the left were awaiting their approach, while all ideas of order or discipline were at an end, the lines breaking up and becoming so many loose crowds of armed men, instead of roughly-formed Greek-like phalanxes ready for action.

Those were exciting moments, and as the time neared for giving the order for action, Marcus' heart did not fail, for it beat as strongly as ever, but a feeling of doubt began to grow as he glanced along the line of the army he was approaching, and then at the loose mass standing or moving about at right angles, and thought how impossible it would be to dash through them.

At last, when the chariot was about fifty yards from the line, and a couple of the enemy who seemed to be leaders stepped forward as if to take their weapons, Marcus, without turning his head, whispered softly:

"Ready, Serge?"

"Ready!" was the reply.

"Then drop your rein when I say *Now*. You, driver, turn their heads at the same moment and gallop away."

For answer the charioteer gathered up the reins a little, when, startled at the touch, the ponies threw up their heads.

What followed looked so natural upon the movement of the steeds that when Marcus gave the word, and he and Serge stepped back together it seemed to the enemy as if the horses had snatched the reins from their hands, and when the chariot was turned rapidly, to dash off, the actions of Marcus and Serge in catching at the sides and swinging themselves in were looked upon as attempts to help the driver check the endeavours of a restive pair of horses which had taken fright and galloped away at full speed.

Consequently a burst of laughter arose, to travel down the line, every man watching the progress of the supposed runaways with delight, while the body of men, now a disorderly crowd, instead of taking the alarm and closing up with presented spears to receive and impale the runaways, caught the contagion of laughter and separated, tumbling over one another in their haste to escape the expected shock, and leaving a wide opening through which the horses tore, urged to their utmost speed by their driver's excited cries.

Seeing this, Marcus shouted to Serge, who was ready with the spears and holding out one to Marcus.

"No, no," he cried, and seeing no danger he bent over the front of the chariot, making believe to snatch at the reins, and grasping his idea Serge seemed to be seconding his efforts as they tore by, and it was not until the last of the enemy was left behind that any attempt was made to follow, while even then the idea that it was a ruse went home but slowly.

"Hurrah!" said Marcus, softly, for he did not dare to shout. "They may think what they like now; we have got the start and ought to be able to drive clear away for the army again, eh, Serge?"

"I hope so, boy, but after what I've seen I'm afraid that the passage of our army has roused up the whole country, and that we shall be meeting enemies every step of the way."

"Oh, don't say disheartening things after this escape, Serge," cried the boy, excitedly. "That's right, lad; keep them going for a bit longer, and then steady down again to give them breath. Look at the beautiful beasts, Serge. I wish we were mounted upon them, instead of letting them drag this heavy chariot."

"I'm looking at the enemy, my boy," cried Serge. "They don't seem to know the truth yet, but scores of them are coming after us at a run. I don't think they'll catch us though, for we are going four feet to their one."

"Yes, but we must not distress the horses. Steady! Steady! An easy gallop now. That's better. A quarter of an hour like this, and we can laugh at them, unless old Serge is right and enemies are ready to spring up everywhere in our way."

"Ah!" shouted Serge, at that moment, and the ponies took his cry to mean faster, and increased their speed. "No, no," he cried. "Steady, steady! Look, Marcus, boy, we are going right," and the old soldier pointed to another of the grim traces of war in the shape of an overturned chariot, with the skeletons of the horses that had drawn it looking ghastly and strangely suggestive of what might have been their fate, or might happen even yet.

Before long the crowded together lines of the enemy began to grow more and more confused; then the idea of distance manifested itself more and more, and those who had pursued melted away into the main body, while the gallant little steeds, whose pace had been slackened down into a steady hand gallop, were eased more and more, to proceed at a gentle trot such as they could easily keep up, till they were checked in the midst of a green slope that ran along by a pine wood, pleasant indications of the mountain land being left behind.

Here a clear cool stream ran prattling along, towards which the ponies stretched out their necks and were allowed to drink, their example being followed by those they had drawn, a short distance higher up, and Marcus rose looking eager and refreshed.

"We shall do it, Serge," he cried; "but I have seen no signs lately of the army having passed this way. Have you?"

Serge gave him a peculiar look.

"Yes," he said, roughly; "there has been fighting just yonder, if you look for it; but don't, boy. I want to get on gently again, and to find some sign of a farm, or peasants' hut. We must have food of some kind if we are to do our work. Let's get a little farther on, and then I must forage."

"Yes," said Marcus, sadly. "It seems waste of time, but it must be done, I suppose. But why not let the ponies browse a little here? See, they have already begun."

"Because it will be of no use for us to look about here."

"Of course not," said Marcus, hastily, and he stood looking hurriedly round, to see for the first time that all along the edge of the forest which should have been bordered with fresh green bushes, was broken down and trampled, while not far from where he stood fire had been doing its work, and a large portion was blackened stump and skeleton-like stem.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Marcus' Promise.

"Seems to me, my lad," said Serge, "that we ought to have been started on this journey two days earlier."

"Yes, Serge," replied Marcus, in a despairing tone. "It's maddening. Here have we gone on, almost starved, never getting a proper night's rest—"

"Well, but that's nothing to grumble at, my boy. That's soldiering; that is what I always told you. A soldier must be ready to fast and go without sleep, and be always prepared to fight. Now, didn't I teach you that?"

"Yes, Serge, but I didn't quite understand it then."

"But you do now?"

"Oh, yes, I know now; and I wouldn't care a bit if we could only overtake them. Three times over during the past week we have been so close that half a day's march must have brought us to the army."

"That's true," said Serge; "and each time we were cut off by parties of the enemy, and driven back, just as we thought we could march in, find the master and Caius Julius, and deliver our message. Fortune of war, my lad; fortune of war."

"Misfortune of war," cried Marcus, angrily. "Here, I don't know how many days it is since we started, for days and nights and time all seem to have grown mixed up together."

"Yes, we have had rather a muddled and worrying time of it, Marcus, lad."

"And now we are just as far off as ever."

"Well, not quite, my lad."

"I feel weak for want of food, and confused for want of sleep."

"Not you! You only fancy that because you're down in the dumps. You'll be all right as soon as ever there's anything wants doing and we have tumbled by accident near to one of those parties of the enemy, who all seem to be moving the same way as we are to surround the army."

"Yes, Serge, and that's what I am afraid they are doing, and keeping us outside. It's all desperate and bad."

"Oh, I don't know. We shall get to them some time," said Serge.

"Some time!" cried Marcus, mockingly. "Our poor general with his followers must have been utterly destroyed by this time."

"Tchah! Not he! You don't know what a Roman general can do. He'll hold out for months, or kill those who are attacking him. Give it up your fashion!"

"What do you mean by my fashion?" cried Marcus, sharply.

"Give it up in despair sort of way when there's no need."

"No need!" cried Marcus, bitterly. "You seem to be blind to the danger. Why, the main army, as you must see perfectly well, has penetrated so far into the enemy's country that it is completely surrounded by the tribes that have gathered together, and are only now waiting for a favourable opportunity to fall upon it and crush it."

"Well, the army's no worse off than we are. They've surrounded us—parties of them—only we wouldn't be crushed. It's just the same with the Roman army; it won't be crushed. I've taught you times enough, boy, what our generals can do—lock their men together, shield to shield, cohort to cohort, all facing outwards and bristling with spear and sword. These barbarians are brave enough and they rush at our men meaning to crush them and sweep them out of the country; and so they keep on at it, losing more and more, before they roll back beaten."

"Yes, Serge, but only to try again."

"Oh, of course. That's right enough, but it only means to be rolled back again. Now, look here, my boy; you have got your message to deliver."

"Yes, yes, I know," cried Marcus, despairingly.

"And you are a bit disappointed because it's not done. Everything's bad, you say. It's been all misfortune since we started, and we may as well give up at once."

"Well, isn't it all true?" cried Marcus, as he stood unconsciously caressing one of the chariot horses as the pair stood ready to make another dash at a moment's notice, their driver busying himself the while with seeing to and examining the different parts of the harness.

"True! Hardly a bit of it," cried Serge. "I ought to give you a good drilling and bullying for what you said; but somehow I can't, for we have had some very hard work, and all through you have been such a brave boy."

"Oh, nonsense, Serge! You are only saying that to comfort me. You will praise me so."

"Oh no I won't," said the old soldier, gruffly. "I won't give you a bit more than's good for you, boy. When I say you have done well it means you have done well. You won't get any flattery out of me. All this trouble that we are going through is no more than you must expect. Look what we are doing, and how we stand."

Serge was sitting down on a stone, busily employed as he talked polishing and sharpening his sword as it lay across his knees, and he did not trouble himself to look up at his young companion, but kept on lecturing him in a bluff, good-humoured way, smiling to himself with satisfaction all the time.

