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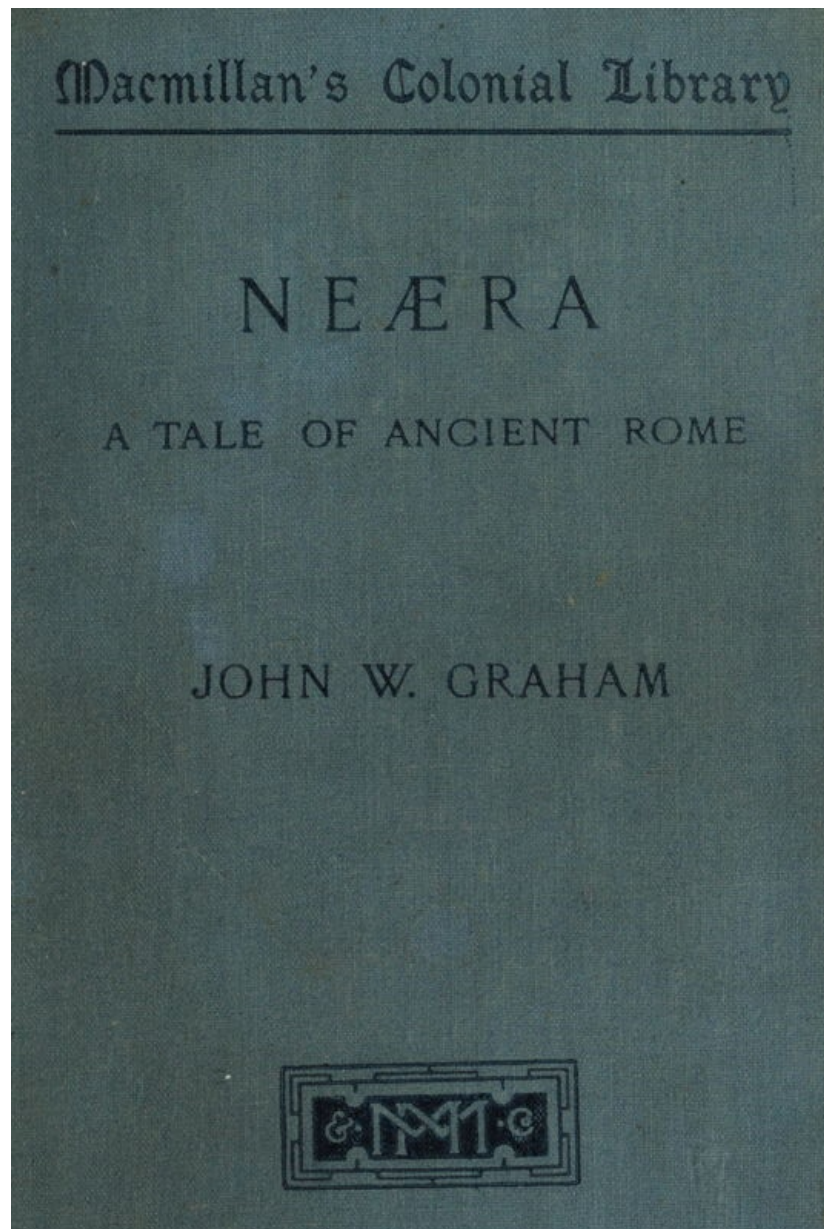
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NEÆRA

A TALE OF ANCIENT ROME

BY
JOHN W. GRAHAM

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PART I

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NEÆRA

CHAPTER I.

Anno Domini Twenty-six, Tiberius Caesar, the ruler of the world, left Rome, with a small retinue, never to return. In the following year he arrived at the island of Capreae, and there took up his permanent abode. It was a spot which already possessed substantial proofs of imperial favour, in the shape of villas, baths, and aqueducts built by the orders of the Emperor Augustus. It well merited the partiality displayed, for there are few places to be found more favoured by nature, in point of situation, than this small, lofty, iron-bound mountain-island of Capreae.

Opposite, at a distance of three miles, approaches the tip of a sharp promontory of the mainland, which divides two bays curving away on either hand. That on the north, from the earliest times, has had the reputation of being the loveliest in the world. That on the south, although not comparable, has yet considerable beauty. Capreae, therefore, stands aloof amid the blue waters, at the apex of these two semicircles, surveying both from its lofty mountain and sheer cliffs.

Why the Emperor Tiberius left Rome and secluded himself, for the remainder of his life, in this small island, away from the seat of his empire, has never, with certainty, been explained. Whether it was for political reasons, or for the purpose of giving full indulgence to those vicious habits which rumour so freely ascribed to him, is not within the scope of these pages to be determined. He hastened to continue to his new home those same marks of favour which his deified predecessor had begun. Armies of workmen assailed the summits of the cone-like hills and wave-washed cliffs. New villa-palaces arose on every hand, so that the narrow limits of the island hermitage might afford to Caesar the utmost variety possible. Of the twelve projected villas, each named after a deity, some three or four had been completed and occupied at the time of our story, whilst the building of the remainder was actively proceeding. In the autumn of the year thirty, the date of our story, Tiberius had hidden himself away from his people for about three years, and, already, dark rumours were flitting abroad of strange enormities and dread cruelties shrouded in that outline of mountain amid the sea. The seclusion of the imperial hermit was strictly preserved, and unauthorised feet were jealously warned from his rocky retreat. Curiosity became more inflamed and imagination more rampant. To turn the invisible Caesar into something akin to an ogre or monster was an easy and natural outcome of the insular mystery.

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One thing, however, is certain, that, although lost, as the Emperor may be said to have been, to the eyes of the world, the world and its affairs, in turn, were never hidden from him. Caesar remained Caesar—sleepless, prompt and vigorous amid his mysterious rocks. Day after day, couriers came and went with tidings from every corner of the known world. The vast empire, like a sprawling giant, had Capreae for its heart, which impelled the life-blood ceaselessly to every extremity of its veins and arteries.

On an October morning, one of the long, swift boats, used in the imperial despatch service, left the landing-place in the little Marina, on the north side of Capreae, and shot away toward the barren promontory of Minerva opposite.

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The vessel was one of a number used for the busy service of communication with the mainland, and was built on fine, sharp lines to attain high speed. Plenty of power was lent by the brawny arms of a dozen stout slaves, whose oars swept the craft along, with the gently rippling sea foaming under its sharp bows. The morning was bright, and a delicious autumn serenity softened mountain and sea with a mellow haze; so that in default of a breeze to fill the large sail stowed neatly away under the bulwarks, the rowers bent their backs with a will to their work.

There was one passenger on board—a young man with a soldierly air. He seemed not more than two or three-and-twenty years of age, with large, handsome, boldly-cut features, of the true Roman cast, and keen, dark eyes. The expression of his face, something stern and proud in repose, was, perhaps, heightened by a naturally dark complexion, still swarthier with sun and wind. He lay wrapped in a large military cloak, beside the steersman, whose chatter he acknowledged, now and again, by a nod, or occasionally a brief word, or smile which softened all severity of visage with a gleam as bright as the sunny sky above.

After leaving the chill shadow of the terrific, perpendicular cliffs of the island, the passage across the straits to the mainland was rapidly made. As the vessel glided finally to its destination alongside a small landing parapet of stone, on the shore of the promontory, the young man arose, flung back his cloak, and sprang lightly ashore. He showed a manly stature of at least six feet, and a spare, sinewy frame of the best athletic build, deep in the chest and thin in the flank. No other garb, than that which clothed him, could more admirably display these fine proportions.

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There was the richly-chased, polished cuirass, moulded closely to the lines of the body from throat to abdomen, and imitating them as accurately as a plaster cast. From this hung the short drapery of a kilt, or philibeg, nearly to the knee, leaving the leg, downward, bare to the high boots, which were laced up to the swell of the calf. The muscular arms of the young officer were likewise uncovered, save for a short way beneath the shoulder. The large cloak, before noticed, which hung gracefully from his left shoulder, greatly enhanced the effect of this military panoply, particularly suiting the tall stature of the wearer. It was fastened at the neck by a gold buckle, and could be shifted to either shoulder, or to the back, or wrapped around the body altogether. On military service, a polished, crested helmet would have completed the costume; but, at present, after the usual Roman fashion, the young man's head bore no covering but its own dark, close-curling hair. For arms, he wore the short, straight, Roman sword, and a poniard.

Just as it may be remarked at the present day, of a certain exclusive portion of our own military service, so the unusual richness of the young officer's appointments, as contrasted with those of the legionaries, denoted him to be one of the Pretorian Guard, the household troops, lately gathered into a permanent camp at Rome, and brought fairly into a position for entering on their future famous career in the affairs of the city and empire.

As he left the boat its crew saluted him. Returning the courtesy, he flung the perspiring slaves some pieces of money, and walked rapidly up the shore towards a group of buildings, comprising the posting establishment, which had newly sprung into existence, as a necessary adjunct to the Emperor's abode. A signal had been waved from the despatch-boat before reaching the shore, and when he arrived at the door of the stables he found the ostlers awaiting him with a horse ready caparisoned for the road.

'Back to Rome, Centurion?' said one, saluting him.

'Back to Rome,' replied he, girding his cloak close around him.

'A good journey!' chorused the stablemen.

Two or three coins rattled on the gravel for answer, and the Pretorian vaulted on to the horse's back, and galloped away.

Riding as rapidly as the path would permit, and without drawing rein, it was not long before the lovely plain of Surrentum broke on his view, embosomed in the circling vine and olive-clad mountains, edged by the blue waters of the sea, clothed with luxuriant fruit-groves, and studded with the villas of the noble and wealthy, who had retired hither to revel in the soft, salubrious air of this most lovely spot of a lovely land.

But our horseman paid little attention to the exquisite scene. His thoughts were otherwise absorbed. He passed the girdling hills, and closed with the town of Surrentum itself. At the posting station, in the midst, he changed horses and went on, scarcely giving time for an idle crowd to gather round. He did not, however, go very many hundred yards on his second stage, before he suddenly drew rein on the very outskirts of the town, where the last houses straggled out amid garden-plots and fields. It was at a point where a by-road debouched upon his own, almost at right angles. It seemed to lead back to the town by a roundabout course, and was lined on either side, in a straggling, intermittent way, by gardens and cottage-houses, in the manner of a country village street. The dwelling nearest to where he stood, at the end of the lane, was about a hundred yards distant. It was a small, humble house, like the majority of its neighbours, and was the outpost habitation of the town in that direction. It was detached and flanked on the town side by a small olive-grove. In the rear of the premises was an outbuilding; a workshop, to judge by its black, smoking chimney. The house itself was open-fronted as a shop.

The Centurion turned down this lane, and, when within a few yards of the house, dismounted and led his horse through a gap in a ruinous wall to the inside of the enclosure, where he tethered him amid some trees. Thence he walked up to the house, and looked inside the open shop, pausing with a fixed gaze.

The interior was fitted with shelves, on which was displayed a stock of pottery of a kind for which Surrentum was noted. It was not upon these, however, that the rapt eyes of the soldier rested, but upon the tall, lithe figure of a girl, who was busily engaged in taking the articles down and dusting them. Her back being toward him, he entered the shop with a stealthy step and stood behind her without her knowledge. Pausing, for a moment, to gaze upon the figure and the glossy coils of the luxuriant brown hair of the unconscious girl, he bent down and whispered in her ear the name 'Neæra!'

She started violently, and the bowl, which she was wiping, fell from her fingers and shivered with a crash on the floor.

'Oh, sir, is it you?' she murmured.

Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes fell.

'Yes, Neæra, it is I—but only for a few niggard moments. I am on my way back to Rome. 'Tis six weeks since I saw you, Neæra—you look pale! have you fared well?'

'Quite well,' was the brief, constrained reply.

'And your father and mother?'

'Both are well—they are within if you will be pleased to see them.' She moved as if to go to the interior of the house, but he laid his hand gently on her arm and detained her.

'In a moment, Neæra—do you wish to be rid of me?'

She gave a hasty, timid glance into the street, and he led her aside into a recess which was less overlooked.

'You neither look at me nor speak, Neæra—are you displeased to see me? Would you rather have had the weary six weeks prolonged into twelve?' She raised her head and looked at him with an appealing expression in her beautiful gray eyes, but, in a brief moment, her gaze fell once more. 'Still you do not say whether I am welcome or not, Neæra?' he persisted.

'Spare me from an answer, I pray you,' she replied, in an almost inaudible tone.

His swarthy cheeks flushed with a yet deeper colour, and he drew himself up. 'As you will,' he returned; 'but if your answer would be "Nay," say it without hesitation or fear; for I would have the truth from your heart, even at the expense of a little courtesy.' Her agitation increased, and her fingers worked nervously with the dusting cloth she held. Those fingers, though stained and roughened with toil, were slenderly and delicately formed. He took them in his own, and, in spite of her attempt to withdraw them, kept them in his grasp.

'What has happened, Neæra?' said he, looking into her downcast face. 'Has anything that I have done angered you, or rather, that I have left undone, since I have been chained to duty in yonder island for six weeks? It is long indeed, but we must reflect that had the Prefect no business with Caesar then our meetings would be far seldomer. To Caesar and Prefect I owe the happy chance of seeing you, and on them for a while still depend future opportunities. But what is troubling you, Neæra? You are pale and worn—what has happened?'

'Nothing but reflection—ah, sir, have pity on me—it was better not to have returned at all.'

'Ah, is it so?—that is easily mended!' he replied, in bitter astonishment.

'Don't blame—don't kill me with scornful tones!' she said, with more courage, even though the courage of despair; 'think, as I have been thinking through these bitter weeks—oh, so bitter! It is right—it is just that you see me no more. What is there in common between us? I am a poor

potter's girl—am rude in speech and manner; you are nobly born and rich—' Her voice trembled with extreme agitation, and she stopped abruptly as if she could trust it no longer. A smile of infinite tenderness and pity illumined his fine features.

'Had I needed but one thing more to clench my love, you have given it me,' he said, catching her hands again and drawing her towards him.

'No—it were better to love one of your own station,' she panted, trying to repulse him.

'It is too late to tell me that. Come, look at me, child!'

'No, I have been foolish and am to blame. I ought to have seen that your way of life cannot be mine. My father has also said it, and he is wise.'

'Ay, he has said it, but you?'

'I say it is truth and must be followed.'

'Foolish! You only bind me the faster to you. Your joint wisdom is vain against my conviction. What! are we to part because a weak, foolish fancy seizes you, that your speech and bearing are not like the artificial, superfine graces of the proud dames who loll away their lives in palaces? Gods forbid! Why, there are those of your sex in Rome—ay, even in Surrentum, who would deem me as the dust beneath their feet.'

'And there are others, also, whom you would look upon in the same fashion,' replied the girl.

'True! and many of them of family and wealth far beyond mine.'

'Yet what you have of both is far above me, and therefore, between us, all remains the same.'

'Surrentum cannot better you in a lawyer's wit, Neæra,' he said, with a smile, 'but you spend it in so poor a cause. There remains something far beyond rank and wealth.'

'Whatever it is, it is not for us in common,' she said, striving to appear calm; 'it is over now. I have been weak and foolish, and oh, how I have suffered for it! Forgive me, Centurion, if you can forgive me—go from me and forget me—all our folly.' As she looked him full in the face there was a depth of anguish in her eyes which filled him alike with pity and joy. At the same time she held out her hand, but he folded his arms across his breast. 'Centurion!' he repeated, in a tone of reproof; 'Neæra, have you forgotten my name?'

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His bearing and speech throughout had never shown a sign of hesitation which might have encouraged her in her determination. He stood before her vast, immovable, and calmly resolute. Her glance drooped, and her outstretched hand and arm gradually fell to her side. Then she buried her face in her hands.

He bent closer till his breath played on her hair. 'Neæra,' he said, 'you have been kinder and called me Lucius ere now. Enough of this madness—this folly of saws and maxims! Misdoubting girl, I love you for what you are, and above all on this earth. To thrust me away were to wreck me wholly; and you would not though you possess the power. For I have gathered it from your lips, your eyes, your sweet face, that you have some measure of love for me in return. Is it not so? Speak, Neæra!'

She trembled violently, and, yielding to an irresistible impulse, he threw his arms around her and pressed a fervent kiss upon her cheek.

She freed herself with a desperate exertion, and stood off, panting and shaking in extreme emotion, with her cheeks aflame.

'Neæra!' he ejaculated, advancing to her again.

'No, no! Leave me—go and forget me, if you would be merciful and kind!—oh, you are cruel! Alas, can I ever look in my father's face again!'

The sound of a footstep in the passage leading to the interior broke upon their ears. She cast one swift look of lofty reproach, mingled with sorrow, upon the young man, and then drooped her head upon her breast.

A short, thick-set man presented himself in the shop. His hands, his coarse garments, and even his face, were stained with the grime of the furnace and the smearings of clay; but through these outward tokens of the common artisan shone the unmistakable signs of superior intellect, in the brilliancy of his eyes, deep set under thick brows, and in a massive forehead, which was very broad and full at the base. His hand, which he raised with a gesture of surprise, as his gaze rested on the young couple, was of the shape usually supposed to be peculiar to the gifted artist and mechanic, being long, square-tipped, and sinewy, with an immense flexibility and power of thumb. Reading the tell-tale faces of the pair with a rapid glance, his countenance instantly assumed a grave sternness, unlike the preoccupied expression which previously rested upon it.

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'What—Centurion! Martialis!' he said, coldly, and even with an amount of haughtiness which

might, ordinarily, have been deemed incommensurate with the relative stations of himself and his visitor.

Although his tone was quiet and free from anger or emotion of any kind, there was an unusual quality in it which seemed to strike the girl not the less acutely, for she hid her pale face in her hands.

'Yes, Masthlion, even I!' returned the Pretorian, stepping forward and offering his hand.

Masthlion met the open, frank gaze of the young officer for a moment; then, as if not noticing the proffered greeting, he dropped his eyes to the floor and remained for a few seconds in deep thought. Then raising his head he said—

'Centurion, I should be grieved to say that you are unwelcome, yet, I say plainly, that the honour of your visit is not altogether free from that feeling. Not from personal dislike, I am bound to say. I will be frank with you. I am a poor fellow, who earns a modest living for my family by the hard labour of my hands. You are of the knightly order, and hold high office in Caesar's service. You are wholly above the station of me and mine. As you do not honour my humble dwelling for the sake of buying my handiwork in the way of trade, I have, therefore, a right to reflect and inquire what object your presence has.'

[pg 12] 'You have a perfect right, Masthlion,' replied the other, 'and, although you know, as I think, right well already, I commend your method of putting the matter thus plainly. I have as little inclination to allow any misunderstanding and ambiguity to creep about my actions as you have, and I will, therefore, give you freely, and without hesitation, an answer as clear as your question—I love your daughter Neæra!'

The potter nodded in a manner which showed that the reply was no other than expected. His glance roved from one to the other, whilst his daughter's head drooped so low that her face was completely hidden.

'It is a matter which demands further talk, and, as there is no reason why it should take place in the sight of neighbours and passers-by, perhaps you will enter my poor house, Centurion.'

'Willingly—I desire nothing better,' was the reply.

Masthlion, heaving a deep sigh, took his daughter by the hand and led the way along the inner passage. Martialis followed them into a small room, furnished simply with a table, some stools, and a couch; whilst, for ornament, some brackets and shelves bore a few exquisitely-finished specimens of glasswork, together with some small figures sculptured in stone, the fruits of the potter's self-taught genius. From the door Masthlion called aloud for his wife, and she hastily appeared. She was a spare woman, with patient eyes. Her face had been comely, but was worn and faded with the hardship and anxiety of a long struggle against hunger and want in their early wedded life.

A significant glance passed between her and her husband as she perceived what had occasioned the demand for her presence.

She made a silent obeisance to the visitor, and waited for her husband to speak.

As for Neæra, she stood with her head still bowed on her breast.

Her lover's tall, erect form, draped in its ample flowing cloak, seemed to fill the little room. His eyes rested with calm confidence on Masthlion, who began in grave measured tones:—

'Wife, the Centurion Martialis hath told me that he loves our daughter.' Here he paused a few moments, looking on the floor. 'What we should tell him is this, that she is our only child, the one light of our house. But had we twenty, we must be assured, as far as possible, of good and honourable keeping ere we let one go from our roof. You understand this, Centurion?'

[pg 13] 'Perfectly; it is only natural and proper. Do what you think best for your assurance.'

'First, then! is it from mere fancy that you would try to take my daughter away, and then to cast her off when that fancy has burnt itself out, after the fashion of many of your order?'

'No,' said the young man, drawing himself up with sparkling eyes; 'I told you I loved her—now I tell you she must be my wife, or none other.'

'And are you sure you would always rest in the same mind as now?'

'Ah, as far as human thought and perception can go, I have no doubt of it,' returned Martialis proudly.

Masthlion shook his head and sighed; and his wife, from long habit of waiting on his looks, unconsciously did the same, though without offering any remark of her own.

'It is ever the way with the young—eager and heedless!' said the potter. 'Centurion, as an older man, and one who has not lived in the world with blind eyes, I must tell you that I disagree with

you. You are attracted by the child's fair looks, and you know not, or forget, that familiarity will weaken their influence over your senses. The gods made women fair to please the hearts of men; but, did they bestow upon them no other qualities, they would become nothing more than mere toys to be bandied about at will. Looks attract first; but it is the disposition, and the accomplishments of the mind, which are necessary to weave a lasting bond of esteem and love. Where, within these humble walls, has this poor child learnt those manners and graces which, from habit, you require, before all, in a companion? Where could she have gathered the refinements which would be necessary to the wife of one of your station? Could you present her to your fine friends and family? She would shame you at every turn—at every word. The first blush of your fancy would wear off. You would grow angry and disgusted. You would repent of your bargain, and the rest would be nothing but bitterness, reproaches, and unhappiness—if not worse. This is a picture more to be depended on than yours, Centurion. Go, therefore, and if you think over it, as you ought to do, without allowing your feelings to bias your reflections, you will see that I am right, and you will come no more. Thus there will be one rash, ill-advised affair the less in the world.'

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'Masthlion, your daughter has already told me this,' answered the Centurion, with a smile.

'Did she so?' cried the potter, casting a look of pride and satisfaction at the girl. 'Then she did wisely and obediently—and bravely too, if I guess aright. Alas! your proudest dames could have done no better. Come and kiss me, my brave girl!'

Neæra glided to him, and hid her face in his shoulder.

Martialis folded his arms and watched them. The potter had unconsciously dealt a deathblow to his own cause, if it needed one at all. Their eyes met at that moment. The acute perception, or instinct, of the artisan interpreted too well the calm, resolute light of the young man's glance, so warm with the picture of the fair girl before him, and he groaned inwardly as he restlessly stroked his daughter's glossy locks. He knew not what to say, so heavily did the sense of his helplessness press upon him.

'It is a year since I stopped one day at the old fountain-basin yonder,' said Martialis, stretching out his arm. 'I had ridden far and was thirsty, and Neæra was filling her pitcher. It was thus I met her first. I went on my way, but her image haunted my mind. I sought her again, and discovered that her looks did not belie her heart. I have chosen her to fill my mind, even as you would have me choose; not from a light fancy of the eyes alone, but because I know she is pure, noble, and good in spirit. As for the rest, you may magnify, from ignorance, my position and importance. Neæra is naturally predisposed toward those trifling changes which you deem necessary, and she would glide into them instinctively and unconsciously. Masthlion, these arguments will be vain, so use them not. I ask you to give me your daughter Neæra, in betrothal.'

The potter did not reply straightway, but, smoothing the trembling girl's head ceaselessly with his hand, he stood with his brow contracted in painful thought, and his eyes bent on the ground.

'In good faith, Centurion,' he said, after an uneasy silence, 'you rend my heart between doubt and anxiety, and a desire to act generously as well as prudently. Can I deliver up my child to a stranger? Were you of this district I could judge better of you. You are honest and fair-spoken, and your looks correspond to your speech. But yet you are no more than a stranger, and Surrentum knows you not.'

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'I would fetch Rome, if I could, to aid you,' said the young man. 'You are pleased to be satisfied with my appearance; I, for my part, will await your further inquiries with confidence.'

'I have no suspicion of your character, noble sir, but prudence requires proof. I cannot give you a decided answer, for now we are at odds and evens. You are sanguine and confident of the future; I am not. Hawks should pair only with hawks, and sparrows with sparrows. More words at present, however, would be spent to no purpose—the matter requires time and reflection.'

'The child Neæra is not goods or chattels, husband—is she to have no word for herself?' remarked his wife quietly.

'Ay, truly, Tibia; thou hast ever a word in season,' answered the potter to his delighted spouse. 'The gods forgive me for a thoughtless blockhead. It would be a fine way of making a pot without first proving if the clay be fit. What say you, Neæra—do you love this young man?'

The girl clung closer, and buried her face deeper in his shoulder, but her silence was eloquent.

The soldier's bronzed face gathered a deeper tinge, and his ears were strained to catch the accents which he expected to follow, but which came not.

'Come, my child,' continued Masthlion earnestly; 'I want thee to say truly what thy heart prompts thee to say. If thou lovest him speak it then; there is no crime or harm in it that I can see. You have heard what has passed, and I can call your confession, if it is what I expect it to be, only by as hard a name as a misfortune. Speak!'

A simple 'Yes' was the reply, in a voice so low and yet so clear that it caused her lover's blood to bound in his veins with exquisite joy. He stepped forward as if to take her, but the hand of

Masthliion restrained his eager advance.

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'Enough,' said the potter, 'the mischief is done, it is clear, but yet the matter must rest as it is for a time. I am yet unconvinced, and I give not my consent so heedlessly to a partnership so brimful of hazard. I must be better assured. In the meantime, Centurion, I ask of thee one condition.'

Martialis was burning with eagerness, for his beloved now stood before him ready to his arms, with downcast eyes and cheeks blushing with sudden joy and hope.

'Name it!' he said quickly.

'It is that you neither visit nor correspond with this child without my knowledge.'

'It is no more than I have done hitherto,' said Martialis.

'I believe it, and it is much to your credit,' returned Masthliion. 'Now go, Centurion. Stand by our agreement; and may the gods direct the matter to the best end—for I need their help.'

'Farewell!' said the young man, reaching forward to clasp Neæra to his breast.

'No!' said the potter, once more stretching his ruthless arm before him.

The Centurion frowned; but the cloud fled when he saw the tender, curving lips of Neæra moving, as though silently fashioning his name, and her beautiful eyes, more beautiful still, with the light of love and hope and joy. From the divine smile on her face he drew consolation, as he grasped the earthy hand of the potter instead of hers.

With a lingering look he drew his cloak around him, and hastened away at a pace which received additional lightness and speed from his feelings. A couple of minutes more and he was galloping at a headlong speed on the road to Rome.

As soon as their visitor had departed, Masthliion withdrew to his workshop at the rear of his premises. He found it vain, however, to try and use his tools during the disturbed state of his mind; for every now and then he discovered himself standing motionless with them in his hand, his thoughts being far away. After a wasted half hour, therefore, he threw them down, and, washing his hands and face, left the house to wander away on a lonely ramble along the edge of the sea, and up the ravines of the hills, in order to give unrestrained liberty in his meditations.

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The mountains were looming dark and purple in the gathering gloom, and a chilly breath from the dusky sea was stirring the leaves when he turned his steps homeward. He found his simple supper and his wife and daughter awaiting him. An unusual restraint weighed upon them all. The customary familiar chat was lacking, and the meal passed quickly and in silence.

When Neæra put her arms round her father's neck for her nightly caress, she whispered, 'Have I done wrong in loving him, father? Are you displeased with your Neæra?'

'I am not displeased, child. I blame no one for loving; yet would I be less anxious had you loved some humbler man.'

'He is noble and good, father.'

'The gods grant it true.'

'If you will it I will see him no more.'

'Nay, you talk foolishly—I hope I am neither harsh nor selfish. Get to bed, child, and try if you can sleep, though your heart be galloping, this moment, to Rome.'

'Say you are not angry with me then!' she murmured.

'I blame you not, silly girl; I blame six feet or more of human flesh, and a handsome face, which hath beguiled your silly girlish thoughts. Heaven only knows how much more mischief of the same nature they are guilty of already, for I do not—now go!'

Her lips pouted a little, but she left the room with a light step.

The firm, determined mouth of the man quivered, and the moisture dimmed his deep-set eyes. He passed his hand over his massive brow and gave a deep sigh.

'Wife!' he said briefly, 'I am going to Rome.'

'To Rome!' echoed Tibia fearfully, for the mention of the great city always loaded her simple rustic mind with a sense of mystery and danger.

'Ay, to Rome,' rejoined Masthliion; 'the time has come when I must try and find your brother, if alive. Silo will give me a passage in his trader—'tis about his time to be touching here Tiberward.'

CHAPTER II.

On the following day, in Rome, about the seventh hour, or noon, a small party descended the slope of the Janiculan Hill toward the Tiber.

Though not included in the more famous cluster of the seven hills across the river, which formed the heart of Rome, the Janiculum, with its long straight ridge running nearly north and south, was the greatest in altitude, and commanded the noblest and most extensive view of the city itself, as well as the loveliness of the surrounding plain, as far as the circling Apennines beyond.

With the straight line of the hill as a base, a sharp curve of the river forms the other two sides of a triangle, enclosing a level tract of ground. This was the Transtibertine district, which formed the fourteenth, and largest, region of the city, as arranged by Augustus. In interest and importance it was perhaps the least, being populated by the lowest classes, particularly fishermen, tanners, and the like. It was also the original Ghetto, or quarter of the Jews, which now occupies the bank of the river immediately opposite.

The obvious advantages of dwelling above the cramped and stifling valleys naturally brought the hills, in time, from the princely and fashionable Palatine, almost wholly in the hands of the powerful and wealthy classes. The Janiculum, as a suburban mount, was greatly lacking in the noble buildings and ancient traditions which clothed the urban seven. Neither was it fashionable, for it lay too far from the public places of the city, most frequented by society. Nevertheless, there were some who preferred its fresher and purer air, its nobler prospect and its greater seclusion, to the advantages and attractions of a more central residence.

[pg 19] One of these was a wealthy man who had long retired from a busy, public life, to devote himself to the quiet pursuits of study, in a house he had built, and gardens he had laid out, on a commanding eminence of the hill.

The name of Quintus Fabricius had once been celebrated in the city as that of a senator distinguished for uprightness, firmness, and liberality, but his public fame had almost passed away with a new generation. He was now, at the time we speak of, far better known throughout Rome in connection with a domestic matter, which will unfold itself in the following pages.

He was of an old family; and if wealth, taste, and an easy conscience could make a man happy, surely he might be said to be truly so. We will follow him, for it is he, and his five slaves, who form the small party previously mentioned.

They walked in three divisions. Two powerful slaves led the van, whose especial care was to clear a way for their master through the crowded, tortuous lanes. When their cry of 'Place, place,' was unheeded, they enforced a passage, after the usual custom, by a rough and ready use of their brawny arms and shoulders. The remaining three slaves walked in the rear, each bearing some trifling burden of personal attire or convenience belonging to their master. In the centre walked Fabricius himself.

[pg 20] He was tall and spare, but with a slight stoop. His features were regular and handsome. His hair, though closely cropped, was yet thick and luxuriant, but white as snow. He could not have been less than seventy-five years of age; but the vigorous, free motions of his limbs, and the healthy hue of his aged, wrinkled face, denoted a still sound constitution, preserved by a temperate mode of life. His dark eyes, though somewhat sunken, were yet bright and quick. As he now passed along, engaged with no train of thought in particular, their expression was one of settled melancholy abstraction. His mouth was closely knit and firm, but, occasionally, as some poor neighbour saluted him, his lips curved into a kindly smile. His vigorous old age, and the natural nobility of his appearance, were calculated to inspire respect; but there were also distinctions in his dress which marked his rank. His toga was made of wool, in its natural colour of greenish white, a fashion of garment which was preserved by men of distinguished rank long after the toga itself had fallen into disuse. On the right breast of his short-sleeved tunic, where it peeped from beneath the graceful folds of the toga, might be seen a glimpse of the 'Augustus Clavus,'¹ or narrow purple stripe, which was woven into the garment, and ran down perpendicularly from each shoulder. The high buskins on his feet were each fastened in front by four black thongs, ornamented by a small crescent, the exclusive, sartorial badge of senatorial rank. Such little particulars were trifling enough in extent, and unnoticeable to a stranger, but to a Roman eye they denoted at once the rank and importance of the wearer. They were, however, unnecessary in the poor and crowded suburb through which he and his slaves passed leisurely towards the river. He was well known to the humble inhabitants, in consequence of the proximity of his mansion, which stood on the height overlooking them; and, also, by acts of liberality and good-nature, which ever met with full appreciation. Hence, as he wound his way through the crowded and not altogether sweet-flavoured district, his vanguard of slaves before mentioned had only occasion now and again to use their voices to open a free passage. The people gave way readily, with gestures of respect.

The main street of the district which they traversed brought them, in a few minutes, nigh to the river, just where it curved round the point of land. In a right line before them stretched the Aemilian Bridge, leading direct to the Palatine Mount and the city; to the left hand forked another road over the island of the Tiber. At this junction the leading slaves halted and turned to learn their master's pleasure as to his intended route. The old man hesitated as if undecided, and, as he did so, a slim personage presented himself before the stationary group. Two or three rings on his fingers proclaimed his gentility as a Roman knight, and every fold of his toga was disposed with the most scrupulous exactness. He might be about forty years of age, with straight black hair, a long nose, curved very much downwards, and small black eyes, rather too prominent and close set to be called handsome. As he halted, his lips parted in a smile, which displayed a row of brilliant white teeth. The slaves of Fabricius, on perceiving him, made him marked obeisance.

'Titus Afer!' murmured one of them in his master's ear.

Fabricius looked up from his momentary deliberation or abstraction.

'Ha, nephew, is it you?' said he.

'Even so, dear uncle. You seem to be on the horns of a dilemma,' returned the new-comer; 'have you started out to dine, uncle, not having settled where to turn in for your dinner?'

'Why, no; I am going to dine with my old friend Florus on the Quirinal—but you, nephew?'

'Oh, I!—it is of no consequence—I was coming just to spend an hour with you. It is three days since I have seen you. With your permission I will turn and go along with you, for a space, on your way, whichever it is!'

'By the Circus Flaminius; it is less crowded, though a little longer in distance,' said Fabricius.

He gave a slight motion of his hand, indicating the left turn, and they took their way over the Cestian Bridge unto the island of the Tiber, sacred to Aesculapius. Thence by the bridge of Fabricius they were quickly on the opposite bank, and passing round by the outer side of the Capitoline.

So far they walked in silence. The elder seemed absorbed in abstraction, and the younger to be waiting, as if in deference to his relative's cogitations. At length the old man turned his head toward the slaves who followed and waved his hand. They fell back farther in rear.

'Were you coming to tell me aught of your mission, Titus?' he began.

'I went as you desired,' returned his nephew, nodding.

'It was good of you, as ever, nephew; but to no purpose, I suppose—as ever,' said the old man, adding the last words with a weary, half-suppressed sigh.

'None at all!' rejoined Afer, with another and deeper sigh. 'The woman was six-and-twenty years old if she was a day; and, as for her appearance, she was as likely to have grown from your Aurelia, as a barn-door fowl from an eaglet. These tales and rumours are detailed by knavish people simply to work upon your weakness, uncle, and to squeeze your purse—why listen to them?'

'Ah, nephew—how can I shut my ears?'

'You are an unfailing, bottomless gold-mine to these people.'

'Oh!' cried the old man fervidly, throwing up his open palm to the blue heavens, and looking up with a burning glance of his sunken, sorrow-laden eyes, 'if the good gods would only give me back my lost darling, the joy of my old age,—my gold, and all that I have, to the last farthing, might be flung, if need be, broadcast over the streets of Rome.'

The black brows of the nephew knitted at the vehement words.

'And, truly, if what you have spent already, uncle, on this vain quest were sown broadcast, there would scarce be a gutter vagabond in the city that would not be the richer. You have done all you can do, and I have helped to the best of my ability.'

'You have, nephew, right nobly. Think not that I have forgotten it.'

'Then why cast good after bad? Will you not be assured after all these silent years of the hopelessness of all efforts?'

'If I lived to a hundred years, nephew, I could never sever hope from me—it is part of me.'

'And I have none left, though I grieve to say it, and, moreover, my reason is less governed by feeling than yours—poor Aurelia!'

'The gods overlook us,' said Fabricius, with a quiver in his voice, while the lips of the other curled

in scorn.

'The impudent scoundrel, whom you sent to pilot me to his supposed discovery, demanded two thousand sesterces ere he would budge. It is horrible, but I was forced to pay the extortioner. I would not mention it, uncle, but for my misfortune of being not too well provided with property.'

[pg 23] 'It shall cost thee no more than it ever has,' returned Fabricius; 'thou shalt have it back and another two thousand, as well, for thy kindness.'

'Nay—I should seem to make a trade of robbing you like the rest of them.'