"Now here we are, trying to overtake our army, which had some days the start of us. If I say what you think isn't right, you stop me. Well, our army has invaded the country of these Gallic tribes. The Gauls are no fools. They know Caius Julius has come to conquer them, and they don't want to be conquered. Their idea is to invade Rome and conquer us. Well, my boy, we have come into their country, and every man who can fight has been called upon to come and fight against us, so that like a big crop in a cultivated land, what has been planted has come up all over. And this crop is fighting men with swords and spears. Now we—you and me and the driver, and we ought to put the horses in, bless 'em, for they've done wonders—have come after the army, marching through this bristling crop, and you, without taking any account of what a hard job it is to get through, keep on grumbling and saying everything is bad."

"And so it is, Serge."

"It ain't, boy!" cried the old soldier, firmly, and letting his sword rest, brightly polished and sharp as it was, he now raised his head and looked smilingly in the boy's face. "Haven't you got proof of it that things are not as bad as you say?"

"No," cried Marcus, angrily. "I was entrusted with a message to my father and Caius Julius, and I have not done my task."

"Not yet, boy, but you are going to at the first chance. Why, look here, my lad, if things were half as bad as you say they are we shouldn't be here. If we have escaped once from being taken or killed we have got through a dozen times. Look at us. Why, we haven't got a scratch, and here we are, better, ever so much, than when we started."

"Better?" cried Marcus.

"Yes, better. We are a bit hungry."

"I tell you I'm half starved," cried Marcus.

"Take your belt up another hole, then, boy. That's a splendid tightener. Hungry! Why, you talk about it as if it was a disease, when it's a thing you can cure yourself the first time you get hold of a big cake and a bowl of goat's milk."

"Oh, how you talk!" cried the boy, holding out his arm and trying to span his wrist with his fingers. "Look how thin I am getting."

"Thin!" cried Serge. "Why, you look prime. You have got rid of a lot of that nasty fat that was filling out your skin through doing nothing but sit on a stool all day making scratches with a stylus on a plate of wax. What does a soldier want with fat? Your armour's quite heavy enough to carry, without your being loaded up with a lot of fat. That's right enough for women and girls; makes 'em look smooth and nice and pretty, and fills up all the holes and corners; but a soldier wants bone and muscle—good, hard, tough muscle and sinew, and that's what you have got now. Look at me."

"Yes, I have looked at you time after time, Serge, and you look hollow-cheeked and haggard and worn."

"Why, I feel prime, my boy, ready for anything; ten years younger than when we started. Why, I have got into regular

fighting condition again. Did you see how I jumped into the car yesterday when the ponies started without me?"

"Yes, I saw you run ever so far and jump," cried Marcus.

"And you begin talking to me about being haggard and worn! Isn't a sword all the sharper for being a bit worn?"

"Yes, of course."

"So's a soldier. Look here, boy; we are getting seasoned, and I'm proud to say that I am what a man's officer would call a veteran, and that's the finest title there is in an army. Then, too, look at our lad here. See what a splendid driver he's turned out, and how he can send that chariot in and out among the rocks so close as almost to shave them, and right in between pairs of them where you or I would think there wasn't room to pass. And then there's the ponies! They are a bit thin, certainly, but they are as fine as bronze, and can gallop farther and better than ever. Now then! Speak out honest! Did you ever before see such a splendid pair?"

"No, Serge, never."

"And yet you say that everything's wrong and hopeless and bad. Why, boy, if I didn't know it was all through your being young and anxious and eager to do your duty, I should be ashamed of you."

"But you are not, Serge?" cried the boy, excitedly.

"Shamed of you? No, boy. I feel proud."

"There, Serge," cried Marcus, leaving the pony, to go and lay his hand upon the old soldier's shoulder, "I've done, and I will try and never complain any more. I do see now what a lot we have to be thankful for. Now then; what's the next thing we ought to do?"

"Same as usual, my lad," said Serge, rising and sheathing his sword, which went back into its scabbard with a quick glide till the hilt was nearly reached, when it required a firm thrust to get it close into its place. "Well, to begin with, forage first. I often think it's a pity a man wasn't made like a horse. Look at those two ponies! How their coats shine in the sunshine! They began eating their breakfast before it was light, for I was watching and wakeful, and I got thinking like this as I heard them busy at it, crop and blow, crop and blow, and after they had eaten all they wanted they had a drink of water, and there they are fit for the day, while we three have got to find out some place or another where we can buy, or frighten them into giving us some bread and milk. We always have been lucky enough so far, and I don't see why we shouldn't be again to-day."

"But which way shall we go, Serge? It's of no use to try to follow up the army as we did yesterday, and then have to turn back because the enemy are between us and it."

"No, boy; I think the best thing we can do is to leave that till we have done foraging, for we must have something to eat. Then we'll try if we can't creep round these tribes, or get in between them somehow. Perhaps we may have a bit of luck to give us a little help. Anyhow, we are not going to despair."

"No, Serge," cried Marcus, firmly; "anything but that."

"Hah!" cried Serge. "That's spoken like Cracis' son."

Chapter Twenty Nine.

On the Brink.

Evening was coming on on the following day, when, growing tired but in higher spirits, Marcus and Serge were cautiously following the traces well marked along the side of a forest which gave unmistakable evidence of the passing of a large body of men.

There had been rain some hours before, which had left the earth softened and refreshed, ready, too, for yielding to the pressure of horses' hoofs and the clearly-indicated lines formed by chariot wheels. These formed a splendid guide for the adventurers, who added their own traces as they pressed eagerly on.

"They are our people, Marcus, boy, and they are not far ahead."

"Think so, Serge?"

"Sure of it, boy. It has rained since morning, and whoever passed along here has made these marks since the rain."

"And it's certainly not a retreat, Serge, for there's no sign of fighting."

"Not a bit, my boy. It's our army on the march, and all those signs show that our men were in full fettle, ready for anything, and are pushing forward into the middle of the enemy's country. See yon mountains?"

"Mountains!" said Marcus. "You might call them hills."

"Well, hills, then; and it strikes me that we shall find these tracks lead straight to one of those green nicely-rounded tops with a pleasant slope all round. Now, there's that one there," continued Serge, pointing to a hill standing by itself; "that's just the sort of place my old officer would have picked out for his next halting camp, lead his men right to the top, mark out their places, and have them all at work before sundown, busy as bees digging out a ditch and

throwing up a wall of earth in front for our men to fight behind, in case they were attacked.”

Serge had hardly ceased speaking as he walked with Marcus on one side of their horses, the driver on the other, to rest the brave little animals as much as possible, when, passing round a clump of trees, following the bend of the track made by the marching army, they came more fully in view of the hills whose tops only they had seen before.

Nearest of all was the one to which Serge had drawn attention, and as this opened out more and more in the evening sunshine Marcus uttered an ejaculation and caught at his companion’s arm.

“Ah!” cried Serge, starting, and he raised his hand to sign to their driver to stop, before catching at one of the ponies’ reins. “What is it? Enemy?”

“I don’t know,” cried Marcus, excitedly. “Look!”

The old soldier shaded his eyes, and uttered a cry of joy.

“Enemy? No?” he cried. “It’s just as I said. Look, boy! Our people! Our army! Far off as it is, I know them by the standards, and the way they have gone to work. Look at them! Why they look no bigger than bees from here, and it is as I said. They are forming camp as if they meant to stop for days.”

“Oh, don’t, Serge,” cried the boy, huskily. “Don’t talk like this if you are not sure. It seems too good to believe, after all that we have gone through.”

“Not it, boy!” cried Serge, excitedly. “Not a bit too good. Look at all the bad we have had. Everything has another side, and there it is for us.”

“Are you sure?”

“As that I am here, boy. That’s the Roman army, or part of it, for I can’t be certain that Julius and Cracis are there. But if it’s only a part it will do for us, for the general who commands can receive our message and go to yon poor fellows’ help. Now, then, forward at once, for though that camp looks so near we have miles to travel before we can march up and be stopped by their sentries ready to challenge us in the good old Latin tongue. Why, boy, you said yesterday that all was bad and everything had failed. What do you say now?”

“Forward!” cried Marcus, “and at once!”

The ponies had done little work that day, for the advance had been made cautiously on account of the many bands of the enemy’s warriors which swarmed throughout the country, and the empty chariot had formed the load; but now without further conversation Marcus sprang in.

“If we walk, Serge,” he said, “we shall not get there till after dark.”

“And then have a lot of trouble about going up to the camp,” said Serge—“perhaps get a spear in one’s ribs; but I wouldn’t hurry. Besides, we don’t know whether the country’s clear between us and them.”

It was a glorious evening, and for the first time the land with its forest and verdant hills looked beautiful to Marcus by comparison with the rugged barren mountains they had traversed, and whose peaks lowered up stern and forbidding in the distance, as they glanced back from time to time.

A sharp look-out was kept, as whenever the trees were not too close the adventurers made cautious observations of the surrounding country, but nothing suggestive of the enemy was seen, the broad track made by the advancing Roman army marked their way, descending gradually from the edge of the forest into one of the valleys beyond which extended the range of verdant hills. Upon the special one that they had marked down they had a clear view of the busy soldiery passing to and fro and looking diminutive in the extreme, before the track led farther into the woody valley and the hills were completely shut out.