'Say no more, nephew, I insist upon it.'

The other shrugged his shoulders and was silent, and so they reached the foot of the Quirinal Hill, upon which the house was situated where Fabricius was to dine. Here Afer halted.

'You are for the bath then?' said Fabricius.

'Even so; and then to dine with Apicius.'

'Ah! we old-fashioned men dine at an old-fashioned hour. This Apicius gives feasts such as we could never dream of.'

'The finest in Rome.'

'Well, every one to their own tastes. Florus and myself will, no doubt, enjoy our modest entertainment as much as Apicius his profusion, though it cost nothing in proportion. It is a foolish, empty way of spending one's money, Titus.'

'From necessity I am not likely to copy it, uncle. Nevertheless, if he choose to throw a portion of his away on me, I will not refuse it.'

'Yet there is a subtle danger in it, for——'

'Nay, nay, uncle,' said his nephew, laughing; 'if you begin to moralise your dinner will grow cold. So I will go and tell you later how mine was served.'

'Come then to see me soon, nephew—a good appetite. Farewell!'

Fabricius and his slaves turned to ascend the hill, and Afer watched them going. 'Nothing will cure him of this delusive hope, it is clear,' he muttered. 'Assuming, therefore, that all this profitless expense is unavoidable, it is only just and prudent that it should flow mainly into the purse of his heir, and not into the swindling hands of scamps and aliens, in order to feed wine-shops and brothels. Hermes himself will give me witness that I spoke truth when I said that yon vagabond demanded two thousand sesterces ere he would budge. So he did, but he only got two hundred in the end. What a brilliant idea—what a stroke of genius it was, on my part, to obtain the monopoly of this infatuation! Formerly, every one of sufficient impudence could work upon his credulity, and extort their own terms from the foolish old man; but since my appointment as superintendent of inquiries, I regulate all to suit my own ideas. It pleases him and it benefits me. Who could do better? Not the deities themselves.'

[pg 24] 'But if your terms were more liberal your custom would increase, as well as your profits, noble Afer,' said a deep voice in his ear.

The knight wheeled round with the swiftness of light, and the severity of the sudden surprise was seen in the rush of blood which suffused his otherwise pale face. His brows knitted so as almost to hide the furious glance of his eyes.

Before him stood a man whose superior bulk, lighter complexion, broader and less marked physiognomy, betrayed other than the Latin blood. He was dressed in the rough woollen tunic of the common citizen, girded with a belt of untanned leather, whilst his feet were shod with a kind of sandal, having strong leather soles. The short sleeves of his tunic displayed his hairy, muscular arms. His chin was bristly and needed the razor, and his hair unkempt and disordered. He might be anything in the lowest strata of the city community, but there was that in his loafing, cunning appearance, which seemed not to belong to an honest, industrious mechanic. His attitude, as he stood regarding his superior, whom he had so familiarly accosted, was cool and careless, and his smile as full of impertinence as assurance.

If a glance could have laid him dead upon the pavement, he would have fallen, straightway, before the rage, hate, and contempt which flashed upon him from the glowing eyes of Afer. But, unabashed, he altered not a jot of his bearing.

'Is it thou?' uttered Afer, in a voice thick with passion; 'how darest thou lurk at my elbow and play the eavesdropper?'

'It needed no extra sharp ear to catch what you said, patron. But for the noise of the streets you might have been heard somewhere between this and the Palatine. It is dangerous to think in such a loud, public voice, and I recommend you to shake off the habit, for your own good, patron.'

The familiar style of this speech in no way allayed the storm in the mind of the knight, and he shook like an aspen leaf, with a passion impossible wholly to hide.

[pg 25] 'You are not in the humour to see me, patron—you are angry with me,' added the man coolly; 'it is as plain as anything can be.'

'Take heed, or your presumption, which is growing beyond all bounds, will run you into a certain amount of danger—impudent vagabond, is it for such as you to accost me thus? More respect, I bid thee, or beware!'

The menacing tone of the knight, and the dangerous, evil expression on his face, might have been judged sufficient warning in an ordinary case, but the man's hardihood was in no way daunted.

'Presumption, patron,' he echoed; 'there, with your honour's leave, I must differ with you. I consider myself—in regard to the intimate relations between us—a most modest, respectful, and untroublesome client. Why, it is full three months since I presented myself to your honourable presence. I have seen you at chance times—for I am compelled now and again to encourage wearisome existence by the grateful sight of your person—but these have only been glimpses at a distance. Nor would I intrude myself upon you now, only that hard necessity compels me. In fact, patron, my treasure is drained to the last sesterce, which went this very morning to inspire my failing strength with a draught of vinegar, which they called wine.'

'I have nothing to give you—you are importunate beyond reason. You have, already, had much more than was stipulated. That you know as well as I. I will give you no more, so be off!'

'What, patron, and without as much as the cost of a mouthful of dinner? cast me off to starve?'—this with a burlesque of righteous horror in his looks and gestures—'I, too, who have had the blessed fortune to do you such service! Some reptile has bitten my noble patron and changed his nature. Poor Cestus, then, may go and hang himself, or throw himself to fatten the pike in the Tiber; but no—you cannot, surely, refuse poor Cestus, thus empty and naked before you.'

[pg 26] 'Silence!' cried he of the toga, as fiercely as he could, without attracting the attention of the passers-by. 'Good-for-nothing spendthrift, you have had enough to have made you wantless for the remainder of your life, with an ordinary amount of care in its use!'

'I only follow the fashion of many of my betters, patron. To be free with one's treasure is an excellent way of becoming popular and powerful—none better—in Rome at least.'

'Enough, I have said! If you are wise you will leave your insolence behind you, among your pot companions, when you seek to come before me.'

'Surely, patron, when you consider the matter calmly, you can hardly refuse me a small present,' said Cestus, assuming instantly a mock respect, which was only too palpably impudent.

The knight bit his lip, and the heaving of his breast stirred the folds of his toga with rapid pulsations.

'You fool!' he said bitterly; 'do you imagine I would beggar myself to enrich you? No—I can afford no more!'

'May I be cursed if I should ever think of bringing you to the same sad state as mine,' was the satirical answer. 'Far from that, I know, so well, that the fountain of your purse is fed from a stream which flows un failing out of Latium, even as the grateful spray of Orpheus, on the Esquiline yonder, is fed by the aqueduct from the waters of heaven. You will excuse the style for once, patron: you know I was once in the household of a poet.'

These words drew upon him another viperous look, but being in a position which rendered him careless of such exhibitions of his superior's feelings, he continued his simile. 'It is wonderful to me, patron, that you are content to see such scanty dribblets filtered through a worn old fountain, when you might, so easily, direct the full glorious flood straight to your own coffers. My devotion to your welfare is my only excuse for my tongue. But, patron—you are a most patient, enduring man.'

'I am—of your insolence, you dog,' was the rapid and burning answer. 'A less enduring man would have had your ribs tickled, or your tavern cup flavoured long ere this, most noble Cestus.'

The man palpably changed colour and winced; but if the words of his patron had not the effect of quelling him, they instantly changed his easy impertinence and effrontery into a sullen, dogged front.

[pg 27] 'Come,' growled he, with a dark, lowering visage, 'if we get to threatenings, you shall find that two can play at that game. Give me some money and let me go—I must have it, and no more trifling!'

'Good! If you *must* have it you must, and I cannot refuse,' answered the knight, whose humour seemed as suddenly to change, as if in triumph, for he actually allowed a smile to part his lips. 'I grieve that words of mine should have ruffled you. As I am not in the habit of carrying about with

me such an amount of money as you will doubtless consider proper to ask, perhaps you will do me the favour to walk with me as far as my house, dear Cestus?’

Cestus hesitated, and looked doubtingly on the unexpected spectacle of his patron’s politeness. His cunning nature was suspicious.

‘What a changeable man!’ was the bland remark of the other; ‘a minute ago he was demanding his wants, like a robber tearing spoil from a victim. Now when he is asked to walk a short way to receive it, he hangs back.’

‘No tricks, master—or else!’ said Cestus, eyeing him keenly.

‘Tricks! Certainly not. You are very coarse. Come!’

[pg 28]

Afer then led the way with the man at his heels, so close indeed that he turned and motioned him to keep at a greater distance. Their course lay through the middle of the Subura, a district which lay in the valley, between the Eastern hills and the Fora. It was one of the most ancient districts of the city, as well as the most densely peopled, and noted for its crowded thoroughfares, its low society, its noise and dirt. Occasionally the traffic would come to a dead-lock, amid much shouting and forcible language, caused, perhaps, by the stoppage of some heavy wain, laden with blocks of building material, hauled along with ropes. Or, again, some great man, in his litter, surrounded by his servants, thought fit to halt, for some purpose, in the narrow ways. His suite would, thereupon, become the nucleus of a squeezing crush of pedestrians, who cast frowning glances at the litter and its occupant. At another place, his greatness, moving along, would meet with a like obstruction, and there would be seen the spectacle of rival slaves battling a passage through. Nor were the customs of the tradesmen calculated to increase the public convenience, for they intruded their business into the already too limited space. Their stalls jutted out, and even then failed altogether to confine their occupations. A cobbler hesitated not to ply his awl in public, nor a barber to shave his customer outside his door. The gutters were frequented by noisy hucksters plying their trade, and selling all kinds of articles, from sulphur matches to boiled peas and beans. Importunate beggars were rife with every sorrow, complaint, and ailment; from the lame, sick, and blind, to the shipwrecked sailor, carrying a fragment of his ill-starred ship over his shoulder, as a proof of his sad lot. Down the narrower alleys were noisome, reeking dens crammed with the scum of the city. Thieves, murderers, blackguards, bullies loafed about; fallen women also loitered and aired themselves till the evening approached, when all this daylight idlesse of human filth betook itself to its frightful occupations of crime and wickedness, either in its own refuges, or flooded abroad upon the city. Yet this district, from its central position, was necessarily frequented, and even inhabited, in a few cases, by the higher orders of society. To imagine an unsealed Whitefriars, or a tract of the east end of modern London, cramped and narrowed, after the style of the old Roman city, and placed between two fashionable quarters, would give the best idea of the character of the Subura of Rome. It was the peculiar situation of the city which led to this intermixing of classes. In a city of a plain, where no part of the ground offers any advantage over another, the wealthy naturally form a district select from the poor. In Rome, the great and wealthy sought the elevated and pleasanter faces of the hills, while the poorer people remained beneath. Thus the intermediate valleys, however populated, unavoidably became thoroughfares, and no doubt, to a certain extent, the haunts of all classes.

[pg 29]

Through the teeming Subura, then, we will follow our two characters. They each threaded their way after their own manner. The knight, slim, supple, and quick, slipped along like an eel, avoiding all contact and gliding through every opening with the accustomed ease of a person city bred. On the other hand the Subura was the home of Cestus, to whom every nook and corner was familiar. This fact, combined with his superior weight and bulk, rendered his movements more careless and independent of passers-by, some of whom came into collision with him, to their own sorrow. He was, moreover, recognised by more than one fellow inhabitant as he passed along. Two or three fellows, as idle and rough looking as himself, leered knowingly at him from the open front of a wine-shop where they were lounging. Another one nodded and winked to him from out of a reeking, steaming cook-shop where he was munching a light meal of the simplest character. Among the many street idlers, one greasy vagabond, with an evil, bloated face, went so far as to catch his arm and whisper, with a coarse laugh, ‘What, Cestus, boy, hast hooked thy patron? Thou wilt come back like a prince!’ But Cestus shook him off, and having cleared the Subura, he and his patron entered on a less crowded path, and the short, steep ascent of the Esquiline Hill.

At the summit they passed a statue of Orpheus. He was represented playing on the lyre to a group of wild animals, exquisitely modelled in the attitudes of rapt attention to the inspired music. The group was placed in the centre of a large circular basin for the reception of the spray, which usually danced and sparkled from the head of the immortal musician. On this day, however, for some reason, the fountain was dry.

As he passed, the knight turned round, and, pointing with his finger to draw his follower’s attention to the fact, said, with a cold smile, ‘My Cestus, when you likened the supply of my funds to the feeding of that fountain, you made a bad comparison—it is a bad omen, good and faithful man. Do you accept it?—I do.’

Cestus was in no way behind the age in superstition.

‘Humph!’ muttered he, bestowing a parting glance at the dry figures and empty basin; ‘plague on

the aediles for falling short of water just at this time! No matter—water, or no water! omen, or no omen! I shall still remain a faithful client to my patron.’ And he followed on with a grin. After proceeding another hundred yards Afer stopped before the porch of a dwelling, small and modest, but pleasantly situated, overlooking no small portion of the city.

‘Step in, man, and drink a cup of wine while we arrange terms,’ said he, with ironical politeness.

[pg 30] But some suspicion was awakened in the breast of the other and he did not stir. ‘Bring it to me—I will wait here,’ said Cestus, with a shake of his head.

‘But you have not told me what you want.’

‘Six thousand will serve me.’

‘You are growing modest, Cestus—come and I will give it you.’

But Cestus still refused to proceed inside the house.

‘Why—what do you fear?’ demanded Afer.

‘You said something over there, where we met, that I liked not, patron,’ returned Cestus doggedly; ‘there is something about you now that bodes no good. I will, therefore, put no wall between me and the open street.’

‘What I said over there was true enough,’ said the knight, drawing near and fastening upon him a peculiar look; ‘there are scores in Rome who would have said “dead men tell no tales,” and, acting on that, would have made you a breathless carcase long ago, if they had suffered the behaviour which you have favoured me with. Fool, do you think I would hurt you any more than you would harm me. No; you are as necessary to me as I to you—I have more work for you to do—come!’

He went inside, and proceeded to one of the doorways which opened off the spacious hall, or atrium, as it was called, which had a tessellated floor and a small fountain in the midst. At the sound of his foot appeared two or three slaves to wait upon him. Cestus followed more slowly, with a keen, wary glance at the various doors and passages around, as though they might, at any moment, belch forth vassals to fasten on him. The knight lifted the curtain of an apartment and beckoned him to follow. He did so, and found himself, with no small amount of misgiving, in a small room, lighted by a narrow window of glass. There were a couple of couches, for furniture, and a small carved table, and, for ornament, three or four bronze statues of exquisite workmanship. In addition to these the walls were adorned with frescoes of mythological subjects, done by no unskilful hand. Afer, standing with the curtain still uplifted in one hand, pointed with the other to a couch, and, bidding his follower wait, disappeared. Cestus remained motionless, watching the screen of the doorway, with all his senses strained like a beast of prey, to catch the least sound. But nothing reached his ear, till, at the end of a quarter of an hour, his patron returned. He came to the table and threw a bag thereon. It jingled as it fell, and the eyes of Cestus flashed and fastened on the precious object.

[pg 31]

‘There, my worthy Cestus, are six thousand sesterces; take them and use them economically.’

The broad hand of the man fell upon the bag and thrust it away in the breast of his tunic.

‘What—are you not going to tell it over to see that I cheat you not?’ said Afer mockingly.

‘No—I can trust your counting, noble patron,’ answered Cestus hurriedly; ‘and now I will go, for I am craving with hunger.’

‘And thirst!’ added Afer, clapping his hands loudly.

The echo had hardly died away when a young Greek slave entered, bearing a cup and a larger vessel of variegated glass. At a nod from his master he filled the cup with wine from the flagon and handed it to Cestus. But that individual hesitated and declined with some amount of confusion. Nothing but the direst need could have compelled him to make such a sacrifice.

‘I dare not drink with an empty stomach—I dare not indeed; ‘tis rare wine, but allow me to go, or I shall drop from sheer want of food, most noble patron—indeed I shall!’

‘Then I will drink it for you, O man of tender stomach—you grow delicate,’ said Afer, with a derisive laugh; ‘fortune to us both!’

He drained it off, and the slave disappeared with the emptied cup.

‘If I want thee soon I can hear of thee at the same place, Cestus?’

‘As usual!’

‘I will keep you no longer. Go and feed on the best sausages you can find.’

‘Thanks, noble patron—you will find me ever ready and devoted.’

'As I found thee this morning. Expect to hear of me very soon.'

With these words they emerged into the hall, and Cestus, drawing a long breath as he saw the way clear, went off at a pace which utterly belied his fainting state.

[pg 32]

CHAPTER III.

From the centre of his atrium Afer watched his well-furnished client retreat down the passage or lobby which led to the street, and marked, with a sour smile, the hasty stride, or almost leap, with which he vanished out of the sunlight which filled the porch. He stood a while with lips compressed, as, with a heart aching with wrath and mortification, he pondered on what had passed, on the sum of money he was lacking, and the hateful manner of its extortion. Then he turned and bade his slaves prepare to accompany him to the bath, which was an indispensable daily luxury to a Roman, and usually indulged in previous to the dinner hour.

Though not what Rome would call a wealthy man, T. Domitius Afer was of sufficient means, and from his connection with Fabricius, we may gather, of sufficient right of birth, to rank him among the equestrian order. His house, though small, was incontestably ruled by a master possessing the somewhat rare quality of exquisite taste. Harmony and symmetry reigned over all its appointments, ordered by the still more rare magic of the hand, which rounds off the formal chilliness of perfect chastity and regularity, by an artful and timely touch of graceful negligence.

There was no painting, statue, nor carved vase, nor couch, which might not, from its beauty and delicacy of design and finish, have had a place amid the household magnificence of Caesar. The combination of faculties which we call taste can perform wonders of delight with the meanest appliances. It requires inexhaustible resources, together with barbaric ignorance and coarseness, to shock the senses.

[pg 33]

Afer remained some minutes pacing up and down the atrium of his house in deep thought. Then rousing himself he beheld his slaves awaiting his departure, with towels, unguents, and other necessaries. Without further delay, therefore, he left the house and proceeded to some private baths in the neighbourhood, where he enjoyed the company of some acquaintances, as well as the physical refreshment of what moderns call a Turkish bath. When he had leisurely gone through this delightful process; when he had finally been scraped with the strigil, rubbed dry and anointed from head to foot with a perfumed unguent, his youthful Greek attendant robed him with most elaborate care to suit his exacting taste, and he left the baths to step into a kind of sedan chair, which awaited him at the doors. He was borne thus, the short distance which intervened, to the house of one Apicius, on the Palatine, the most fashionable quarter in Rome, and finally to become almost the exclusive property of the emperors.

He alighted in a courtyard, whereon opened the magnificent entrance of a very large and imposing mansion. He went in. The lofty interior gleamed with rich marbles and gilding, and the air was laden with the scent of the perfumed fountain which twinkled and sparkled in the shaft of light, descending from the blue sunny sky through the square opening in the centre of the roof. Beyond was the vista of the entire length of the house, through its columns and peristyle to a portico and ornamental garden beyond. The sumptuous magnificence which met the eye at every turn, the priceless statuary, the frescoes on every wall, the rare, polished, carved wood and stone, the ivory, gilding, and tapestries, betokened the lavish extravagance of vast wealth. Crossing the spotless floor of marble, Afer was ushered into a reception room of the same rich character, where lounged or stood some half dozen guests engaged in conversation. Our knight's attire, though of irreproachable taste and fashion, was modest compared with the superlative richness displayed by some of those he now rubbed against.

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Charinus was a dandy of the first water, whose glorious garments, oppressive perfumes, smooth, well-tended, effeminately handsome face and languid hauteur, at once betrayed his disposition and ambition. Flaccus was a dandy, whose still youthful and ambitious mind animated a physical organisation long since bereft of vigour and beauty. Art did its best to disguise the ruthless blight of time, and age put a good face on its impotence, whilst it was being racked with follies and excesses which belonged to its grandchildren. So the withered old trunk stuck itself over with green boughs, seeking to hide its sapless rottenness, but succeeding only in rousing the laughter of men.

In the puffy face, and uncertain wavering eyes of Pansa, together with his nervous, trembling fingers, could be seen the demon of drunkenness; whilst his seat apart, and his sullen, dejected, downcast looks, marked a nightmare depression of spirits, during a brief separation from the wine cup.

Torquatus, unlike Flaccus, retained no foolish vanity in his advanced years, and his simple attire

bore a strong contrast to the rest. Curiosity might be awakened as to the reason why he was included in the company present, for peevish, snappish acidity was plain as written symbols in his prying, sharp, small eyes, in his hard, withered, wrinkled face, and thin, sourly down-drawn lips. To the host, in the middle of these, Afer proceeded to pay his respects. Unheeding, unanswering to the chatter around his chair, the lord of the house sat absorbed in his reflections. He leant his head first on one hand and then on the other, shifting continuously and restlessly, as if a prey to uneasy thoughts. His face was pale, and his brows slightly contracted. Ever and anon, when his attention was desired to hear something of interest, he gave a nod, or glimmering smile, rather weary and ghastly than otherwise. His dress was the envy even of the dandies, his guests; for his 'synthesis,' or loose upper garment, which all wore, as more convenient for table than the toga, was made of silk—a fabric, at that time, in Rome, of such extravagant cost, as to be forbidden by imperial edict only a few years before the date of this story. The appearance of Afer before him roused him from his reverie.

'Welcome, my friend,' said he, extending his hand, and shaking himself, as if to clear away all thoughts that interfered with his duties as host; 'welcome to my poor house!'

'I trust you marked the poverty as you came through,' rasped the voice of Torquatus, the sour, ever on the watch to vent a sneer.

[pg 35] 'I came hastily to greet Apicius, our generous host,' returned Afer, as he exchanged courtesies with the smiling guests, all of whom he knew.

'And faster still to eat his dinner,' added the old man.

'Ho! ho! Torquatus, I see you are in your best humour,' cried Apicius, joining in the laugh, with more vivacity and briskness in his appearance.

'Who arrived first to his appointment, Apicius?' inquired Afer.

'When my slave called me to the room, I found Torquatus here alone to greet me,' replied the host.

'Then has Torquatus the best right to the best part of your dinner, noble host, since his eagerness to eat it outstripped us all. Hungry Torquatus!'

Loud laughter from all drowned the snarling reply of the old man, but his scowling eyes spoke volumes.

'Thou hast it fairly,' said Apicius, when the merriment ceased; 'but don't be ill-humoured, Torquatus—it so ill becomes thee.'

The juvenile mirth of Flaccus shook his sides at this, and dislocated some of the enamel on his face; and ere the amusement had subsided, the heavy purple curtain of the doorway was drawn aside to admit another comer, a man in the prime of his age, of tall commanding presence and handsome countenance. He bestowed one rapid glance upon the occupants of the room, and ere their eyes, in turn, were drawn towards him, his lips were wreathed in a bland smile.

'The Prefect Sejanus!' announced the slave at the door.

As the name of the most powerful man in Rome fell on the ears of the company, it banished the laughter from their lips. Following the example of their host, they pressed around the new arrival, eager to salute him. Flaccus, the elderly dandy, who was a small man, tried to strain himself, like the frog in the fable, into an individual of imposing appearance. Torquatus posed himself into a caricature of a philosopher of elevated and dignified severity. Even the nerveless Pansa elevated his tremulous eyes, and rose from his chair. But when the first greetings were over, the conversation soon fell back once more into a current of liveliness and jest, under the influence of the imperial minister's good humour and indiscriminate affability.

[pg 36] 'Come, friends, it is time to get to table,' said Apicius; 'and for the laggards who are yet absent, let them abide by what their unpunctuality may bring them. Ha! here comes one. Caius, I cannot enter my dinner as an equal attraction to love; but yet, for once——'

'What is the finest feast to a man in love! Heed him not, Martialis,' said Sejanus, grasping the hand of the newcomer. The latter, a young man of about thirty, smiled in response to a shower of badinage which followed this initiative, until a slave entered and announced the feast in readiness to be served.

'Come, then!' cried the host; 'we lack one, but he is ever behind—'tis part of his religion. Let him take the empty place when he thinks fit.' So saying, he took Sejanus, as his most distinguished guest, by the hand, and, followed by the others, led the way to the dining apartment, where a table, blazing with an equipage of precious metal, awaited them.

It is no purpose of these pages to enter into a detailed description of the extravagance, the innumerable and curious dishes, of a Roman banquet of the first order. Antiquaries have already done so in accounts which are easily to be met with. The recital of the ingenuity, invention, and wealth lavished on a meal is extraordinary to modern measurement of luxury and extravagance.

Fish, fowl, and beast were brought from the ends of the earth, in order that jaded appetites might nibble at them, or at some particular part of them, dressed by a *chef* of the highest art; and, in the present instance, nothing was likely to be lacking from the feast of one who won historic fame as a gourmand.

Nor was the entertainment deemed sufficient of itself, but it must be served in an apartment of splendour equal to the occasion. That of Apicius did not aspire to the novelty and outlay brought to bear on the saloon of Nero's golden house of a few years later, which was constructed like a theatre, with scenes which changed at every course. But, for a private individual, of a period just launching fairly into degraded luxury, his dining-room was, perhaps, the most magnificent in the city.

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Along with the cunning of workers in ivory and precious metals, the hand of the painter and sculptor had adorned it with the best children of their genius. In the centre of the apartment was placed the square dinner-table, which had the repute of costing the owner a fortune in itself. It was made from the roots of the citron tree, whereby the perfection of beautiful markings was obtained. It was highly polished, and the massive legs which supported it were of ivory and gold, elaborately carved at the extremities into the semblances of lions' feet. On three sides of the table were ranged three couches of the same costly workmanship. They were spread with deeply-fringed cloth of gold and cushions to match. The latter were to assist the diners in their attitude, for the Roman reclined at full length at his meals; and, while he reached for his food with his right hand to the table, on a lower level than the couch, his left elbow and hand, aided by the cushions, supported his head and upper part of his body in a convenient lounging posture.

The knotty face of Torquatus involuntarily twisted into a grimace of delight as he and his companions stretched themselves in their places around the glittering table. The failing eyes of Pansa emitted a feeble flash as they fell on the old jars of Falernian wine of the Opimian brand, the most celebrated vintage of all, and perfectly priceless.

When all the diners were placed according to the marshalling of the slave who acted as master of ceremonies, the slippers of each guest were drawn off by their own domestics, who attended them to table. A company of musicians struck up a slow measured strain, and the professional carver of the establishment forthwith commenced to show his dexterity in dividing the dressed viands to the beat of the music. Then the diners spread their napkins of fine linen edged with gold fringe, and directing their servants to set before them whatever delicacy they fancied, they forthwith gave their utmost energy and attention to the business of the evening with a zest as critical as keen.

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Torquatus gobbled and ravened like a beast of prey. The hard, protuberant muscles of his face heaved and fell, and worked, incessantly, under the skin, which soon began to shine and glisten with perspiration. Charinus, the exquisite, nibbled at the most curious and highly-seasoned delicacies, with the pampered appetite of a gourmand. The first deep draught of old Falernian restored Pansa and restrung his drooping nerves. His eyes brightened, his face lightened, and, with a smack of his lips, he reached briskly forward to the golden platter, which his slave had just placed before him. It was the custom of his countrymen to temper their wine with water; but, beyond cooling it with the snows of the Apennines, Pansa approved of no such folly, so that his slave troubled the water pitcher no more than to give an appearance of decency. As cup rapidly succeeded cup his vivacity returned and his tongue became witty. It was a marvellous restoration. The guest who in the greatest measure followed his example, though still at a considerable distance, was Caius Martialis, who occupied the place next and above his host, on the left hand, or third couch. Dissipation had placed its marks on the noble features of this young man, and he appeared to drink and talk with an increasing recklessness, and even desperation.

Whilst in the middle of the first course the last guest entered the room to make up the number of nine—three to each couch, the number of the muses. The new-comer was rather short in stature and thick-set, with squat, dark features, as though descended from negro blood. As he came into the room he glanced round with a supercilious look. Scarcely bending to his host, he bowed more markedly to Sejanus, whilst the remainder of the company he seemed to ignore utterly. The seat reserved for him was the lowest on the couch next his host—the worst at the table. He took it with a scowl, amid the ill-concealed smiles of the others. Apicius himself, after bidding him welcome, sank back on his cushions with a sigh of triumph and relief. Zoilus the millionaire, the son of a slave, the great rival of himself in the extravagance of Rome, had on a splendid silk garment, but it was only edged with gold, whereas his own was most beautifully figured and wrought with the same all over.

[pg 39]

The enormous acquired wealth of this individual, and his ostentatious use of it, made him a very noted leader of fashion; but, while people applauded and truckled to him they scoffed aside at his innate vulgarity and arrogance. He began his dinner, at once, by asking haughtily and ill-humouredly for some unusual dish. It was at once supplied. Apicius ate calmly on, and the rest smiled and winked covertly. It was a trial of strength between the champions of luxury. The same thing happened more than once throughout the banquet; but nothing, however rare, in the range of culinary art was lacking from the plate of Zoilus that his ingenuity could suggest. The face of Apicius, though calm and stoical, covered a heart devoured by anxiety. A slight defection of his cook, a slight oversight in the study of their records, a trifling mistake or misadventure in the combination of their ingredients, might have opened the way for his rival's adverse, if courteous criticism. But everything was perfect. The household, from its officers downwards, had surpassed

itself. The result was the perfection of culinary and decorative art, combined with the utmost variety and rarity. Praises flew from lip to lip. Some were fired into ecstasies of admiration and wonder; pleasure sat on every countenance, except that of Zoilus. He had remained silent for full a quarter of an hour. His ingenuity was exhausted, and his enemy's armour unpierced. It was the culminating point of the complete pre-eminence of Apicius. He gave a sign, and the butler, with much solemnity and ceremony, set a magnificent dish on the table with his own hands, amid a flourish of the musicians.

The guests looked on curiously.

Apicius announced the name of the delicacy which steamed on the gleaming gold. He bade them try it. Its style was entirely new and novel to Rome. A portion was cut and handed to Sejanus; after him the others were served. Its delicious and novel flavour was proved by the enraptured expressions of each feaster as he tasted the portion set before him. It had only one fault, as Pansa said, with a sigh—there was not enough of it. Zoilus was left to the last, and the only remaining piece on the dish was placed before him. Livid and trembling with passion he motioned it away, muttering something about his inability to digest it. Apicius, therefore, with mock regret, beckoned the slave to transfer it to himself.

'Good!' said he, when he had finished it, speaking to his steward, whose glance hung upon him. 'Tell Silo, Hippias, and Macer, that they have surpassed themselves. Their master is well pleased with them—with you all. He will not forget.'

[pg 40] It is to be regretted that history has preserved only the tradition of this remarkable production of Apicius' kitchen, the fame of which subsequently filled aristocratic circles. Further than relating that the foundation of the dish was the carcass of a small unknown animal, captured in the limits of the empire, and brought home by a recently arrived ship, all details are wanting.

Gradually, after this interesting incident, the guests, languidly, fell more at their ease on their cushions, with laden stomachs and appeased appetites. Beyond nibbling furtively at sweet dainties and fruits, there was only inclination left to sip at the precious wine, and to employ their tongues and laugh at each other's wit. But from this stage Apicius himself relapsed once more into his former fit of silent, unconscious abstraction. The minutes gathered into hours, and chatter and jest flew uninterruptedly around. Only at times the host was roused by the jesting challenges of his guests, rallying him on the subject of his absorbed reflections. Among the numerous glorious entertainments of Apicius this, the guests admitted to each other in many an aside, was the most perfect Rome had yet known. And yet, instead of being blithe and jocund with success, the hospitable entertainer reclined with melancholy, fixed eyes—opening his lips only to sip his wine from time to time. This could not fail to have an effect eventually, for what ought to have been the inspiration of their conviviality was cold, fireless, and mute. They struggled on for some time, but, at length, their cheerfulness sank beneath the chilling influence of those fixed, sad, downcast eyes and heedless ears. A social meeting largely takes its tone from its leader, and when the conversation became slower and more fitful, Afer exchanged glances with Sejanus and Flaccus with Charinus. Meaning looks went round from each to each to the seemingly unconscious Apicius, and from Apicius back to each other. Zoilus had no love or good-feeling to detain him. More or less discomfited and snubbed, he waited no longer, kicking against the pricks, but seized the opportunity and began to rise, briefly hinting that his absence was necessary.

[pg 41] 'Stay!' said Apicius, suddenly starting, as if from a dream, at hearing these words spoken in his ear. 'Stay yet for a few moments, Zoilus. I—I implore your pardon, friends, for I see I have fallen a prey to my reflections and forgotten you. It was behaviour unworthy even of a barbarian—I pray you give me your indulgence!'

'Nay, noble Apicius, every one is liable to be overridden by his thoughts,' said Sejanus.

'True, and I will forthwith give you the clue to mine,' was the reply.

'Ha! we will, therefore, begin again,' quoth Pansa, in thick tones, holding up his empty goblet for his slave to refill.

They all laughed, and then bent their eyes on the face of Apicius with renewed interest.

'Nothing, dear friends, but the most sorrowful thoughts could have led me to exhibit such conduct toward you,' said their host. 'It has been my greatest ambition—ever my pride and pleasure to see my friends happy around my table.'

'Dear Apicius, you have ever succeeded, and not the least this day,' said Martialis gently.

A murmur of approval ran round the couches.

'You do me honour,' resumed Apicius; 'you have been good friends and companions hitherto, and I have done, humbly, my best to return your love. Be patient, I will not detain you long; and especially as you will never again recline round this table at my request. I am grieved to say it,' continued he, after allowing the expressions of startled surprise to pass, 'but I am resolved to change my condition, and Rome will know me no more.'

Ill-concealed joy lighted up the vulgar face of Zoilus, but the visages of Torquatus, Flaccus, and Pansa were blank and thunderstruck at this unlooked-for announcement.

'Say not so, Apicius!' quoth Martialis, turning his prematurely worn, but noble face toward his host, 'you rend our hearts.'

Apicius, with a fond look, laid his hand gently on the speaker's shoulder, but did not speak.

'This is rank treason that cannot pass,' said Sejanus jestingly. 'Rome cannot spare thee, noble Apicius—thou shalt not even leave thy house—I shall send a guard of my Pretorians, who shall block thee in.'

[pg 42] A faint smile rested on the lips of Apicius at this conceit.

'We shall see how that plan will act, Prefect,' said he. 'Send thy Pretorians—a whole cohort—only you must be quick.'

Torquatus sat dumb and forgot his jibes; the remainder listened for what was to follow.

'It is true, my friends, I am about to quit the pleasures, the bustle, the virtues and vices of our beloved city of the hills. I am eager for perfect serenity, far from the struggling crowd, and I go shortly to see it.'

'Whither? We will seek you out—I, at least,' interrupted the voice of Martialis next to him.

'Thou shalt learn ere very long, my Caius. Which among you does not, at certain times, if not constantly, wish for the tranquillity of the rustic, whose music is the whisper of the groves, the rippling of the stream, and the notes of the birds? Eating simply, sleeping soundly, rising cheerfully. Contented with what the gods have given him—the summer sun, the pure air, the green pastures, sweet water and the vine-clad slope; a heart unvexed by ambitions, envyings, ingratitude. When I see him wander, wonderingly, through the streets, I envy him his brown cheek, his clear skin, his cheerful simplicity, his vigorous body which cleaves the torrent of pallid citizens. He seems to breathe the odour of the quiet groves and dewy grass. I am sick at heart and weary, friends. I loathe the sight of my once loved city of the hills—the marble, the stone, the thronging people. Peace! Peace! That song of Horace haunts me. Hear it, although you know it well—it will help you to divine my spirit in a little degree.' He then recited the beautiful song of Horace, the sixteenth of his second book, of which we offer the following translation, inadequate as it is:—

'Whosoever tempest-tossed
Upon the wide Aegean waters,
Prays the gods for peace and rest,
When darkling the moon is hid
Amid the murky clouds,
And guiding stars shine not
To cheer the sailor's breast.

[pg 43] 'War-torn Thrace cries Peace!
And Peace! the quivered Median bold:
But, Grosphus, it is neither bought
With purple, gems, nor gold.
 For neither riches
Nor the lictor of a consul's nod,
Can drive the troubles of a mind aloof,
Nor flout the cares which flit
About a gilded roof.

'With him who lives with little
Life goes well;
Whose father's cup
Shines bright upon a simple board:
Whose slumbers light
Are never harmed by fear, nor sudden fright,
Which tells of hidden hoard.

'Why strain ourselves to gain so much
In this short life of ours?
Why change our childhood's homes for lands
That glow with other suns?
What banished man whose fate is such
He fain would shun himself?

'Grim, cankering care climbs up the brazened ships,
And swifter than the stag,
Or eastern wind which sweeps
The storms and rattling rain,
It leaveth not the bands of horsemen

Trooping o'er the plain.

'Be happy for the day,
And hate to think on what may follow!
Tempering all bitterness
With an easy laugh;
For no such happiness there is
As knows no sorrow.

'Swift death bore off Achilles, and old age
Hath shrunk Tithonus—
Time, mayhap, will give to me
That which it denies to thee.'

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This foreign rendering can give only a faint idea of the effect which Apicius produced upon his hearers, by the beauty of his elocution, in his native tongue; for it was given in a voice of singular, pathetic melancholy. The hot burning tears dropped silently from the down-turned face of Martialis. Then, for a brief moment, he raised his swimming eyes toward his friend. All that was purest and noblest in his nature struggled with those welling drops, from beneath the load of a careless, misguided life, and beautified his weary face. The voices of the others were raised in entreaties and arguments, and even Torquatus summoned a snarling joke. But Apicius was firm, and only shook his head.

'Think not that I go heedlessly,' said he; 'we have passed many delightful hours together. Although I shall henceforth be absent, I would not have my memory altogether die amongst you. I have, therefore, to ask each of you to accept of a slight memorial which may, at various times, as I hope, recall something of Apicius and his days.'

'But you tell us not where you go,' murmured Martialis once more.

'Patience, Caius—you shall know; it is within easy reach, on an easy road.'

Martialis made a gesture of pleasure, and Apicius gave a sign to his butler. On a sideboard stood a row of nine objects of nearly equal height, entirely draped and hidden by white gold-fringed napkins thrown over them. They were curious and unusual, and had, many times, already, excited the inward curiosity of the company.

The slave advanced to these and carefully took the first. At a nod from his master he placed it before Martialis, on the table, with the snowy white napkin still hiding whatever was beneath. The next was placed before Sejanus. The others before Charinus, Flaccus, Torquatus, Pansa, Afer, and Zoilus in rotation. One was left. Apicius pointed to his own place. The slave put it down before him, and the table was ranged round with these mysterious white-robed objects.

'Friends,' said Apicius calmly, 'beneath those covers you will find the presents which I give to you in token of our fellowship. I have striven to the best of my ability to render them suitable and useful to their owners. Look at them and accept of them, I pray.'

They all, with more or less eagerness, lifted the napkins from their allotted gifts and sat gazing thereat, at Apicius, and each other with mingled expressions of ill-suppressed anger, mortification, and disappointment. The napkin before Apicius was still untouched, and he received the rancorous glances which were shot towards him, with a calm, scornful expression.

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Before Sejanus was a small representation of a lictor's fasces, a miniature axe bound up in a bundle of twigs; but in addition to the axe was the model of an iron hook, such as was used to drag the bodies of traitors and malefactors down the Gemonian steps into the Tiber.

The cheek of the conspirator flushed, and from beneath his gathering brows he flashed a look as dangerous and dark as a thundercloud.

'Be not offended, Prefect,' said Apicius; 'I act as a true friend who fears not the truth, and not as a parasite, who bestows nothing but what may prove pleasant to the ear.'

His cold, mocking tone belied his words, and, ere he finished, Zoilus, with a face purple with rage and fury, had jumped from his seat and dashed the article he had uncovered to the floor. It was a small figure of a negro, carved in ebony, having its nakedness barely draped in a ludicrous fashion with a little cloak of figured silk.

'What!' cried Apicius jibingly; 'displeased with the image of your grandfather?'

But Zoilus, speechless and shuddering with his boiling feelings, rushed from the room with his slaves. He was followed by a titter, which the biting satire of the proceeding even wrung from the offended natures of the others.

Torquatus sat scowling before a small stand, on which was placed a common wooden platter having a copper coin in the centre. Pansa evinced his disgust of a similar stand bearing a diminutive cup of silver. The figure of a very ancient goat on its hind legs, having a garland of roses around its horns, caused Flaccus to fume and fret immoderately. Afer smiled scornfully

upon a miniature gilded weather-vane; whilst a mirror, upheld by an Apollo, with an averted face, was regarded by Charinus with ineffable disdain.

Thus had Apicius amused his invention. A small bronze casket was deemed sufficient for Martialis. It was unpretentious in its outward appearance; but a fast-locked box ever provokes curiosity.

'Lift it, Martialis!' snapped Torquatus derisively, 'and see whether it be filled with iron, or chaff, or what is lighter still—emptiness.'

[pg 46] 'There is the key, my Caius,' said Apicius, in answer, drawing the article from his breast and handing it to his friend. 'Before you leave the house you shall use it—at present, sad necessity must deprive any one of the pleasure of seeing what the box contains. Dear friends,' he added, turning his eyes upon them, 'I grieve that my trifling tributes should not, by appearances, have pleased you. Had I been less truthful and more liberal, probably you would have overwhelmed me with gratitude. At least I have ever found it thus. There is little more to add save farewell—Caius, give me thy hand.'

The hand was extended and grasped fervently by Apicius, who then lifted the napkin before him. A richly chased gold cup, studded with jewels, was exposed, gorgeous and glowing, to the expectant gaze of all. The eyes of Torquatus, Flaccus, and Pansa kindled. Sejanus still sat motionless, with a cloud resting on his pale, immobile face. The sad brooding eyes of Martialis showed no change.

'That is my father's cup,' continued Apicius; 'Martialis, thou wilt preserve it—it is too rich for my future needs of simplicity. I will drink to the future welfare of you all. May the gods send you plentiful pastures of liberal purses and groaning tables; and may ye die the death of noble, virtuous, uncovetous men. Listen, dear friends,' he said, with a bitterly scornful emphasis of the adjective, 'I have lived to the age of forty years. With your help and the help of others I have spent of my patrimony sixty-four thousand sestertia.'²

A movement of sensation passed round the couches at this calm statement of such enormous extravagance.

'In the process I have discovered how rarely the immortals make true friends, and how idle it is to try and gain them with the glitter of gold alone. I have met with but one in my career who has followed me for love—Caius, true friend, may the gods repay you, for Apicius cannot.' He raised the goblet in his hand; it was partly filled with wine. Looking round the company, while he poised the flashing cup, he said: 'Vultures, I have done. I have had my pleasure—I have spent my patrimony—what is left I give to thee, Caius—that casket will vouch for it. I want it not; it is not worth living on for. *Vale!*'

[pg 47] He emptied the cup at a draught, threw it from him on to the table, and then proceeded to sink back to his former position on the cushions. Ere he reached them, the smile on his lip became suddenly contorted into a horrible grimace. The pallor of his face changed to a ghastly lividness. His body and limbs gave a spasmodic twist of agony, and he fell back a breathless corpse.

The room was filled with consternation and confusion. Martialis, with a horrible suspicion, sprang up and encircled his friend. Slaves sped away for a physician, and the remainder, together with the guests, gathered round the dead Apicius with startled looks.

'Come!' said Sejanus to Afer in a low voice, 'we can do nothing here but waste time. Apicius has given the signal to depart. His only true friend will attend to him—the slaves will probably see to the house—and themselves.'

'The fool,' muttered Afer, following the imperial minister out of the room, 'he has lost his fortune and dies—I go to get one and live.'

The company fast melted away. Charinus, with haughty, measured step, and sublimity of indifference on his unruffled face. Pansa, stupefied with wine and fright, leaning on the necks of his slaves, who, indeed, nearly carried him. Torquatus, with a keen eye for any movables and an opportunity. So they departed to blow this strange business over the city.

A group of frightened domestics remained huddled in one corner of the room. Martialis waved them away, and he was left, amid the gold and glitter of the chamber of death, bending and sobbing alone, over the dead body of his friend.

The entrance of one of the household domestics, bringing a physician, roused the young man from the first stupor of his shocked feelings. He rose to his feet and assumed a stoical calmness.

'I am a physician,' said the new-comer, breathing somewhat heavily, by reason of the pace at which the slave had hurried him thither. Martialis made a gesture toward the dead man and sank his chin on his breast. It needed no more than a moment for the practised eye of the mediciner to see that life had been suddenly and utterly snatched away.

'I can do nothing,' said he, letting the hand of Apicius fall. 'Out of which cup did he drink?'

Following a slight motion of the young man's head, he went and picked up the jewelled goblet, which remained on its side, near the edge of the table, where Apicius had thrown it. He put his nose to it and sniffed the dregs. There was no odour but that of wine, yet the man of science shrugged his shoulders significantly.

'There still remains in the cup enough for the death of two or three, most noble sir,' said he.

'I might do worse than try to prove your words,' remarked Martialis bitterly.

'The gods forbid! Aesculapius himself could not save you if you did!'

'To whom and to what place am I to send if I should want you again?'

'I should be ever grateful for your notice, noble Martialis. I am Charicles, and may be found without difficulty in the Vicus Tuscus.'

[pg 49] Martialis nodded, and Charicles, with much humility and expression of sympathy, withdrew.

'Twas for himself then,' he muttered, as he passed quickly through the deserted hall. 'O precious drug, swift and sure as light, when did you ever fail or disgrace me!'

The eye of Martialis fell on the casket which Apicius had bequeathed him. He stood regarding it for a few moments, and then turned to a slave who remained, and said, with renewed vigour of faculties, 'Let the kinsfolk of Apicius be brought hither at once, if not already sent for—Plautia, his sister, Sabellus, his uncle; and go you, yourself, bring with you back, in all haste, Festus the lawyer, from nigh the forum of Caesar—haste!'

The slave disappeared and left him once more alone. He stood and gazed on the face of the dead, and his grief broke beyond his control. Half-smothered sobs broke from his lips, and his eyes were blind with hot pouring tears.

'Oh Apicius,' he groaned, 'if thou wert weary of the world, hadst thou so little regard for our love and companionship? This is thy retreat from men so easily found! Easy indeed—thou didst not err. All may reach it when they list, gods be praised! For in whose ear can I whisper, as I whispered in thine, all that oppressed me? Gone—gone, Apicius! Thou hast forsaken thy friend—selfish—selfish! Did you deem the void would be filled by another of your blood? Oh, miserable thought!'

He lay stretched on a couch murmuring in broken sentences, but, as the leaden minutes lagged on, he became more composed. The sound of a voice without made him leap to his feet. The next instant the heavy curtains were thrust back, and a young, richly-attired female stepped into the apartment. Despite the crushing blow the heart of Martialis had received, it gave a bound at the entrance of the new-comer. Her stature was above the feminine standard, and her figure large and voluptuous, but perfect in symmetry and grace. Whilst giving the impression of robustness and vigour, its stately carriage admirably matched the brilliant and haughty beauty of her face. The gaze of Martialis was riveted on her. Scarcely deigning to return the look, she swept up to the suicide and bent over him. Drawing herself up again she cast her glance over the room,—the disordered table with its litter of plate and luscious fruits, fallen cups and crumpled napkins, all glittering in a jumble of confusion under the light of the huge candelabra. Thence her brilliant black eyes flashed upon him who stood by, with infatuation and misery written on his face.

[pg 50]

'Speak, Martialis, what led him to do this?'

'I know no more, Plautia, but what he said before us all here but now,' answered the young man, sweeping his hand toward the table; 'he was tired of life—he had spent his patrimony—poverty haunted him—so he drank and died, ere one could move or speak.'

'Poverty!' echoed she. She looked round again upon the extravagance which glowed in every part of the room, and her red lips curled in scornful incredulity.

'Even so,' he rejoined.

The farewell and eccentric gifts of the dead host to his guests were yet remaining on the table where they had been put. Her eyes rested on them in curiosity.

'What are these?' she demanded again.

Martialis explained their presence, and, being particularly interested, she was not satisfied until

she had learnt to whom each article had been appropriated.

'And that he gave to you?' said she, pointing to the bronze casket.

'He did,' replied Martialis.

'Know you what it contains?'

'I can only guess.'

'Well?'

'With his last breath he bequeathed to me all that remains of his effects. The box, doubtless, contains the documents relating thereto,' said the young man, in a voice trembling with emotion.

'Doubtless—you were his nearest friend and companion,' remarked the lady; 'of me, his sister, doubtless, he said nothing. What little there was in common between us was not much tempered with love and good-humour.'

[pg 51] 'Alas, Plautia, take what there is! I want it not—I would give it a hundred times over to gain one kind look from your eyes. He was your brother—born of the same mother—to me he was more than a brother. There he lies before us. Cannot his dead body, bereft of likes and dislikes, soften your heart to me who loved him most?'

'Martialis, you knew his intention before this night,' said she, disregarding his pleading tone as she would the whining of a dog.

'No, before Heaven—or maybe we had never seen this bitter night.'

'Tis strange, and you two secretless friends, as I have heard you say.'

'This, at least, was dark to me, as to every one else, until he drank from yon fatal cup and fell back where he lies.'

Plautia took up the cup from the table where Charicles had placed it, and, with a natural curiosity, smelled at it, as he had done.

'Take care!' ejaculated Martialis, as the golden rim seemed to graze her ripe lips. 'There is yet sufficient left to harm more than one—so the physician has said—beware lest a drop smear thy lip.'

'Tush, Martialis!—I am not so tired of life,' she replied contemptuously, setting down the goblet; 'who comes?'

'Festus, the lawyer, or thy uncle, Sabellus.'

'Festus?'

He pointed to the box, and, at the same time, an old man entered, wrinkled, grave, and thin. He made a profound obeisance, and then looked inquiringly from one to the other.

'Martialis summoned thee, he hath need of thee, Festus,' exclaimed Plautia haughtily; and, passing to the door, she summoned the domestics.

'It is true I sent for thee,' said Martialis briefly.

'This is a woeful sight,' said the lawyer, as the slaves crowded in, and, under the directions of the lady, lifted their dead master and bore him away to his own room. 'It was only this very morn that I saw him and spoke with him in the forum of Caesar, as well and content as ever he was, to all seeming.'

Martialis took the key of the casket and placed it in the lawyer's hand.

'Open the box—it was the gift of Apicius to me, his friend.'

[pg 52] Plautia took up her position on one of the couches, stretching her magnificent form on the place and cushions which had before been occupied by Sejanus the Prefect. The long, loose, flowing drapery of the Roman female clung and moulded itself to the voluptuous curves of her figure. Gems and trinkets of gold glittered amid the wreathed and plaited masses of her bluish-black hair, and numberless jewels flashed upon the fingers of her dainty white hands. Her features were slightly aquiline, but perfect and delicate in outline, and her ivory-like skin was warm and glowing with the tints of a ripe peach. With her bold, imperious, black orbs she looked like a queen as she reclined, the most apt and brilliant centrepiece of that apartment of gorgeous splendour.

The grave, elderly Festus, as he opened the casket, cast at her a glance filled with admiration. Martialis buried his face in his hands, as if fearful of allowing his hungry eyes to rest upon her, except at intervals, when the matter in hand called for some remark.

When the lawyer opened the casket he found therein several papers. After glancing at each in turn, he took one up and said, 'This is the will of M. Gabius Apicius, bequeathing his property solely to Caius Julius Martialis, knight, his friend.'

'Read!' said that unhappy personage in a hollow tone.

Festus obeyed. The task was brief and did not occupy many minutes. The remaining papers were found to be informal inventories of effects. Martialis bade him read them also. They were long; including, as they did, everything of value in the house. Plautia signified her impatience long before it was ended, and, during its progress, a slave entered to announce that Sabellus of the Aventine was not to be found.

When the wearisome monotone of the lawyer at length ceased, Martialis raised his pale face from his hands.

'Ah!' exclaimed the lawyer suddenly; 'here I find the value of the whole computed. Deducting the debts due, and a few minor bequests, the balance amounts to an estimate of ten thousand sesteria.'³

Plautia started on her cushions at the statement.

[pg 53] 'What!' she demanded, contracting her fine black brows; 'ten thousand sesteria, free?'

'Absolutely, as the will expressly states,' replied Festus. 'The whole total reaches a huger sum, but there are debts, as before mentioned. No money is spoken of—these inventories must be realised.'

'Was this the poverty he fled from? Why, it is a fortune—a heaven to the greater part of mankind!' she exclaimed.

'Ay, but not to the mind of Apicius,' interrupted the voice of Martialis; 'for remember—scarce a coined piece within his coffers. Everything gone but what the walls of the house compass. Had Apicius lived it was necessary to live as hitherto. To do that he must needs have despoiled his home—the noblest in Rome—of its treasures. Rather than strike, to all, the note of disgrace and ruin, he did as he did. It was pride, not fear—it is too plain. But small or great as the remnant may seem to thee, Plautia, thou art his nearest of kin—to thee, therefore, it belongs. I have no claim but what the love of a friend has given me. I render it up—take it therefore.'

'A noble deed!' quoth Festus.

The glance of Plautia softened a little, and she held out her jewelled, white hand to the young man. With eyes aflame he seized it, and covered it with kisses.

'It is truly high-minded and generous of thee, Martialis,' she said.

'Take it—I need it not!' he answered eagerly.

'Foolish!' she rejoined, drawing her hand away and accompanying her words with a mocking smile. 'Bid Festus teach thee to be wiser than rob thyself.'

'It is a question for his own heart to decide,' remarked the lawyer, replacing the papers in the box.

'Festus has done his part and I will keep him no longer—say no more!' said Martialis.

The lawyer rose at this hint, and at the same moment a voice came from the doorway. Looking thither they beheld a tall cloaked figure standing in the doorway, regarding them and their surroundings with keen eyes.

Martialis started. 'Lucius!' he exclaimed.

'Even so, brother,' returned the new-comer.

[pg 54] It was indeed the Centurion, bearing the stains of hard travel on his garments and a jaded air on his face.

Plautia rose to her feet. Her cheeks were suffused with a sudden flood of crimson, and her bosom stirred her tunic with deeper and more rapid pulsations. A delicious tremor seemed to melt her natural stateliness of carriage. Her eyes, so full of haughtiness and will, encountering the calm gaze of the Pretorian, sank like a timid child's, shaded beneath a deep sweeping fringe of eyelashes.

A deadly sickness crept about the heart of Caius Martialis, for his senses, preternaturally sharpened, saw all.

'Do you seek me?' he demanded, scarcely able, or caring, to conceal the bitterness of his tones.

The Centurion dropped his cloak from his shoulder and stepped forward, whilst, at the same

time, Festus, the lawyer, glided from the room.

The resemblance between the brothers was traceable in the mould of their features. But, whilst those of the soldier were scarcely so finely carved as were his elder brother's, they were considerably more manly and decided. The expression of spirit and determination which was characteristic of his bronzed face and fearless glance, were less perceptible on the countenance of the civilian. The vigour and robustness of the younger eminently fitted him to press forward in the battle and strife of the world; whilst the characteristics of the elder were of a more delicate organisation, which seeks the calmer atmosphere and placid occupations of retirement and study. The personal appearance of the Centurion, which has already been alluded to, spoke for his habits. His commanding stature, rude health and strength and perfection of physical training were all at the service of the readiness and resource of mind which seemed to lie charactered in the glances of his eyes. On the other hand, the person of Caius was medium-sized, and the signs of habitual ease, indulgence, luxury and pleasure, were only too plainly stamped on his face, to the deep injury of its native nobleness and delicacy.

'Do you seek me?' said the latter.

[pg 55] 'No—I seek the Prefect. Not at the camp, I was directed to follow him here. No porter in the lodge to tell me—no slave visible. I found a light here—if I have intruded I am grieved, but you paid no attention to my knock.'

'Sejanus has left some time ago—a long time.'

'Whither, then, Caius, do you know?'

'No—nor care—faith not I!' was the careless and somewhat uncourteous answer.

'You have travelled far?' broke in Plautia's voice; deeper, softer, and more melodious than hitherto.

'I have, Plautia, and I trust the Prefect will not lead me much farther.'

'Whence have you come? You are fatigued—I see it in your face. You must, then, have ridden a prodigious distance; for your fame, as a horseman, has reached even me. You are a very centaur, so rumour tells me.'

'Rumour tells many idle and foolish things, but, as I have posted fifty leagues without stopping, save to change horses, since my last brief resting-place, I may claim to feel somewhat weary. I am thirsty too—with your leave, I will drink a cup of wine with infinite relish.'

He turned toward the sideboard where the wine-flagons stood; but, ere he could take a second step, she glided past him, and selecting one of the vessels, raised it with her own hands. Caius looked on and gnawed his lip.

'I will be my own cupbearer,' cried the Centurion; 'you do me too much honour, lady.'

As he relieved her of the pitcher, he would have been scarcely human not to have dwelt with admiration on her brilliant beauty, which was unusually flushed and animated. She parted with the jar, and, at the same time, flashed a glowing glance upon him with her lustrous eyes.

[pg 56] He turned round from those dangerous orbs to fill with the wine the nearest cup which stood on the table. The eyes of his brother Caius suddenly gleamed with a hard, steel-like glint, and his face turned, simultaneously, deathly white. Lucius half turned as he raised to drink from the cup he had filled. The bumper had barely reached his lips when a scream burst from the throat of Plautia. With the cry she sprang forward and dashed the vessel from his hand on to the polished floor. The wine splashed them both and the goblet fell with such violence as to be dented. It was that one which had already played such a fatal part that night.

Transfixed with astonishment the Centurion gazed upon the beautiful girl, whose face crimsoned and paled, and whose bosom heaved and fell tumultuously.

'It was the cup—the poisoned cup!' ejaculated she.

'The poisoned cup!' cried he, looking with increased surprise from one to the other.

A terrible revulsion of feeling swept through, and shook, the frame of the elder Martialis. At the look of his brother he gave a hysterical gasp and dropped his head into his hands.

Plautia pointed to the fallen goblet with an impressive gesture, and said, 'It has already taken the life of one man this night. Had you drunk therefrom you would have shared his fate. That cup yet reeks of the fatal drug. Though I saw you not fill it, fortune be praised that my poor eyes perceived it ere your lips touched its horrid brim.'

'How, the death of a man?' repeated the bewildered Centurion.

'Even so! From that very cup at the close of this night's feast,' said she, waving her hand over the glittering disorder of the table, 'Apicius, of his own will, drank a poisoned draught.'

The young soldier was horror-struck. He looked around and shuddered.

'Apicius—poisoned himself!' he muttered. 'This is a dreadful tale—and for what reason, in the name of the gods?'

'Your brother can tell you better than I—he was his bosom friend, and, moreover, was present,' answered Plautia, turning away, as if to hide a sudden burst of feeling.

'Nay!' said Lucius hastily, and with deep sympathy, 'I will trouble you no more with my presence. I will learn, in sad time enough, the terrible tale—I would spare you the pain of a fresh recital. Alas, I dreamt not what had happened, and yet I remarked it strange that Apicius was not here. You will pardon me, Plautia. 'Tis a sudden and bitter blow—farewell!'

He gathered up his cloak, and, as he turned to the door, he spurned the goblet with his foot, muttering some expressions of abhorrence and disgust.

[pg 57] 'Stay, Centurion,' said Plautia, 'go not without quenching your thirst. If I was lucky enough to rob you of your first draught, here is wine enough, and of the purest.'

While she spoke, she quickly filled another drinking vessel with wine and water.

'See,' she said, coming forward with it, 'I will be answerable for it. Drink without fear—I will be your taster.'

She accordingly drank two or three mouthfuls and offered him the ample remainder. He drank as briefly as herself and merely out of courtesy.

'You said you were thirsty.'

'I *was*. It seems to have left me.'

'Had you drunk before, you would have been, now, far beyond all thirst on earth.'

'I am indebted to your keen eye and prompt arm for my life, therefore. I trust chance may enable me, some day, to repay the debt.'

'Tush, Centurion, you are jesting. You, the Pretorian Achilles, acknowledging to the hand of a weak girl!'

The young man bowed coldly, for the style of the speech was not very agreeable to his mind.

'Farewell, Plautia. I trust you may speedily find comfort in your affliction. Do you come, brother? My way lies with yours for a space.'

Caius shook his head.

'Nay!' said Plautia, 'he must remain, where my brother hath left him, in charge. But I will beg your escort, Centurion, as far as you will give it, through the streets; for I came hither in haste, with scarce a follower.'

'That shall be my task, Plautia. It belongs to me rather than to him,' interposed Caius, starting up fiercely.

'To whomsoever I choose to give it,' said the lady, with an accent of supreme haughtiness.

'It must be as Caius says, nevertheless,' observed the Centurion quickly. 'I have that about me which must be delivered without further delay, and I have dallied too long already. Forgive me the discourtesy, lady, for my duty must take me back to the camp, in such direction and haste as would prove inconvenient to you. It is unavoidable, and I must risk your displeasure in deference to my business. Farewell!'

[pg 58] Bowing toward her, the Pretorian abruptly left the apartment and the house. Plautia bit her lip and clenched her hand; and, when the voice of Caius uttered some remark, she turned suddenly and fiercely upon him. She shot a basilisk glance upon him and pointed, without a word, to the jewelled cup on the floor. His cheek paled and his eyes wavered, and finally fell before the incisive eloquence of her look and gesture.

He essayed to speak and move toward her, but an imperious wave of her hand rooted him to his place in confusion. The next instant she was gone, and he was left, once more alone, to wrestle with the tortures of remorse, jealousy, and despair, which writhed together on the cold background of his grief.

His brother, on quitting the gloomy house of Apicius, turned his tireless steps toward the permanent fortified camp, or barracks, which had been formed by the present emperor to accommodate the household troops, on the north-east edge of the city, beyond the slope of the Viminal and Esquiline and the wall of Servius. His road lay tolerably straight across the city, under the Carinae, partly through the Subura, and finally along the Vicus Patricius, which followed the valley between the Esquiline and Viminal hills. Then, directly in front of him, rose

the ramparts and walls which harboured about ten thousand horse and foot.

The origin of these celebrated troops is said to rest with Scipio Africanus, who, in the first instance, formed a company of picked men to guard his person. This cohort was exempted from all other duty and was granted larger pay. Their number was increased from time to time, until the Emperor Augustus established them in cohorts of a thousand men each, horse and foot, to protect his power and person. They were chosen only from Italy and the old colonies, and we have already hinted at their superior privileges, pay, and equipment. Careful to avoid any appearance of despotism, Augustus retained only a small portion of them in Rome, and scattered the rest among the neighbouring towns. It remained for the fears or craft of the Emperor, his successor, from whom our young Centurion now bore a despatch in his breast, to assemble them all into one body within their strong, fortified camp in Rome, thus fairly starting them on their future path, in which they rivalled the janissaries of the eastern emperors in making and unmaking the rulers of the empire.

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Of these troops Sejanus was the commander, and entering the camp, the Centurion proceeded to his quarters to find, to his satisfaction, that his search was at an end.

Sejanus was sitting thoughtfully in a chair, with his brows contracted and deep lines furrowing his forehead.

'Ah, Martialis!' he cried eagerly, as his eyes rested on the form of his officer; 'I heard you had returned.'

'I followed you, Prefect, to the Palatine,' replied Lucius.

'To the Palatine! Ah, then you must know what has happened there. It will be all over Rome to-morrow. You have a despatch?'

He held out his hand, and the Centurion placed a sealed letter therein.

Turning his back on the messenger, the Prefect tore open the cover and read the contents by the soft light of a silver lamp, which barely illuminated the luxurious apartment. Pleasure and delight straightway broke over his face like the first light of dawn shooting athwart the dark earth. He perused the epistle twice, and smoothed his countenance ere he turned to the waiting Centurion.

'You have been an expeditious courier, as usual, my Lucius,' he said, in a brisk, elated tone. 'When did you leave Capreae?'

Martialis related the time and particulars of his journey.

'Thou art made of iron, I verily believe,' returned the Prefect smilingly; 'after such fatigue I am loth to use thee again. I work thee too hard; but there is another service imminent, and I would have none perform it but whom I could trust.'

'I am ready. What fatigue I feel will pass with a night's rest,' answered his officer.

'What should I do without thee? It is the willing horse gets ever the most work; but this matter is particular.'

Then before he told his officer the nature of the service required, he proceeded to put to him a number of questions in relation to his experiences during his mission. When he had exhausted his ingenuity concerning everything he could think of, pertaining to matters in the imperial household, he relapsed into silent reflection for a few minutes, during which he paced up and down the room.

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'Centurion!' he said, at length, 'Drusus leaves Capreae and comes to Rome shortly. To-morrow, after nightfall, take a troop of twenty men and ride to Ostia. Drusus will arrive there in a galley. You must stop it and arrest him. Bring him to Rome, under guard, at night, and place him in charge of the keeper of the palace on the Palatine. All will be in readiness to receive him. Be careful and secret. Leave and enter the city by night; and, when you have completed your mission, hasten to report the same to me without delay. Now to bed!'

Martialis was not loth to obey, and, seeking his room, was in a few minutes sleeping the profound slumber of tired limbs, an easy conscience, and bright hopes.

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CHAPTER V.

From the house of Apicius and the spectacle of his sudden and awful end Sejanus had first gone

to the modest abode of Domitius Afer. There they remained closeted by themselves, engaged in earnest conversation, until shortly before the meeting of the Prefect and his officer, as described.

Previous to this Afer had quietly sent off a message to Cestus by the Greek Erotion. That astute youth threaded the inmost haunts and foul intricacies of the Subura with sure confidence, and succeeded in discovering the object of his search, deluged with wine, and revelling in the heat of a brutal orgy, amid ruffians and women of the lowest type. Assailed by the obscene chorus of this satanic crew, the Greek, with the readiness and aptness of his race, exchanged witticisms with a fluency and smartness which equalled, if not exceeded, their own. Seizing an opportunity, he whispered into the ear of the intoxicated Cestus the instruction to meet his master in the gardens of Maecenas, on the following morning, at a particular spot, at a particular hour. The fellow, with a leer, nodded and agreed, and the young slave departed to report the result of his errand.

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The gardens of Maecenas were on the north-eastern side of the Esquiline, nor must the term gardens be accepted in the modern sense; for, to suppose that they were ornamental grounds, and duly kept in order by a staff of servants, would be misleading. They seemed to be, and there were many such in Rome, open places for the common recreation and airings of the populace. These, to which Afer repaired to keep his appointment with Cestus, had been formed by the celebrated patron of literature and art, upon ground which, hitherto, had held bad repute, as the burial-place of the lowest orders of the people. It seems, even, to have been no uncommon matter for the bodies to be thrown down and left without any covering of earth whatever. To clear this charnel ground, and change it from a horrid repository of mouldering bones and putrefying flesh into a pleasant lounge for the people, was one of the generous works of Maecenas. It lay outside, and adjoining, the ring wall of Servius, and we may conclude the place was not altogether denuded of its sepulchral memories, since it was here that Canidia, the witch of Horace, came to perform her incantations, and invoke the shades of the dead amongst the tombs.

Though this particular part without the wall had the most need of purifying measures, and bore the most infamous memories, it did not form the whole extent of the gardens. They extended within the wall, for a certain distance along the hill, toward the city. Near this extremity was situated the noble mansion of Maecenas himself, commanding a fine prospect of the city from its windows.

Past this dwelling, and at every step treading on ground so often pressed by the famous Roman poet and his patron, Afer took his way to await the arrival of Cestus. He passed through the Esquiline Gate of the huge rampart of Servius, and entered the outer portion of the gardens. It was the busy time of labour, and the morning itself was somewhat raw and chilly, so that very few individuals were to be seen scattered here and there over the open park. The few who did loiter about were of the class that honest labour could well spare.

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In the portion of this large tract which had been devoted to the burial of the dead, were still many tombs scattered up and down. They were grass-grown, neglected, weather-beaten, and still more defaced by the climbings, scramblings, and mischievous peltings of children and youths. Among them was one of larger size and more pretentious appearance than any other. It was circular in shape, and constructed of massive masonry, which defied all attempts at destruction. It bore no inscription, and was conspicuous for nothing but its superior bulk. There was a tradition among the people of the neighbourhood, that it marked the spot where an erring scion of a noble house had sunk so low as to meet death and burial as a common malefactor, in days past when the place was reserved for the wretched fate of the dregs of pauperism and crime. Though disowned by his outraged family during his depraved life, the death of the reprobate aroused the inextinguishable feelings of kinship. Family pride could not leave even this dishonoured member without some mark of attention due to his birth, if to nothing else; but no chisel was suffered to raise a letter or figure on the tomb which arose. Darkness and oblivion were the fittest shrouds of disgrace, and the muteness of the masonry lent a mysterious affirmation of the legend to the minds of posterity.

It was to this prominent object the knight bent his way across the park-like gardens in the raw morning air. With many backward glances in search of the yet invisible Cestus, he finally reached the mysterious, moss-grown pile of stones, and after pacing up and down the grass for some time, with fitful and angry mutterings on the laggard's account, he began to think of returning. Stray passengers came and went, with a solitary, melancholy air, across the bleak, empty track, but still no form answering to the powerful frame of the Suburan made its appearance.

'The drunken fool has either not slept off his debauch or else not ended it,' said Afer angrily to himself, turning his eyes for the twentieth time toward the Esquiline Gate. 'A fine thing if I am to wait in the damp grass for a vagabond; I'll go back: maybe I shall meet him on the way.'

The expectation was realised. He had only gone a very short distance when his eyes were gladdened by the expected figure of the Suburan, who came up breathing hurriedly. Afer surveyed his bloodshot eyes and disordered dress, his uncombed locks, and general hang-dog, not to say ferocious, aspect, with which a night of revelry, succeeded by very brief slumbers, had endowed him.

'Good-morrow!' said the knight, in reply to salutations and apologies. 'I perceive you have succeeded in appeasing your ravenous appetite, my Cestus—I see it in your face. You have also drunk wine to aid digestion, which has probably interfered with your sleep.'

[pg 64] 'It is the danger of the ravenous stomach that it overloads itself when it gets the opportunity,' replied Cestus, with a grin and a hiccough.

'You are drunk yet, my good fellow!' proceeded the knight calmly.

'Nay, patron, I am sober enough to walk steadily and keep a secret. Besides, I found that the aediles, or the gods, have caused the fountain of Orpheus to play again this morning; so that, when I passed it just now, I dipped my head into his clear basin, which makes me as fresh as a young girl meeting sunrise.'

'You have that appearance. Did you accept the renewed flow of the fountain this morning as a favourable omen, reversing that of yesterday?'

'I never thought of it in one way or another, patron. I was in too great haste and concern lest I should keep your worship waiting.'

'You are very considerate! Taking the circumstances of your case into account, I am of the opinion that you have carried out this appointment with remarkable credit. Do you know why I have brought you here?'

'Something which needs only two pairs of ears,' said Cestus, with a swift glance around at the deserted fields.

'Shrewd as ever, Cestus! I mean to unfold a plan by which we may both make our fortunes. Am I to rely on your perfect faith, secrecy, and promptness as before?'

'Patron, you are the cleverest man in Rome, and I would not quit you to serve the greatest. Whenever you call upon me to help you I come instanter, knowing that the business will be something clever and instructive. The pleasure of serving you, therefore, has as much weight with me as the pay—it has indeed.'

'The fluency and readiness of your language will never leave you; it is the admirable fruit of your residence with a poet. It has already been of immense service to you; but for the present it will be sufficient for you to be brief and to the point. I wish to know if you are prepared to carry out my wishes, even though they may incur some desperate action, which, if discovered, would end most certainly in the executioner's axe?'

[pg 65] 'I should like to hear more particulars, patron—I would be pleased to do anything with a fair show of safety; but, at the same time, I have no desire to be a bull-headed fool.'

'I think, with ordinary precautions, there will be not much danger. The streets of the city are, at night-time, as a rule, dark and secret enough for a thrust or two, and an easy departure before the watch decides to interfere.'

'Oh, if that is all, I make no doubt but that we shall soon come to terms,' said Cestus, with a sinister smile on his bristly lips. 'Is it desired of me to meet by chance, or to escort some friend of my noble patron home—?'

'To Hades!'

'Exactly,' rejoined the Suburan, grinning.

'Concerning your reward, I shall require you to name a lump sum, and to promise, thereafter, to trouble me no more.'

'That means dismissing me from your worship's employ.'

'I shall never lose sight of you, believe me,' said the knight, with a cold smile.

'I know your goodness has always been most anxious for my welfare,' returned Cestus ironically.

'What figure would you consider sufficient to reward you for the pangs of conscience, and the risks incurred, by ending the life of a respectable member of society?'

'The pay would vary according to the possible amount of hue and cry raised by those belonging to the deceased,' said Cestus cunningly. 'For an ordinary citizen I would not demand so much as for a person of rank and importance.'

Afer smiled.

'To what degree of boldness would five hundred sestertia inspire you?' he asked calmly.

'What!' almost yelled the ruffian. His eyes stared as if to start from his head, and his breath came in gasps, as though he had been plunged into ice-cold water. 'Five hu— five hundred sestertia! Patron—why—for that you might bid me tap a senator, a consul—Sejanus—Caesar himself.'

'Enough!' replied Afer. 'I am glad you consider the terms liberal; I myself am sure of it. You will not have the desperate office of harming any one of those you have mentioned.'

[pg 66] 'So much the better! Patron, you are the easiest of masters.'

'It is a bargain then—you will be prompt, faithful, and secret?'

'Have I ever failed?'

'I cannot remember that you have; it is to your interest, as to mine, to remain so trustworthy. I have told you that before, and your common-sense cannot but perceive it. Five hundred sesteria are not to be picked up every day for the light labour of a few hours, together with the simple task of keeping one's mouth shut concerning the matter. You are not such a fool, I think, as to destroy a profitable business connection, Cestus.'

'You speak truly indeed, noble Afer—have no fear therefore. I am ready to receive your commands and instructions for the business.'