The distance proved greater than they had expected, but there was their guide wandering here and there up ascents or down into the depths of the valley along which meandered a lovely little river whose moist meadow-like sides were sadly trampled and cut up. Still there was no sign of danger, and the river bank was followed for some distance.

“But those hills are on the other side, Serge,” said Marcus after a time.

“Yes, and before long we shall come upon a shallow place that has been forded. They’ll have picked out a spot where the chariots could easily pass, and what would do for them will do nicely for us, boy. So keep on, and hold your eyes open, for where the Roman soldiers are, the enemy’s men will be pretty near at hand.”

Soon after, the track followed a bend of the river, going nearer and nearer, and then all at once struck straight for the bright flowing water, ending at the trampled down bank, and reappearing plainly enough on the farther side.

“Not above a foot deep,” grunted Serge; and he proved to be right, the water never once coming up to the chariot’s axle trees, while the ponies’ hoofs just splashed in the barely covered gravel as they passed out on to the springy grass on the farther side, where the track was more plain than ever.

“Shall we get there before dark, Serge?” said Marcus, after a time.

“Hope so, boy, or we shall find it a bit hard. It’s easy enough now, but when the sun’s down it will be rather hard to follow the marks with all these trees overhead.”

"But the path must soon begin to ascend the hill," said Marcus.

"I expect they'll have found it easier to walk round it and slope up from the other side. I dare say they've got a good deal of baggage—impedimenta, as we call it—else I should have thought that they might have struck up the valley slope at once. It will be dark before long; sooner than I expected."

"But they had the broad daylight, and of course taking a long sweep it would be much easier for the chariots."

"Yes," grunted Serge, "I don't like having it dark. We mustn't strike up at once, must we? It would be nearest."

"No," said Marcus, decisively; "we might not strike the track again, and perhaps find that we had chosen the wrong hill, and have to come back."

"Yes, that's right," said the old soldier. "Slow but sure;" and the ponies went steadily on, their hoofs rustling through the thick, moist grass where it was not trampled down.

"What's the matter, Lupe? Thirsty?" asked Marcus, as the dog raised himself up, looked over the front of the chariot, and then turned to gaze wistfully in his master's eyes. "Want water, old fellow?"

The dog gave the speaker an intelligent look and then sprang out of the chariot, and after trotting alongside for a time, bounded silently forward and disappeared.

They saw no more of him for the next quarter of an hour, and then came upon him sitting waiting at a spot where the beaten track swept away from the river.

"At last!" said Marcus, eagerly, as the ponies' heads were turned; and before they had gone many hundred yards they had the satisfaction of seeing the trees open out and the sky look lighter.

Lupe sprang on in front and disappeared, but at the end of a few minutes they came upon him again, standing gazing straight before him, motionless, while as the ponies reached him, they too stopped short.

"What does that mean?" whispered the old soldier. "Has he seen anything to scare him?"

Serge had hardly spoken when from somewhere in front there came the distant whinnying of a horse.

"From the army!" cried Marcus, excitedly. But Serge clapped his hand upon the boy's lips.

"Our army is not there," he said, in a hoarse whisper, and the driver gave a quick snatch at the reins, just as one of the ponies stretched out its neck to answer the challenge.

"Good!" said Serge, sharply. "Now then, back."

"Turn back," said Marcus, "now we are so near?"

"Yes, boy, and try to get round to the camp another way."

"You think the enemy are near?" whispered Marcus.

"And enough to make me, boy, seeing how our people have been surrounded and followed. I thought we were getting on too fast."

"But look here," said Marcus, excitedly, "I don't like to turn back without making sure. Let me go on alone and see if you are right."

"Well," said Serge, slowly, "it would be best, for then—No, I can't let you do that, boy. We'll stay here for a while till it grows darker, and then, go on together, creeping amongst the bushes to see what we can make out, and then come back to the chariot."

"Why not make a brave dash forward?" said Marcus.

Serge shook his head.

"It would be too rash," he said. "We'll take the horses into yon clump of trees, where they can stand well hidden and it will be easy to find when we come back."

"Serge, we shall never find it again in the darkness. Better keep with it," whispered Marcus, excitedly.

"Well, maybe you are right, boy. Lead on, then, my man, as silently as you can. This way."

Serge stepped in front, and with the darkness closing in fast the ponies were led forward some twenty yards and then out of the clear open space in amongst the dark patch of young growth, and the chariot was hardly hidden from the sight of anyone who might be passing along the track they were following, before Lupe uttered a low warning growl.

Marcus bent over the dog and seized him by the muzzle to keep his jaws closed, and the dog crouched down, while directly after there came the heavy tramp of advancing men, following their path exactly, and very dimly-seen from where the adventurers lay *perdu* a body of men, who, from the time they took in passing, must have numbered two or three thousand, came by, the dull sound of their footsteps dying out suddenly when they were some little distance away.

"Gone?" whispered Marcus, as soon as he thought it safe to speak.

"No, boy," was whispered back directly. "They've halted a little way farther on."

"What does it mean?" said Marcus.

"I believe," replied Serge, with his lips close to his young companion's ear, "that there is quite an army of the enemy in front, and that these we heard are going to join them."

"Then we ought to go on and give our people warning that they are going to be attacked."

"No need, boy," whispered Serge; "they won't catch our men lying about with their eyes shut. Careful watch has been set by now, and scouts will be well advanced. Cracis and Julius will not be caught asleep in the enemy's country. Now, then, as soon as we can feel sure that no more are coming we will try and get up to the camp."

"But you will not be able to find it in the darkness."

"I think I shall, boy," said the old fellow, confidently.

"Pst!" whispered the driver, and Lupe uttered another growl, and then had to suffer the indignity of being muzzled with Marcus' hand, till the fresh trampling sound had approached them and then passed away.

"Now, then," said Marcus, "we must risk it now."

"I'm ready," said Serge. "But what are you going to do?"

"Go back nearly to the river, and then strike for the hill which must be to our right. It will be too dark to see, but we ought to be near it before long, and we are pretty sure to be challenged."

"I can't propose anything better," said Serge. "So on at once."

The ponies were led out, and in the gloom Lupe was just seen as he stepped out in front of the chariot and started off as if to lead the way, while directly after the low, dull trampling of the ponies and the soft, crushing sound of the chariot wheels rose in the moist evening air, the ponies following the dog and the latter acting as if he perfectly well knew where his master meant to go. For some little time after the rippling of the river had reached their ears the dog struck off to the right up a very gradual slope apparently quite free from trees, keeping on for nearly an hour, before he stopped short, uttering a low, deep growl, while as it rose in the silence the driver checked the ponies, just as a sharp, low whispering of voices came from their front, and then there was silence again, while Marcus and Serge stood together in the chariot, hand clasped in hand.

Chapter Thirty.

What Serge thought.

The silence seemed to be awful to the listeners, who were prepared to give the word for the ponies to dash away as soon as the approach they expected commenced.

"Our people?" whispered Marcus at last, with his lips close to Serge's ear.

"No," was whispered back, and the next moment there was the heavy trampling of feet, but not towards them; and they had proof directly that they were no friends by the strange yell of defiance which suddenly rang out in response to a challenge given in the unmistakable Roman tongue.

"Oh!" whispered Marcus, excitedly. "Our people, and so near! We must go forward now."

"No, not yet, boy. Hark! Yonder are our people speaking out, and the fight is beginning."

"A night attack," whispered Marcus, hoarsely, and with his heart beating heavily.

"Yes, boy, and as far as I can make out the hill and camp have been surrounded. Now, then, the darkness may prove to be our friend. What do you say? Shall we try to join our people, or fall back till morning, when we can see what is best for us to do?"

"Try and join the army," said Marcus, firmly. "If the hill is surrounded we shall be getting into fresh danger by attempting to fall back."

"Yes," said Serge, in a low, deep voice, and no further word was uttered. Lupe gave vent to an impatient growl, and the ponies from time to time stamped uneasily as if eager to advance, while away to right and left rose, all the more horrible for the darkness, the clash of arms and roar of voices, mingled with the loud braying of trumpets, followed by the responsive shouts of the soldiery. There were moments when the tide of battle seemed to flow in the direction of the chariot, but only to be beaten back and sway to and fro.

Then, Marcus never afterwards knew how it happened—all he could recall was a fragment or two of their situation—Serge had just almost shouted in his ear, having to raise his voice to make himself heard, that they must at all costs make a dash to get away, and he himself had laid his hand on their driver's shoulder to bid him drive on, when he found that he was too late. For all at once he discovered that the battle was raging close at hand, right in front of the horses' heads, and directly after as they were swung round in the opposite direction for the occupants of the chariot

to seek safety, there was a rush of armed men. These came into contact with another body, and so it was that whichever way they turned there was the wild turmoil and fury of the fight going on, while as far as Marcus could make out, one minute the Roman soldiers were driving the barbarians back and carrying all before them, but only to be overwhelmed in turn by some tremendous wave of the enemy in the shape of reinforcements, which raged and swirled round the more disciplined men, carrying them back by sheer weight of numbers in the direction from which they had come.