'The first is this,' said the knight emphatically, 'that from the first moment, until the affair is satisfactorily settled, you abstain from the wine-pot.'

'I will swear by the aqueducts, patron.'

'Good! You will require, say, three stout fellows to help you. You will select them and pay them a certain sum, and tell them no more than that they are to help in a highway theft. You can, no doubt, find individuals who are accustomed to such work.'

'Leave that to me. But their pay, patron?'

'It shall be exclusive of your own, and shall be discharged by me, my careful Cestus. They need not cost much.'

'Certainly not! I have a job in hand—I want them to help me, and I pay them so much. I need not say another word, and they will not ask a question.'

'Exactly! You comprehend me perfectly. It is a positive pleasure to arrange details with an intelligent person like yourself, Cestus.'

'You are flattering, patron. Who is this individual who is so unfortunate as to stand in your displeasure?'

[pg 67] 'I repeat it is a pleasure to do business with you, Cestus,' resumed Afer calmly. 'Previous to the actual execution of your task, I shall require you to act a little part. I shall require you, in fact, to clean and adorn yourself in order to make a visit.'

'Oh, oh!' murmured Cestus doubtfully.

'You are to be a decoy duck of the very best plumage, for a short time. You will make an excellent one. Your poetical training will stand in excellent stead. Indeed, there is no telling, but what the part will give a new turn to your genius. We shall be seeing you treading the stage some day.'

'You are pleased to jest, noble patron, instead of allowing me to reflect whether this part of the business is within my power or not to carry out.'

'I have no anxiety on that point, Cestus. Listen! You will have to improve your outward appearance, in order to represent an honest mechanic in his holiday clothes—that is, as nearly as possible. That done, you will have to go as far as the Janiculum and ask an audience of a certain patrician who dwells there. He had once a granddaughter who was lost when a child.'

'Ah, now I smell a rat! You are going to outdo yourself,' cried Cestus eagerly.

'You understand, I perceive. You are merely to go to this gentleman with a story, told in your best language and style, that you are a messenger from a repentant man on his deathbed, who confesses that he formerly stole the child. The dying man is most anxious for an interview with the gentleman he has wronged, for the purpose of imploring his pardon and revealing the whereabouts and position of the girl, who, he says, is yet living. When you have succeeded in arousing the gentleman's interest and eagerness, as you doubtless will, he will almost surely send you to me. I shall not be in Rome, and shall be careful to let him know beforehand. He will, therefore, recollect himself, and, as we may hope, decide to accompany you to this dying man. All this must be timed to fall tolerably late at night, which will also give the affair all the more appearance of genuineness. On the way to that dying man my worthy uncle must be left by the roadside, for ever oblivious of missing child and present grief.'

[pg 68] 'By Pluto!' cried the Suburan, smiting his thigh in delight and admiration, 'the very thing I advised you only yesterday. I marvel you have not done this before; but then your worship is so merciful. However, better late than never, and it was bound to come at some time. Bacchus, what a cunning plan! Fate cut you out for a great man, and a thousand Fabricii could not stay you.'

'No names—walls have ears!' said the knight sternly.

'True,' replied Cestus. 'It was my delight which let it slip. *Euge*, Cestus! Five hundred sesteria

for simply helping an old man on the road to the Elysian fields—why, patron, the pay is so princely, and the task so light, that I feel somewhat ashamed of accepting the terms.’

‘You are perfectly at liberty to return whatever your conscience considers to be superfluous,’ remarked Afer.

‘Well, we will see how matters turn out,’ answered Cestus, with a grin. ‘No doubt when the sad news is brought to your wondering ears, you will be in a dreadful state of mind, and will lay the bloodhounds on the track of the villains all over the city?’

‘It may, very probably, be necessary to act in some such way,’ responded the knight, with a shadowy smile. ‘Let me see,’ he murmured, as he passed his hand over his brow, and remained in deep thought for a few moments; ‘come to-night, and we will arrange everything.’

‘To-night!’

‘And, Cestus, be secret; and beware of the wine-pot.’

‘Never fear; it is only when Cestus is idle that he amuses himself in that way. Give him work, and work to some purpose, like this, and his head remains clear as water—and when your honour lays the plan there is no more to be added.’

‘Engage your comrades to-day. To-morrow I shall go to Tibur—the day after to-morrow meet me at the Sublician Bridge at nightfall.’

‘But I shall see you to-night, as you said?’

‘Yes; and on the evening of the day after to-morrow I will be at the Sublician Bridge. It will involve much riding, but I can be nigh you and yet return to Tivoli before morning breaks.’

Cestus held up his hands in affected admiration.

[pg 69] ‘You are inspired, patron! But hold; how if the old man will not come forth with me? What then comes of all this fine scheme?’

‘Nothing,’ replied Afer calmly. ‘We shall have to wait and devise again.’

‘I care not for this complicated notion. I prefer to have not so many cooks to the broth. There is nothing so sure, and so easy, as a little dust of a certain kind in his wine or meat.’

The knight shook his head.

‘It is too effective, my Cestus, and too common. It would not fail to be talked about. No; our rough footpads leave the least suspicion.’

‘Well, you are perhaps right; for when the watchmen find the old man in the gutter next morning, it will be said that he met his end at the hands of thieves, who gave him a knock a little too heavy—not the first since this good city was built.’

Afer nodded and said,

‘Come to-night, as I bade you.’

‘I will. Am I not to have the honour of following you toward the city?’

‘No,’ replied the knight, turning away; ‘I go to the camp. Be discreet—this will make us or mar us.’

Cestus bowed and loitered away leisurely in the direction of the Esquiline Gate, whilst Afer walked quickly toward the Viminal Plain, on the border of which lay the ramparts of the Pretorian camp.

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CHAPTER VI.

Whilst this conversation, which we have related, was passing between Afer and his client, a small coasting vessel was ascending the river Tiber, making slow headway against the current. In the little poop-house, along with the captain of the craft, was standing Masthlon, an interested observer of all that passed within view, as they wound up the famous stream.

To go back a little. We left the potter retiring to rest full of a determination to proceed to Rome.

He arose next morning with a mind unchanged, and soon after dawn took his way to the cliffs. As he was about to set his foot to descend the steps which led down to the Marina, the head of an ascending individual showed up above the level. He was a short, thick-set man, with a mahogany complexion, shaggy beard and moustache. Each made an exclamation and then shook hands.

'I was coming with no other reason than to seek tidings of you, Silo.'

'Good!—here I am myself, Masthlion.'

'I thought it about your time. Are you for the Tiber?'

'Direct.'

'When?'

'At noon, or before. I don't want to lose this wind,' said the sailor, casting his eye to the eastward.

'I have business in Rome—give me a passage.'

'In Rome! You? What has bitten you? Come, and welcome.'

'I will come about noon then.'

'An hour before, Masthlion; and if I want thee before that I will send.'

[pg 71] The potter went home, and after gathering a few articles of clothing and food together in a wallet, he quietly resumed work until the time came for departure. During this period Neæra glided into the workshop. A new and radiant expression beamed on her face and sparkled in her beautiful gray eyes. The delicate colour of her cheek was deeper. An unconscious smile seemed to play on her lips, as though responding to the springs of joy and hope within. The loosely-girded tunic of coarse, poor fabric could not hide the graceful curves of her lithe figure, which promised a splendid maturity. Her household work had caused her to tuck up her sleeves, and her revealed arms and wrists gleamed white and round. Her loveliness seemed to the potter literally to bloom afresh as he glanced at her.

'Father,' said she, 'you are going to Rome?'

'I am, child, and Silo's felucca sails by noon at the latest,' he answered, without raising his head.

'You are going because of me, father?' she continued, drawing nearer.

He did not answer.

'It is I who am sending you to Rome, father?'

'You have said it, child. But I shall, at the same time, satisfy a lifelong desire to see the great city; and I may be able, likewise, to pick up a hint or two from the Roman shops.'

'As far as I am concerned, father, you need not give yourself the trouble.'

'Wherefore?' asked the potter, in doubt as to her meaning.

'Because I can save you the journey.'

Masthlion smiled.

'You go to seek to know whether Lucius be a true man or false,' she continued, with animation and a heightened colour; 'you may stay at home, for I can tell you.'

'And whence did you gain the knowledge I am truly in want of, child?' he said.

'Here!' she answered proudly, as she laid her hand over her heart.

[pg 72] A smile of admiration, and yet compassionate, rested on her father's lips, as he gazed into her kindling eyes, and watched the glowing hues spread over her exquisite face. New graces, fresh nobility and dignity, unknown before, seemed to blossom forth upon the maiden beneath his wondering eyes. His acute brain comprehended the change; it was no longer the child, but the woman.

'The foolish heart is so often mistaken, Neæra,' he said, touched by her simple faith; 'it would not be wise to trust entirely thereto.'

But she only shook her head.

'Facts are against you,' he continued; 'how many have acted from their impulse and have lived to use their eyes and minds soberly afterwards? But no,—no more of that! I had rather try and bale the bed of the sea dry than attempt to cure a lovesick girl of her folly. Meanwhile, I shall go to Rome, as I intended, and try to satisfy my own mind, after the fashion of cold, heartless men.'

'You expect to come back with bad news of Lucius, and thus forbid me to think of him again.'

'That I never said.'

'No, but you think it. I warn you that you will be disappointed, and that your journey will go for nothing.'

As she said this, she wound her arms caressingly round his neck, and then slipped from the room.

Masthlon's eyes dulled, as though a reflected gleam had vanished, and, heaving a sigh, he meditatively pursued his work. It was about an hour before noon when a young urchin made his appearance with a message from Silo, to hasten him on board, without delay. He went, accompanied by his wife and Neæra; and as soon as he set foot on board the coaster, his impatient friend cast off and hoisted sail.

The fair wind blew, and Silo, the sturdy skipper, was thoroughly amiable. A fair wind and a good cargo, homeward bound, would render even a nautical Caliban gracious.

Next morning they passed round the long mole, or breakwater, of the port of Ostia, which lay at the mouth of the Tiber, and, thereon, Masthlon's eyes noticed a tall soldierly figure, standing and evidently watching them keenly. Beneath the closely wrapped cloak the surprised potter recognised the proportions and carriage of his daughter's lover, and was even close enough to make out, or fancy he did, the young man's features, beneath his polished crested helmet. Assuring himself on this point, the potter shrank farther within the cover of the poop-house, until all danger of recognition had passed.

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Toward evening they arrived at their destination, which was the emporium of Rome, situated under the shadow of the Aventine Mount. Thus the Surrentine found himself, at once, in the midst of one of the busiest localities of the imperial city. Wharves lined the river, and warehouses extended along the banks. Here were the corn, the timber, the marble, the stone, the thousand species of merchandise from the ends of the earth landed and stored. And hither, to the markets, assembled the buyers and sellers thereof. The air was full of the noise and bustle on shore and ship. Waggons rumbled and clattered to and fro, and weather-beaten seamen abounded. Through the maze Silo guided Masthlon, whose provincial senses were oppressed and weighted by the unaccustomed roar and bustle into which he had been suddenly plunged, and the shipmaster, with amused glances at his wondering companion, hurried him along the river-side, nearly as far as the Trigeminan Gate. Here, not far from the spot where stood the altar of Evander, the oldest legendary monument of Rome, the sailor entered a tavern. It was an old building, with the unmistakable evidences of a substantial reputation; for it was well filled with customers, and was alive with all the bustle of a flourishing business. To the hard-faced, keen-eyed proprietor of this establishment, who greeted Silo with familiarity, the shipmaster presented his friend, in need of comfortable lodgings for a time, and having seen him comfortably bestowed, returned to the business of his coaster and cargo.

After Masthlon was satisfied with a good meal, a young lad, the son of the landlord, was commissioned to guide him, on a stroll through the adjacent parts of the city, as far as the decreasing light of day would allow. On returning, he found his friend Silo released from his engagements, and together they passed the evening.

'Know you anything of the Pretorians?' asked Masthlon of the innkeeper, ere he retired to his bed.

'I know they are camped on the far side of the city, beyond the Viminal,' replied the lusty-tongued publican, 'I know that Caesar brought them there some years ago, and that Sejanus is their Prefect—who is, between ourselves, you know, a greater man in Rome than Caesar himself. All this I know, and what is left is, that they are a set of overpaid, underworked, overdressed, conceited, stuck-up, strutting puppies. That's about as much as I can tell you of them.'

[pg 74]

'Ah!' said Masthlon, somewhat disheartened by these bluff, energetic words, which were delivered with a readiness and confidence, as if expressing a generally received opinion; 'then have you in Rome a poet by name Balbus?'

'A poet named Balbus!' repeated the host, with a comical look; 'faith, but poetry is a trade I never meddled with, and I am on the wrong side of the Aventine, where sailors and traders swarm, and not poets. I doubt not, worthy Masthlon, that poets abound in Rome, for Rome is a very large place, I warrant you. But you must go and seek them elsewhere. What, gentlemen! does any one know of a poet named Balbus in Rome?' cried he abruptly, putting his head inside of a room tolerably well filled with drinkers.

A laugh arose at the question. 'North, south, east, or west?' cried one.

'Scarce as gladiators,' shouted another; 'the times have starved them.'

'Nothing can starve them—the poets, I mean,' answered a thin dry voice, which seemed to quell the merriment for a space, 'they are as thick as bees in the porticoes and baths of Agrippa. Your Balbus, not being there, landlord, enter the bookshops and you will find as many more, reading their own books, since nobody else will. You will find plenty of Balbi, be assured, but no poets—'

Horace was the last——'

Laughter drowned the remainder of his speech, and the landlord withdrew his head into the passage, where Masthliion was awaiting.

'Balbus the poet does not seem to be very well known,' he said to the potter. 'But what do these rough swinkers know of these things any more than myself? Nevertheless, he says true, and you might do worse than inquire at the bookshops, the baths and porticoes, where the men of the calamus and inkpot love to air the wit they have scraped together by lamplight in their garrets at home.'

[pg 75] The potter, thereupon, retired with an uneasy feeling of helplessness and hopelessness filling his mind, at least as far as regarded Balbus.

Next morning he sallied forth soon after dawn, determined to make the utmost use of his time. He made an arrangement, by which he was again to have the services of his young guide of the previous evening, feeling that he would thus save himself much time and labour. In about three hours' time he had walked a long distance. He had passed along the principal streets in the centre of the city. He had gazed at the shops and buildings. He had mounted the Palatine and Capitoline Hills; had viewed many temples, porticoes and mansions, and from a lofty point had surveyed the city, spread below, with delight and admiration. Then, deeming it time to be about his business, he gave the order to proceed to the Pretorian camp.

[pg 76]

CHAPTER VII.

In a luxuriously fitted room, Aelius Sejanus, the Prefect, was alone, busily engaged with his thoughts and pen.

He had inherited his father's command; but, unlike his father, his absorbing lust of power scorned to be bounded by his office. His were the persuasions, by which the Emperor had been led to gather the cohorts of the Guards together into one united body. Scattered about in isolated garrisons, his subtle, aspiring spirit saw a great power broken and nerveless. Here he held them under his hand, while he showered largesses, rewards, promotions, and fair words upon them liberally. Popularity with these picked troops was the life and strength of his ambition. They were, at once, the ground-work and leverage of his onward steps, if ever in need of a bold stroke.

[pg 77]

Far around lay the streets and barracks of his great camp, swarming with thousands, and, in the midst, this dark-thoughted, plotting mind was silently hewing its path toward the goal of its hopes. On the table lay a long sheet of paper, and on the paper a list of names was being laboriously compiled. His brows were closely knit, and he paced the apartment incessantly. As his reflections became matured he sat down to write, and then, springing up again, he resumed the monotony of his walk. Thus, at slow intervals, name after name was added to the list on the paper; and, every now and then, he would stop at the end of his walk, and peer through a chink of the curtain across the entrance to the ante-chamber, where a Pretorian was on guard, in full panoply of helmet, cuirass, and buckler. There was that in the person and manner of the Prefect which had succeeded, at least to all outward appearance, in winning over such a profound, suspicious mind even as that of Tiberius, his master. Nature had endowed him with a very formidable combination of qualities to be fired with a burning ambition. With a handsome and imposing exterior, energy of mind, activity of body, a plausible tongue, and insinuating manners, this man was dangerous enough. But when the cold subtlety of his brain and the devouring fire of his heart were unhampered by scruple or remorse he became terrible. No tiger more murderous when stealth and craft had failed; for he hesitated not to strike at the life of the man in his path through the honour of the wife. He could glide to the crime of murder through the guilty excitement and pleasure of female conquest and debauchery, and there he bottomed the depths of infamy and horror.

For what dread purpose was the steady lengthening of the list on the table? What dark scheme was developing behind that white forehead? The voice of the sentinel in the outer room broke upon his meditations, and he hastily slipped to the table and thrust the paper into a drawer. He had scarcely done so, when a voice in the ante-chamber called the name 'Titus Afer!'

'Enter, Afer!' replied Sejanus. 'I thought of you as breathing the pure air of Tibur.'

The knight accordingly entered the room. A large travelling-cloak enveloped his form, and a Phrygian cap covered his head. 'I am now on my way,' he answered; 'yesterday I was lazy, and remained at home. In the Baths of Faustus yesterday was Sabinus.'

'Ah!' said the Prefect.

'He grows no wiser, but indeed more rash and calumnious respecting you. I think it would be prudent to watch such a reckless fool; for even his spite and virulence might do mischief amongst some people. He loudly condemns you as being the bloodhound of the Germanici, and indeed is equally bold and noisy in accusing you of usurping the place of Caesar, and of misapplying your authority to your own ends. Such speeches have been heard before, but there are those whose ears are only too ready and willing to suck in such ravings.'

[pg 78] 'You are quite right, Afer; Sabinus has about reached the end of his tether: he must be looked after,' said Sejanus, taking out his tablets and making a memorandum. 'I am right glad he has, at last, given vent to his ideas, so plainly in the presence of such an one as yourself, my friend. So you stayed your journey to tell me this?—it was kind.'

'Also to learn whether I can congratulate you on favourable news from Capreae.'

'Hush! not so loud, Afer!' replied the Prefect, raising his finger warningly; 'it will be time enough to speak freely of a matter when success is assured; then there is the better chance of possible failure being buried in silence. I expect a courier any moment.'

'Indeed!'

'I have waited within doors until now for his arrival—what he will bring I cannot tell.'

'I could guess,' remarked Afer, with a courtly smile.

'Humph!' quoth the Prefect, shrugging his shoulders and smiling also.

At the same moment the sound of voices caught his ears, and he stepped to the curtain and looked into the ante-chamber. The courier he was so anxiously awaiting had just arrived, and the sentinel was advancing to announce the same.

'Ha!' exclaimed the Prefect, stepping into the ante-chamber, 'I expected you before this—your despatches!'

The courier unbuckled a stout leathern girdle which he wore underneath his tunic, and took out of a pouch, attached thereto, a packet, which he delivered into the eager hand of Sejanus.

'Wait!' said the latter briefly; and without returning to his chamber, he turned aside and broke the seals of the packet. With fingers trembling, and a heart eaten with excitement, he ran his eyes over the imperial missive. The next second his eyes flashed. With exultation written on every line of his handsome face he went back into the presence of Afer.

'Ah,—I knew it,—I was right!' remarked the latter, at the first glimpse of the Prefect's glowing visage. 'I give thee joy of thy noble Livia; and I congratulate myself that I am the first to do so.'

[pg 79] Sejanus grasped his client's hand, and fairly laughed out in the exuberance of his feelings.

'Enough, my Titus! This letter hath proved thee a good prophet. The daughter of Caesar is mine indeed, for Caesar himself declares it. Nay, more—I go to Capreae in a few days to claim her. So prepare, my friend, for thou must go along with me thither.'

'Willingly, and gladly, if you will tell me when.'

'Return within the week,' said the Prefect. He clapped his hands loudly, and a slave appeared.

'Bid the courier be ready to return to-morrow! Give him wine—and this!' he said, taking a small purse of money from the table and throwing it at the domestic's feet.

The slave picked it up, and said, 'There is a man without demands to see you, Prefect—a workman, by appearance.'

'What is his business?'

'He will not say—only that he has come from Surrentum to see you.'

'Admit him then, and the sentinel as well.'

The slave retired, and, in a few moments, the armed Pretorian made his appearance, ushering in our potter, whom we left on his way to the camp.

Sejanus gave him a hasty, but keen glance; and the potter, in his turn, surveyed the famous and dreaded Prefect with a fearless but respectful gaze. Bowing his square, sturdy frame, he waited to be addressed.

'Who and what are you, and what do you want with me?' asked Sejanus, skimming his glance furtively over the welcome letter which he had just received.

'My name is Masthlon, and I am a potter of Surrentum,' replied the other; 'and, as I venture to trouble you, noble sir, on a personal matter, concerning one of your officers, perhaps it would be prudent if this soldier did not hear it.'

Sejanus looked up in surprise, and regarded his visitor more curiously. With an amused look on his face, he nevertheless nodded to the sentinel, who silently retired from the room. The deep-set, expressive eyes of Masthlon then rested on Afer, who had picked up a book from the table, and was idly unrolling it.

[pg 80] 'As your business is not of the State, perhaps my friend can remain?' said the Prefect sarcastically.

'No, Prefect, my business is not of the State,' replied the potter, 'but I have come seeking information respecting one of your Centurions, and you must judge whether it be right the noble knight hear it or not.'

'Know then, potter of Surrentum, that I do not enter into nor suffer the inquiries of any idle person with regard to my officers,' said Sejanus sternly.

'I will leave it to your generosity, when I tell you the circumstances which have brought me to make the request.'

'Let me hear!'

'I am only a poor man, earning my bread with the labour of my hands, yet the peace of my home, and the welfare of those belonging to me, are as dear to me as to the noblest,' said Masthlon. 'I have a daughter, Prefect; all the more precious to me because she has no sister or brother—'

'Ah, I perceive,' uttered Sejanus, with the shadow of a smile curling his lips. 'Go on!'

'Ay—it is easily guessed!' replied Masthlon, 'and it needs few words. This Centurion of whom I speak, in passing through the town, saw my daughter. Since that time he has come more than once to visit her at my house. She has been called beautiful, Prefect, but she is not his equal. I bade her tell him so, and forbid him. On that he demanded her in marriage; but though she loves him, yet I will be satisfied that he is not one to deal lightly or carelessly by her, or I will not consent.'

'You have forgotten the name of the Centurion, which is indispensable,' said the Prefect; 'and yet I can only guess one.'

'His name is Martialis.'

'Even so! The Centurion may well not object to as many journeys as I can give him, and also prefer the land route to the sea—here is the explanation.'

Sejanus burst into a laugh, whilst Afer, who was seemingly immersed in his book, stroked his chin.

'Potter, you are right,' continued the Prefect. 'Men and women, to be prudent, should not marry out of their station. Your daughter must be a paragon of loveliness, or cleverness, or goodness, to have ensnared my Centurion.'

[pg 81] 'She is such as she is, Prefect, and ensnares no one,' returned Masthlon, with a frown of his shaggy eyebrows.

'Whichever way it be, if they have fallen in love with each other you may as well leave them to it, for you will be hard put to rule them,' laughed the commander. 'When a woman is truly in love she parts with what little forethought she had, and leaves her senses to find themselves in cooler days. As for Martialis, I can only tell thee, potter, he is not the man to change his mind lightly, or take away his hand when he has once set his grip.'

'I am sore beset,' said Masthlon sadly; 'in Surrentum I could know nothing; here in Rome I thought I might learn something.'

'The performance of the Centurion's duties is what concerns me; beyond that lies not within my province,' replied Sejanus.

'And yet it would be hard not to know something more,' sighed the potter.

'To conclude, you may go back to Surrentum with an easy mind as far as I know to the contrary,' said the Prefect, with signs of impatience. 'This seems to be a piece of lovers' folly on the part of the Centurion. If he is fool enough to marry your daughter, she may think herself lucky in her elevation. Many a man in his position, of gentle blood, would have proceeded differently. 'Tis pity none of his family remains to dissuade him from grafting such a poor scion on to their ancient stem.'

'I care nothing for that—I seek my daughter's happiness, not her position,' replied the potter proudly.

'Good! Then I know nothing more. Is the Centurion an acquaintance of yours, Titus?' cried Sejanus, turning to the knight.

'No, I have not the honour,' answered Afer.

'Then, potter, you may take that as a strong assurance in his favour,' added the Prefect satirically.

'You are in the best of spirits,' remarked Afer, showing his white teeth.

'Now, potter, you can go,' said Sejanus; 'you have all I can give you—stay, how is your daughter named?'

'Neæra!' replied Masthlon.

[pg 82] 'Then your girl Neæra will probably have her own way in the end in despite of you. But deprive me not of my Centurion between ye, or you shall lose my favour, I promise you. He is worth more to me than all the maids, wives, widows, and hags in Campania, honest or not—wait!'

He clapped his hands, and the same slave attended as before—a dark-skinned Nubian.

'Lygdus, is there not an old family friend of the Centurion Martialis, whom he visits on the Aventine?'

'Mamercus—near the temple of Diana,' replied the slave laconically.

'Go thither, potter,—Mamercus will serve your turn better than I,' said the Prefect, waving his hand and turning his back.

Masthlon followed the Nubian out of the apartment with a brighter countenance, and was quickly on his way to the Aventine.

'Your Centurion has caught your own complaint,' said Afer to his patron jestingly.

'The gods confound it!' replied the Prefect, 'a wife will not improve his Centurionship. The fool! to saddle himself with a wife now—a red-faced, brawny-armed brat of a clay-moulder, most likely. As if there were no other arrangement; I'll try my persuasion. And so for Capreae, my Titus!'

'Whenever you are ready, Prefect.'

'Be back within four days.'

'No longer; and till then farewell—I leave you happy.'

'Farewell! Remember our friends at Tibur!'

'I will.'

Afer bowed, and left the Pretorian commander to ruminate with delight on his good fortune, and to indulge his mind with dreams, more intoxicating and glowing than ever, on the strength of the success of his last, and, perhaps, most important move.

At the gate of the camp, a light two-wheeled vehicle for rapid travelling, and drawn by a couple of handsome, speedy mules, was waiting for the knight. The two slaves, who formed on this occasion the modest retinue of the traveller, had been despatched on before.

[pg 83] After proceeding about nine miles from Rome, the hired vehicle was dismissed back to the city. A couple of hours before dusk Afer arrived, in a second carriage, at the outskirts of the ancient town of Fidenæ, which stood on the steep banks of the Tiber, on the Salarian road, which led nearly due north from Rome. He had thus completed two sides of a triangle, and, as the first shades of evening began to gather, he began to traverse the third side in a third conveyance. The road entered the Colline Gate in the Agger of Servius; when he reached that point the dusk was thick enough to prevent recognition. Here the knight descended and paid the driver his fee; then he drew the hood of his cloak over his head, and bent his steps towards the Sublician Bridge beneath the Aventine. In less than half an hour's rapid walking he arrived at his destination. The bridge was the oldest in Rome, and had been built by Ancus Martius, to connect the fortifications on the Janiculum with the city. It bore a sacred character, and was under especial care. Being constructed of wood, however, the increased traffic and burthens of the growing city began to overweight it. A stone bridge was then built close by, and the old one preserved as a venerable and sacred relic. In the proximity of these Afer loitered. It was now dark, and the feeble glimmering of two oil lamps, suspended in the gloom, denoted to passengers the foot of the modern bridge; its ancient fellow being buried in darkness. Across the river the lights of the Transtibertine portion of the city glimmered, extending up towards the slopes of the Janiculum Hill. Behind the knight the Aventine Mount arose with its answering gleams. The day's toil was over, but the night was yet young, and there was sufficient stir in the city to pervade the air with a dim hum of life, broken by the tread and voices of passers-by, and the rumble of some belated waggon. Stealing silently along the pitchy stream glided the light of an occasional vessel, its hull shrouded and invisible. No one but the importunate beggars, sturdy, halt, and blind, who haunted the bridge and pestered the passengers, as yet kept the impatient knight company. Suddenly the figure of a man strode under the feeble glimmer of the lamps and bestowed a few hearty curses on the tribe of mendicants. Afer went up to him and laid his hand on his shoulder.

'Oh, oh!' said the new-comer in the voice of Cestus; 'it is you, patron!'

[pg 84] 'It is yet too early,' replied Afer.

'There are yet a few arrangements to complete, which will take up a little time,' replied the Suburan.

'Come, then, let us about it at once; the old man retires early,' said the knight, and they disappeared in the darkness toward the Aventine.

[pg 85]

CHAPTER VIII.

Pleasantly situated on the commanding height of the Janiculum was the villa of Fabricius. More delightful in the enjoyment of its cool breezes during the summer heats, yet in winter or summer, the old ex-senator was seldom away from it for a whole day together. At times, however, he would yield to a desire to make the journey to visit his estates; but this was not often. His suburban villa, and not his birthplace, was the scene of his happiest days of prosperous domesticity. But that was all changed. A few select friends of old times he yet preserved and cherished. With these, and the serene consolations of a well-stocked library, he passed his uneventful days, in calm resignation, under the haunting sense of his loneliness. As he sat and brooded in the seclusion of his silent house, he conjured up the ghosts of former days; he listened to the well-remembered voices—he stirred, and all was gone again. And then, what painful sighs arose from his breast. Alas! how many such had those walls listened to!

[pg 86]

On this evening Fabricius sat in his winter room, before a fire which burned brightly in a brazier on the ample hearth, for the October nights were chilly. His elbow rested on a small table, whereon were lying books and writing materials. But the old man's eyes were bent on the blazing logs, and his mind was far away in the past. The soft light of the silver lamp beside him flooded over his face, and revealed every line and wrinkle, as sharply as the level rays of the setting sun display the seams and furrows on a mountain's breast. The native expression of courage and determination displayed by the high, bold curves of his features, was relaxed and overborne by an air of melancholy, so deep, that it seemed almost on the point of merging into actual tears had not the entrance of an old grizzled slave roused him from his reverie.

'What do you say, Natta?' he asked, not catching the domestic's announcement.

'There is a man awaiting in the porch, who wishes to see you.'

'What kind of a man?'

'A craftsman, I should say. He has something important to tell—so he says,' replied the old porter, with apparent sarcasm.

'Ay, ay, I know!' sighed Fabricius. 'No matter, bring him in.'

The slave retired, and reappeared with Cestus, washed, clean-shaved, and wearing coarse but clean garments, such as an artisan would reserve as his holiday attire. It was full two hours since Afer had tapped him on the shoulder at the bridge below. He entered with a deep obeisance and a well-feigned nervousness and awkwardness. Natta, the slave, thought proper to remain within the door, and keep a keen eye on the visitor.

The ex-senator's scrutiny did not, perhaps, beget the utmost confidence, to judge by the slight and almost imperceptible contraction of his eyebrows. There was that, evidently, in the broad Teutonic cast of face and small eyes of the burly Cestus which soap and water and a razor could not remove.

The habitual current of a man's mind cannot, it is true, alter his features, but it charges them with an essence as readable as a printed page.

It was, therefore, the misfortune of the physiognomy of Cestus to leave no favourable impression, for he had not as yet opened his lips.

'You wish to see me,' said Fabricius.

'The noble Fabricius!' answered Cestus, with deep humility—perhaps too deep.

'I am he; your business?'

'So please you, noble sir, I am nothing but a poor labourer down at the river below there, and I

would never have the boldness to trouble your worship, or to set my foot across the threshold of your palace, but that I come not of my own accord, but to befriend a mate of mine who is dying.' Cestus paused, and nervously fingered his belt.

'Well!' said Fabricius, 'go on! You have not come on your own account, but on that of a sick friend—what next?'

'It concerns you also, and I was told to tell it to you alone,' replied Cestus, with a glance at Natta. The shadow of a smile rested on the face of Fabricius as he signed to the slave to retire. Natta, however, feigned not to observe the motion, and did not move.

'You may go, Natta,' said his master, and the old porter had no alternative but to obey, which he did, with reluctant steps and sour suspicious looks at the visitor.

'Now speak,' said Fabricius; 'I think I could guess at the nature of your message. Has it aught to do with a domestic matter of mine?'

'So please,' replied Cestus, 'I will tell you exactly what I was told to tell, for I know nothing more. Lupus—that is my friend—has been hurt to death by a block of marble which slipped upon him whilst it was being slung from the ship on to the quay. He sent for me to-night, and I did but clean myself and come straight to your palace. He said, "I did a deed some years ago which has lain heavy on my mind ever since—heavier even than that cursed block from Luna which fell upon me yesterday. I am going fast; there is no hope, and I must ease my mind. On the top of Janiculum there dwells a nobleman named Fabricius. Seek him, and bring him hither back with thee, that I may tell him what I did, for my mind torments me more than my crushed body. He had a granddaughter, a little child—a little goddess; I can tell him of that child—bid him come with haste! Fourteen years ago I stole her from his door and sold her. She yet lives—a slave!"'

In spite of himself; in spite of the numberless plausible tales and previous disappointments, Fabricius felt his heart beat violently, and a tremor seize his limbs. Cestus's small keen eyes noted the change of colour on his cheek.

'Fourteen years!' murmured Fabricius to himself; 'right almost to the very month; how could he know that if—alas, my little darling—my little Aurelia! shall I be fooled again?'

'I pray you, Fabricius, be speedy, out of pity for my poor comrade,' urged Cestus; 'he will soon be beyond reach. It was a sore sin against you, but your nobleness will pardon a dying man. And besides, you will forgive me, noble sir, for offering a suggestion of my own; if Lupus departs without seeing you, you may thus lose all chance of ever getting your lost grandchild again. Ah me, that one could do such a deed as rob a house of its sunshine for the sake of a few paltry sestertia!'

This was uttered in a sighing kind of *sotto voce*, and the old Senator, racked with doubt and eagerness, with hope and the fear of oft-repeated disappointment and disgust, passed his hand over his brow in poignant doubtfulness.

'Go to the Esquiline to my nephew—but no! I forgot; his Greek boy came hither t'other day to say he was going to Tibur for a space. Phœbus aid me! Where does this comrade of thine dwell?'

'Not far away, so please you,' answered Cestus; 'on the other side of the Aventine, nigh to the Ostian road.'

'It is late,' muttered Fabricius.

'It is,' observed the friend of Lupus, 'but Death is not particular as to time. In fact he seems to prefer the night-time. If Lupus live past midnight I shall wonder. Imagine, noble sir, a block of marble crushing poor flesh and bone—ugh, 'tis terrible!'

'You saw it?'

'I did—worse luck.'

'You are a labourer like him?'

'I am—see!'

The worthy labourer showed his hands. They had been specially rubbed and engrained with dirt before washing. So cleverly were they prepared, that they might have belonged to any hard-handed son of toil.

'Did your comrade never tell you of this theft before?'

'Never.'

'And what does he deserve, think you, if he have done as he says?' said Fabricius, speaking with agitation; 'taking away what to me was more precious than life itself. What harm had I ever done him? To sell the sweet child for a slave—oh!'

[pg 89] "Twas a crime indeed, and no fate too hard for him,' observed Cestus. 'But haste, I beseech you! The poor devil is dying; have pity on him, and serve yourself as well; for, as like as not, you may get your maid again. 'Tis all plain to me now. When I first knew Lupus, some twenty years ago, he was as blithe a fellow as ever stepped; and then he began to change. Ay, ay! It is plain enough to see now what weighed upon him.'

'Humph; do you say so?'

'That is easily vouched for by others than myself. Will you not come? or must I go back and tell him—'

'Faith, I am distraught. I know not—'

'Tis scarcely likely he would die with a lie on his lips, noble sir.'

'I will go with you,' said Fabricius, with a sudden determination. 'Go to the porch and wait! Natta, haste! Bid Pannicus, Cyrrha, and Crotus take their staves and go forth with me to the Aventine. Fetch me my cloak and cap!'

'What, now—to-night?' demanded the astonished slave, who ran in at his master's call.

'Yes, now, this minute—haste!'

Now that his mind was made up the old man was burning with eagerness, and, ere long, he and his slaves were ready to depart.

In the meantime Cestus went to the porch and stood on the outer step. The moon was rising behind some heavy cloud-banks, and her effulgence shone dimly through the rifts. The great city lay stretched below, with its gleams peeping through the hazy gloom. In the uncertain light a form crept noiselessly up to the pillars of the porch, and whispered to the Suburan standing there.

'Well, is he coming?'

'Yes—take care; he is here!' replied Cestus, and the figure glided back into obscurity.

Fabricius, followed by the three slaves bearing lanterns, came forth.

'It is moonlight, Fabricius—the lanterns will be rather a hindrance than otherwise,' observed Cestus.

[pg 90] 'It is moonlight truly, but not much as yet,' answered Fabricius; 'so until it mends we will carry our own light with us. Lead on, good fellow, with Pannicus, and we three will follow.'