Both Marcus and Serge seemed to bear a charmed life. They made no attempt to use their weapons, and their position in the car had something to do with their escape from injury as they held on to the front, to be borne here and there by their frantic horses, while naturally enough Roman and Gaul, where they were crowded together in contention, yielded and made way for the plunging and rearing steeds, whose hoofs seemed to them for the time being more dangerous than the weapons of a foe.

How long all this lasted Marcus never knew.

It was enough for his brain to take in the wild horrors of the fierce fight and its many changes till all at once in the dim light shed by the stars the chariot horses had borne him and Serge partly out of the fierce crowds of fighting men.

Encounters were taking place all around in single combat, and charges and counter charges made by little parties who were separated from the main body crowded together in the central portions of the battlefield; and snatching at the opportunity, Serge, spear in hand, leaned over to Marcus and, pointing forward to an opening in front, shouted to him to bid their driver make for that gap in the human wall.

Marcus planted his spear shaft sharply down upon the floor of the chariot to steady himself, as he leaned down to the driver to utter his commands, and the next minute the fiery little steeds were tearing away at full gallop along the open space, as if in their wild excitement they were eager to escape from the savage scenes and bloodshed going on around.

But before a hundred yards had been traversed, the sea of human beings closed in again, completely filling up the opening, and seeming about to entirely stop the fugitives' course.

Serge and the driver, both now as excited as the horses, burst forth into a wild cry of command, and this and the sight of the dimly-seen approaching steeds thundering along had their effect. The crowd opened out again just as the driver's efforts were rewarded and he was able to check the furious gallop of his steeds and save them from plunging into the mass of friend and foe alike.

The gallop became a trot, the trot a gentle amble, as the chariot now rolled slowly on to where about a score altogether of Romans and Gauls, each party headed by an officer, were just in the act of meeting, pretty evenly balanced, in deadly combat.

As with wild shouts they rushed together with sword and spear clashing loudly against helmet, shield, or the protecting body armour they wore, the driver of Marcus' chariot dragged upon his left rein to try and swing round to avoid the contending foes. But in the darkness he did not grasp that which was on his left, and Marcus became aware by a sudden jerk that their further progress was at an end, the chariot being wedged in between a couple of trees, while the horses were plunging wildly to escape from a tangle of bush and branch, and the driver had leaped out to seize them by their heads.

"Look, look!" shouted Serge just then.

Marcus, who had had to cling to the sides of the chariot to save himself from being thrown out, turned sharply to learn the meaning of his old comrade's cry, and he was just in time to see him throw himself over the chariot's side, evidently to hurry to the help of the Roman officer and his few men, who, completely outnumbered, were being beaten down by two or three times their number of Gauls.

Serge said no more in words; his acts spoke for themselves, and grasping that he meant at all costs to go to the help of the Roman officer, Marcus stood for a moment spear in hand and hurled it with all his might at four of the barbarians who were attacking the Roman leader, who was cut off from his companions and faring badly, in spite of a valourous defence, at his enemies' hands.

It was pretty nearly momentary, but Marcus took all in at a glance. He saw that their coming and the dash of the chariot had had their effect upon a portion of the Gauls, who turned and fled, while some of their fellows were beating back the few Roman soldiers left unhurt.

There were enough still, though, of the Gauls to rush at spear-armed Serge with a yell of triumph, and Marcus, as he saw the sturdy old soldier making furious play with his spear, snatched out his sword to rush to his help; but his course was diverted by that which he saw just beyond, dimly enough, but with sufficient vividness to go straight to his heart.

It was the Roman officer staggering back with his helmet falling from his head from a blow he had just received from one Gaul, while, taking advantage of his momentary helplessness, a second rushed at him with his spear, bore him down backwards, and with a yell of triumph planted one foot upon his chest and drove his spear with all his force right at his throat.

There was a curious crashing sound as the spear point was turned aside by the finely-tempered gorget the Roman wore, and with a snarl the Gaul raised his weapon again for a second blow.

He made the thrust, but it was caught midway by the sword of Marcus, who ended his rush to the Roman's help with a bound; his keen sword met the descending spear shaft, cutting it right through as if it were a twig, while he who wielded the sword came with all his weight full upon the Gaul's chest and sent him rolling over and over upon the ground.

Marcus, too, came heavily to earth, but it was upon hands and knees, and, still retaining his sword, he scrambled to his feet again at the same time as the Gaul, who raised his headless spear on high to bring it down upon the head of his assailant.

But at that moment Marcus was reinforced by the officer whose life he had saved, and who, regaining his feet, cut down the Gaul and turned to meet his next enemy; for about a dozen men came at him with a rush, but only to be borne back in turn by a rallying party of the Romans, who, coming at their officer's help, sprang at the Gauls, to be swept on in turn by a tremendous rush in which Marcus was trampled down, to lie half insensible for a few minutes before he struggled up, looked round, and then staggered towards the trees in which the chariot was entangled, while the horses were still being held by the driver.

Here Marcus supported himself, panting and breathing hard, by the edge of the chariot. He was giddy, and the dim battlefield seemed to be heaving and slowly gliding round before his eyes. There was a curious feeling of sickness troubling him and an intense longing for a draught of water, while his thoughts were all, so to speak, broken and confused and mingled together with a selfish feeling that he must be very badly hurt.

By degrees, though, the various objects began to settle down, and the roar of battle and clash of arms gave place slowly to a dull, singing noise in his ears. Then, as if by a sudden jump, his power of thinking lucidly came back, and he looked round for the officer he had tried to help.

But he was not there. Some twenty or thirty dead and wounded men were scattered about as they had fallen, some few of whom wore the armour of Roman soldiers, but for the most part they were Gauls, and Marcus looked in vain for the object of his search.

Then he turned giddy again, for a mental cloud seemed to close him in, and he snatched at his helmet and dragged it off, when the cool night wind that played upon his heated brow brought with it a sense of relief, and he thought clearly again, not of self but of Serge, and with a cry of horror he ran from where he had stood, to bend over each of the prostrate Roman soldiers in turn, uttering a sigh of relief as he raised himself up, replaced his helmet, and looked round, fully conscious now that the tide of war had swept right away to a distance. The fighting was still going on, and the cries and the clashing of weapons were strangely commingled, but faintly heard. One side had evidently won the battle and was driving its enemies before it. But where was Serge?

Marcus turned to where the driver was still soothing the horses, but he could give him no information. He had not seen Serge since he leapt from the chariot and was lost directly in the crowd of fighting men. Marcus stepped back to the spot where his own encounter had taken place, and looked round again for a few moments, but though he could see several prostrate bodies Serge's was not one, and going on and on in the dim starlight he was to some extent able to follow the course of the fighting men by those they had left behind, till he grew confused as to his position and began to retrace his steps.

It was not easy, for he had nothing to guide him, and some considerable space of time had elapsed before, utterly worn out and disheartened, he made out a clump of trees, towards which he now directed his steps in the hope that it might be the one in which the chariot had been entangled.

To his great delight, as he approached, he heard the voice of the driver talking to the horses, and, hurrying on, he found that he was approaching the chariot from the opposite side to that he had left. The next minute he was tugging his sword from its sheath, for an armed man suddenly rose up from just in front, and as the boy's sword fell to his side, caught him in his arms.

"And I thought you were dead—I thought you were dead!" came in a familiar, deep, gruff voice, broken by sobs. "Oh, Marcus, my boy, where have you been?"

"Looking for you, Serge."

"You have? Well, that's what I have been doing for you."

"But where were you?" cried Marcus.

"I d'know, boy, only that I have been fighting. I was hard at it when there was a rush, and I was carried along with all the rest, getting a hit now and then at one of the enemy, but not often, for they don't fight fair. They all crowd at you together, and I got the worst of it badly."

"Then you are wounded?" cried Marcus. "No, boy; but I lost my spear."

"Lost your spear?" cried Marcus, staring. "Yes, boy; this 'ere's only a savage one."

"But you are not hurt?" cried Marcus again.

"Not hurt?" cried Serge. "Why, boy, I just am. Battered and banged and hit all over. If it hadn't been for the goodness of my armour there wouldn't have been no Serge—nothing left but a few bits. But you, my boy?"

"Oh, I'm very sore and bruised and sprained, but nothing worse. But that officer, Serge, that we went to help?"

"Ah!" cried Serge. "That officer we went to help! What about him? You didn't let him be killed, boy?"

"No; I remember he got up and fought again."

"That's right, boy; but where is he now?"

"I don't know," cried Marcus. "I was trampled down and lost my senses. Don't you know what became of him?"

"No," said Serge, "and I don't care, boy now that I have found you. Here, don't let's stand talking, but help to get out that chariot. I want to get up to the Roman camp."

"Can we? Did our people win?"

"Win? Why, of course, my lad! Romans never fail."

"Quick, then!" cried Marcus. "The chariot, and then up to the camp. There's the message; and let's hope my father's there."

Chapter Thirty One.

The General's Tent.

The driver's face lit up as he saw Marcus and Serge come to his help, for the battle was as nothing to him compared to the state of the chariot and horses; and he eagerly set to work over the extraction of the vehicle, which, though splintered and battered, was not much the worse for the accident, and was soon dragged out from where it had been wedged close to the spot where the horses, now quit calmed, had settled down to browse upon the grass, which grew in abundance outside the clump of trees.

It was the harness which had fared the worst, but the driver and Serge were both pretty handy, and by the time the day dawned tying and lacing had done their work, so that, excepting appearance, the ropes, straps and thongs were as good as ever, and, tired and anxious, Marcus hurried his companions into the chariot to start for the camp.

Guessing at the direction where the slope led, they had just started when they were encountered by a minor officer at the head of a party of men, who looked hard at them and accosted them with:

"Have you seen anything of an overturned chariot in a clump of trees?"

"Yes," said Marcus, smiling.

"Which way?" cried the officer, who looked surprised at Marcus' way of receiving the question.

"Straight down that slope," said Marcus. "You can almost see the trees from here."

The officer nodded his thanks and was turning away, but Marcus stopped him by saying:

"The chariot is not there now."

"Not there?"

"No; this is it."

"Ah!" cried the officer, eagerly. "Then you are the youth and this is the man I want."

"What for?" asked Marcus, flushing slightly.

"Oh, you'll know soon enough. My chief has sent me to find you. It is for something that took place in the fight last night."

"Something that took place in the fight last night?" faltered Marcus, wearily. "But tell me, did the Romans win the battle?"

"Oh, yes, of course; but don't stop to talk. I must make haste back. You haven't been murdering and plundering the people, have you?"

"No, of course not," cried Marcus, sharply.

"So much the better for you," said the officer, shortly. "Come along."

He gave orders to some of his men to form up behind the chariot, and with the rest he placed himself in front, and gave the order to march, leading off at once to the left of the route in which the chariot had been moving when it was stopped.

"Why, anyone would think that we were prisoners," said Marcus, who felt annoyed, but, satisfied that they were being taken to the camp, he thought of his message and was content. He, however, reached over the front of the chariot and called to the young officer, asking who was in command of the army.

The young man looked at him superciliously.

"What is it to you?" he said, shortly. "Ask the general himself when you come before him, and then perhaps you will

be able to explain why you who are Romans have come to be fighting on the side of the Gaul."

"What!" said Marcus. "Do you know that—"

"Never mind what I know, my lad," said the officer, shortly, "and don't speak to me again in that free off-hand tone. Please to understand that I am an officer and you a prisoner. Forward, and mind this: any attempt to escape will be followed by a shower of spears."

"Thanks," said Marcus, sarcastically; and he turned to Serge.

"I shall not tell him why we have come," he said, with his face of a deeper red than before.

"That's right, boy," growled Serge. "We don't want him to be civil; all we want is for him to take us to the general. You can tell him why we have come."

They were ascending a slope that grew more and more steep, and the morning would have seemed beautiful to Marcus, whose heart beat high at the prospect of being able to deliver his message to the general in command, whoever it might be; but the beauty of the scene and the approaching sunrise were marred by the traces left by the battle, which they were constantly passing: the dead here, wounded men waiting for help there; the trampled and stained earth everywhere. It was a pleasant relief when the top of the hill they were ascending had been reached, though it showed no trace of any camp till the descending slope came into view, and then the adventurers found that they had to cross a valley, beyond which, with the trench and banks showing in rich brown tints gilded by the rays of the rising sun, was the Roman camp, with its few tents and moving columns of men passing up the flanks of the steep hill upon which it stood, evidently returning in regular order from the pursuit of the scattered foes who had resisted the attack upon the invader during the past night.

In his eagerness Marcus gave an order to the driver for the chariot to advance down the slope and cross the valley at a trot; but the officer turned upon him angrily, and ordered two of his spear-armed men to take the ponies by the rein, and in this fashion Marcus and his companion were led right to the centre of the camp before one of the tents, up to whose entrance the officer marched, spoke to another who was on guard, and then entered.

"Got all you want to say ready?" whispered Serge.

"Yes," whispered back Marcus. "Oh, if he would only be quick! This is all wasting time."

The young officer was quick enough, for he returned directly, and his manner seemed changed as he stepped up to the chariot.

"Follow me, sir," he said. "The generals will see you directly."

Marcus' heart beat quicker than ever now, as he sprang from the chariot, wincing slightly from his stiffness, while Serge limped and screwed up his face as he strove in vain to hold himself erect.

It was bright with the early sunshine outside the tent, where Marcus now found himself face to face with a stern-looking man in the dress of a general, who sat with his hand resting upon his helmet.

But he was not alone, for another officer was lying upon a rough couch, evidently, from his bandaged head, wounded; but he was fully dressed, and his helmet and sword were upon the rolled-up cloak at the side of his averted head.

"You are welcome," began the sitting general, warmly. "I have sent for you to give you the thanks of my injured friend, whose life—Why, what is this! My severe young friend Marcus here!"

"What!" came from the couch, and its occupant sprang into a sitting position.

"Father!" cried Marcus, and Serge, who had doffed his helmet, now in his astonishment let it fall upon the skins which covered the ground with a heavy thud.

As Marcus spoke he ran to his father's side and sank down upon one knee to gaze anxiously in his face.

"Are you much hurt?" he said, hoarsely.

"No, no, not much, my boy," said Cracis; "but in the excitement I did not know you, Marcus. Oh, it seems impossible that you could have been my preserver!"

"It was more Serge than I, father," cried Marcus, quickly.

"Nay, nay, nay!" growled the old soldier, in his hoarsest tones. "Speak the truth, boy."

"That is the truth," cried Marcus, quickly.

"I helped, of course, but it was him, master, who made that cut at the Gaul's spear and knocked him over. But we neither of us knew that it was you."

"But you, Marcus, my boy," said Cracis, as he gazed wonderingly in his son's face, while Caius Julius watched them both in turn—"you knew me, of course?"

"No, father," replied Marcus, whose face was scarlet now with excitement. "I only saw that it was a Roman officer."

"And you dashed at once to his help," said Caius Julius, smiling. "Well, it was a brave act then, while now I scarcely

know what to call it. Why, Marcus, you must feel very proud of what you have done.”

“Stop!” cried the boy, quickly, eager to end the words of praise and compliment.

“Yes, stop,” said Cracis, sternly. “You here, Marcus, in a soldier’s armour, and Serge as well! Is this the way my commands are obeyed? Why are you here?”

“To bring the message of the general commanding the rear-guard, father. He is shut in on the snowy pass that crosses the mountain, and held there by many times his number of the enemy; and he sent me and Serge to the army here to ask for help.”

“He sent you, boy?” cried Cracis, quickly.

“Yes, father,” replied Marcus, “and I was to say that at all cost he would hold out till help was sent.”

“Help shall be sent at once,” said Cracis, firmly; “or better still, Julius,” he continued, “our work being so far completed, with yesterday’s victory, we will march to his help ourselves.”

Caius Julius bent his head without saying a word, and then sat back in his seat, attentively watching father and son.

“But your message did not answer my question, boy,” said Cracis, coldly. “Marcus, my son, how came it that you were with the little army that at my orders was to follow in our wake, crushing down the Gauls who would be sure to gather after we had passed? Speak out, sire: how came you there?”

“I could not bear it, father: something seemed to tell me that you would be in danger, and I followed you to Rome, and then on here.”

“Then you disobeyed my commands, boy,” said Cracis, sternly; and Marcus sank upon his other knee, clasped his hands, and held them out before him. Closing his eyes then he threw back his head and was silent while one might have slowly counted ten. Then in a low, distinct tone, full of sorrow and despair, he said slowly:

“Yes, father; I disobeyed your command.”

“And you, Serge, my old and trusted servant, old soldier though you were,” continued Cracis, in tones that sounded icy, “as soon as my back was turned you plotted with my son to follow me and forsake your post.”

“Nay, master,” cried Serge, quickly; “there was no plotting. I deserted first.”

“Hah!” ejaculated Caius Julius again, and his clearly-cut face looked as if it were formed of marble.

“Worse and worse,” cried Cracis, angrily. “Then you set the example which my weak son followed?”

“No, father,” cried Marcus, quickly; “I did not know that Serge had gone.”

“Ah!” said Cracis, quickly. “What excuse have you to make, sir, for deserting your post?”

“I didn’t, master,” cried the old soldier, stoutly. “I didn’t desert my post. My post was where I was last night, at my master’s side. It was my post that deserted me.”

“What!” cried Cracis, angrily. “Insolent!”

“Nay, master,” cried the old soldier; “I’m as humble as young Marcus there, and I’d kneel down just the same as he’s a-doing now, but them Gauls knocked me about so in the fight that my legs won’t bend. Look here, master; I couldn’t help it. I was just like the boy there; I felt somehow that you’d want your old follower’s help, and I was obliged to come and join you. You see, we came together, and reached you just in time.”