Cestus did as he was told, cursing the lanterns in his heart. Pannicus walked by his side. Far enough behind to escape observation, the cloaked form, which had spoken to Cestus, dogged their steps like a stealthy tiger. They passed down the hill and through the Transtibertine district to the river. After crossing the Sublician Bridge they proceeded to the gate of the Servian rampart called Trigemina, and then ascended the Aventine Mount by the Publician Road.

In the earlier times of the city this hill had been regarded as ill-omened. It had been occupied chiefly by plebeian families, but now was becoming more fashionable, following, as already said, the inevitable rule of the wealthy classes seizing upon the most elevated and pleasant situations, as the city waxed great. At the head of the upward road Fabricius and his party passed the temple of Juno Regina, which Camillus had built after his conquest of Veii. The three lanterns of the slaves were undesirable accompaniments, in the estimation of Cestus, so he rapidly hit upon a plan which might lead to their extinguishment. Fortune favoured him as they passed the temple of the famous conqueror. The moon glanced out with her silver-bright disc from behind the sharp edge of a black cloud, and bathed the columns of the temple, as well as every object around, in a flood of splendour. The obnoxious lanterns, with their smoky, yellow glare, were useless, and a contrast to the pure brightness around. The moment was opportune. Pannicus the slave, walking on the left of Cestus, carried his lantern hanging down at the full length of his right arm. As the moonbeams fell to the earth, Cestus purposely slipped with his left foot, and falling across his companion's path, dashed the lantern out of his hand to the ground, where it instantly became dark.

'My ankle seemed to turn on some cursed stone,' said Cestus, as he gathered himself up, rubbing his elbows and knees.

Fabricius inquired if he was hurt.

'No, not much—nothing that I can feel yet, save a bit of a shake.'

Pannicus took his lantern to his fellow-slaves to have it relit.

[pg 91] 'Never mind the lantern, man! Who wants candles with such a light as this Diana gives us?' cried Cestus, with a parting rub at his dusty clothes,—'come, we can see better without.'

'I think so,' remarked Fabricius quietly, and the remaining two lanterns were extinguished.

The road began to descend again toward the valley. In some places it was cut through the rock, more or less deeply, and at one particular spot it passed through a grove of trees. The chiselled rock, which walled the upper side of the road, was scarcely breast-high, and fringed to the very edge with ancient trees, as though the process of cutting the path had been limited by veneration for the spot and the bare requirements of the work. This was a barrier on one hand which required considerable agility to surmount. On the opposite side the face of the hill continued to slope downward from the edge of the path into the dark depths of the grove, which the moonlight was unable to penetrate. It was one of those silent, secluded, mysterious spots, rich in tradition, which were fast disappearing before the relentless march of the spreading city.

A few paces within it stood a large square altar, dedicated to the deity of the grove. Its sculptured figures were indistinct, and worn by centuries of elementary strife. The hoary trees surrounded and spread their branching arms far above it. The silvery rays of Diana slipped through upon it, and it stood, barred with light and shadow, in its sylvan loneliness—ghostly, mysterious, and, as one might fancy, meditating on the memories of generations.

It was to this spot the party led by Cestus now approached. The hour was growing late according to the habits of people then. The road, never very busy at any time, was deserted, and the dwellings had ceased before they reached the sacred grove.

They walked on until they arrived within eighty or ninety yards of the ancient altar. Fabricius was busy balancing his hopes against the logic of his experiences, and his slaves were, no doubt, cursing the whim of their master, in bringing them out on such a nocturnal expedition. Suddenly Cestus, who had beguiled the way by an intermittent conversation with his companion Pannicus, picked up a stone, and flung it vigorously, as far as he could, among the branches of the trees, in the direction of the altar, which they were approaching. The pebble rattled among the twigs, and fell, with a thud, on the turfy sod beneath.

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'What now, good fellow?' cried Fabricius from behind, 'has your day's labour not given you sufficient exercise?'

'Dost not see it?' said Cestus, pointing to the tops of the trees,—'an owl! shu!' And he made a loud noise and flung another stone.

'Hush, man—you will stir the goddess of the grove—leave the owls in peace!' said Fabricius.

Cestus accordingly desisted, having done as much as he required. In a few strides they were opposite the altar. The Suburan stopped, and wheeled round so suddenly, that the old Senator and his two slaves well-nigh ran against him.

'What now, man—what possesses you?' said Fabricius sharply.

'One minute, so please you, to pray to the goddess for my poor comrade?' asked Cestus.

'Go, then!' replied Fabricius in a gentle tone, and the pretended workman stepped aside to the altar, where he appeared to engage himself in devotion. He prayed, as follows, in whispered tones:

'Are you all there, and ready?'

A murmur and a voice rose from the thick shadow of the stones, 'Ready, ay, and sick of waiting—are they yonder?'

'Three dogs of slaves who will run at a shout, and the old man himself. I have come, on leave, for a minute to pray for a sick comrade to get better who died five years ago. When we move on I shall whistle, and then come you on our backs like four thunderbolts.'

Having said this Cestus turned to go back, when a sibilant 'sh!' detained him.

'Wait, Cestus, I think I hear horses' feet, and the game will be spoiled—hark!'

But Cestus was either not so keen of hearing, or else was too impatient to make a speedy end of the business, so that, after listening for a brief second or two, he snarled in reply, 'What horses, you fool; there are no horses out this time of the night, on this road—just as likely the goddess herself—be ready for the whistle!'

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With that he rejoined the party, who were resting unconscious of such a dangerous trap. They had scarcely taken half a dozen steps onward, when Cestus gave his signal, shrill and sudden. Four forms leaped like tigers from the shadow of the altar and fell on the affrighted slaves. Cestus himself bounded on Fabricius. At the same time the figure, which had dogged their steps from the Janiculum, leaped down from the rock-wall of the road and stood apart to watch. Two of the slaves had fallen in the sudden onslaught, but the third had managed to escape at the top of his speed. Fabricius, who, in despite of his age, retained yet a large use of his keen senses and bodily activity, had taken sufficient warning to raise his staff, and meet the charge of Cestus with a vigorous blow. The ruffian staggered, and the moonbeams flashed upon the polished blade of a

weapon, which was dashed from his hand by the lucky stroke.

'Wretch!' the old man shouted, when a blow from behind felled him senseless. Cestus, furious with rage and pain, belched forth a frightful imprecation. His right arm was benumbed or broken, and he stooped for his knife with his other hand.

Not far away was a sharp turn in the road. The tramp of horses and the jingle of accoutrements smote on their ears.

'Bungling fool!' hissed the mysterious figure, springing forward to complete the work in which, so far, the Suburan had been foiled. But he was met, and rudely thrust back by the powerful arm of the confederate who had knocked the Senator down from behind.

'Take your time, my lad,' bellowed that individual hoarsely, 'he's more mine than yours.'

[pg 94] The slash of a poniard was the answer, and they closed in a struggle, when the others suddenly raised a cry of '*Cave!*' and fled in all directions into the recesses of the wood. A body of horsemen had rounded the bend in the road and was almost upon them. They were in military attire, and the moon glittered on their polished helmets and the trappings of the horses. The foremost trooper immediately sprang to the ground and rushed forward, followed by two or three more. The struggling men parted and darted into the grove after their companions, whilst the foremost of the new-comers, singling out Cestus, followed him at the top of his speed. He was in a few moments hard upon the heels of the Suburan, who strained every nerve in fear of his pursuer, who possessed a far fleeter foot than himself. Fortune favoured him just at the critical moment, when, in terror, he seemed to feel a hand upon his collar. The outgrowing, straggling roots of a tree tripped the foot of the trooper, and he flew, with a dire crash, to the ground. The fall was so violent that he lay for a few seconds stunned. When he picked himself up, the whole of the flying vagabonds had disappeared among the gloomy boles, like water through a sieve, leaving neither trace nor sound behind. He shook himself with a laugh, and gathering up his brazen helmet, walked back to the road. Some others of the troop were here dismounted, using their best efforts to revive the unconscious Fabricius. Flasks were produced; wine and water were poured into his mouth and rubbed on his temples. The two inanimate slaves were laid side by side until a helmet full of water could be brought from a neighbouring fountain to be dashed upon them.

The soldier we have particularised knelt down beside the prostrate Fabricius. 'Is he badly hurt?' he asked.

'It is hard to say, Centurion; but, dead or not, it is a man of the Senate,' replied the comrade, who was bathing the old man's forehead.

'Humph!' said the Centurion, 'is, or was, rather—he wears only the narrow band. However, he is worth the trouble of a few minutes. Do your best. Do you object to wait for a brief time, Drusus?'

This question was addressed to one who sat motionless on his horse close by. Leading reins were attached to his charger's bridle and held by a mounted soldier on each side.

'No!' replied this person, 'I hold this delay as kind and fortunate, for the pleasant moonlight and the sweet air of heaven will soon know me no more.'

Fabricius soon showed symptoms of life, and then his recovery was rapid. He sat up and glanced around. 'Where am I? What is all this? Ah, I know,' he ejaculated. 'I remember!—but you?'

[pg 95] 'Why, simply in this way,' responded the officer; 'we saw you on the ground, and a couple of night-hawks squabbling over you. A few moments later, and probably you would never have spoken again on earth.'

'Most surely—robbed of what little money I have about me, and deprived of my life as well. I have been decoyed into a trap,' said Fabricius, rising to his feet, with the help of the Centurion's arm. 'Thanks! My name is Quintus Fabricius, and I dwell on the Janiculum. I owe my life to you this night, and I will prove my gratitude, if my means and exertions are able to do so.'

'There needs no thought, but thankfulness, that we chanced to arrive so opportunely. The rest was easy—they ran off when they caught sight of us—we came, saw, and conquered!' said the officer, laughing.

'Be that for me to determine,' rejoined Fabricius; 'I will ask but two things of you.'

'Name them.'

'The first is the name of one I have cause to remember.'

'We are a good score of fellows—would you wish for them all?'

'Thine only. Through you I shall know the rest.'

'For their sakes, then, we are Pretorians.'

'So I see,' observed Fabricius, with gentle impatience.

'Well, then, I am Centurion thereof, and my name Martialis. But what of that? We all have done, one as much as another, and the whole amounts to nothing,—come, sir, and I will send two or three to guard you home.'

The old man, still somewhat confused and trembling, murmured once or twice the name he had heard, as if it bore some familiar sound.

'Your name seems to ring in my ears as if I had heard it of old,' he said; 'but that in good time. Having given me your name, you will not, therefore, refuse me the honour of your friendship. Give me your word, you will visit me, and speedily. In the Transtibertine I am to be found by the simple asking.'

'Willingly! I accept your kindness with pleasure,' answered Martialis, with growing impatience to go onward.

'Come with me now! Your men could return without you,' urged the old man.

[pg 96] 'What—entice me from my duty! Nay, you would not,' cried Martialis, shaking his head and laughing.

'He would be bold, indeed, who would try to seduce an officer of our Prefect,' interposed the quietly bitter voice of him who sat on the led horse, 'especially when that zealous and frank-minded Prefect sends his officer to lead a son of Germanicus, like a felon, to Rome.'

'What!—of Germanicus!' exclaimed Fabricius, in astonishment, and ere he could be stopped he pushed up to the speaker and seized his hand.

'Drusus—of that same unhappy family. Evil fate spares us not.'

'Your pardon, Prince, but this is against my orders,' interposed Martialis, quickly and firmly; 'you will not compel me to enforce them?'

'Enough! Lead on!' responded the ill-fated prince, in a mournful voice. 'Farewell, friend, whoever thou art.'

'March!' commanded the Centurion, and the band proceeded. He himself walked on foot at its head, in order to lend the old Senator the support of his arm. The slaves Pannicus and Cyrrha, with no worse effects of their adventures than a confused singing in their heads, brought up the rear. In this wise they continued, until they had crossed the mount and descended to the level ground near the Trigeminan Gate. Here Fabricius took leave of his preserver, with a few warm heartfelt words of thanks, and Martialis detached two of his men to escort him home. Continuing on his way the Centurion led his troop in double file. The clang of the horses' hoofs, with the jingle of accoutrements, awoke the echoes of the silent, empty streets. Ascending the Palatine they halted before the Imperial palace, and were received by an official and a few slaves. The prisoner was desired to dismount, and he was led into the palace. The lights of the interior showed him to be a young man of not more than one or two-and-twenty, and he maintained the sullen expression of one who has suddenly been made the victim of deceit.

'Is this my journey's end?' he asked of Martialis.

'Here I must quit you, noble Drusus; I have no further instructions than to leave you in charge of the keeper of the palace.'

[pg 97] 'Take me to my room then,' said the prince, haughtily, to the keeper, 'where I may eat, and drink, and sleep, and forget what I am.'

The keeper obeyed and led the way through the halls of Caesar, until they arrived at a narrow passage, which terminated in a descending flight of stone steps.

'Whither are you taking me?' demanded the prisoner sternly, as he came to a sudden halt.

'To the vaults of the palace,' answered the official laconically.

'Know you who I am?'

'Perfectly well. But I am ordered to place you in the vaults, and I have no alternative but to obey.'

The young prince looked fiercely around, but seeing how useless any resistance would be, he dropped his chin on his breast with a silent stoical resignation which touched Martialis to the heart. Torches were lit and the party descended the steps, and went along an underground passage. The keeper of the palace halted before a narrow, heavily-barred door, and unlocked it. It needed a strong pressure to cause it to move on its hinges, and, as it did so, a heavy, damp, noisome atmosphere puffed forth, which caused the torches to flicker and splutter. They went in. The interior was hewn out of the rock; spacious enough, but humid, chill, and horrible—a perfect tomb. The trickling moisture, which bedewed the walls, glistened icily through the gloom in the light of the torches, and the floor was damp and sticky, and traced with the slimy tracks of creeping things. There was a pallet and a stool, and the slaves placed some eatables thereon. Martialis felt sick at heart and shuddered.

'You are sure you are right in bringing him to this fearful place—a place unfit for a beast to rest in?' he whispered to the gaoler.

'It is the best of all the vaults,' was the brief reply.

[pg 98] The unhappy prince looked round, in a stupefied way, and shivered. The change was frightful, from the sunny skies and balmy air of the lovely sea-girt Capreae. Martialis stepped up to him. 'I must leave you, Drusus,' he said; 'I am sorely grieved to quit you in such a lodging—it must be by error, and if so, I will not fail to do my best to have it rectified at once.'

'Thanks, friend,' said the unfortunate, looking with fixed eyes; 'bid them send their murderers speedily!'

Without another word he went to the pallet and sat down, and buried his face in his hands in mute despair.

One of the torches was fixed into an iron socket on the wall, and the order was given to withdraw. Full of distress, Martialis took a second light from the hand of its bearer, and extinguishing it, he laid it on the little stool, so that it might succeed the other when needed. Then taking his large military cloak from his shoulders, he gently dropped it over the unhappy prisoner's form and turned away. The dungeon was then vacated and locked, and the Centurion rushed, as hastily as he was able, with a heart full of painful feelings, up into the fresh pure air and sweet moonlight outside.

When he reached the camp with his troop, he was summoned to the Prefect to deliver his report, which was received by the commander with every sign of satisfaction. Proceeding, on his own impulse, to describe the dreadful circumstances of the prisoner, he was coldly interrupted and dismissed. He turned to go, inwardly burning with disgust and indignation.

'Stay, Centurion!' cried Sejanus; 'you have been inquired for here to-day—it is right I should inform you.'

'Indeed! In what manner, and by whom, may I ask?' said Martialis coldly.

'By a workman—a potter from Surrentum! Ha! You change colour!'

'Tis not from shame at least,' returned the other haughtily.

'No, no—from conscious folly rather. You would wed a potter's girl. You are blind to your own interests. Amuse yourself with her, if you wish, but think twice ere you bind a clog about your neck.'

'And even such clogs are as easily got rid off as assumed at the present time,' retorted the Centurion cuttingly.

Sejanus bit his lip, and his brows met darkly. The retort cut home, for he had put away his wife Apicata, to further more freely his guilty intrigue with Livia, the Emperor's daughter-in-law.

[pg 99] However, he replied sarcastically, 'That is true; but not in the case of such eminently virtuous men as yourself, Martialis. But just as you think proper—it is your own matter. As long as it affects not your Centurionship I care not—not I.'

'Rather than suffer that to happen, Prefect, I would relinquish my duties entirely—you need have no fear,' answered Martialis coldly, and, saluting, he left the room.

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CHAPTER IX.

Cestus, straining every nerve as he fled from the scene of his failure, expected each moment to feel the fingers of his rapidly gaining pursuer hooked into his collar. Doubling this way and that through the gloom, in imminent peril of smashing his skull, and experiencing all the terrors of a hunted hare, he gave a gasp of joy when he heard the crash of the trooper's fall at his heels. A few more leaps took him out of sight and hearing; and then he doubled on his track. When he gained the edge of the grove, he dropped down at full length in a convenient shelter, with his heart throbbing well-nigh to bursting, and his eyes swimming. His slothful, indulgent habits rendered him totally unequal to such a terrible trial of exertion, and his horrible gasping for breath was so severe as to render him incapable of perceiving whether there were any signs of further pursuit. Burying his face in the grass, he smothered, as well as he could, his grievous pantings, until he recovered breath sufficiently to sit up and listen with more attention. All was as still as death, however, and, in another quarter of an hour, he felt emboldened to make the best

of his way to the safe haunts of his native Subura. Going cautiously he quitted the Aventine and gained the Ostian road which ran to the heart of the city. As he progressed along the deserted streets he began to curse his ill-luck and speculate on the consequences. The promised reward, though further from his grasp than before, yet shed its glamour over his mind, and whetted it to ponder over renewed plans, on a less delicate and ingenious style, more peculiarly his own.

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The vast exterior of the Circus Maximus towered on his left. Walking swiftly along its moonlit, porticoed base, full of caves of ill-repute, another figure appeared, so as to converge on to the track of Cestus.

Traversing that mighty circuit of masonry, the Suburan overlooked the approaching object, as one might have overlooked a small animal specked on the side of a mountain, until he found himself in close proximity, and then he quickened his pace. The result of this was that the stranger did the same, and the mind of Cestus began to wax uneasy. He finally started off at a smart trot, whereupon he was hailed by an angry voice.

'Stop, you fool!'

Cestus recognised the tones of his patron and waited in as much dread as surprise.

'I did not recognise you, patron,' he said, as the knight came up.

'So you have got away clear,' said Afer sharply.

'More by good luck than anything else—there was a swifter foot than mine behind me had it not slipped,' replied Cestus, humbled and abashed by his failure. 'You were too bold to be nigh—had you been caught, it had been fifty times worse.'

'Rest yourself easy on that score—I am not such a bungler as yourself.'

'Well, patron, the plan failed, but you can hardly blame me,' began Cestus.

'Whom then? if not you. It is the climax of your bragging worthlessness—idiot!' said the knight wrathfully.

'Well, but, patron—the soldiers! Who could be at both ends of the road at once? Another minute and I had done my work to perfection—I had finished it even now, but for that meddling fool, who chose to put in his word. Be reasonable, patron; I carried out your plans to the very letter and minute, but you made no provision for a troop of legionaries to interfere.'

'Silence, blockhead! could I not see?' fumed Afer. 'Why, the old dotard, if they had left you to it, would have cracked your skull, thick as it is.'

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'No, never—if he outlived Saturn!' retorted the Suburan, with rising voice, as well as choler, 'nor fifty dotards from fifty Janiculums. Let me do the job in my own way, without the useless tomfoolery of a whining tale and a moonlight walk, and a cohort of asses lurking on one's steps—leave it to me alone and you shall see.'

'Yes, I should see you with thy neck in a noose and myself proclaimed,' sneered Afer. 'Leave it to you, indeed! If you cannot do better than this, with four stout fellows to back you, what would you do alone? Fool!'

'I am no fool!' returned Cestus fiercely; for the cutting contempt and epithets of his patron were more than he could bear.

'A double fool—a swaggering, bragging, drunken fool, thick of sense and slow of hand—faugh!'

'I tell thee, Afer, I am no fool!' bawled Cestus; 'it is thyself!'

'I was, to trust your workmanship. Fabricius eats his postponed supper, and you are off to your foxholes, like a cur, with its tail between its legs. Begone and trouble me no more!' thundered Afer, in uncontrollable passion.

'You shall know that—clever as you think yourself, you are under my thumb. One word from me —'

'Silence, you dog, when I bid you!' hissed the knight, striding up to him and clutching his collar.

'Not I, by Hercules!' cried Cestus, thoroughly roused and reckless as he shook off the grasp. 'You, a chicken-hearted, double-faced pauper, to be my master——'

'*Accipe*——! Let that silence thee for ever!'

The knight threw up his arm as he spoke, and the Suburan, giving a sharp cry, fell heavily, stabbed in the breast.

Afer hastily wiped his poniard and replaced it in the folds of his cloak.

'There is no bungling in this,' he muttered; 'dead men tell no tales.'

Only delaying to drag the fallen man by the heels more into the shadow of a wall, he hurried swiftly on; and, before morning dawned, he entered the yet sleeping town of Tibur, disappointed in mind, and yet not altogether without a feeling of satisfaction and relief at the course circumstances had taken.

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CHAPTER X.

Not far from the shadow of the Capitoline, and nigh the Forum of Caesar, Plautia dwelt in a small, but handsome mansion. Her wealth, although not as great as that squandered by her spendthrift brother, was yet ample, and in her hands better controlled. Her entertainments were not very frequent, but, nevertheless, were famous amongst a certain set for their enjoyableness, which was due, not alone to the exquisite fare provided, but more to the tact of the hostess in selecting her guests. We have already attempted to describe the attractions of her brilliant, though voluptuous, style of beauty. Of lovers she had no lack. Her manners with all of them were perfectly free and familiar. So misleading, that more than one, ere now, encouraged and inflamed thereby to presumption, became sorrowfully aware of the claws which lay sheathed in velvet.

She was a mystery, therefore, and a tantalising one. Whispers and rumours were perennial; but yet absolute proof was wanting to substantiate the fame which people awarded her. She, herself, was indifferent, and could return as haughty and unembarrassed a stare as any which the proudest patrician matron bent upon her. Even those individuals, proverbial for the possession of the most secret information—namely, her handmaids and domestics—were at fault; so secret, variable, and contrary were her actions and humours.

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One morning, two or three days later in our story, she was going forth to take the air, and she came to the porch of her house, where her litter, borne by four powerful slaves, stood awaiting her. This litter was roofed in, and of sufficient size to admit of the occupant lying at full length if necessary. It was also furnished with curtains, which could be drawn so as to secure perfect immunity from observation. This contrivance for conveyance, so common in ancient Rome, was standing on the ground, and Plautia stepped therein, before the admiring gaze of the pedestrians who thronged the causeway. Lydia, a young female, who was half lady's-maid, half companion, was about to follow, but her mistress waved her hand and said she wished to be alone that day. With that she drew the curtains partially to hide her face and yet not to interrupt her view. The maid withdrew into the house abashed; it was the third consecutive morning she had been so treated; such behaviour was unwonted, and being filled with fears and doubts of all kinds, she forthwith began to weep heartily.

The four slaves, not at all grieved to lose the weight of the discomfited girl, bore off their mistress toward the Esquiline Gardens. The human beasts of burden dared no more than exchange a fleeting look. It was, likewise, the third consecutive morning they had been given the same direction.

To the north of the gardens lay that portion of the plain which was called the field of the Viminal. This extended to the Pretorian camp, and was, therefore, the natural drill and exercising ground of the troops. Thither the litter of Plautia was carried by her direction; skirting the outside of the rampart of Servius, after it had passed through the Esquiline Gate.

There were a number of the guards in the plain, busily engaged in exercising. Approaching within convenient distance for witnessing their movements, the slaves were ordered to set down the litter and rest themselves. Plautia, reclining with the curtains withdrawn, scanned the cohorts eagerly and keenly. After a lengthened survey a look of disappointment gathered gradually on her face. She ordered her litter to be raised, and from her elevated position once again scrutinised the moving ranks. She seemed to get no more satisfaction than before, and gave the word to return homeward.

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The morning was bright and bracing, and the streets were full of citizens. As her litter passed through the crowded Subura it was rudely jostled in a narrow way, and in danger of being overturned by a crowd of slaves, who preceded the litter of some presumably great personage. Amid the struggle, clamour, and curses of angry voices, the litter of Plautia was rocked and tilted, so violently, that she gave vent to a cry, more in anger than fear. She thrust her face outside the curtains to look on the turbulent scene, and grasped the side of her litter with her hand, in imminent dread of being thrown out. Such struggles were very common in the narrow streets, and called for no particular interference; but the sight of her handsome face, perhaps, inspired the friendly interference of a tall young man, who, along with a crowd of people, had been dammed up by the contention. He hastily thrust himself forward, and Plautia's face became suffused with a deep flush when she perceived it was Lucius Martialis. With one hand he grasped one of the foremost poles of her litter, and raised it, so as to allow the burly slave, who held it, to

recover his overweighted grasp and position, whilst, with the other arm, he thrust back the foremost of the opposing menials. There was something in the stern resistless strength of the action which bade them think better of their uncompromising manner of proceeding, and they edged away more to one side, though not without much abuse. In another moment both parties were free and disentangled, and the great personage, who had never thought fit to show himself and notice the squabble, was carried on.

Plautia's countenance was brilliant in colour, and her proud eyes soft and lustrous as they dwelt on the Centurion, who was clothed as a private citizen. She thanked him for his service, and her voice was tremulous and rich. He merely bowed, and muttered some commonplace words in return, and, ere she could say more, he turned away and disappeared amid the throng of passers-by.

Plautia gazed after him for a few moments, and then sank back on her cushions in a deep reverie, which, judging by the smile resting on her lips, seemed pleasant enough to entertain her agreeably for a much longer time than sufficed to bring her to her own door.

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The lady entered her favourite apartment, which was pervaded by the perfume of the costly wood burning in a brazier on the hearth. The appointments of the room were as rich and brilliant in colour as herself, and on a small carved citron-wood table stood a delicate basket, tastefully packed with the most beautiful flowers.

Lydia took them up and presented them to her mistress, saying, 'Martialis sent these with best greetings.'

'Which Martialis—there are two?' asked Plautia, receiving them with a smile.

'Why, Caius Martialis!' replied the handmaiden in surprise.

'Humph!' ejaculated the lady, dropping the basket carelessly, almost flinging it on the table again. 'They are not such as please me; take them yourself. Who is that without?'

'Glaucus, your freedman,' answered a voice at the door, 'with news!'

'Enter, Glaucus, with your news!' cried the lady, relinquishing her outer cloaks and wraps to the care of Lydia, who retired. The freedman entered—a low thick-set man, having a rough, but yet intelligent look about him.

'Well,' said the lady, warming herself at the fire, 'what sort of news—private or public?'

'I have reason to think that, at present, it is pretty well private,' replied the freedman, with an air of self-satisfaction and importance, 'but ere long it will be public enough, that is very certain. I have learned that the Prefect Sejanus has obtained Caesar's consent to his marriage with Livia.'

Glaucus paused, as if to allow the lady to take breath and recover from the effects of his communication.

'Well,' said she, as unmoved as marble, 'is that all?'

'All!' echoed Glaucus, staggering back in astonishment and disgust. 'Why, not half a score of people have yet heard a breath of it!'

Plautia burst into a fit of hearty laughter as she watched the fall of his countenance. 'Psa, you fool!' she said, 'every one knew that the mighty Prefect was angling in the Imperial waters long ago. What reliance can I place on your information? Where did you get it?'

'In the camp itself, and from the lips of the Prefect's own eunuch—Lygdus himself.'

'Truly he might be expected to know; but he is a cunning rogue.'

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'He does know,' said Glaucus, with increasing emphasis; 'and what is more the Prefect has been summoned, or has been granted permission, to visit his bride at Capreae, and he is going accordingly in a few days.'

'Ah, that is something more to the purpose; that is twenty times worth the other, my Glaucus, for it looks like business.'

'The Prefect,' continued the freedman, 'so Lygdus told me, was only ill-pleased that Caesar would not allow more than two or three friends to accompany him, in addition to his usual guard of Pretorians. Tiberius seems mightily afraid of strangers in his enchanted island.'

'Perhaps the worthy Lygdus also informed you who the favoured few friends of the Prefect were to be? It might be interesting to know.'

'No, noble Plautia, he did not say who was going, except, of course, the guard of Pretorians, with the first Centurion—the tall young brother of Caius Martialis.'

'Ah! thus much you know for certain, Glaucus?' said Plautia carelessly.

'Yea, for Lygdus heard the order given.'

'Well, there cannot be any better authority than that, unless the Prefect change his mind.'

'Truly he might.'

'And so you cannot give me the names of the chosen companions of Sejanus?—they would be worth hearing,' said Plautia.

'Indeed I cannot, at present, for the eunuch knew not himself; but I might hear before long.'

'In that case you will let me know.'

'I shall fly, like a swallow, to acquaint you,' was the answer of the devoted freedman.

'You are rather thick and heavy with flesh and years to do that,' observed the young lady satirically; 'nevertheless, I am assured you will hasten on your legs as fast as you can. I am indebted to you for several favours lately, Glaucus—'

'The noble Plautia deigns to be gracious to her humble freedman,' said he, smirking and bowing to the ground.

'See you that small drawer in the citron-wood table? Open it—there is a purse within it!'

[pg 108] The freedman did as he was desired with alacrity, and took out the purse.

'Transfer the contents to your own pocket and replace the purse,' said Plautia.

Glaucus did so with admirable celerity, and gushed into profuse expressions of gratitude.

'Enough—you are a good man,' said his patroness, nodding toward the door. He took the hint and withdrew, and after a few moments' reflection, Plautia went to a writing-table, and indited the following laconic epistle:—

'Come and see me at your earliest.'

Sealing it up, she gave it into the hands of a slave, with instructions to deliver it to the Prefect himself, wheresoever he might find him. When the slave had gone she wrote another letter, which she destroyed as soon as she had read it over. She composed an amended one, which shared the fate of the former, and not until four or five had been ruthlessly sacrificed to her fastidious taste, did she succeed in completing one sufficiently satisfactory to her mind to fold up. It was put into a secret drawer, and its fair author proceeded to pass the hours with her usual occupations, which were mainly the reception of visitors, and the lengthy and elaborate business of the bath.

The time had long passed since her slave had returned from his errand, and his embassy had, so far, been followed by no result. Her impatient temper suffered considerably, and she was about to send off a more peremptory mandate, when the appearance of the tall form of the Prefect himself concluded the matter.

'You sent for me, Empress—here I am!' said he, smiling gaily, and pinching her beautiful cheek. She pushed his hand away. Had she been really the exalted personage he jokingly termed her, her gesture could not have been haughtier in manner. He laughed.

'Forgive me, beautiful Plautia! I ought to have known that my salutation should have been warmer. Be not offended! I will hallow with my lips what my fingers have profaned.'

[pg 109] He bent down his lips, as if to kiss her rich-hued cheek, but she pushed him away, and reared her head with an angry flash of her black eyes.

'Alas! wherefore did you send for me to be so cruel?' sighed he, with burlesque sorrow and pain.

'Psa!' she said scornfully.

'It was not so always,' observed the Prefect, with an affected sigh.

'And should be less so now,' was the rejoinder; 'the noble Livia should be granted some measure of faithfulness—at the first at least.'

'Ho! ho! jealous?'

She gave him a momentary glance of surprise, and then exploded into uncontrollable laughter. Peal after peal rolled full and musically through the apartment, and yet so freely and spontaneously, as to forbid any idea of its mirth being forced.

'Well—you seem amused at something,' said the Prefect presently, with a frown.

'Jealous, mighty Prefect, on your account!' quoth Plautia, sinking on a couch with a sigh, and the fitful mutterings of her laughter. 'I can freely pay tribute to your invincible fascinations, but I am not jealous. Never allow your conceit to grow at such a rate, Prefect, or it will do you serious harm.'

'There is no fear,' he replied, biting his lip; 'but whence did you know concerning Livia?'

'A bird of the air brought it this morning.'

'If I could net that same bird I would, perhaps, clip its wings.'

'To what purpose, but the pleasure of playing the tyrant? All Rome must know, and speedily too, of the Prefect's last move.'

'That is true; but simply to teach him or her caution. Another time it might happen to be a more secret matter, premature exposure of which might lead to serious results. Bid your newsbearers be more wary, sweet lady. But you have not yet told me why you sent for me.'

'Partly for one more look at you, ere you depart on your matrimonial expedition,' she said satirically.

'Do you also know that?'

[pg 110] 'It is part and parcel with the other.'

She rested her hand gently on his arm, and smiled in his face. 'You are going to Capreae—to your Livia,' continued she. 'I congratulate you on the success of the whole affair. What follows then, Sejanus?'—she dropped her voice in a low tone—'Tiberius is an old man.'

'What do you mean?' said he, bending on her a cold, stony glance.

'I spoke without thinking,' she replied, with a careless shrug; 'I mean nothing—what could I?'

'A careless and dangerous habit, and one to be guarded against.'

'Psa! it is excusable in a woman.'

'In some—in most perhaps; but there are many—and I include yourself amongst them, beautiful Plautia—whose brains move busily before their tongues wag.'

'Ah me!' sighed the lady impatiently, 'why did I allow the one for once to get before the other? And though you should turn inquisitor, and bring hither your judicial chair, you will make no more of the matter.'

She stamped her foot with a charming affectation of wrath, and he smiled grimly.

'I shall not make the attempt,' he answered; 'I am content to think that Plautia is wise and prudent. Come! what lies beneath all this?'

'Why, see how you are at fault—something I do mean truly!' she cried, clapping her hands with glee.

'Do you suppose I ever thought otherwise?' he rejoined, rather puzzled.

'No, most subtle of men; but your suspicions lie in a different groove. What care I for your Livia, or Caesar himself, or the windings of your politics, or the bubblings of your ambition—for you have ambition, Prefect, and a goodly share thereof—'

'Let him herd with oxen who has not.'

'I care nothing for these; I am too content with, and intent upon, the affairs of my own small world—'

'Which is the rosy realm of Venus—go on!' quoth he drily; 'we shall, probably, now hear what this has to do with Tiberius. He is an old pensioner of the bright goddess.'

[pg 111] 'Fool—nothing whatever! I want to know who is going with you to Capreae.'

'You have taken a strange method of proceeding in your quest. I shall not tell you, sweet lady; you may await the tidings of that same trusty bird again.'

'I know already.'

'Wonders upon wonders! The gods preserve you to the earth! Wherefore did you ask, then?'

'To catch you tripping, if possible.'

'I should grieve to disappoint you, beauteous Plautia, astute as you are lovely; but I cannot avoid it, for I know not myself who are to be my companions.'

'Miserable deceiver—I expose you at once! A Centurion and a troop of guards go with you.'

'This is folly; you have spent the day with children,' he said, bursting into a laugh. 'I give you full credit for your penetration. Martialis and his myrmidons certainly go along with me. Could a Prefect depart on a mission without his trusty Pretorians? Who next?'

'Pray tell me, Prefect!' she wheedled.

'I have already told you I know not myself, and, therefore, cannot tell.'

'Then I will—*I am going with you!*'

The wily Prefect started back, and fairly opened his mouth in dumb astonishment.

'What! You! Go to Capreae—with me!'

Plautia set her lips firmly and bowed gravely.

'Pooh! pooh! you are losing your wits!' he said, with scornful incredulity, and then he burst into laughter.

She watched him calmly until he had finished.

'I am not going thither because I am unable to exist without you,' she remarked quietly.

'Certainly not; I should be the last to entertain such a mad idea,' he replied, with a satisfied laugh which belied his words.

'No, I am going because I wish to go, and because I will go: and you, Aelius Sejanus, must contrive to convey me thither, openly or in secret.'

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'Oh, openly would be, of course, the most sensible and politic plan for me, as I am situated,' he said ironically; and then he added sternly, 'What silly whim is this? It is impossible.'

'It is possible and shall be.'

'You mean to enslave Caesar with your charms. Ambition inspires others, it seems, than myself.'

'I care nothing for Caesar. As little for a foul old man in purple as a foul old man in rags. I seek him not.'

'It would come to the same thing, sweet Plautia, were you to set foot in the island, supposing you were able to do so; for you would, most surely, arrive before the ruler of the world in the end, willingly or unwillingly.'

'That would be my business. I would take care of myself.'

'Humph! You have done so hitherto, it is true; but then you have had no difficulties to overcome. The pretty, autocratic ways of Plautia have always been carefully humoured. If you will take my advice, you will remain where you are, the queen of your own domain, in Rome. If you step outside into the world,—into Capreae, for instance, you may probably taste of a different experience.'

'I am determined, in spite of all you say.'

'Be rational!' said the Prefect, bending his brows impatiently. 'Should I be in my senses to appear before Livia and the Imperial court with you at my heels?'

'You are infatuated with the idea that I am chained and bound to you,' scoffed Plautia. 'I have no more affection for your heels than for any other individual's. Give me only the assurance that I shall not be hindered in my desire, and I shall not trouble you at all.'