“You disobeyed my commands, Serge,” said Cracis, speaking as if deaf to his old follower’s appealing words. “You too, my son; but the words of both tell of the repentance in your breasts. Prove, then, by your next acts that you are willing to make amends. Silence! Do not speak, but act. The horrors and bloodshed of this campaign are not for my son and servant. You, Serge, do your duty as guardian—you, Marcus, yours, in obedience at once. Back home at once, and I will forgive.”

“And leave you now, father, wounded, amidst all these perils?” cried Marcus, wildly. “I cannot! I would sooner die!”

Cracis started angrily to his feet and tore the bandage from his head, as at that moment two officers advanced as if to receive commands.

“You hear me, Marcus?” he cried, sternly. “You hear me, Serge?”

“Yes, master,” said the old soldier, slowly, and making an effort with his bruised and stiffened limb, he slowly passed his hand across to his left side and drew his short, heavy sword, passed the hilt into his left so that he could clasp the blade with his right, and in that way held it out to Cracis as he went on speaking: “I disobeyed you once, master, and that’s enough for a Roman soldier. Take hold. I’ve kept it as sharp as it was in the old days when I followed you to victory, ready to die for you, master, as I am this day, for I can’t live to disobey you again. Take it, I say, master, and let me die at once; better that you should cut me down than that I should myself fall upon my sword, for that has always seemed to me a coward’s death.”

“Stop, Serge!” cried Marcus, passionately, and he laid his hand upon his old comrade’s blade. “I am a Roman, if only a boy, and I have the right to appeal.”

Turning to Caius Julius, he cried:

"You refused me once, sir, when I appealed to you, saying that I was but a weak unseasoned boy—not in those words, but that is what you meant."

Caius Julius gravely bent his head, and fixed his keen, glittering eyes upon the speaker, who went on:

"Since then I have tried hard to prove myself worthy to bear the arms I was taught by an old soldier to use."

The general bowed his head slowly once again.

"Then help me, sir. It is from no desire to disobey, but I feel that I cannot leave my father now. Forgive me, father. I cannot obey you. Forgive me, too, for this appeal."

"Yes," said Caius Julius, rising from his seat and taking a step or two forward. "You both disobeyed, and came here bearers of an important despatch which means more than you, boy, can imagine, in time to save a father's and a master's life. Serge, old comrade," he continued, laying his hand upon the unsheathed sword, "keep your blade for our enemies. If it prove necessary I will kneel for you to my oldest friend and ask his forgiveness for you and my brave young soldier here. Boy," he continued, "you have confessed your fault as your father's son, but since he left you, a simple scholar, you have become a soldier and bravely done your duty in your country's cause. Cracis, my brother general, I grant your son's appeal. Endorse it, man, for a fault so frankly acknowledged is half atoned."

"I must have obedience," said Cracis, coldly, "not defiance, at a time like this."

"I feel with you, old friend," said Caius Julius, slowly, "but your wounds have fevered you, and it has not been cool, calculating Cracis who has spoken, but the angry, offended general. Brother, you desire that your old servant and your son should return home at once?"

"Yes," said Cracis, speaking faintly now.

"How?" said Caius Julius, quickly. "Alone, to fight their way through the thousands of half conquered Gauls who will bar their way to the pass where the great captain is waiting for help?"

Cracis looked wildly at his brother in arms, and then slowly turned his eyes upon his son—eyes that had flashed but a short time before, but which now softened into a look of loving pride, as he slowly sank back insensible upon his rough pillow, Marcus darting to his side.

Chapter Thirty Two.

"My own Brave Boy!"

The speech Cracis made when he recovered from the fainting fit brought on by emotion when he was weak and prostrate from his wounds, and found Marcus by his side bathing his face, was very short, setting the boy's heart at rest and telling him that the past was entirely forgiven; and the stern Roman judge merged once more in the loving father. For the speech was this:

"My own brave boy!"

"Ah!" cried Caius Julius, who had just hurried back, after having been away for a very brief time giving the orders which had set the whole camp in motion. "This is bad for you, Cracis, for we start at once straight for the pass, and as fast as we can go. Do you think you will be able to sit a horse?"

"I will," said Cracis, firmly. "Yes, I am better now. My wounds are mere scratches, and once I get to-day and to-night over I shall be nearly myself again."

"Nearly," said Caius Julius, with a smile. "Well, we shall see. What do you say, nurse?"

Marcus flushed up at the term by which he was addressed.

"If my father says he will do a thing he will," cried the boy.

"No doubt," said the general; "but do you feel well enough to give me your counsel and make any suggestions about our return?"

"Yes, certainly," was the reply. "First, then, tell me if you are fully aware of our position."

"Yes," said Julius, "we have scattered the Gauls in every direction, and as soon as we start they will take it for granted that we are so disheartened that we are hurrying back through the country in full retreat, and they will begin to flow back upon us like a great tide, fiercer and more venturesome than ever."

"That is enough," said Cracis. "I ought to have known your feelings, but nearly helpless as I am, I was afraid that last triumph would make you over confident, and that our followers would take their cue from their leader and become careless at a time when our position will be more hazardous than ever."

"Trust me, Cracis; I shall be ready for the enemy at any moment. Now, Marcus, can I leave your father in your charge?"

"No," said Cracis, before the boy could speak, "I am not going to be a burden to our men and join the train of litters and our wounded. My son Marcus and his old follower, Serge, will join one of the cohorts, and you will place him where I am sure he would like to be as his father's son."

"And that is—?" said Caius Julius.

"Where would you like to be, my boy?"

Marcus flushed deeper than ever as he replied:

"Serge always taught me, father, that the place of honour was in the front."

That morning, as the army moved off in perfect order from their camp upon the hill, a message came to where Marcus was marching on one side of his father's horse, Serge limping stiffly along on the other, that the boy was to come forward to join his cohort at once, by the general's orders; and Marcus started upon seeing that the messenger, at the head of ten stern-looking veterans, was the young officer who had fetched him to the general's tent.

There was a brief and soldierly leave-taking, and then Marcus was hurrying forward with his guide, who began at once to falter out hurriedly his apologies for his former treatment of the boy.

"I didn't know," he said. "I couldn't tell who you were. I thought you were to be a prisoner brought in as a traitorous Roman who had been fighting on the enemy's side."

"Don't say a word more," cried Marcus, holding out his hand, and, the best of friends directly, the young officer began to tell him how all that he had done was known in the cohort, and how proud the men were to have Cracis' son appointed to join their ranks.

"Ah," said Serge, as soon as he could get an opportunity to speak to Marcus alone, "do you see how I am marching now, my lad?"

"Oh, I have been watching you all the way," cried Marcus, "and pitying you."

"What!" growled the old soldier.

"You seemed so lame and in such pain. I don't know what has become of our chariot, but as that's gone you ought to be in one of the litters carried by the slaves."

"Wha-a-at!" growled the old soldier, making the interjection as long in its utterance as half a dozen six-syllabled words. "Well, I do call this hard! The knocking about you have had must have got into your head, my lad, and upset your eyes. Why, you can't see a bit!"

"What do you mean?" cried Marcus.

"Why, this, boy. When I began to march after that young cockerel had brought the orders, I was so stiff that I could hardly put one leg before the other; but the very news of you being appointed to take your place in one of the leading cohorts of the army has acted like salve, and all my stiffness is as good as gone. Carried in a litter by slaves! Me! Do I look the sort of fellow who wants carrying in a litter like a sick woman? Bah! Why, before we get far on the march we shall have the enemy closing in on all sides, and the fight beginning."

"Think so, Serge?"

"Yes, my boy. We have got our work cut out, for they'll never believe till it's knocked into them that we are not making a retreat. Me in a litter!" he growled. "Just you wait a bit, and I shall be showing that I have got a little fighting left in me."

Serge proved his words the very next day, when, after many hours' marching painfully in the ranks, pretty close to where his young master had been appointed a junior officer, and been received by the men with cheers, a desperate attack was made upon this, the advance guard, by a perfect crowd of fierce Gallic warriors made up of the scattered remnants of the beaten army, who came down upon the marching cohort like the sea upon some massive rock. So fierce was the onslaught that though the Roman ranks remained comparatively unbroken, they were pressed back by the sheer weight of their enemies, but only to recoil, and as they advanced to recover their lost ground, it was over the bodies of some of their wounded men, and to Marcus' horror he found himself once more called upon to dash forward to another's help. This time, however, it was not blindly and in the dusk, for a shiver of dread ran through him, knowing how crippled his old companion was, when he saw that Serge was one of those who had been unable to keep his place in the rank when the Romans were driven back, and that now he was defending himself and striving to hold his own against the attack of three of the Gauls. Tearing off his helmet, as if it were an incumbrance, and making his short sword flash through the air, Marcus rushed to his old companion's help, but too late to save him being hurled heavily to the ground, while, ready as he was to contend against ordinary weapons, this barbaric method of attack confused and puzzled him. One of his half-nude enemies made as if to flinch from a coming blow, and then sprang up, hurling something through the air, and in an instant the boy found himself entangled in the long cord of strips of hide, which was dragged tight above his arms and crippled the blow he would have struck, while as he was jerked round the Gaul's companions flung themselves upon his back, and for the moment he was prisoner in his turn.