'Tiberius is never deaf to the voice of a lovely woman. Let me tell him you want him, and there will be no more difficulty.'

'No!' returned Plautia doggedly, 'I mean to land by myself, quietly and unobserved, on the island.'

'The guards will prevent you,' said Sejanus, with a scornful smile, 'or, rather, seize you, and hurry you before Caesar, and there will be an end of your frolic. You will inevitably arrive at this conclusion if you persist in your folly.'

'I intend to persist.'

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'Good! Then you may take your own way and the consequences thereof. But, bear in mind, if you give cause for awakening any suspicion to my detriment, you will rue the day you allowed yourself to be possessed of this absurd fancy.'

'You may rest easy, if that comprises all your apprehensions,' answered Plautia composedly.

'Disenchant yourself, as speedily as possible, on the point of your supposed importance to me. Your vanity is your weakest point. I will not meddle with you; for I have no desire.'

'I cannot dissuade you, then?'

'No.'

'Then tell me how you mean to proceed.'

'Whichever way you think best.'

The Prefect took a turn or two up and down the room, biting his thumb-nail in deep cogitation. He scarcely knew whether to carry matters with a high hand and flatly forbid the importunate lady. He knew her determined nature and her energy, and was well aware that she possessed sufficient knowledge to make herself extremely troublesome, if she thought proper. At the same time, her presence, along with himself, in the island of Capreae, where his intended bride awaited him, was highly fraught with danger, on account of the jealousy naturally to be expected on the part of that princess, were the matter to come to her ears, as it was only too possible it might, in that circumscribed domain. Perplexed as he was, therefore, a sudden idea like an inspiration struck him and filled him with satisfaction.

'Well, carissime?' quoth the watchful Plautia, as the rays of his relief flooded his countenance.

'Hush—hush, girl! That no longer!'

'What, then?' she asked jeeringly.

'Nothing whatever. No more folly!'

'Agreed! You have thought of a plan. Tell it!'

'When I choose my companions I can smuggle you under the wing of one of them. It can easily be explained. You may perhaps be obliged to set out at a different time; but that will matter little.'

'Nothing! When am I to be assured of this arrangement?'

'To-morrow you shall know all particulars. What more do you want of me, for I am full of business? Nevertheless, you see how a simple word from you brought me to your side.'

[pg 114] 'I want nothing more. You are now free for your royal Livia.'

'Free, but not forgotten—at least on my part.'

'Farewell, Prefect!' said Plautia, waving her white hand.

'For the last time, then,' he said, laughingly catching it and kissing it.

'To-morrow I shall hear from you without fail?'

'To-morrow most surely!' he replied; and, wafting another kiss with his hand, Sejanus left the room and hastened away. Entering the neighbouring Subura, he sought a by-court out of the stream of the bustling, main thoroughfares. It was narrow, tortuous, dirty, and unsavoury. But little of the sky could be seen above; and the denizens of the place were slovenly, dirty, half-dressed men and women, slouching along, or lounging in knots. Any intruder of respectable appearance into their haunt, encountered such a cross-fire of baleful glances from these evil-eyed individuals, whose lowering visages were plainly stamped with night and enormity, that, being of timid nature, the visitor might well breathe more freely, and be thankful when he reached a public place once more. The Prefect, however, was of different mould, and gave no heed to the scrutiny of the night-vultures whom he passed. He paused before a door, at which he knocked. There was a considerable delay, and only, when he had thundered two or three times more, was a shuffling step heard within. The bolts were drawn and the door opened slowly a couple of inches, just sufficient to afford a glimpse of elf-locks, a withered skin, and a pair of watery, glistening eyes.

'What want ye?' asked a harsh, but yet a woman's voice.

'Thy master, Tigellinus. Open quickly!' said Sejanus roughly.

'Nay, you must wait a little!' answered the hideous doorkeeper, proceeding to shut him out.

But the Prefect's reply was a vigorous push, which nearly overturned her, and brought him inside the passage, which was strongly pervaded by the fumes of cooking.

The old hag, staggering nearly to the ground, recovered herself and rushed at him, giving vent to an angry scream, and showing a formidable extension of her bony claws.

[pg 115] 'Away, you filthy harpy. Hideous crow!' shouted Sejanus, repulsing her with another vigorous shove,—'away and tell Tigellinus that Lars Porsena awaits him from Etruria.'

His imperious, as well as vigorous, manner cowed the old woman, and she shuffled away into the gloom of the interior, grumbling and muttering her suspicions. For the few moments which intervened Sejanus paced the obscure passage, inhaling the odours of the kitchen, to the disgust of his refined senses, and listening to the distant bursts of chatter and laughter, of what seemed to be female voices. A man made his appearance at length, and greeted him with deference. He was young, and had swarthy and handsome features.

'I have had the misfortune to disturb you at your dinner, worthy Tigellinus,' quoth the Prefect; 'deny it not, for I can smell it palpably. I also hear the merry voices of your happy family, from which I have dragged you. I apologise!'

'Do not, P—I mean Porsena,' replied Tigellinus, 'fifty dinners and families are not to be compared to the privilege of your visit. What can I do for you, noble sir?'

'In here and I will tell you,' said Sejanus, and they entered a small room. 'When were you in Capreae last?' inquired the Prefect, with a lurking smile.

'Three months ago,' was the reply.

'Would it be wise and politic for you to go again within a few days?'

'I am at present anxiously on the look-out for merchandise; the Imperial connection is a business I would not readily lose.'

'A lady wishes to visit the island. I want you to escort her. You understand?'

'Perfectly; if it is to serve you, Prefect.'

'You will serve me and yourself at the same time. To you also, who are so fond of female society, she will be a most exquisite companion, since she is one of the most beautiful women in Rome.'

'That will be delightful. I await your instructions.'

'You will come to me to-morrow at the fourth hour.'

'I will obey.'

Sejanus took him by the arm and whispered in his ear. The eyes of Tigellinus sparkled.

'Well, what think you?' said the Prefect.

[pg 116] 'I am astonished, bewildered, enraptured. It is mysterious and glorious! Your lordship must tell me more.'

'To-morrow, Tigellinus, to-morrow! Farewell! I need not warn you to be secret.'

Sejanus, thereupon, went swiftly away from the reeking abode, and left the man Tigellinus in the doorway bowing to the ground.

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CHAPTER XI.

When the Centurion Martialis came to the rescue of the endangered palanquin of Plautia, he was leisurely pursuing his way toward the Janiculum, to redeem his promise given to Fabricius. The little incident which befell him, as described, soon ceased to occupy his mind. He reached the villa of Fabricius, and admired the far-reaching prospect which it commanded—from the city, at its foot, to the distant, circling Apennines. At the bare mention of his name, Natta, the ancient porter, ushered him direct to the presence of his master, with unmistakable signs of pleasure. The visitor's fame had evidently preceded him.

Fabricius was in his winter room, whose windows overlooked a pleasant garden, sheltered and shaded from the cold winds. The old man scanned his visitor's manly face and form with a swift eager look; then he stepped forward and opened his arms.

'Welcome to my house!' said he, embracing the Centurion. 'It augurs well that you should have remembered an old man and redeemed your promise. I have longed for your coming.'

'Tis my first leisure morning, Fabricius—you may see,' answered Martialis, touching his toga.

'Tell me, Centurion,' said Fabricius earnestly, 'for your name, on that unlucky night, seemed to awake old memories. I am a Latian born, and my patrimony lies near to Casinum. There, in the

old days, when I was a lad, dwelt neighbours and old family friends of thy name—tell me, then ___'

'I was born in Etruria, at Veii,' said Martialis, with a smile.

'Ah!' said the old man disappointedly, 'what led me to make up my mind?'

[pg 118] 'But my father, Caius Julius Martialis,' continued the young man, 'first saw the light near to Casinum, as his forefathers did before him for generations.'

'Caius Martialis thy father!' cried Fabricius, seizing the young man's hand with intense joy, 'Caius thy father—he was my playfellow, boy, in those happy, sunny days long ago! Together we made the summer-day trips and climbed the hills; and then, while yet a lad, I was sent to Rome and I saw him no more. And thou art his son—thou, that didst save his old playfellow's life—how my heart warms to thee! I warrant thou art the living image of him, though I never saw him in his manhood. But his boyish frame shaped like thine—tall, spare, sinewy, and as strong as a young lion: and what of him, Centurion; is he alive yet—tell me?'

'Dead these ten years,' replied Martialis.

'Then I was not fated to see him again on this earth. We loved each other as playfellows; but I shall not be long after him. I am a lonely old man, who has outlived his time; thou wilt not forget me for the little time that is left me to breathe and live? Ah, if the gods had preserved me a son like thee!'

The young man's heart softened to see the mingled emotions which swelled the stately Senator's breast, and he heartily returned the vigorous clasp of his hands.

'You are yet hale and strong, and such a friend as I can be, I hope to be, for many a year to come,' he answered.

[pg 119] 'The end cannot be far away now,' said Fabricius, shaking his head. 'I stand in no fear of it, for in truth I have nothing left to live for. The gods preserve thee from a solitary old age such as mine. This gloomy house was once bright and happy enough; death has reaped a rich harvest in its walls. One boy, Titus, came home to die from wounds received from the barbarian in Pannonia; an ill-fated galley, bearing another, foundered on its way to Hispania; a third was yet a child when he left us. One girl reached the most winsome years, when a malignant disease carried her suddenly off and left us heartbroken; the last daughter lived and was married, and died in giving birth to her first babe—my only grandchild. That little maid, Centurion, was beauty and sweetness itself; it was all that was left me—wife and children all gone. She frisked about these halls, lightening them like a sunbeam; she had begun to lisp our names and prattle like the sweetest woodland music—ah me!'

'Died she too, Fabricius?' asked Martialis, after a short pause.

'I know not whether she lives or is dead,' muttered the old man; 'to me she is dead—fourteen years ago she vanished on one accursed day, and no tidings of her have ever reached us since.'

'Alas, that was too cruel!' murmured the other.

'Crueller perhaps than all, for I am harassed by the thought that if she lives she may be groaning under cruel slavery or bondage, which is worse than death. Time has dulled somewhat the smart of this grievous thrust, but tongue cannot speak the anguish I have known in my heart. As for the wretch who dealt me this last fell, heartless stroke, let the gods deal with him and his. Treasure and time I have lavished in vain search; and, doubtless, I have been robbed through it all. Cunning people, knowing the old man's ever-green hopes, have worked upon his credulity. The other night on the Aventine was an instance which would have probably cost me my life but for your timely appearance. One of those very villains, whom you scattered, came to me in this very room, with a request from a supposed dying man, purporting to be the fiend who had stolen away my little Aurelia. It was nothing but a cunning tale to lead me into a trap—silly fools, they might have taken my life, but little besides!'

'Had not my foot tripped, one of those same rascals would now have been safe under lock and key awaiting his deserts,' observed Martialis.

'I warrant it if your fingers had once closed upon him,' replied Fabricius, with an approving smile; 'but it matters not much. It is only another and more flagrant case of my infatuation, as my nephew calls it. I shall fall under the lash of his tongue bravely for it. But what, Centurion, if I give up hope, what need is there of living?'

'None.'

[pg 120] 'And you, a young man, live vigorously, having copious hope. Ah, I see!' continued Fabricius, smiling, as he noted the ready colour tinging the sunburnt cheek of the Pretorian, 'as well as if your shaven cheek had been the delicate red and white of a young girl. First and foremost, at your age, is the hope which is rooted in love—well, I shall know more when our friendship enlarges.'

'How old was your granddaughter when you lost her?' inquired Martialis hastily, coming back to the former subject of conversation.

'How old! About three years,' answered Fabricius, the smile fading from his face.

'You would hardly recognise her, then, if fate brought you face to face with her?'

'Not know her! She is as fairly pictured in my mind, with her bright silky locks and fawnlike eyes, as if I had only kissed her last night ere she went to her little bed.'

'But then fourteen years make a vast change. The woman of seventeen obliterates the child of three—by what token could you assure yourself beyond doubt?'

'Token—woman of seventeen!' repeated Fabricius wonderingly, as though a new light had struck upon his brain; 'my little Aurelia a woman of seventeen!'

'Ay, truly, she must be, if alive,' responded Martialis, regarding him curiously.

The old man rose from his seat and walked across the room and back. Here was a problem as startling as it was simple, since, strange to say, it had never by any chance been suggested to his thoughts. His mind, up to this moment, had been thoroughly filled, and absorbed to the exclusion of every other reflection, by the picture of the ill-fated child as he had last seen her, say, dancing about his room, or sporting with her ball in the garden, as he passed out on a visit or a walk.

'My little maid a woman of seventeen!' he repeated again in a bewildered manner.

'Not so strange as that you should expect to find her as she was,' observed Martialis; 'stature increases, and form changes and develops; eyes alter, and hair changes in hue with years.'

'That is true,' said Fabricius absently.

'Well then, how would you prove her identity?'

[pg 121] 'My heart would tell me!' replied the other fervently.

Martialis shook his head gently.

'You cannot believe it—is not instinct unerring?' cried Fabricius. 'It can lead a mother to choose her child after a woful gap of years.'

'A mother maybe,' said Martialis, doubtfully.

'And, if I brought not the girl into the world, I tended her; I was father and mother in one to her—she was my sole care and I lived in her—yes, I should know her.'

'Heaven grant you may have the opportunity.'

The subject then dropped, and Martialis was not sorry, for he saw how painful it was to his host. To entertain his visitor Fabricius then proceeded to show his house and his treasures of art, his gardens and the noble prospect therefrom. His interest in his young acquaintance and preserver seemed to quicken his vivacity and cheerfulness in a wonderful degree, and he drew upon his stores of knowledge and anecdote in a manner which delighted his listener. The young soldier was easily led on, in this way, toward the old man's dinner-hour, and found himself duly partaking of a meal more varied and splendidly served than was usual with his host's simple and solitary habits.

They had reclined at table but a few minutes when Afer was ushered in, bearing on his face the signs of extreme solicitude.

'Praise be to the gods, uncle!' said he, stooping over the couch and taking the old man in his arms; 'praise be to the gods,—I find you eating and cheerful, and so I know you have suffered little. The murderous thieves! I have but just returned, and have come straight from my house, when I was told of the treachery which had befallen you. A fine thing, in truth, to happen to a citizen. Nay, I will neither bite nor sup until you assure me you are no worse.'

'No worse, nephew; thanks to the Centurion there. I was only stunned, and find I am tougher than I thought. Nephew, this is the Centurion Martialis who befriended me—I have discovered also that he is of Latian stock, and son of an old playfellow of Casinum. Martialis, this is my nephew, Titus Afer.'

[pg 122] 'We are not totally unacquainted,' said Afer, bowing coldly, whilst the other returned the salutation in silence; 'I have the honour of knowing his brother more intimately.'

'Brother! I never asked thee, Lucius, of any brothers or sisters—tell me, then!' interposed Fabricius.

'I have one brother only.'

'The nearest friend and heir of Apicius, whom you have heard of, uncle,' said Afer; 'he who spent

his patrimony, and after dinner, t'other day, poisoned himself because his treasure-chest was empty.'

'I heard something of a tale—Natta told me, I think. If I mistake not, nephew, it was there you dined only a few days ago?'

'I witnessed the whole affair; the Centurion's brother was left as chief mourner, and, I understand, what remains of the wealth of Apicius goes entirely to compensate him for his long devotion. But the Centurion knows better than I how the matter lies—perhaps brotherly affection has divided the generosity of Apicius.'

'For that information I must refer you to the same source whence you derived the other,' replied Martialis coldly.

'It is what neither belongs to me nor to thee, nephew,' said Fabricius. 'You will make me know your brother at the first opportunity, Centurion.'

'Ask him to dine with you, uncle; but you will have to provide him with a more artistic banquet, in order to give him an opportunity of proving his critical powers. Caius Martialis, the Centurion's brother, is well known for his perfect knowledge of the elegant arts and pleasures of life. No one disputes his dictum as to the beauty of a woman, or the flavour of a dish, or the fold of a garment—especially feminine,—or the business of the bath, the action of a player, the knowledge of the midnight city—the whole delicate art, in fact, of sustaining a continuous and uniform course of pleasure, without rushing into undue excess, or relapsing into ennui. His acquaintance is a privilege, uncle, and you will find it so.'

'I prefer that my host should judge for himself of the character of my brother, rather than accept it from your lips,' said Martialis, with the hot blood tingling in his veins at the sneering tones and curling lip of the speaker.

[pg 123] 'That has ever been my custom, Centurion, and there is no reason why I should alter it in this case,' interposed Fabricius. 'Take your place, nephew—eat and drink, and tell me how the time has gone with you since you went away.'

'No, uncle, your turn before mine—I am burning to hear an account of this adventure. How came you, in Heaven's name, to be on the Aventine at that time of night?'

The knight, as he spoke, took his place on the couch opposite Martialis. The sinister glance of his eyes met the gaze of the latter, and declared inevitable war. The slaves hastened to serve him, and, whilst he proceeded to eat, Fabricius related the circumstances of his night's adventure, not forgetting, most particularly, to allude to the services of his deliverer, who, straightway, began to wish that all recollection of the affair might be buried in the sea.

'It is very well, good uncle, you got out of the trap as you did,' observed Afer at the conclusion; 'this, I trust, is the last phase of your credulity and infatuation—this, I humbly think, will act as a salutary corrective, and effect what no reason or words of mine could do. As for the Centurion, had he been a school-lad appearing on the scene, he would have been sufficient, at that critical point, to have startled and routed the ruffians from their task, like so many rabbits. I trust, Centurion, you received no hurt in your encounter with the vagabonds, when, like a Patroclus, you bestrode the prostrate body of my uncle?'

'I neither bestrode my host, nor drew a sword, nor even clenched my fist,' answered Martialis calmly, though inwardly fuming with anger. 'I did nothing whereby I can claim the credit or praise which my host persists in awarding to me against my will.'

'Nor even with your troopers to lay hands on one or more of the vagabonds?'

'Nor even with my troopers lay hands on a single one of them.'

'I crave pardon, Centurion, for the thoughtless question,' said Afer mockingly; 'I ought to have known better than to suppose that Imperial Pretorians would stoop to act as common city police.'

[pg 124] 'You labour under a wrong impression of the cohorts to which I have the honour to belong,' returned Martialis, with less command over the tone of his voice. 'If I know anything about them, I should say they are as ready as any to frustrate rascality and bring it to account, whenever it lies in their power.'

'Hark ye! nephew,' interposed Fabricius sternly, 'whether you rose this morning in an ill-humour or not, I cannot tell, but I must have no snapping tongue to break good-fellowship here—let us finish our meal as it was begun, in peace and pleasantness, I pray. There is little I would not part with, rather than Martialis should associate anything disagreeable with his first visit here. He has done me a service, which it may please him to disparage and you to decry—enough! My old playmate has suddenly and unexpectedly returned in the person of his son; for that, if for nothing else, I seek his good opinion of all about me.'

'I apologise for having been so foolish as to offend you, uncle,' said Afer, with a barely perceptible shrug of his shoulders; 'I was, in truth, only jesting. Centurion, I have the honour of

drinking to your health!' he added, with an accompanying look which mocked the courteousness of his voice. The Pretorian coldly returned the compliment, scarcely trusting his tongue to speak, for fear of the scorn and dislike which filled him. Fabricius nodded approvingly, and Afer continued, 'And now, uncle, to the news of our great Prefect—or, perhaps, your friend, the Centurion, has already told, you? No—I am glad, then, to be the first to inform you. Sejanus is the accepted son-in-law of Caesar, and goes forthwith to Capreae to claim his bride.'

'Ah!' quoth Fabricius quietly, 'he creeps up the ladder apace; but these matters interest me not. Time was when I would have paid it more heed, but now I live apart, and allow consuls and pretors and the like to pass on, almost unheeded—with all respect to your commander, Lucius.'

'I understand you accompany him on his pleasant expedition, Centurion?' said Afer.

'As a most intimate friend of the Prefect, you have, no doubt, been already acquainted with most, or all, of his arrangements,' answered the other.

'What—you going?' observed Fabricius, with a disappointed air; 'when then will you return?'

[pg 125] 'I cannot tell you, Fabricius. Your nephew will, most probably, know more than myself.'

'Indeed, uncle, my knowledge is overrated,' responded Afer; 'but, if you will take the opportunity, you will commission your preserver to bring you, when he does return, some pottery ware from the adjacent Surrentum—it is a town famed for its excellence in this manufacture, is it not, Centurion?'

The glance and the sneer of the speaker were malicious enough, whilst the cheeks of the young soldier flushed deeply at the allusion. The swift eyes of his host drank all in; he had already gathered sufficient to see that his guests were not altogether so ignorant of each other and each other's affairs as he had at first supposed. The mounting colour on the Pretorian's face, as well as the flash of his dark eyes, denoted that his nephew's last words, from some reason, had proved as disagreeable as his former remarks. It became evident, also, that they were designedly so; and, therefore, without waiting for any reply, he proceeded quietly to discourse upon the artistic merits of pottery in general, with the fluency of a critic familiar with his subject. Afer, as a man of elegant taste in matters of art, was led into the discussion, which lasted for some time, during which the Centurion sat silent, lending only fitful attention to the conversation.

The subject had no charm for him, and his mind rankled with the irritating bearing of the man opposite. His last allusion astonished him not a little, inasmuch as the pointed manner of its delivery revealed to him the knight's knowledge of his connection with Surrentum; but, after the potter's communication to the Prefect, the matter would easily and naturally filter to the ear of the confidant, Domitius Afer. Nevertheless, the blood burned in his veins and flamed in his cheeks when his mind, so sensitive on this question, tortured itself by imagining how the loose and irreverent tongues of his commander and the sneering individual across the table, had, doubtless, amused themselves with the purest and most delicate feeling his heart could know. This thought added to the disgust and fierce hostility which bubbled in his breast, on account of the nephew of Fabricius, for whose disagreeable manner he was able to ascribe no reason, except a paltry feeling of spite and envy. But even these distempered reflections gave way to the soothing and delightful contemplation of his speedy removal to the immediate neighbourhood of his beloved; and, in an interval of these self-communings, he became aware that the dialogue upon the merits of artistic ware was flagging and moribund. The pleasure of his visit had long departed, and he seized the opportunity of taking his leave. Rising, therefore, he pleaded the exigency of some camp regulation, and Fabricius left his seat also, to escort his guest to the porch.

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'My nephew has not made himself altogether agreeable to you,' said the latter, as they stood hand in hand ere they parted; 'something has probably tried his humour ere he came; but you will not allow that to militate between us twain. You can afford to pass over his whims, for they are not worth your serious thought.'

'Easily!'

'You are going to Capreae—I have one thing to say to you. Formerly I busied myself in matters of state, though I have long retired therefrom. But I still live here above the city; and I have yet a few friends of high influence and large information in that busy hive of toil, ambition, and passion down there; therefore, it is impossible that I can exist without knowing something of what is passing. I have watched the course of your Prefect Sejanus. He goes to become the Emperor's son-in-law; such honour and elevation would satisfy an ordinary man's ambition, but not his. I know him not personally, though the general whisper of public opinion seldom errs; but Tiberius Caesar I have known thoroughly of old. Strange and noisome tales of his island dwelling are, even now, wandering through Rome like fitful, noxious night-airs. You may possibly be better acquainted with this than I, and I trust they may never infect you. But apart from this, I would bid a man beware of Tiberius Caesar. His intellect is strong and clear, and his energy unflagging. A tiger is not more ruthless—the deep ocean is not more dark, mysterious, and subtle than his nature; and his suspicions are clothed with the eyes of an Argus and the tentacles of a polypus. I pity a man, from a Prefect to a slave, who jars upon them. Take the advice of an old man, not inexperienced, and have the greatest care to let your action be bounded scrupulously by the

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duties of your military office. Do not be tempted beyond them by any one. Remember that while you obey the Prefect there is yet one above all to whom you owe allegiance—Caesar himself. If there be those who choose to underrate his power, leave them alone to their folly. If events follow the course I anticipate for them, you will, perhaps, at some time, be thankful, that you allowed nothing to tempt you beyond the limits of your Centurionship. Obey your legitimate orders and seek to know nothing more. You are a soldier; remain one, and beware of adding the trade of politician—at the present time. A volcano may burst beneath our feet before long. You will ponder on my advice, boy?’

‘Fear not,’ replied Martialis; ‘I am in no hurry to change my occupation. I prefer a sword to a pen. I have plenty to do without loading myself with politics.’

‘Yes; Mars was in the habit of relieving his gory business with softer pursuits,’ said the old man, smiling gently. ‘Success in both. Farewell. I shall await your return with impatience, for I yearn to make a son of you.’

When the Centurion arrived at his quarters in the camp he found two strange slaves awaiting him with weary looks. One of them bore something in his hands covered with a cloth of gold; the other presented him with dainty small tablets, which he opened and read as follows:—

‘Plautia sends the Centurion Martialis a very trifling acknowledgment of the ready service which his strong arm rendered her in the Subura this morning, and begs him to accept it. She also prays him to honour her by supping in her poor house on the morrow. Let not the unhappy slaves bring back an unfavourable answer.’

The great and ready service had almost passed from the young soldier’s mind and his lip curled. As he hesitated, the slave who bore the gift held it forward and lifted the covering. A small, carved, myrrhine drinking-cup was disclosed; it was a gem of exquisite workmanship, as even he was able to see, though he had but small critical knowledge of such matters. Had the offering been ostentatious, he would have refused it at once. As it was the affair was sufficiently ridiculous in his eyes, and he doubted for a few moments. Then he bade the slave go and set it down somewhere, whilst he sat to write a reply.

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His literary style was plain, blunt, and unstudied, and took the following laconic form:—

‘Centurion Martialis keeps Plautia’s gift, lest he should offend her by sending it back. She overrates the affair in the Subura; but if she can remember the house of her brother and the gold cup, she may consider that the writer has discharged a part of his debt.’

As to the invitation to supper, he did not trouble to mention it, but despatched a negative message by the slaves.

To say that he did not feel flattered by the evident interest of a beautiful woman, would be to say that he was beyond human feelings; but the impression, although gratifying, was fleeting, and the brilliant loveliness of the Roman damsel soon fled before a more familiar picture which arose, ever ready, to his thoughts.

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PART II

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CHAPTER I.

Whatsoever change may have been wrought in the rugged isle of Capreae by the neglect, or the hand, of man, during the long ages since the days of Imperial fame and favour, we can be sure, as we survey the sea-girt spot from one of its rocky eminences, that we look upon the same outlines and formation of nature as met the eyes of humble fisherman and jaded patrician of antiquity. A low-lying sandy shore appears and disappears in the lapse of centuries. What was once a sandy strand, worn by the waves, grated by the keels of ships, and pressed by the busy feet of citizens a

thousand years ago, is now, perhaps, an inland region of cultivated fields lying around a sleepy town. What was once a green plain, ages ago, is now the sandy bottom of a waste of waters. But the rocky face of Capreae is unchanged and changeless. Its flinty cliffs rise sheer from the blue sea; beaten by the waves, but imperishable. At their feet are the natural caves and grottoes which have been discovered from time to time in modern days, and pointed out as marvels, when lo! on inspection, they are found to have been better known and more frequented in the olden time.

There, starting out of the sea, lie, in a row, three huge detached crags, as if they had been torn from the cliffs and hurled beneath—abrupt, impregnable, immutable, as in the day when they saw the ships of the fabled Aeneas sail by on their way to found a mighty empire.

What an ephemeral existence to theirs was that of the Pharos which once stood adjacent, and, nightly, cast a gleam from its lofty lantern upon their jagged tops, maybe for a long space of generations!

[pg 132] And, see, on the summit of one of them rest the remains of a Roman tomb, which arouse strange wonderings as to the being of antiquity whose spirit desired such an isolated, inviolable spot for a last resting-place!

On the summits of the hills, in the valleys, even under the pellucid water of the marge, are yet remaining the traces of the magnificence which sprang at the Imperial nod to adorn this lovely island, in the period when the Caesars sought it as a secluded residence. The traces are but small of the much that is known to have once been; but, as the eye roves from one elevation to another, over the luxuriant gardens, vineyards, and orange plantations which carpet the valleys and clothe the terraced slopes, we can picture to our imaginations the palaces and groves of Imperial luxury, and, if tradition speak truth, of Imperial vice.

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CHAPTER II.

A few weeks subsequent to the last related circumstances of our story, Domitius Afer, with nothing better to occupy his time, on a certain afternoon, indulged an inclination for gentle exercise and solitary reflection, and took his meditative way up the gradual ascent which led to the eastern cliffs of the island of Capreae. The highest elevation at this end of the island is the extreme north-eastern promontory. Thereon stood an extensive villa of the Emperor, which formed, for the most part, his favourite residence. The suspicious nature of Tiberius had not deemed its erection complete and satisfactory until it had been surrounded by what an ordinary observer might have deemed the superfluity of a strong fortification. It stood there in all the glory of its new, gleaming, white masonry—a pile wellnigh impregnable to anything but starvation, surveying island and sea and mainland for leagues, with the waves roaring a thousand feet below around the base of the perpendicular cliffs. This residence bore the name of the villa of Jove, and, although it claimed preference, on account of the magnificent prospect which it enjoyed, together with the natural strength of its position, it was only one of some dozen which had arisen at the Emperor's bidding, or were building, in various parts of the island, each of them named after a deity. Thus the ruler of the world was enabled to change his abode according to his whim, or oftener, perhaps, to the workings of his subtle, mistrustful spirit.

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Leaving this favoured retreat of the Emperor on his left hand, the knight went some distance further along the brow of the cliffs, and wrapping his cloak closer around him, he sat down in a nook of the limestone cliffs in order to indulge more fully in a fit of abstraction. The scene, which was displayed before him, has excited the raptures of gazers of all ages. But it was the better fortune of those of antiquity to be able to see it at its brightest, when its natural loveliness was embellished by the citizens of an empire in the fulness of its power and wealth, and ere a most melancholy-famous eruption of nature had cruelly defaced it for ever.

So precipitous were the cliffs upon which the feet of the Roman knight rested, that a stone, flung from beside him, would have dropped plumb into the waters below. Thence, from this point of vantage, the delighted eye drank in the matchless panorama which circled before it under the clearest of skies.

Far on the extreme left, out of the blue waters, glimmered the green isle of Aenaria, some sixteen miles away, together with the low-lying islet of Prochyta. Scarcely severed from the latter, rose the famous promontory of Misenum, harbouring an Imperial fleet, and crowned by a Lucullan villa, ere long the death-scene of its Imperial owner. Baiae nestled close by, on the lovely inlet which dented the palace-covered shore. After which Puteoli, the queen of commerce, the focus of the foreign-going galleys—one of the most frequented doors of Rome, with its mole, and its docks, and busy quays. Then Neapolis, in the centre of the semicircle, and, still nigher round the curving shore, the vine-clad slopes of high Vesuvius, with ill-fated Herculaneum and Pompeii

resting at its foot, on the brim of the sparkling waters. Surrentum, in the green nook of its sheltering hills, lay hid, but its cape, reaching out to within three miles of our island, forms the southern horn of the crescent. The peaceful mountain in the midst, so luxuriant with verdure, as yet gave no sign of the blot of awful desolation with which it was about to mar for posterity the loveliest prospect in nature. Not as now, but from end to end, a continuous belt of buildings circumscribed the bay; for this enchanting strand was the favoured region for the retirement and residence of the wealthy. Villa upon villa, in thick profusion, sustained the line between village and town, until it seemed as if it were an unbroken city which gleamed so white along the circuit of the lustrous Campanian shore. Turning again to the right hand was expanded the less lovely Gulf of Paestum, with the city of the roses itself lying on its edge, far away on the opposite side. Behind the knight lay the valley of Capreae, rich and green, and shut in by a mountain barrier from the other half of the island, which was a high table-land sloping towards the north-west. Conical hills, *taurubulae*, as they were called, rose from this valley on either hand, crowned with buildings and clothed with foliage; whilst in the midst, which was the neck of the island, nestled a little town. Yet even this part, the lowest point, and saddle-seat, as it were, was high above the sea; and steep descents, to the north and south, led down on either coast to the only two practicable landings the precipitous shores possessed. Thus it may be seen how secluded and safe from intrusion this isolated spot of only eleven miles in circumference could be maintained. Scarcely could a man, had he the choice of the world, pitch upon such another place, where he could revel so peacefully in the beauties which nature had so lavishly clustered around, under a climate so equable and genial, as to render mere existence delicious.

But the sensations caused by such a prospect are rather for the breast of the stranger of a northern clime than for our Roman Afer, for whom life-long familiarity with the scenes described had blunted his appreciation of their beauty. Although his glance appeared to be earnestly fixed upon the opposing shore across the strait, his eyes retained that far-away expression which is produced by absorbing thought. There was sufficient within the narrow limits of the island at his back to occupy his thoughts, as it did those of the whole political world. For, in the palaces which gleamed on the summits of the hills or amid the groves of that insular retreat, were the persons of the despot himself, whose touch ruled the world; of the all-powerful, ambitious Prefect, who, as it was darkly hinted, ruled his master—as well as others of blood royal, whose youth and close affinity with Caesar rendered them the objects of a too jealous care.

But to these the mind of the knight did not at present pay any heed. His thoughts were running back to the villa on the Janiculum overlooking Rome, and were recalling the circumstances recorded in a previous chapter. The strong interest displayed by his uncle in the young Centurion gave him many a moment of uneasy mistrust. Not willing to allow the smallest communication to pass unobserved, if his jealous watchfulness could avoid it, he had stolen after the new-made friends towards the porch, and had there overheard the parting words of the aged host to his guest: 'I shall await your return in impatience, for I long to make a son of you.' They rang in his ears with discomfiting freshness, and his face grew darker the more he pondered on them. They had been made in a generous impulse of courtesy and gratitude, he argued. It was absurd to take them literally, even though the meddlesome Pretorian had proved to be the son of an old playmate. Thus the knight proceeded, as he had often done before, in trying to soothe himself; but the logic of his arguments failed to entirely satisfy his apprehensive nature.

'Old men take strange whims,' he communed with himself, though without unclosing his thin lips even on that lonesome crag. 'But then I have nothing to fear, being the only living kinsman of my worthy uncle, whose conscientious rectitude would never allow him to play false with his lawful heir, especially when that heir has been so dutiful!'—this was a favourite joke, and his lips curved slightly. 'But for that cursed bungler Cestus, I might have been at this present hour in the serene enjoyment of my rights, instead of biting my nails in a daily worry. Well, at least, it afforded one happy stroke of genius, which rid me, at a single thrust, of a cunning beast, whose knowledge has robbed me of at least five years of my life on the score of anxiety. *Euge*, it was well done! and it was a deed which had to be faced, sooner or later, for it was impossible that both could live without something of the kind happening. Let me be thankful; for if the ill performance of the business of that night led to confusion in one way, it led to an unpremeditated conclusion in another, equally as good. I am rid of the past—it concerns me no more; but of the future—pah, it worries! I am too scrupulous, too patient, too long-suffering! There are more obvious affairs bungled through and winked at in Rome every day. Meanwhile, I must watch my gay young Centurion, and do him a good turn at the first chance I have.'

These and a hundred other thoughts floated through the brain of the knight; when, as he sat, a coasting vessel, which had been approaching from the northward, attracted his attention. It came on, running before the wind, with its large square sail set full; but, from the great elevation at which the knight sat, it looked like a small insect struggling through the waves. He regarded it in a listless kind of way as it went by through the straits between the island and the mainland, but, when he saw it heave up in the wind, as if to bring to under the lee of the southern side of the island, he increased his attention to its movements at the expense of his meditations. The well-braced up sail of the galley began to shake and flap as it lost the wind under the cliffs, and it was then hauled down and the sweeps run out. The vessel, whatever its business, was, therefore, bent on making a port on the south side of the island. This was calculated to increase curiosity, inasmuch as it had passed the northern and customary landing-place, to, apparently, make use of the other, which was comparatively unused, and, in the present case, more undesirable in every way. At this moment, as he was trying to account for the cause, he heard the sound of voices

approaching. Glancing round the corner of the large boulder which formed his shelter, he perceived two men hurrying from the direction of the villa, previously described, toward the south. One he intuitively recognised as Martialis, our Centurion, of whom his thoughts were so unpleasantly full. From the rapid pace and the attention which the pair seemed to bestow upon the approaching galley below, Afer concluded that they were proceeding down to the southern landing-place, to watch the movements of the vessel, in accordance with the severe and rigorous guard which was kept over the Emperor's island home. A few words, overheard as they passed, at a very short distance from him, confirmed this conjecture. The natural bent of his inclination to know as much as possible of what was going on around him was in the greatest measure stimulated by the monotony of island life. The growing sharpness of the evening air, moreover, prompted action, so he rose and followed in the same direction, as soon as he could do so without being observed.

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The night shades were falling, and objects were beginning to wear an indistinct and uncertain shape. The Campanian shores were already dim, but the mountains behind heaved in dark purple masses against the clear heavens. The valley of Capreae lay in the dusk of its groves, backed by the clear-cut, towering peak of the island mountain, over which hung the slender crescent of a young silver moon in the luminous flush of the western sky. The faint, wan rays of the satellite rendered the light only more ghostly and uncertain, save on the uplifted summit of the cliffs, where the white masonry of the villa Jovis gleamed with a pale illumination. Following the footsteps of Martialis and his companion, Afer, with scarcely less rapid step, soon quitted the cliffs, and, after crossing a small valley, arrived at the foot of one of those conical hills before mentioned. Skirting the base of this, he came out upon an elevation, wherefrom he could see to which point the vessel was tending. Having satisfied himself on this point, that she was undoubtedly making for the landing-place below, he once more made his devious and steep, not to say difficult, way down to the rocky strand. He debouched at last, by a zigzag flight of steps cut out of the rock, upon a little strip of stony beach, encumbered by large boulders, of which one or two were fragments of huge dimensions. To the westward loomed the large forms of the three detached rocks lying in the sea, one beyond the other, like gigantic stepping-stones, and passing now by these the knight observed the slowly approaching galley. It was as much as he was able to do, for the gloom was fast merging into darkness. Several fishing-boats were drawn up on the pebbly beach, and, at the foot of the steps, a portion of rock had been excavated and turned into a shelter-house, or coastguard station. In the dark shadow of this Afer noticed, as he expected, the forms of some watchers, and as he was already sufficiently near to hear and see all that occurred, he quietly arrested his steps, and refrained from subjecting himself to an inquisitive scrutiny. The watchers awaited in silence, broken only by whispers, and listened to the slow measured clank of the sweeps which sounded across the calm water from the approaching galley. She came tolerably close in shore, and forged ahead past their lurking-place for some distance. Then the strokes of the cumbersome oars ceased, and the tones of a voice in command came over the water. The hollow plunge of an anchor immediately followed, and all dropped into silence for a time.

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The watchers now left their shelter, and went forward along the beach. Arriving at a small creek, at the base of one of the large boulders before described, they halted, and once again clustered in the shade.

A rattling on board the galley, followed by a splash, struck their ears, and in a few minutes more, the proof of the justness of their dispositions appeared, in the shape of a small boat, directed with vigorous strokes toward their station.

'Gently! just to the left of that biggest rock, and you can run us ashore,' said a voice in the boat. Under this guidance the oarsman sent the keel of the little bark grating on the pebbles. 'So,' uttered the voice again, 'that is perfection; and now we will go on shore, and you will not be sorry, I warrant, lady.'

A man leaped on land, and then helped two female forms to follow.

When they were quite clear of the boat they found themselves surrounded by the party which had been awaiting them. The masked lanterns which the latter carried were uncovered, and cast a stream of light upon the features of the new arrivals. The two females, closely hooded, shrank away, with sudden fear to still further hide their faces; but the man was heard to laugh behind his cloak, which he had raised before his features.

'You are amused,' said Martialis, who was the foremost of the guard. 'Who are you, and why are you here?'

At the sound of his voice, one of the muffled females started and swerved, so as to obtain a glance at the speaker, whilst, at the same time, her male companion dropped his cloak, and disclosed the handsome, swarthy, and smiling features of Tigellinus.

An expression of disgust crossed the face of his questioner. A murmur and a slight laugh broke from his comrades.

'A fair night to you, Centurion,' answered Tigellinus; 'I thought the shadow of that rock would hold some of you—it usually does. But you are not so well acquainted with me as some of the regular folk of the island.'

'A misfortune for me, doubtless,' responded Martialis. 'You have authority, I believe, to come and go at will?'

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'Quite right, Centurion, I have,—as well as for whatever merchandise I can bring along with me. I go at once to my royal patron to offer what I have for his approval. I am afraid I must rob you of one of your men, Centurion, to go on an errand to the villa Jovis; I am sorry, but it is for Caesar's sake, whom we must all obey. Had I been going thither myself direct, I might have spared the legs of some one else, but, you see, I have to look after the wellbeing of my two friends here.'

'The men are there at your service. You need not be at so much pains to excuse the trouble you feel called upon to give,' said Martialis, with a frown at the man's impertinence and vulgar assumption of importance.

'Thanks, Centurion, much,' responded Tigellinus; 'then, with your kind permission, I will ask my good friend Rufus, whom I see there, to go on my errand.'

Singling out a certain man from amongst the guard, he took him aside and imparted his injunctions. The man departed, and Tigellinus turned round and said: 'In which palace does Caesar rest at present, Centurion?'

'In the villa of Neptune,' returned Martialis briefly, turning to leave the shore.

'The villa of Neptune!' echoed the other, with a grimace. 'Just my luck! Of course, when I come on shore, I must needs find my patron in the furthest corner of the island, at the far end of the most toilsome path—humph! And the Prefect, the mighty Sejanus, your commander, Centurion?—Proud-stomached puppy!'

The last expression was not applied to the dreaded Prefect, but, in an undertone, to the contemptuous back which the young officer had abruptly turned upon him.

'Tis the pampered creature of the pampered master,' he muttered sneeringly to himself, 'but there is a day in store for them, or I am mistaken. Tell me then quickly, where is the Prefect lodging in this island of palaces? with which of the gods does he at present reside, if the Caesar lives with Neptune?'

This last question, loudly asked, was answered by one of the coastguard men, to the effect that the Prefect was housed, with his retinue, in the villa dedicated to Mercury, which stood on the hill, on the north side, overlooking the town and the Marina.

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'Take us not to the Mercury of the Prefect, nor yet the Neptune of Caesar,' said the guarded voice of one of the heavily-shrouded females, in his ear; 'but to the lares and penates of some humble and obscure islander, where we may rest unnoticed and secure.'

'If that be your wish, noble lady, you had better retire at once into one of the grottoes of the cliffs,' replied Tigellinus, 'for on this mite of an island everything is known; and one cannot hope to live on its face and remain secret. This is not Rome, but a tiny spot, where want of occupation renders everybody and their business the concern of everybody else. It is a strange place, and one not lightly to be meddled with, as no doubt you will discover before you are quit of it, my lady.'

The merchant, or whatever he was, gave a laugh.

'Spare your remarks, and do as I bid you,' said Plautia, for it was no other than she, who, together with a slave, had thus carried out her intention of visiting Capreae; 'you know to whom you are answerable for my safe and secret conveyance to this spot.'

'Perfectly well, noble Plau—'

'Silence; you have already said sufficient, and it is unnecessary for your lips to speak my name at any time—still less in this spot. Come, let us dally here no longer.'

'I will but give a few directions to these fellows concerning the landing of my merchandise to-night, and then I will proceed with you speedily.'

Stepping up to one of the coastguards, he spent a minute in conversation. Then he intimated he was ready, and proceeded up the steps before described, followed by the adventurous lady and her maid.

No item of all this scene escaped the keen senses of Afer, who had varied his position in accordance with the circumstances. Every outspoken word he had heard, and whatever the furtive flash of the lanterns had revealed, he had duly observed.

Surprised with what he had witnessed, and still more puzzled to account for such an unexpected visitor, he lost no time in following up the path taken by the females and their escort.

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'I might have known that yon galley bore something strange about her,' he murmured to himself as he went along, 'but for the fair Plautia to skip ashore on the sly in Capreae, was a thing undreamt of. What brings her here? She comes in brave company, however, and she seems to

know it; but whether she is here on Caesar's account, or the Prefect's, or her own, remains to be seen. The presence of the worthy Tigellinus seems to smack of Tiberius. Sejanus would hardly risk his billing and cooing with his royal sweetheart by such a presence. But, whatever be the reason, she seems to agree wonderfully with the arrangement. Time will soon show everything.'

Having climbed up to the level road above, a very few minutes brought them upon the verge of the little town of Capreae, when Tigellinus swerved to the left, which caused them to avoid the houses. This turn led them once more back to the south shore, or rather to the steep cliffs which formed the coast-line. Tigellinus proceeded to the extreme edge, where they came suddenly upon a low, flat-roofed house, flanked by fruit-trees and gardens, and nestling behind a face of the hill which rose up behind it.

After a sharp knock, the self-designated merchant entered the house, followed by the two females. The knight, who dogged their steps, waited, and when, after a lapse of a few minutes, Tigellinus came out alone, and went rapidly past him in the gloom, he also wended his way toward the town, where he had his lodging. 'A very snug retreat, and now I suppose the jackal is off to the lion,' he said.

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CHAPTER III.

Afer's idea with regard to the movements of the jackal, as he termed him, was shrewdly correct, for Tigellinus bent his steps without further delay towards the villa of Neptune. The path was far from being an easy one. There was the high mountain barrier towering above him and separating him from the table-land, which sloped towards the north-west, upon the furthest verge of which the villa of the Emperor rested. He, therefore, decided to shift part of the burden of his toil upon some other shoulders. For that purpose he passed through the town and descended to the Marina proper on the north side, where he commanded a boatman to row him to his destination. His word seemed to carry as much authority with the fisherman as with the coastguard, since he was obeyed, although with some amount of grumbling on account of the unseasonable darkness.

Within an hour's row the boatman pulled into land and deposited his passenger on a small ledge chiselled out of the rock. Therefrom Tigellinus ascended a flight of steps to the level ground above, where, nigh at hand, loomed the walls of the villa Neptune.

In the rear of the palace were its gardens surrounded by a wall. Tigellinus, evidently familiar with the premises, went straight to a small side door therein, where he received a sharp summons to halt, from a sentinel who paced in front fully armed.

'What, Siccius, not know an old friend?' quoth Tigellinus, with a laugh; 'or must I show my signet?'

'Ho! ho!' replied the soldier, peering close; 'here again! Where have you dropped from? You come on one, all of a sudden, out of the darkness, like a ghost. Have you flown or swum?'

[pg 144] 'Neither, Siccius. How are things with you all in the island?'

'Pretty well; a trifle more bustle and stir since the Prefect came. He is going to be the son-in-law of Tiberius.'

'Ay, ay! that grows stale, but do you happen to know how Caesar's humour runs this evening?'

'I have heard no complaint, and if the weather is foul it spreads, as a rule, pretty fast.'

'Good, then I will go in. Good-night, Siccius!'

'We shall see you later on,' pleaded the sentinel, 'to tell us the talk and the news of Rome—sweet Rome?'

'It depends; if I can I will,' returned Tigellinus, going inside the door. Passing through the gardens he reached a long and lofty portico of two stories, from which two or three doors opened. Two more sentinels were on guard here, underneath the portico, but perceiving who the visitor was, they merely exchanged a few whispered words with him. Tigellinus chose one of the entrances which led him into a narrow passage, thence into a court, open to the sky, and surrounded by offices. The kitchen, in one corner, with its blazing fires, the adjacent servants' hall, as well as other open doors, threw their stream of light into the central space, in aid of the various torches which were stuck around the walls. To and fro across this court busy slaves passed and repassed in the execution of their duties. Others, free for the time from responsibility, were assembled in the servants' hall, full of laugh and chatter. The cooks were resting from their labours beside their fires, amid the yet uncleared disorder of their apparatus, and, together with

a company of equally idle scullions and waiting slaves, were busily and pleasantly engaged in nibbling at the fragments of dainties returned from the Imperial table. These signs did not escape the keen-witted Tigellinus, who concluded, therefrom, that the business of Caesar's evening repast had come to an end. After scanning the faces inside the various offices he quitted the court by a short passage on the left, meeting one or two more domestics on the way, each bearing a load of table furnishings. By these he was satisfied, on inquiry, that the Emperor was at ease after his meal, and he went on into a peristyle or open hall, of magnificent proportions, surrounded by a pillared portico. With the exception of the portico it was open to the sky, and the reflection of the glittering stars danced in the waters of the fountain, which splashed in the basin in the centre of the marble floor. Around the basin was arranged a miniature flower garden, and throughout the whole of the space a soft clear light was diffused from silver lamps, which burned perfumed oils at frequent intervals around the circuit of the portico.

Of the numerous doors which opened therefrom, one at the south side was guarded by the inevitable armed Pretorian. From the frequent passing in and out of stealthy-footed slaves this would seem to be the Imperial supper-room, but, instead of proceeding thither, Tigellinus pushed open a door within a yard of the passage by which he had entered. It was a kind of office containing only a bench and table, at which was seated a man engaged in reading, what seemed to be, a paper of accounts. Disturbed by the sound of the incomer he looked up and gave an ejaculation of surprise, 'What, Tigellinus! At last! I have been looking for you long.'

His accent was distinctly Greek. His figure was slender and supple, and his complexion fair. His features were perfectly handsome, but a cold penetrating expression of eye overbore their beauty with an air of repellence.

'Yes, Zeno; it is no other than myself,' replied Tigellinus, closing the door behind him; 'and, old comrade, how go things with yourself?'

'Just in the humour for fellowship such as yours,' answered Zeno.

'Delighted at the compliment,' rejoined the new-comer; 'but Caesar first and you next, worthy steward. Are the omens favourable that I see my royal patron this evening?'

'Without fear,' said the steward.

Drawing their heads together they conversed in whispers for a quarter of an hour, at the end of which time Tigellinus drew a signet ring from his finger and gave it to his friend. Zeno departed and Tigellinus awaited his return, which did not occur until fully twenty minutes had elapsed. 'Come!' said the steward, thrusting in his head at the door. In the meantime the sentinel had changed his post to another door in the peristyle. Through this Tigellinus was ushered by the warrior, and the steward returned to his accounts.

Within the apartment, which was simply enough appointed, the ruler of the world sat awaiting his agent, with his cheek resting on his hand. At his feet a newly-kindled fire of wood burned brightly, and close to his elbow was a small table, upon which stood a gold cup filled with wine. Tigellinus stepped forward into the Imperial presence and knelt down, but not without giving a swift and anxious glance to read, if possible, his master's mood.

To a stranger, the countenance which met his gaze would surely have caused apprehension by reason of its stern lowering appearance, but, in reality, it was nothing more than its native, unruffled expression, which Tigellinus was well accustomed to, and consequently relieved to see.

The Emperor had now almost completed the allotted age of man. The weight of threescore years and ten had been aided by the undermining of continued excesses, of which we have such dark and doubtless exaggerated tales. Yet both had failed to break the iron constitution of the man. It was certainly the result most naturally to be expected; but here was prodigy of physical organisation, which still remained unimpaired under the strain of age and a ruler's cares, as well as the self-imposed waste of vicious indulgence.

But not without the deep indelible traces of the long conflict appearing externally. His tall form had contracted a stoop, and was shrunk almost to emaciation. His head was bald, except some thin locks which grew low down upon his neck. Thus far might honest age be accountable; but to see the offensive ulcerous eruptions stuck over with plaster, which blotched his pale face, was to awaken suspicion of polluted habits. Yet from the midst of this unattractive physiognomy there shone the undimmed brilliance of his large eyes. Their beauty had outlived the once acknowledged comeliness of his face, as well as the athletic proportions of his large frame. Somewhat heavy lidded and slow moving, their glance, nevertheless, when it became fixed, seemed to pierce the inward thoughts of him they rested upon. Their depths were as fathomless as the ocean, save when lit with a sudden magnetic flash of wrath, which his minions ever watched for in trembling. Nothing, throughout the wide empire, received such unwearying catlike watch and ward as these basilisk orbs which gathered more than they emitted.

In his manner, the Emperor was, by nature, silent and reserved, which increased for him a reputation for intractable pride and malignance. He was of the Claudian family, and were they not ever proud and insufferable? He spoke as little as possible, and his words were delivered slowly and deliberately, with an accompanying motion of his forefinger.

Such were the most particular personal characteristics of the tyrant who, for some occult reason, had foresworn the seat of his empire, and had secluded himself in a rocky islet. His energy and watchfulness were unabated in affairs private and public. His continued absence, taken in conjunction with the busy ambition of the Prefect, was fruitful of rumours in no way favourable to the supremacy of Caesar. But who could penetrate the matchless craft, the profound dissimulation which enshrouded the despot's mind? Without some miracle of light, which might illumine, for one brief moment, the secret solitude of his brooding thoughts, it were idle to conjecture and speculate upon their tenor.

The Emperor held out the signet ring which Tigellinus had sent in as an intimation of his arrival. The owner rose and took it with humble obeisance. At a sign from the eloquent forefinger of Caesar, he went and unloosed the folds of a large curtain which he drew across the door, thereby effectually guarding against any chance of their voices travelling outside. This little task completed, he returned, and stood awaiting Caesar's pleasure.

'So, you have come—Priscus never bade me expect you,' said Tiberius, speaking as if it needed an effort to find his voice.

'I know not that, Caesar, but I sent him word as usual,' replied Tigellinus, whose obsequious, not to say cringing, manner in the Imperial presence, bore a very striking contrast to his cool authoritative deportment elsewhere.

'Well, it is no matter whether you did, or whether he forgot to tell me—when did you come?' asked Tiberius.

'Only this very night, illustrious, since sundown.'

[pg 148] 'Where did you land, and what have you come with? Use your tongue and spare mine, good Tigellinus,' continued the Emperor, with the faintest wrinkle of his eyebrows.

'Yes, I was about to!' rejoined Tigellinus, brisking up at his master's tone. 'I have those with me that I have chosen with my best endeavours to be worthy of Caesar's household. I landed at the same place as usual, not far from the Scopuli, and left my companions of the voyage on board the galley, while I came on hither to wait upon you, Caesar, without delay. Meanwhile I sent up to the villa Jovis, and, no doubt, the noble Priscus will see them removed and safely bestowed at once.'

'Humph! I shall be able to judge of your efforts when I go to the villa. Meanwhile what have you to tell me of—come nearer!'

Tigellinus approached a step or two as desired, and replied, 'There is little or nothing that I have been able to gather since I was last here. The people seem to be full at present with the Prefect's visit here—it is whispered everywhere that he is to be honoured with the hand of the noble Livia, for which reason he has come hither.'

'Well!'

'Does Caesar wish me to say exactly what is commonly said in Rome?'

'Exactly!'

'I will speak then without fear. It seems still to pass as a joke, presumptuous and incredible as it may appear, that the Prefect Sejanus is called the autocrat, and you, Caesar, the governor of an island.'

Tigellinus seemed not altogether at ease in imparting this scandal, but Caesar gazed into the fire with a face as unmoved as granite. Not a sparkle rose to his eyes, not a curl to his lip.

'Is that all?' he said dreamily.

'Yes; except that the Romans seem to believe in it.'

'Any more?'

'Nothing, I grieve to say, illustrious; for you only instructed me to collect what floats from citizen's mouth to citizen's mouth.'

'If you did more I would have you flung from the walls of the villa into the sea,' observed Tiberius, with the same placidity of manner.

[pg 149] 'I never seek to exceed the bounds of your commands,' replied Tigellinus hastily, giving an involuntary shudder at the same time.

'Meanwhile I am glad to know that the Prefect is so zealous in the duties which fall to his share,' said Tiberius, calmly spreading his fingers over the warmth of the fire.

'What!—your highness is glad!' exclaimed Tigellinus, betrayed into sudden surprise.

But the piercing glance of the Emperor transfixed him, and his tongue clove to the roof of his

mouth. He clenched his fist in suspense and cursed his heedlessness in his heart.

'Glad!' repeated Tiberius, without removing his gaze—'rejoiced, worthy Tigellinus, as every master should be at the diligence of his servant. Should it not be so?'

'I—it should—certainly! The Prefect is most diligent. And he is happy like my humble self in having a master beyond compare.'

Tigellinus stammered in the former part of his reply, but he rolled out the latter with recovered self-possession and glib readiness.

'May I be hurled to Hades if I permit my voice in future to show that I have an idea how the wind blows,' he thought to himself, as he breathed freer. 'Ugh! I seemed already to fancy myself standing on yonder cliff ready for a dive. He is a sublime hypocrite, or I am an equally sublime fool—I'll stick to my own trade—at least as far as speaking goes!'

'You are a poor newsmonger on this occasion, Tigellinus,' quoth the Emperor.

'I am grieved to acknowledge the fact, Caesar,' answered the other mournfully, 'but what can your humble servant do in the lack of news? You would be displeased if I were to manufacture any to entertain you.'

'Do not try!' said Tiberius drily; 'since nothing stirs the air of the city I may infer then that the people are well satisfied with the conduct of those in authority over them?'

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Fairly warned by his slip, Tigellinus resolutely stifled his curiosity with regard to the Imperial policy, and was watchful not to be tempted from the secure path of plain matter-of-fact answers. He, therefore, replied to the artful question of the Emperor in a simple affirmative, 'That it was as Caesar had said, as far as his perception was able to ascertain.'

'Happy people! happy city!' murmured Tiberius softly, as if to himself, or to the fire, into which he was gazing.

'Truly happy!' was the refrain of Tigellinus.

'Ah—what?' said Tiberius, looking up hastily, as though roused from a reverie.

'I was merely agreeing with you, Caesar, when you remarked what is true beyond doubt, that Rome and its people were happy,' said Tigellinus.

'Did I then speak?' said the Emperor carelessly; 'I knew it not—I must have thought aloud—a style I am not given to.'

His glance fell on the goblet of wine, which stood untasted, and he stretched out his hand to take it.

'I had forgotten my drink—no doubt because of your stirring news,' continued Tiberius, with a delicate sarcasm, which the other instinctively likened to the toying of a tiger's claws sheathed in velvet; 'I drink to the happiness of my Romans, and to that of my Prefect in particular.'

A deep draught gurgled down the Imperial throat, and the cup was set down again more than half emptied. Tigellinus eyed his master with covert, doubting glances.

'One little matter, illustrious, I had forgotten for the moment,' he said, not daring to withhold it, and yet doubting how it might be received.

'A little matter,' observed Tiberius ironically, 'I daresay with more in it than the other.'

'It is in a measure connected with the Prefect, who so well deserves your gracious esteem,' continued the other, deeming it safe to add the compliment from what had passed, although it had upset all his previous theories.

The Emperor nodded for him to proceed.

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'Shortly before the Prefect left Rome for Capreae, he told me that a certain lady wished to visit this island, and, in order that she might come without arousing any notice, I was to send her word when I was to start, that she might accompany me. She and a waiting slave, therefore, took passage with us, and, as I was instructed to do exactly as she desired, I took her, at her request; to the most secluded and out-of-the-way lodging I could think of, where she might pass the time without the fear of her presence becoming generally known.'

'Is she young or old?' asked Tiberius, raising his eyebrows in the faintest degree.

'Young, most decidedly.'

'Beautiful or hideous, good Tigellinus?'

'One of the most beautiful in Rome.'

Caesar's pallid lips, for the first time, curved into a satirical smile.

'You have made a mistake,' he said; 'the Prefect's betrothed bride, the Lady Livia, would have been more grateful for your information than I am!'

'I do beseech you, Caesar, remember, that solely in my zeal and duty to you I have revealed what I swore to keep entirely secret,' uttered Tigellinus, perturbed in spirit by the Emperor's answer. 'The worshipful Sejanus may discover and visit his vengeance upon me!'

'Be easy,' said Tiberius, 'as long as anything proves of use to me I suffer nothing to harm it. Who is this woman?'

'Plautia, the sister of Apicius.'

'Apicius the spendthrift fool of the Palatine who poisoned himself at supper?'

'The same—all Rome talked of it.'

'And this Plautia?—I know her not.'

'She dwells nigh the Forum of Caesar—alone.'

'Has she anything to recommend her but her beauty?'

'Her suppers are celebrated among a certain set.'

'Of which the Prefect makes one?'

'They have been most intimate for some time.'

'Who else of any note?'

'The Prefect's friend, Domitius Afer; one called Martialis is infatuated with the love of her, follows her like a dog, and report says she treats him like one.'

'She is fonder of the Prefect, and, now that she has followed after him, this Martialis will forthwith hang himself, as a dog in despair should. The Prefect has a centurion whom I know by that name. Without doubt it is the same luckless dog.'

'No, the centurion is a younger brother.'

[pg 152] 'You are invaluable, Tigellinus,' said Tiberius, nodding his head approvingly. 'I should deem myself clever with only half of your industry and power of memory. Do you happen to know if this other Martialis, the officer of the Prefect, is also accounted one of the set blessed with the cookery of this lady's kitchen?'

'No, I should say not. He is seldom seen, even with his brother, I am told. He and the guard were waiting for me to-night, when I rowed ashore at dusk—bears himself somewhat proudly.'

'It is a prerogative of the legion to which he belongs, Tigellinus, and we poor mortals of the simple coat must put up with it. But he is a good officer, and highly prized by Sejanus, which is a sufficient guarantee for his trustworthiness. But enough of that—tell me who else is familiar with this lady's table.'

'Charinus, Pomponius, Blaesus, Vitellius—these are some I know, but I never set myself to inquire particularly concerning the matter. Had I known that you would have taken so much interest I would have made it my business to have got more information.'

'It matters little—I seem scarce to know those you have already named. The lady, herself, no doubt, is the chief attraction—what else is there of interest about her in addition to her comeliness and her savoury suppers? Are her manners free and captivating—is she wise or witty?'

'H'm, in truth, Caesar,' said Tigellinus, with a hesitating air, 'some say one thing and some another, but I am told that she is a woman whom no one can properly fathom, so that no one can prove whether she be too free or not. I have only been in her company from Rome hither, but I would confidently say that she is a woman of ability, and with a haughty temper such as I should not care to get foul of. Of her loveliness there is no doubt.'

'You are a judge, my Tigellinus.'

'It is my profession, or part of it, so please you, illustrious,' replied the other, with a smirk.

The lips of Caesar deigned a faint smile, and he betrayed further curiosity as to the reason of Plautia's visit. But his informant was obliged to admit his complete ignorance.

[pg 153] 'I should recommend you to tell me, nevertheless,' quoth Caesar coldly and mercilessly.

'I swear to the gods, illustrious, that I do not know,' protested Tigellinus with vehemence and

trepidation; 'had I any knowledge I would not, nor dare I, hide it from you—I would have no cause for doing so. What cause there is for her coming is, perhaps, only known to her and to the Prefect. I have observed nothing which could give me any suspicion. But I will endeavour to get some information if Caesar thinks proper to bid me.'

'I will consider,' returned Tiberius, musing; 'it seems, however, to be easily explained, and no doubt may be left to herself and the Prefect. In what part of the island have you put her, in order that she may be undisturbed?'

'Noble Caesar?' ejaculated the Suburan faintly.

Tiberius frowned.

'I say where have you left this woman?'

'In the house of one named Tucca, at the edge of the cliffs under the hill of the villa of Mars. It is almost hid from sight; there are no dwellings at hand, so that it seemed to me to be as serviceable for the purpose as any.'

'No doubt,' observed the Emperor; 'but had it been under the villa of Mercury it would have been more convenient for those concerned.'

There was a knock at the door, and on receiving permission to enter, the sentinel made his appearance, and announced the arrival of a courier with despatches.

Caesar's demeanour and voice betrayed evident interest. 'I will summon him directly—let him be at hand,' he said. 'And now, Tigellinus, best and most discreet of servants, we will let these matters of ours rest until to-morrow.'

Tigellinus made a low obeisance and withdrew. He went across the spacious peristyle, and disappeared down the passage, by which he had arrived, toward the quarters of the household staff, where he held a largely attended levee, as the newest arrival from Rome.

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The Emperor stepped to the door, and, slightly opening it, peered through to assure himself of his vassal's complete departure. When the sound of steps had completely died away, he clapped his hands and then returned to his seat. In a few seconds the slender figure and handsome face of the Greek steward Zeno entered.

'Know you the house of one named Tucca, standing on the cliffs at the foot of the hill of Mars?' demanded Tiberius.

The steward replied in the affirmative.

'There is a young female arrived there in secret, together with a slave. I wish to have her described to me; I wish to know, if possible, why she is here—I wish to know all her movements. Neither she nor any one else must know that she is watched, and the matter must be confined to three persons—myself, yourself, and the spy, whoever he may be. And, especially, must it be kept from Tigellinus, your good friend, as I know.'

'I understand perfectly,' answered Zeno.

'If she desires to be secret you will find darkness more prolific than daylight. Go, and call the courier!'

The Greek vanished, and the Emperor took some small tablets from his bosom and proceeded to make a few notes. By the time he had finished the courier entered, bearing a packet of despatches, to which he immediately turned his serious attention.

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CHAPTER IV.

Suspicion was a weed which clothed the face of the island of Capreae. It penetrated every nook of hill, cavern, or grove. The very air was charged with its essence, as it is loaded with electricity at the time of a thunderstorm. Every tiny leaf that nestled to the ground was the peering eye of an Argus. Little or nothing could hope to pass unnoticed within the narrow circuit of those sea-girt rocks. There was an ear for each saying worth repeating, an eye for each movement worth noting, and all finally flowed into the channel which led to the dark, deep mind of Caesar. To the ready ear of the ambitious, plotting Prefect also, in his villa of Mercury, perched on the conical hill overlooking the Marina, the mysterious whisperings and rumours of the isle did not fail to float. What hope then was there of Plautia remaining secret?

The cottage of Tucca became the most curiously regarded spot in Capreae, before the dawn of the morning following the circumstances related in the last chapter. Invisible eyes watched it, so that not even a movement of the ancient cur, which lay before the door, was missed, nor the flight of a pigeon from the flock which perched on the roof.

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The house was a small one almost facing the south, and, consequently, looking nearly full upon the sea. With its left eye, as it were, it looked across to the town of Capreae and the face of the island sloping up to the eastern cliffs. To the right hand there was no path, nor yet foothold, for anything but a bird of the air, and a few yards further on, the crags descended sheer into the sea. These crags rose up above the house, forming the side of the hill, upon which gleamed, above, the walls of the villa of Mars. Thus, it may be seen that the dwelling of Tucca had, for some reason, been perched as far round the outside, seaward face of the hill as possible.

Tucca, the owner and occupier of this abode, was an old man, who lived alone with his wife. He was a small man, with a head nearly bald, and had sharp features, withered and prodigiously wrinkled. He was evidently very aged, but of that spare, wiry toughness of body which best defies time. He did not seem to be scrupulously clean in person. His garments might have been worn night and day for months, by their greasy surfaces and obstinate creases, whilst the leather-like folds of his face had the appearance of being engrained with dirt. He derived his livelihood from wine-growing and otherwise tilling the ground, and his arduous and lifelong toil had had the effect of imparting a stoop to his slight dried-up frame. His tenement stretched from the left of his house along the path which led to the town, and his vines, likewise, reached upward, draping the hillside, as far as sufficient soil could be gathered together to give them sustenance.

Tigellinus had made, no doubt, the best choice possible for the purpose required, when he led the beautiful young Roman lady hither to this spot, hidden away half round a hill, on the brink of the cliffs, as far as a human foot could venture; but, as no previous notice had been made to its resident, of the unexpected honour about to be conferred upon him, the ancient husbandman was, as might be expected, considerably startled. A few whispered words from Tigellinus in his ear, however, charmed away the astonished and ill-tempered expression of his restless, mistrustful eyes, and he became readiness, compliance, and amiability itself. The haughty and even scornful bearing of his visitor, as she glanced around her lodging, and scanned him from head to foot, might seem to have warmed his old heart with gratefulness, so deep was his obeisance, and so great was the grimace of joy with which he contorted his face. His wife, as lean and withered as himself, had a hard time of it for a space; but, finally, all arrangements were made for the comfortable bestowment of the visitors, and the household sank into sleep and oblivion.

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The following morning, as day was breaking, Tucca came out of his house into the raw air. Water was an element he did not favour at any time, but more particularly thus early. Hence he proceeded to his work in a state of semi-wakefulness. A little grove of fruit trees covered the left flank of the house, and through this he directed his steps, more by instinct than due perception of where he was going. In the midst there was an arbour, or summer-house, in a state of bad repair, being a structure designed for ornament and ease, with which Tucca had no sympathy whatever. Its frame, in fact, was mainly held together by the twining creepers, which thickly enwrapped it, and almost hid the doorway from view. As the old husbandman passed close by this, an arm was thrust forth from amid the creepers, and the hand thereof grasped him by the shoulder. Tucca, startled out of his comatose state, gave vent to a yelp of surprise, very largely mixed with fear, but it was lost within the gloom of the arbour whither he was dragged.

‘Good morrow, Tucca; you are out betimes; you deserve to be as rich as people say you are.’

Tucca gazed at his captor; but the gloom, combined with his confused faculties, prevented him from making anything out save a figure clothed in a long cloak and peaked hood, or burnoose, which well-nigh enveloped the face as well as the head.

‘Who are you and what do you want?’ was the natural response of the wine-grower.

‘I am one you know, and I am here to see you on particular business.’

‘You may be some one I know, but this is a strange time and a strange place to lie in wait; I don’t like the look of it myself,’ was the short, crusty answer. ‘Come into the daylight, such as it is, so far!’

‘No,’ replied the figure, holding him back; ‘I prefer staying here until we have finished.’

‘I ought to know your voice.’

‘I told you that I am known to you.’

‘Then why in the name of the furies do you not show me your face?’

‘I will, gossip; but, first of all, a few words. You received two visitors last night?’

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‘Eh!’ said the old man, giving a start.

‘I say you received two visitors last night—two women.’

Tucca kept his hand upon the handle of a knife stuck in his girdle, and he eyed his questioner keenly in silence for a moment, as if to think twice before he spoke.

'Well?' said the other sharply.

'It's none of your business whether I did or whether I did not—I'll not tell you.'

'You will have to tell me more than that—look, old man!'

Tucca's visitor stepped towards the doorway, where his face might meet the fast-increasing light, and he threw back the ample burnoose from his head. The ancient legs of the wine-grower shook beneath him. He became fully awake; for the classic face of Zeno, the Emperor's steward, looked down upon him, as perfect and beautiful as if sculptured in tinted marble, but with the cold, metallic eyes which were fatal to all accompanying grace.

'It is my worshipful Zeno!' exclaimed Tucca, with gestures of abject humility and apology. 'Pardon, noble Zeno; but how could your servant know you in this light and with that hood over your face—and with my eyes too—seventy-five years old? But why come here so early in the cold? Come into—no, I mean—a—a—what can old Tucca do to serve your worship?'

'Thank you, Tucca. Had I thought fit to go into your house I would have done so without an invitation, knowing your esteem and love for me. But,' continued Zeno, with a meaning smile, 'I knew it would not be convenient for you, since you harbour guests beneath your roof. I thought it best to speak with you out of doors first before I ran the chance of making myself an intruder, unwelcome as it might be. Shall we go in now?'

'Well—ah—it is hardly fit to receive you—at this time of day—nothing in order or—'

'No matter for that,' said Zeno, interrupting the stammering and confused old man; 'I only want a seat and a draught of wine.'

'Then wait only one minute until I tell my wife, and she will straighten up and make tidy for your worship,' returned Tucca, turning to trot out of the arbour.

[pg 159] Zeno caught him by the arm.

'Not so fast,' said he; 'I have changed my mind. Old fool, did I not know for a surety that you had those I speak of within your house, your very manner would have revealed it to me, as plainly as written parchment telling the same. Do you deny it?'

'Most worshipful——' began Tucca imploringly.

'Do you deny, I say?'

'Why do you ask me? What can it be to you?' said the wine-grower, with a show of resistance.

'To me—nothing!' responded the steward, with a grim smile; 'I am only one of the tiger's paws to be stretched out at the tiger's will. It rests upon you at present, Tucca, so be wise. I have come from the villa of Neptune this morning straight.'

'Good Zeno, be easy with me, for you have dealt well with me so far,' whined the perplexed and terrified old man.

'You are not proceeding in the way most calculated to incline me to do so. Tell me!' said Zeno, pointing meaningly towards the house.

'I cannot—there is one as great in Capreae as Caesar—I dare not.'

'You will repent of that delusion when you find yourself, very shortly, about to be cast from one of the cliffs of Capreae. What's he that you compare with Caesar? There is but one you can mean—is it the Prefect?'

Tucca hung his head and did not answer. Zeno thereby gained a little information, which had the effect of giving him, at once, some more personal concern in the matter. To spy upon a probable arrangement of the formidable Prefect was a task unlooked for and likely to prove of some interest.

'You are obstinate, Tucca, and you are simple and foolish to put the servant before his master. I might be disposed to leave you in a huff and allow you to take the consequences of your idiocy, but I will take more pains with you, and try and reason you out of your ideas. You live so much out of the way here in this corner that you are ignorant of how things run. Listen: last night a certain merchant, named Tigellinus, brought two females to your house, and there they are at this moment. It is folly for you to deny it. You grow excellent wine, Tucca—I have bought it from you for the Emperor's table, and the Emperor likes it. Caesar is a resident, and if you wish to continue his custom you had better do as I advise you; if not, you will assuredly have every drop of blood drawn out of your old veins, as well as every quart of wine out of your cellars. The same finger that can do this can, equally as well, do the same to the most noble Prefect if sad necessity compelled. Do your duty to your ruler and patron, therefore, and rest easy.'

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'You know what I know—I cannot tell you more,' said the husbandman despairingly.