The struggle that followed was brief, for the blade Marcus wielded was that in which old Serge had taken pride, feeling as he did that his master's son should be armed with a weapon that was keenest of the keen. Fortunately, too, the aim of the enemy was to make a prisoner of the well-caparisoned young Roman, and not a slay, so that Marcus, in spite of the way in which his arms were dragged to his side, was able to turn the point of his sword

upward, and give one thrust between the cord and his breast, when the rope parted like tinder upon the razor-like edge, and his enemies started back from the sweep of the terrible blade he whirled above his head.

Staggered for the moment, they were preparing for a fresh attack when Serge, uttering a deep growl like a wounded lion, sprang to his feet, after snatching his sword from where it lay.

That was enough for the three Gauls, who turned at once and fled, for a rank of the Roman soldiers was advancing, and as they closed up, Marcus and Serge were free to take their places in the line once more as if nothing had happened, and the advance guard steadily pressed on.

There was a fortnight's hard fighting carried on day by day, with a succession of halts for the formation of camps in the strongest positions that offered themselves as havens of refuge against a teeming enemy which refused to be crushed and constantly swarmed round the retiring Roman army, perfectly reckless of life, and apparently content with the smallest advantages that they could gain.

Rolled back one day by a Roman charge, the Gauls gathered together again during the night to attack and harass the retiring troops; but all was in vain, for step by step Caius Julius carried all before him, and the help that Marcus had been sent to seek gradually drew nearer to the beleaguered force till one morning, as the army came into position to continue its march, Marcus was passing along the ranks and halted by Serge, who eagerly drew his attention to the glittering snow upon the mountains a mile or two in front.

"See that?" he cried. "Why, before long we shall reach that stream and be marching into that great hollow among the mountains where we stopped that day with the chariot to see our general lead his men up into the pass. Why, to-night we ought to be camping there amongst the snows; and a nice change too, my boy, for its been rather hot work for about a fortnight now."

"Yes," said Marcus, quietly; "but according to the tidings the scouts have been bringing in all through the night, the Gauls are swarming in that great amphitheatre between here and the pass, and all promises for the biggest fight that the army has yet had."

Serge took off his helmet and rubbed one ear thoughtfully, as he gazed straight before him in the direction of the pass.

"Well," he said, slowly, "I shouldn't wonder if such a fight did come off, and if it does it will be hard and fierce. I shouldn't wonder if it is what your father means. That used to be the way we went on: he planned where the fight was to be, and Caius Julius went on and won. I remember every bit of that amphitheatre place, and what a death trap it seemed. You know the captain would not stay in it when the Gauls had surrounded him, but left the way clear for us to go for the help we've brought, and led his force right up into the pass so as to make the enemy follow him. Now our generals are scheming to get the Gauls, who have kept on attacking us front, rear and flanks, right into that amphitheatre of a place in the mountains, where they mean, so it seems, to make a stand and stop our getting up by the pass—for that's what they think we mean to do—so as to join forces with him who is holding it still."

"But is he holding it still?" said Marcus. "The scouts that were sent out last night as soon as it was dark have not yet returned."

"Yes they have," said Serge, quickly. "I saw them come back an hour ago, and make for the general's headquarters."

Serge was right, for one of his comrades had heard the result of their investigation, the news they brought back being that their leader was still holding the pass, and, what was more, he was well supplied with provisions, for the country people on the farther slope, realising the strength of the Roman general's position, had judged it best to accept the conquest, and, making friends, had kept up an ample supply of food, so that the little force which kept the gateway into Gaul and commanded the approaches on either side, had had no greater difficulties to contend with than an occasional attack on the part of the enemy.

This being made known to Serge, he laughed softly.

"There, you'll see how our generals will carry to-day's work out, my lad. That's it: Cracis has calculated upon its being like this, and this place will be instead of a retreat a masterly scheme which will end this war."

"How?" said Marcus.

"How? Why, in the way your father has arranged. You'll see that when we advance the general will throw out two wings to secure the little hollows by which the Gauls have been advancing, till he has got round them, and then, and then only, he will advance his centre. Do you see?"

"Not quite," said Marcus, "though I am trying to follow you."

"Well, I should have thought you would have been soldier enough to have seen what would follow."

"A desperate fight?" said Marcus.

"Most likely, boy; but don't you see what will happen then?"

"A horrible slaughter, Serge," said Marcus, excitedly.

"Perhaps, boy, but it may happen that when the enemy finds how he has been out-manoeuvred and that he is trapped he may surrender."

"But everything has proved that the enemy is too stubborn for that."

"He has never been in such a fix as this yet, my boy."

"But he has equal chances with us, Serge, and may fight to the last and drive us back."

"Not when he finds out the truth."

"That our men are better disciplined than his?"

"No, boy; he must have found that out long ago. Not that, but that, as I said before, he has been completely out-manoeuvred by your father."

"Well, you said that before, Serge," said Marcus, impatiently; "but I don't see matters as you do, though I have tried very hard."

"Then you ought to have seen," cried the old soldier, gruffly. "The captain is still holding the pass, isn't he?"

"Yes, we have heard so."

"Well, boy, knowing him, do you think he will go on holding it without doing anything when we advance and close the enemy in more and more?"

"Ah! I see now!" cried Marcus, eagerly. "He will come down from the pass with his men, and attack the Gauls in the rear."

"To be sure he will, and do the greater part of the fighting and driving the enemy on to our troops. Why, in a very short time, as I see it, I mean after the attack, half their men will be prisoners, for no matter how clever the Gaul general may be he is bound to give up or have his forces cut down to a man."

"Yes," said Marcus, eagerly.

"Just you take warning, then, boy, by this day's work: never you, when you grow up to be a general with an army at your command, never you let yourself be driven into a hole like this where you may be caught between two fires."

"I never will if I can help it," said Marcus, smiling.

"Forewarned is forearmed, boy. You know now."

"Yes, Serge; but I am anxious to see what this afternoon brings forth."

"Not much but a little marching and counter marching to get things quite exact and to the satisfaction of our generals. I expect this battle will be fought out before night."

Chapter Thirty Three.

After the Battle.

Serge was right. The weather was glorious; the hot sun blazed down; but the heat was tempered by the gentle breeze which wafted its coolness from the snowy pass.

To one ignorant of the horrors that lurked behind, it was one grand display of armed men, with their armour glittering and standards on high, marching in different bodies as if to take part in some glorious pageant to be held in the mighty, rugged amphitheatre whose walls were mountains and whose background was formed by the piled-up masses of ice and snow, here silvery, there dazzling golden in the blaze of the afternoon sun, and farther back beauteous with the various azure tints, from the faintest tinge to the deepest purple, in the rifts and chasms far on high.

There was a grim meaning behind it all as the troops under the command of Caius Julius swept round by slow degrees to seize upon and hold the different little valleys leading into the amphitheatre, and all in a slow orderly fashion suggesting merely change of position, and as if collision with the Gallic force was the last thing likely to occur.

For as the Roman soldiery gradually advanced as if the distant pass were the object they held in view, ready for pressing through it in one long extended column, the barbarian troops gradually fell back, to form themselves into one vast dam whose object it was to check the Roman human river and roll it back broken and dismembered, ready for final destruction in the plains they had invaded.

There were moments when, as he stood beside the line of stalwart men with whom he had been placed, Marcus' thoughts were wholly upon the scene of which, from high up on a slope of one of the valleys, he had a most comprehensive view; and he too was ready to forget what was behind, as for an hour he watched and waited, until as if by magic the marching and changing of position of the thousands before his eyes had ceased.

It was evening then, with the sun sinking behind the hills in the rear of the now concentrated Roman army, while the Gauls who filled the amphitheatre and faced them were lit up, and their armour and weapons blazed as if turned to fire by the orange glow which rose and filled the mountain hollows and the pass beyond with its ever-deepening reddening haze.

Naturally enough Marcus took his stand close by Serge, who seemed to have quite recovered from the injuries which he had received, and stood up bronzed and sturdy, with his face lit up with the expectancy of one whose training taught him to foresee a triumph for the Roman arms.

"Are we all ready, Serge?" said Marcus, in a low voice.

"Yes, boy. Isn't it grand! Take the lesson to heart. You will understand it better later on, for it's too much for one so young as you to take in all at once. Look how our generals have placed their men, with never a bit of confusion from beginning to end, and all ready when the trumpets sound to advance and strike, while these Gauls, crowded up together into this great trap, don't even know as yet that their numbers will be worse than nothing, only a big crowd in which every man will be in his neighbour's way."

"But suppose they stand fast," said Marcus, "instead of giving way?"

"We shall march over them, boy, straight for the pass. Nothing can stop our advance. One of our lines may go down, but another will step into its place, and if that is broken there is another close behind, and another and another, each of which must weaken the resistance and pave the way for our army to pass on."

"Don't say pave the way, Serge. It sounds too horrible, and makes me think of what it means."

"Don't think, then, boy."

"I must," replied Marcus; "but it will be dreadful for the first cohort which leads."

"Grand, you mean, boy," cried the veteran, "and you ought to be proud, for it is ours."

"I don't see any signs of the captain's coming to meet us."

"In hiding perhaps," said Serge. "He's certain to be there. He will not let his men show themselves until we advance, and he has not stirred as yet."

"How do you know?"

"Look at the barbarians," cried the old soldier, pointing to the distant crowd far up the slope. "They would be showing it by now if he were coming on."

"It is getting late," said Marcus, after a pause.

"Yes," replied Serge, "and if I were in command I should be here to begin leading on my men. Think of that now," he whispered, sharply. "Here he is!"

"Who? My father?"

"No, boy. He'd be in the rear upon one of these hills, directing the advance of the legions, where he can look over the whole amphitheatre."

No more was said, for a thrill seemed to be running through the long serried line of veterans extending to right and left, as, followed by a group of his principal officers, Caius Julius rode close up to his leading cohort, gave the order to advance, and turned his horse to ride in front and lead.

Then as the heavy tramp of the armed men rang out and the advance with shield joined to shield moved on over the stony ground, there was a roar like distant thunder which rose and rolled and reverberated from the rocks around, as the Gauls in one vast mass flashed forward to meet them and sweep the van of the Roman army away.

The deep thunderous sound as of a storm was awe-inspiring enough to daunt the stoutest, but it had no effect upon the Roman warriors who steadily advanced close to the heels of their leaders' horses; and once more with his heart beating fast the while, it all seemed to Marcus like some grand pageant in which he was honoured by being allowed to play his little part.

Fate had placed his rank almost within touch of their general, who rode calmly, probably anticipating that the wild charge of Gauls as they came tearing on would never be carried home, and that the enemy would melt away to right and left before the steady pressure of that rank upon rank of unbroken shields bristling with sword and spear.

But the general was deceived. The wild barbarian charge of undisciplined Gallic warriors was carried home. Borne on by their own impetuosity, and pressed forward by the crowd behind, the enemy came on with a wild rush, and then came the clashing arms, the roar of the fierce multitude. Then as the steady stride of the line of Roman veterans was checked in the awful shock, Marcus was conscious of the struggles of a charger which reared up, fighting fiercely with its hoofs against the enemy which hemmed him in, and then of its sidewise fall, to lie upon its flank, plunging feebly in its efforts to rise, before lying prone and motionless with half a dozen spear thrusts in its breast and throat.

Marcus was conscious of striking out fiercely with his keen, short sword, and of the pressure on both sides amidst the roar and rush of the fight in which he was taking part. But all seemed wild and confused, as he stood with one foot planted on the fallen horse's side, the other on the rock, holding his shield the while in front of the fallen rider, who was striving vainly to free himself from the weight of the charger which pinned him down.

It seemed to be some long space of time, all horror and death, during which men fought and heaved and swayed, sometimes beaten back a few feet, then recovering themselves, regaining the lost ground, and pressing on, till in regular rhythmic pulsation rank after rank of warriors tramped on, opening out as they reached the group of dead

and wounded men whose core was the spear-slain horse. But in fact it was but a matter of minutes before the pressure ceased as the ranks passed on and a big, heavy-looking man came up, and by signs—for no voice could make itself heard—seemed to be urging other men to seize and drag the dead horse off the prisoned officer, who was saving himself from falling prone, possibly to be trampled to death by the advancing ranks, by clasping his hands round Marcus' waist as he still stood over him with ready sword and shield.

The start having been made, there were willing hands in plenty to drag the horse away, and its rider stood up, holding on by Marcus' arms, as once more a wave of the enemy seemed to rise up out of the tumultuous sea of carnage, sweeping between the two Romans and their friends, the former being left to face the bristling spears of the Gauls, and death appearing inevitable for Marcus and the officer he had saved.

The boy was borne back by half a score of the hirsute semi-savages, leaving his companion standing erect with nothing to defend himself but his clenched hand, when, half maddened by the scene, Marcus uttered a wild cry, recovered himself, and dashed forward to the rescue, staggering the foe with astonishment by the fierceness of his onslaught, as he literally hurled himself between the officer and his fate, the upraised shield turning aside the spears gliding with deadly aim toward his throat.

At that moment the deadly wave of destruction was checked in its onward sweep by the rebound of a line of Roman veterans, the Gauls fell back, and the officer drew himself up panting and waving one arm on high, when a couple of officers rode up, one of whom dismounted and held his stirrup, when, without a word, the companion of Marcus in peril sprang upon the charger's back and dashed forward, the late rider holding on by the mane.

"Well done, boy! Grand!" was shouted in Marcus' ear, as he stood there wondering whether it was all real, that noise of men tramping by, the clash of arms, and the roar as of muttering thunder ahead, and not some horrible dream in which, faint and sick, everything was whirling slowly round.

"That you, Serge?" someone said, for they did not seem to be his words.

"Yes, boy; grand, but we ought to be along with our cohort, and it's far ahead, so we must join the ranks of one of these that are going by."

"Are we losing?" said Marcus, faintly, and still it was as if someone else was speaking.

"Losing!" cried the old soldier. "Winning, you mean. But think of you having such luck as that!"

"Luck?—Luck?" said the same voice, slowly.

"Yes, I never saw anything like you. Sprang forward, you did, just as the general's horse reared up, and saved him from an ugly death by the thrust you gave that Gaul."

"Who did?" said the same voice, feebly heard in the horrible dream.

"Who did? Why, you did, and covered him afterwards with your shield all the while he was pinned down by his dead charger. Why, Marcus, boy, if you were a man you'd be made a big officer at once. But what's the matter with you, boy?"

"I—I don't know, Serge."

"But I do!" roared the old soldier, with a roar like a lion. "Why, who did this?"

"That—that Gaul," said the boy, faintly, as he felt himself seized and pressed back, to lie with his head pillowed upon the dead charger's neck, while he was conscious of his old comrade's hands being busily unbuckling his armour and then bandaging him tightly to stop the flowing blood.

"Feel better now, boy?" cried Serge, at last, as he bent down close to the wounded lad's face.

"Yes; not so sick," was the reply. "But tell me, Serge, about the fight," and as Marcus uttered these words he was conscious that they were his own.

"Tell you about the fight? Ah, that's a sign you are better. A nasty cut, my boy, between the shoulder and the neck. But it's nothing to hurt."

"But it does, Serge."

"Pooh! Only smarts. It hasn't killed you. Soldiers expect wounds, and you've got yours."

"But the fight—the fight?"

"Oh, just what I told you it would be, boy. The captain has brought his men down the pass, and the Gauls, taken between the two armies, are breaking up and streaming away to right and left. There'll be no Gallic army by the time the litters come to carry the wounded off the field, and the first shall be for the lad who saved the life of Caius Julius."

"Oh, Serge, it is impossible that I could have done that," said Marcus, feebly.

"That's what I should have said, boy, if I had not seen."

"But, Serge?"

"I look out sharp, boy, so don't doubt what I say. Your wound made you forget. I wonder whether the general will."

“But you don’t tell me about the fight, Serge.”

“What, do you want to know more?”

“Of course.”

“Well, the Gauls are taken in a trap, and after all is over I hope that one of those snowstorms will come down from the pass to cover all that the amphitheatre will have to show. It’s terrible work, my boy.”

“Horrible! Horrible indeed!” sighed Marcus, as he looked sadly round at the traces of the fight that had taken place about the fallen horse.

“Yes, my lad, I can’t help thinking just the same,” said the old soldier, as he stooped to pick up the spear he had laid down while he bound his young companion’s wound, and leaned upon the staff as he gazed straight away in the direction where the fight seemed to be raging still.

And the time passed on, till the tumult died away, and the old soldier stood watching still and waiting anxiously, while Marcus lay silent in the troubled sleep that came to dull his pain.

At last the boy stirred, and Serge bent over him.

“Awake, boy?” he said.

“Yes, Serge. Have been asleep?”

“Yes.”

Marcus gazed around him, and shuddered at the traces of the fight.

“Horrible!” he sighed.

“Yes, boy,” said the old warrior, gravely; “I suppose it is, in spite of all the glory and triumph and the like; but,” he continued, after a pause, as he raised his spear, whose head glimmered in the pale light as he pointed in the direction of the shining crest of one of the mountains beyond, while far away lay Rome, “our country must rule the world.”

Marcus sighed.

“And give up the bravest and the best of her sons to fight her cause!” sighed the old soldier to himself. “But I hope the general won’t forget what even a boy can do.”

Caius Julius did not, for a little later a group of mounted men appeared, and the faint cheers of the wounded soldiery greeted them as they passed.

“It was somewhere near here, Cracis,” said one of the party, and then pointing with his sword, “Ah, it must have been there. Yonder is my poor horse. Yes, there lies your brave son not dead, for he has raised and is waving his hand to you. Another great triumph for Rome, Cracis, but I’d give up all the glory I have won to possess a son like yours.”

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