'Their names?'

'Before Jupiter, I know not.'

'I have also orders to dispense certain coins to those who make themselves particularly useful in this matter—it is surely best to please the strongest party and be paid for it—at least my notions run that way.'

Zeno made a dull jingling of some money under his cloak, and marked, with a smile, the flash of the old man's eyes and the pricking up of his ears.

'Noble Zeno, you were ever liberal with me, but if I could serve you without—'

'It will be easily earned, Tucca; good pay, and never fear for your old bones.'

'What, then, do you require?'

'To use your memory and duly relate to me anything that your visitors may say loud enough for your ears to catch. If it be anything about the weather, or matters of equal importance, you need not trouble to store it up; but if there may be a chance remark or inquiry concerning any person or persons of any note in the island, you must truly bring the same to me, as I should like to hear it. You must, likewise, take notice of their movements, and everything which may be likely to throw a light upon the reason of their presence here. You see, therefore, Tucca, that your task is of the easiest and lightest, and beyond suspicion—merely to keep your eyes and ears open.'

'And will you be at hand, or must I go to seek you at the palaces?'

[pg 161] 'Inquire for Alexander at the little tavern of the Widow Paula, and you will be told where to find me—you will remember to inquire for Alexander, old man?'

'For Alexander, noble Zeno.'

'Good; it is important. Now, by way of commencement, tell me the names of these women.'

'I swear by all the gods in heaven, Zeno, I do not know. They came and ate a slight supper, such as we were able to put before them,—for we knew no more than the dead that we were to have any visitors,—and then they retired, and we have not seen them since. It is the truth, as I stand here!'

'Well, and what of their appearance? are they young?'

'Young, Zeno, and the mistress as beautiful as the sun.'

'Ah!' said Zeno, nodding, whilst a smile spread over his handsome face; 'I think there will nothing very serious spring out of this matter, although a ten years' war did once arise on account of a woman. But, nevertheless, be vigilant.'

'I will be all ears and eyes.'

'And secret—do not ask impertinent questions, or you will spoil all.'

'Not one, noble Zeno.'

'Consider your next amphorae of wine as sold and delivered, at a point above the best price in Capreae.'

'Generous Zeno!' said Tucca, bending low.

'And for this,' rejoined the steward, artfully chinking the coins beneath his cloak, 'we will settle when this business is over.'

'May it be soon; why they should pitch upon my house, and mix a harmless man up with their women and their works, I know not—but I would they were away.'

'And so do I, Tucca, for this early morning watch does not agree with your humble servant.'

'But what safeguard can you offer me if he, for whom these people are in charge, should know that I play the spy on them?'

'He cannot know if you do only as I tell you; and if he does, leave the rest to me.'

'Hermes guard me—I should be but the earthen pipkin between two brazen pots.'

[pg 162] The steward was looking cautiously through the leafy screen of the doorway towards the house. He started and said, 'Hasten, Tucca, look upon your housetop! There are these same mysterious beings gazing therefrom upon the landmarks of the island and tasting the morning air—hasten to the house—they may want thee to ask thee this or that, it may be—there is a chance—so go!'

'I will.'

'And hearken, Tucca, it is best to reckon up both sides of our bargain,' added Zeno, catching him by the arm for a moment; 'I rely upon your faith and have no reason to doubt it, being, as you are, in your right mind; but if you play me false from fear, or hope, or promise of what you would expect to be greater in pay, as sure as you stand by me at this very moment you shall suffer!'

'Dear Zeno and friend, I could never——'

'I think not, but if you do—in yonder villa of Jove, within the walls there, is more than one catapult—you shall be shot from the cliffs a league into the sea, like a pebble from a sling. Go, and forget not Alexander at the tavern of Paula!'

The husbandman went back to his house, on the flat roof of which Plautia and her maid were standing, taking the keen morning air and viewing the landscape, as Zeno had said.

The old man shuffled about in view down below, and presently the voice of Plautia hailed him and desired, or rather commanded, him to go up to her.

He did so, and the stoop in his small, withered body was doubled in humility as he remained before her awaiting her pleasure. She looked haughtily down upon him, and the light of day did not improve his appearance. The grease and the dirt-engrained wrinkles, somewhat softened and mellowed by the lamplight of the night before, were as perceptible as only daylight could make them. The finely-curved nose of Plautia was elevated at its tip, as much as it was capable of doing, as she surveyed her host in all his glory. She formed the most complete contrast possible. Her noble figure, large and erect, fronting his small, bent, insignificant frame; her dark piercing eyes and her glowing skin, fresh from the early morning toilet, and tinted with a yet richer bloom by the keen sea-breeze. It seemed to the ancient husbandman as if the glorious Juno herself had descended on to the roof of his dwelling to survey the isle and sea sleeping and silent in the gray light of dawn.

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'I wish to tell you, old man,' she began abruptly, 'that you shall be well paid for our lodging here.'

'That I feel sure of, gracious lady,' replied the reverent Tucca.

'Your house is retired and not overlooked, and for that reason I come here. We wish to be entirely unobserved. It is necessary that our presence here be not known. Therefore you and your wife must refrain from prating a single word thereof. You understand?'

'Perfectly, lady, you may rest easy—we shall give neither word nor sign.'

'Good! if you do I would not stand in your shoes for all the island is worth. Now show me all that can be seen from where we stand—what is yon house on yon hill?—I have been in Capreae ere this, but I forget.'

She pointed across to the villa of Mercury, crowning the conical hill above the Marina, on the other side of the valley. Tucca told her.

'And who dwells therein?' she inquired.

'The Prefect, who is betrothed to Livia, the Emperor's daughter-in-law—he is the greatest man in the Empire they say—he lives there at present. But the villa belongs to Caesar—like that one, and that, and that.' He pointed to the elevated summits around.

'The greatest man in the Empire,' she murmured, with a smile; 'and what of Caesar?'

'He is even now over there,' explained Tucca, sweeping his grimy hand up toward the towering heights behind them; 'he moves about from one place to another. To-morrow may find him over there—as likely as not.'

She followed his pointing finger to the eastern cliff in the distance, where the white walls of the fortress peeped up against the sky.

'And that?' she inquired.

'Is the villa of Jove, of which he is the fondest. It is built in with huge walls; it is full of guards and stores of provisions they say, and the sea roars a thousand feet below.'

Tucca shuddered as he recalled the threat of Zeno.

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'Full of guards, say you—do you know any of those same guards?'

'No, good lady; I have seen them, but I know none of them. They keep watch and ward over Caesar wherever he goes.'

'Are they Pretorians, think you?'

'Surely.'

'And they are lodged in yonder villa?'

'The bulk of them, yes.'

'What, up there?' said Plautia, looking thither earnestly.

Tucca nodded.

'And the Prefect—does his guard lodge with him?'

'I know not, lady; it is little I know of these great people.'

Plautia remained in thought for a minute, then she said, 'You must find me a messenger who will be trusty and secret—but no! You had better do my errands—it would be safer.'

'As you wish, noble lady.'

'Come then, we will go down—we may be seen.'

'It would be safer—there may be curious eyes prying,' rejoined Tucca.

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CHAPTER V.

Shortly before noon on the same morning Domitius Afer climbed the steep path which led to the Prefect's house. On arriving at the villa he found that Sejanus had gone to the Emperor's stronghold on the eastern cliffs, where the Pretorians on duty in the island were barracked. Thither he thought it worth while to follow. Coming out of the gates of the villa Jovis he met Martialis, arrayed in simple civilian costume. With the barest recognition possible they went on their way, but Afer was sufficiently interested to tell his Greek attendant to loiter behind, and watch which way the young Centurion aimed for.

Three sides of the Emperor's favourite villa were surrounded by strong defences. The fourth side, since it rested on the edge of the cliffs, was impregnable to everything save the birds of the air. Between the villa with its private grounds, and the outside girdle of defence, was an ample space, partly planted with trees. It was occupied, in one part, by a range of buildings, which were the quarters of the Pretorian detachment garrisoning the island during its tenure as an Imperial residence. The entrances of the villa itself were each guarded by the customary legionary, but, elsewhere, Afer met with no challenge to impede his steps. In the middle of the wide parade ground fronting the barrack houses, he perceived the Prefect speaking with an officer, who was a man approaching the gigantic in stature.

Afer loitered apart until the huge Pretorian officer went off, and then Sejanus turned towards him. 'Good morrow, my Titus! Did you climb to the villa this morning?'

'As usual, Prefect.'

'I rested ill last night, and was astir earlier in consequence,' said Sejanus. 'There is nothing new from Rome.'

[pg 166] 'Alas, I would I were there!' sighed Afer; 'the heaviness of this listless isle is insupportable. The mountains, the rocks, and the sea—the sea, the rocks, and the mountains; there is nothing else. The senses rust, the brain is numb, and one walks as if steeped to the lips in a heavy dream or phantasmagoria. Would I were standing in my porch on the Esquiline!'

'What, exchange this pure air, this fair isle, its peace and repose, for the smells, and smoke, and roars of that seething cauldron Rome! Tush, you have twice as much colour in your cheeks, and twice as much sparkle in your eye, as when we left it. You are hard to please. Turn philosopher or poet—anything to pass the time. You never hear me repine.'

'Ah no, but I am not in the lucky position in which you are, Prefect; I have no betrothed bride to bid time fly like the wind,' answered Afer sarcastically.

'Go and get you one, then,' said the smiling Prefect.

'And in what eagle's nest nigh the clouds, or in what secret den below ground should I keep her in this sea prison, that I might have her and call her still my own?'

'Get an ill-favoured one and live in peace.'

'I would rather take beauty and run all risks, if I could land beauty, on some dark night, and find

a snug corner to bestow it safely and unseen,' observed the knight carelessly.

Knowing his man, he did not expect his speech to have any effect, and he was, therefore, surprised to see a sudden light flash into his patron's face.

'By Hercules!' exclaimed the Prefect sharply, as he struck his forehead at the same time with his hand, 'was ever an idle speech such an apt reminder!'

He fumbled in the breast of his tunic.

'What is it? what lucky word have I said?' said Afer curiously.

'How came it to slip my mind, and I only received it this morning as I left my chamber,' said Sejanus, drawing forth a crumpled paper and offering it to his friend. 'Read!'

Afer took the paper, which contained a few crabbed words, as follows:—

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'I arrived last night, and the two females you know of are safely lodged in the house of one Tucca, under the Hill of Mars, a very safe place.'

There was no signature, but Afer needed none to tell him from whom the missive came.

'It is very suggestive,' said he, with an inscrutable countenance; 'but, for the rest, I am still too much in the dark to say more.'

'What then if I tell you that these damsels came from Rome—who would you say they were, or rather she—for one, as I apprehend, is only a slave?'

'Rome is large and its females many,' said Afer; 'I would as lieve begin to count the stones on the Marina.'

'Who but our lovely entertainer on many a pleasant afternoon—who but the queenly Plautia.'

'What! Plautia here, and why?' cried the knight, with a start of surprise which Roscius might have envied. 'Ah, Prefect, what does this mean?'

Afer smiled and looked at the handsome Prefect with a sly askant look.

'Faith, I know not—not I,' answered Sejanus.

'Um!' said his follower.

There was something in the manner of this ejaculation which proved too much for the other's attempted gravity, and he burst out into a laugh.

'You would seem to insinuate something, my dear Titus,' he remarked; 'and yet it is quite true, incredible as it may appear, that our lovely and wilful dame has thought fit to visit Capreae entirely in obedience to her own whim.'

'Most strange!' rejoined Afer pithily.

'Most true!'

'There must be a strong reason for such a dainty, exquisite, proud, city-bred lady to come hither—do you not think so?'

'Whether there be a strong inducement, or merely a woman's curiosity I am equally unaware.'

'Such privations, such hardships, such fatigues, such inconveniences for a female to undergo, who has never known even the hardness of a wrinkle in her bed of down. There is never a man in Rome who would not give five years of his life to be able to boast of this feat.'

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'Pooh, pooh, man! you are fantastical this morning.'

'If I am as near the truth, as it seems to me I am, it matters not what name you put upon it.'

'Tush!'

'Your approaching marriage makes her desperate. It is as clear as the daylight.'

'Pooh, pooh, this is nonsense!'

'The lady is proud; but we ever thought we could detect the signs of feeling for you, in spite of her haughty bearing.'

'Have done, man—you grow silly.'

'What must be the power which can so reduce such pride and disdain to such lapdog humility!'

'Are you so mad as to imagine that she has ventured hither on my account?'

'I have said.'

'Psaw!'

The ablest minds have their weaknesses, and it was beyond the power of the formidable Prefect's affected scorn to hide the gratification which this flattery of the influence of his personal advantages caused to lurk in his very handsome face.

His client well knew that he need have little fear of giving offence by straining too grossly on the point, so he proceeded—

'Until you are able, therefore, to render another reason for the divine Plautia's presence, it will be vain to dislodge my opinion.'

'I really cannot say, except that it is merely a woman's whim,' returned the other, shrugging his shoulders pityingly. "'Tis strange I forgot she was coming.'

'What? did you then know?' said Afer in surprise.

'Had the least thought of it troubled my brain I must have told you before now. Ere we left Rome she vowed, for some reason which I could not discover, that she would pay a sly visit to Capreae. She would not be dissuaded, and for the sake of peace I consented. I arranged her conveyance hither; for the rest she must take her chance.'

'How did she come?'

'In the vessel of one Tigellinus, who has periodical business in the island.'

Both men burst into a laugh.

[pg 169] 'It would be curious to know how the fair Plautia is pleased,' said Afer.

'I do not know; and whatever her experiences may be, and whatever befall her, she must abide by it, for she would take her own headstrong way.'

'She will be seen and whispered of through the island, as sure as yon sun shines upon us. Inquiries will be made. Are you not afraid of contingencies arising, which it would be unwise and unnecessary to provoke—with your pardon, Prefect, for speaking thus.'

The confidential follower nodded significantly toward the west, as if to indicate some particular part of the island. Sejanus regarded him earnestly for a space, and then replied slowly—

'You are right, Afer. I understand what you mean. I thought of that possibility when I granted beauty's request, but I was too hasty and hurried at the time. I am more impressed with it now. This state of things is too dangerous; it must be altered, my Titus.'

'It would be wise to bring the lady's visit to a sudden and hasty close,' rejoined Afer.

'By Hercules! it must be done,' muttered Sejanus, knitting his brows. 'Only think, if my lady Livia were to hear! Come, let us go back to my house. I was intending to depart straight to the villa of Neptune; but not now. One thing is sure; I must see this bold damsel, as soon as there is sufficient darkness to cover one's movements. Come, let us march! May all the powers in heaven give her prudence and keep her in-doors till night. Given that, then the morn may break upon her at a safer distance.'

At a certain time previous to this conversation, the old man Tucca emerged from his dwelling and made toward the town. On the outskirts thereof was a wine tavern—a small, unpretending house, standing in a very narrow lane. It was the tavern of Paula. He went in and inquired of the widow herself for Alexander. She was a native of the island, like himself, and, of course, known to him, as long as she had lived, some five-and-forty years. A quiet smile rested on her yet comely face when, after a few commonplace remarks, Tucca made his inquiry. She brought him upstairs into a cell-like room, just large enough to hold a pallet-bed, whereon Zeno lay asleep.

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'Well, friend Tucca!' said the steward, starting up and stretching himself; 'what news? I am revenging myself, as you see, for my early business this morning.'

'She has sent me to get tablets, wax, and thread,' said the old man.

'Oh, indeed!' answered Zeno, nodding and yawning; 'this looks as if she intended to write a letter. If she does, it may tell us a secret, perhaps. Wait here, and I will be back directly.'

He left the room, and very soon returned with what the husbandman required.

'There you have them, Tucca; go and say you got them anywhere but here.'

'I am well pleased enough,' returned Tucca, 'for it saves me a walk.'

'And only right, Tucca; you grow old. Fail not to call here on your way with the missive, or if you are not to carry it, I must know how and when it flies.'

Tucca departed, and, in due course, once more emerged from his dwelling townward—this time with a stout stick, as if bound on a longer journey. He was barely out of sight of his own house, when he was startled by the steward stepping in front of him, from behind a corner of a wall.

'Well, Tucca,' said that individual, 'have you anything to show me?'

'Yes, truly, noble Zeno. Faith, you startled me coming out on me in that fashion,' answered the old man, bringing out the tablets, which were securely fastened with some of the thread and wax which Zeno had supplied.

'Thanks!' said the steward, thrusting them in his tunic. 'Now loiter on for some hundred yards past the tavern, and I will join you and return this.'

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He disappeared, and by and by rejoined Tucca at the place appointed, and gave him the tablets, to all appearance untouched. In the meantime, it had been an easy matter for his nimble and expert fingers to open the missive, note its contents, and fasten it up as before, with thread and wax from the same stock. The wine-grower perceived, to his inward satisfaction, that the epistle bore no sign of being meddled with, and went on his way to deliver it. He left the town on his left hand, and walked on until he arrived at the outer gate of the villa of Jove, just as Afer and his patron and their servants were turning their steps thither, as described. The quick eye of the knight caught sight of the old man as soon as he appeared on the inside of the enclosure trudging toward the barrack-houses.

'Look!' he exclaimed in a low voice, nudging the Prefect to enforce attention, 'look at yon old man. That is no other than Tucca, at whose house the fair Plautia is lodged. What does he up here? It would be worth while knowing, I'll warrant! A thousand pounds, but if we could get to know we should need little more.'

'But how?'

'Quick! There is time, and he does not notice us. Send and bid yon Pretorian stop him and ask his business inside the villa. Let your slave linger by and listen.'

Sejanus turned hastily and spoke to his slave Lygdus, who hastened to carry the order to the sentinel, whose post was one of mere discipline, since the townspeople came and went, and did their trafficking without the least ceremony, except at the entrances of the Imperial residence itself, which were closely watched.

The party then turned their steps and appeared to stroll gently back, as if in earnest talk. They saw the sentinel stop the wine-grower by placing his spear across his body. Lygdus stood by, and, after a brief parley, the old man was suffered to proceed. He finally disappeared into the door of the building which led to the officers' quarters.

'Pooh, 'tis only some concern of his own,' remarked Sejanus,—'buying or selling. Well, what did yonder fellow want?' he said to Lygdus, who came up. 'He seems a dirty, disreputable knave to wander about here without question.'

'He is charged with a letter to deliver to the Centurion Martialis, so please your highness,' replied the Nubian slave.

'From whom?' demanded his master.

'I do not know. I did not think it right to inquire into anything of the Centurion's affairs without authority, so I did not ask.'

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'Humph! Quite right, Lygdus; but did you see the tablets? He might have been lying.'

'I saw them when the guard demanded to see them. The man is Tucca, one of the oldest islanders and wine-growers. He is well known.'

'Is he, indeed? I crave his pardon, but he looked most villainously to my eyes. He should get himself a better tunic. But what seemed the letter like—the writing?'

'It was quite strange to me.'

'It is necessary that I see it. The Centurion has left the island till evening—you understand. We will go in again for a space. Come!'

Lygdus bent his head and retired to the rear, until Sejanus and his confidant had re-entered the officers' quarters. Then in a minute he appeared before the Prefect and the knight with the ill-fated epistle in his hands.

'No one saw you, Lygdus?' said Sejanus.

'No one. The Centurion's room is empty, and this was lying on his couch.'

'Warm water and open it.'

The slave brought a cup of hot water, and, by its aid, he softened the wax and removed the thread in a most dexterous manner, which bore strong evidence that it was not the first time such a task had been required of him.

The handwriting was large and bold, but palpably disguised. The keen eyes who perused it were easily assured of that.

'I fancy we have seen something like the turn of these characters before,' said Afer drily; 'the varnish is very thinly laid on.'

The epistle was addressed to L. Martialis, Centurion, Villa Jovis. They opened it and read:—

'One who has braved discomfort and peril desires to see you, Centurion. Close by the path which leads down to the southern landing there is a white rock. I shall await you there at nightfall. As you have a heart do not fail me!'

They looked at each other, and the Prefect broke into a laugh, which was, however, forced and disgusted. The knight smiled inwardly.

[pg 173] 'There!' uttered Sejanus, 'I told you I knew not. I am right and you are wrong. It is only thus one can have the chance, sometimes, to fathom what is lowermost in the mind of a woman. She is in love with Martialis! Who would have dreamt of it? A mere Centurion to ensnare the proud goddess!'

'It is, at the least, very extraordinary; but it does not follow that she is bitten with this soldier.'

'It is so likely that I accept the construction very easily.'

'There is one comfort; it may lead to fratricide,' muttered Afer.

'What do you say, Afer?' asked the Prefect.

'I say it is a bitter pill for the other brother.'

'Humph!' said his patron, too sulky in his wounded self-conceit to care about anybody else.

He clapped his hands for Lygdus, and ordered him to restore the tablets to their former state, in readiness for their owner.

'Come, we can go now. There is one thing certain, that we must be somewhere in the close vicinity of that same white rock this night.'

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CHAPTER VI.

We noticed Martialis in the last chapter issuing from the villa Jovis. The sparkle in his eye and the half smile on his lips, as he hummed an air during his rapid walk down to the little southern landing-place, betokened an errand of an agreeable nature. He rowed himself across to the mainland in a fisherman's skiff, and, thence, taking the road to Surrentum, was not long ere he stood in the shop of Masthlon, with the joyful and surprised Neæra in his arms.

'You grow more beautiful each time I see you, Neæra,' he said, pressing a kiss on her lips.

'Foolish!' she murmured, smiling, and sinking her eyes before his fervent gaze. 'And you, Lucius,' she added, laying the point of her finger on his toga, 'you are no Centurion to-day—you are in plain woollen—you are not for the road?'

'I have reached the end of my journey,' he replied, drawing her nearer.

'Your breastplate and cloak become you the best, but they mean haste away. This is the most welcome to me, for it is your own dress and——'

'And says that, for a time at least, its wearer is his own master, to spend his leisure as he lists,' said Martialis, finishing her speech and fondling the hand which rested on the bosom of his garment. 'I have come here, foolish or not, to pass the few hours at my command. Will you offer me no more hospitality than this shop can give?'

'Come,' she said, giving him a divine smile, and holding out her hand to lead him inside; 'but ah,

Lucius, we are so poor and simple!’

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The little dwelling-room, under the industrious and fastidious hands of herself and her mother, was seldom far removed from a state of scrupulous cleanliness and genial comfort. The articles of furniture which it contained were well worn, but speckless; and a bright wood fire, burning in a brazier, cheered and warmed the senses of an in-comer. At the door Neæra ran abruptly off, and her lover was left to the company of the patient, mild-eyed Tibia, her mother. The latter was engaged in scrubbing a brazen pot into a sunlike lustre, and although there were grounds for reasonable familiarity of bearing toward her visitor, yet the attempt came awkwardly and uncomfortably enough. This wore off, however, in a measure with the free, easy bearing of the young man, who sat and warmed himself at the fireside. When Neæra subsequently reappeared, she shone upon him in the best robes her slender wardrobe could furnish. They were modest and simple indeed. A few coins were all their worth, but poor as they were, her beauty made them seem handsome. Fresh and neat from her toilet, with her clear delicately-tinted skin and glossy hair, her person seemed to diffuse a delicious sense of purity and sweetness. She smiled upon the Centurion in the proud consciousness of her charms, and the dame Tibia, also, could not help paying her an especial look of approval.

‘How the child is growing into a woman,’ she murmured beneath her breath.

Neæra reached forth her hand to her lover, and the drapery of her tunic, falling back a little, displayed a rounded arm and wrist of the whiteness of the snowdrift, to which the tinge of toil-accustomed fingers bore a slight contrast.

‘Come,’ she said; ‘we will go and see my father.’

Taking his hand she led him to the workshop in the rear of the house, abutting on the patch of garden. On trying to open the door they found it fast, but they could hear the movements of the potter within. Neæra knocked and called upon her father loudly.

The bolt was drawn within, and they stood face to face with Masthlon, who was surprised at seeing his daughter’s companion.

‘Welcome, Centurion,’ he said. ‘Though Neæra had little need to bring you in here amid the clay of a potter’s shop.’

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The room was of good size, and the floor consisted of hard-trodden earth. A window, or rather an opening which could be closed by a shutter, was on one side, and against it stood a bench, on which was a litter of tools, as well as one or two unfinished clay models of figures, with which Masthlon was fond of varying his time. In the centre of the floor was the potter’s wheel, which gave him his legitimate occupation. A large oven stood on the other side, and close by was also a small furnace. As there were to be seen lumps of unshaped glass lying scattered about in various parts of the workshop, as well as relics of glass bottles and other vessels, together with the tools by which they were produced, it was obvious, that the art of glass-making formed also a pursuit of the potter, either as a hobby, or as a regular avocation. Masthlon himself was attired in his working clothes, and was smeared with clay and grime of the furnace from head to foot. From a habit of frequently drawing his hand across his forehead, his ample brow was of the colour of one of the little images on the bench; and, as this action was sometimes varied by a similar attention to other parts of his features, his face, in complexion, was little removed from the hue of his clothes. Neæra clasped her hands across his shoulder and leant her face toward his, for she was as tall, if not a little above his stature. The contrast between her lovely pure countenance and his oddly clay-daubed visage was so comical that Martialis smiled.

‘Come, father,’ said Neæra in his ear; ‘you have wrought enough for to-day. It is not often we have a visitor.’

‘Such a visitor—no!’ replied Masthlon, smiling. ‘Away! Leave me in my den—you want my room, not my company. Send your mother in here also, and keep the house yourselves.’

‘No, no!’

‘Stand off, girl, or farewell to your finery—think you that the soil on me is cleaner than that on the floor?’

He pushed her gently away from him and looked her over with a fond gaze of admiration. ‘Go, and trouble me not—you have troubled me enough already.’

‘I have come this day to relieve you of her,’ interposed Martialis.

‘Eh?’ cried Masthlon, with a mighty start at this apt and sudden speech. His face flushed and paled under its coating of clay, and a momentary tremor passed through him, whilst the fair skin of Neæra flooded crimson, and her eyes fell.

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‘Or, at least, to determine when your burden shall be lightened,’ added the young soldier.

‘Come, come; no more of this, Centurion,’ returned the potter, with a slight laugh, which had no shadow of gaiety in it, but only nervousness and pain. But the young man shook his head.

'Be not so hasty to bereave us of what little consolation we have of our lives,' added the potter.

'The bereavement need not be so complete as you seem to think,' said Martialis.

'She and you in Rome, and we in Surrentum,' sighed Masthlon; 'the severance will be thoroughly done. But it must be, and must be faced.'

'What binds you to Surrentum? Come to Rome—there will be greater scope for your talents, and fortune will flow in upon you.'

'Ah, yes, father!' cried Neæra eagerly, with delight in her eyes; 'and then we shall be nigh—everything persuades you—you cannot say anything against it—you know you cannot!'

She caressed him, once more, in her soft, loving manner, which never failed to fill the heart of her lover with secret pleasure, but Masthlon put her off as gently as before.

'The aging tree is not removed as easily as the young sapling,' he said. 'No! this is not a fate which befalls thy mother and myself alone: it follows all those who live long enough to see their bantlings grow out of childhood—others have to bear it, so must we. Go whither your duty calls you; your lives have to be moulded, ours are not so lightly altered. And when your husband weds you, child, you become of his station—we know better than to follow you, to your disparagement.'

'You do us little honour by that speech, Masthlon,' said Martialis; 'had I been of such a mean mind I would never have suggested what I have done.'

'You are both young, and cannot see as far as we older people,' replied Masthlon.

'I am glad of it, then, if it were to see such ignoble conduct. What say you, Neæra?'

The girl's head was hanging on her breast in painful thought. 'Could I be ashamed of my own parents?' she said.

[pg 178] The potter's face clouded deep and he went away to the window, where he turned his back on the lovers, and looked into the garden in silent reflection.

Martialis stepped to Neæra's side, and so they remained without a word for some time. A struggle was proceeding in Masthlon's breast, and his lips were moving as he communed with himself. 'Shall she be told?' he thought; 'would she lose me, or still cling to me? We have reared and tended her—new ways beget new ideas—it is idle to say we will be thus and thus until the time try us. To go, and find ourselves despised hereafter, perchance, would be a crueller thing than to remain here forgotten and forsaken. Must she be told? She knows nothing, or is ever like to know—how then can it matter to her if she be left in ignorance? But am I not selfish? Would it be just? I am afraid—it is fear; for the knowledge would sign her relief at once. Even if she still clung to me, how would he, a noble-born knight, take it? Yet, if she could disown me, after all our life of love and companionship, what is there honest or good in the world?'

A half-smothered groan broke from his lips in the tension of his feelings. He drowned it with a forced cough, and turned round. He looked upon the lovers standing in their fond attitude. They were a handsome pair, and the one not a whit unworthy of the other in any degree.

'Well, Masthlon, have you decided?' said Martialis. 'Have you dismissed your suspicion from your mind? You have hurt me by it, believe me!'

'Father!' began Neæra, leaving her lover's arms and going to him. The potter held up his hand before her and said, in a broken voice, scarcely more than a hoarse whisper—

'No—not father!'

'What!' cried the astonished girl.

A strange feeling rose through the mind of the Pretorian. He checked it, and despised himself for it, but he could not help it; he would have been other than human to have done so. He looked inquiringly for more to follow from the lips of the potter, but the latter merely murmured—

'Go, and leave me for a space!' and then dropped his head, and covered his face with his hands.

[pg 179] The sight of his evident agitation was too much for Neæra. She cast a look of perplexity and concern at her lover, and then sprang to her father's side. As she did so there was a loud knock at the door, which opened, simultaneously, to admit a brown broad-faced man with a short stiff beard and moustache, bearing a light wallet over one shoulder, and carrying a stout walking-stick in his hand.

The blow, with which Domitius Afer sought to rid himself of his troublesome client, nigh the huge moonlit pile of the Circus Maximus, on the night of the attempted assassination of Fabricius, was not lacking in force, but was a trifle out of direction to prove fatal. Had the stricken man lain without attention, much longer than he did, it would have been sufficient to answer the end that Afer had in view. But it was fated that a house door hard by should open, not long after the knight had disappeared, to allow a man to pass out into the silent street. The luckless Cestus was, as described, lying in the shadow of the wall, whither his patron had dragged him. He was, therefore, directly across the very narrow sidewalk; and, the gloom of the shadow of the wall being intensified by reason of the bright moonlight adjacent, the individual we have mentioned did not perceive the body in his hurry, until he was made aware of its presence by falling over it. He straightway drew the Suburan into the light to make a more minute examination, not having succeeded in awakening any sign of consciousness. In passing his hand over the breast, his fingers met a damp, clammy matter which caused him to shiver. He held his hand in the light, and saw it was blood. The stricken man was still warm and breathing, as he thought; so he, at once, ran back to the house whence he had issued, and knocked loudly. The help of the inmates was readily obtained, and the sorely wounded man was borne inside, and laid on a bed, pending the arrival of a physician. That person came, and practised so well that Cestus recovered consciousness ere he left him.

'Here is no matter of killing for theft,' observed the leech to the household, gathered in concern to hear his dictum, 'unless, indeed, as may be easily believed, that he was the thief. More likely a street scuffle with some night-hawks of his own feather. 'Tis a deep gash, but ill-aimed. He is a tough rogue, and will recover most likely. Had he been a good, honest citizen of worth to be deplored, he most likely would have died. But being what I take him to be, a rascal, he will come round no doubt. I am afraid, neighbour, you will never be requited for your benevolence.'

'No matter,' responded the master of the house, who was an elderly man, with sparse, gray hair, and a sad expression of face; 'do your best to effect a cure, if possible; if he lives, it may perhaps prove a lesson.'

'More likely to walk off with your valuables,' said the physician, as he went out of the door.

'Never could be such ingratitude,' murmured the other; 'even my wicked, wayward boy would scarce be so inhuman; and he has descended as low, perhaps, as this poor wretch.'

Cestus had every care paid to him, and for some days he remained in a critical state. Then he took a favourable turn for the better, and, aided by his robust constitution, very shortly became convalescent.

His ingenuity was very lightly taxed to explain his disaster to his benefactor. He had refused, he said, to join a society of his fellow-workmen, who, no doubt, had attempted to be rid of him as being a thorn in their sides. He, likewise, hinted that he would be in danger of his life if he remained in Rome, and that he would take the earliest opportunity to be quit of it. As he was accustomed to lounge away his time in idleness, the period of his confinement did not prove so irksome as it might otherwise have done. His benefactor learnt to come and converse at tolerable length, when he became aware of the patient's plausible and fluent tongue. It was, therefore, impossible, that, speaking thus familiarly and often, Cestus should not obtain a certain insight into the family affairs of his host. Amongst other things, he discovered that he owned a scapegrace son, whose misdoings were the sorrow of his life. The great and varied knowledge which the Suburan possessed of the outlawry of the city, enabled him to pitch upon the erring youth as a denizen of the same notorious locality as himself. This much he did not think prudent to reveal, and so, at the same time, saved the grieving parent a far darker evidence of crime than that which he already lamented. Hardened as he was, the old man's sorrow and sense of shame touched him. His narrow escape from death and his enfeebled state, no doubt, had softened the crust about his heart. Had he been a member of the family he could not have been tended with more care and kindness, and this tugged at his heartstrings likewise. He acknowledged his gratefulness, and, for the time at least, it is certain he felt it. But, in the silent and lonely hours of his reveries, his mind was constantly engaged in weaving a web around his treacherous patron. It was, literally, war to the knife.

'He thinks I am dead,' he muttered to himself, with a smile of satisfaction. 'Good! his awakening will be all the more sudden and startling.'

When once safely delivered out of the jaws of death, the march of Cestus toward complete recovery was wonderfully rapid. Day by day he made a huge stride, and, day by day, his appetite grew more and more surprising. When at length the physician ceased from paying his visits, the patient hinted at his own speedy departure.

'Had it been safe for me to have been removed to my own home I would not have troubled you so far,' he said to his generous host; 'but I am strong enough now to bear a journey, and I will betake myself from the city altogether.'

But his friend in need bade him beware of a relapse, and advised him not to mar a wonderful restoration of strength by premature exertion, for the sake of a few days' earlier liberty. Cestus listened and took the advice, which protracted his sojourn for a week.

His plan of action had already been resolved on from the first, and he now made the few arrangements to carry it out. To gather strength and harden his frame by gentle exercise he made short excursions out of doors. The first time he did so his entertainer tried to dissuade him, on account of the danger he ran of being seen by his supposed enemies.

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'Why, master,' returned Cestus, 'there is less danger than you think; for, in the first place, it is the time of day when those fine fellows, who left me for dead, with a curse on them, are all at their daily labour. Then again, I would remind you, that my looks are altered for the time. I am as thin and shrunken in body as an eel-skin; my beard is two inches long; and I further purpose to alter myself with a certain juice of a berry which I can buy for a sesterce; so have no fear, my kind benefactor.'

Now, in safe keeping in the Subura, Cestus had an amount of money which remained of the last instalment he had demanded of his patron, as we have related previously. A tolerable portion had been already squandered, but the residue was enough to enable any Roman artisan, such as he represented himself to be, to live comfortably for a year without labouring. But, not knowing to what exigencies the execution of his plans might bring him, he resolved to incur no suspicion by its immediate use. He, therefore, applied to his host, to provide him with a small loan to cover the cost of a few clothes and the expenses of his journey.

'Your honour,' he said, 'has been so good already that I shame to ask more from you. To take in a poor wretch—to snatch him from death's door—to nurse him, feed him like a brother, and with small hope of return, is a thing that the gods will bless you for and prosper you.'

'Say no more,' replied the other; 'here is what will help you.'

He placed in the Suburan's hand a sum equal to about five pounds sterling.

'Heaven reward your worship!' said Cestus, kissing the robe of his generous friend. 'If I have health and strength I will repay you this loan, as well as the cost you have been put to on my account; but, if I could discharge the debt of gratitude as easily as the money, I would be thankful indeed.'

'Think no more of it,' rejoined the other.

It is not too much to say that Cestus was really touched and grateful for his treatment. He even swore to himself that he would prove it practically, at some future time, if possible.

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The first thing that he did, on getting out of doors, was to obtain a supply of a certain kind of berry, yielding a juice which he diluted to bring to a requisite tinge. This he applied to his skin, and it, at once, gave him the appearance of a man bronzed by exposure to the weather, whilst his thinned drawn features easily suggested, at the same time, the effects of fatigues and privations. Presenting himself suddenly before his host, he was gratified to learn that the change was so great as to mystify that worthy man for a moment.

This excursion proved to Cestus how very far his limbs were from their pristine state of sturdiness. His next expedition, with his embrowned face, was a ramble into the Subura. He took the most unfrequented streets, and, when he arrived at his destination, he avoided all chance of contact with acquaintances. Sending for the individual whom he had constituted his banker, he remained closeted with that worthy in a retreat secure from intrusion. This man was a tavern-keeper in the lowest part of the Subura. His business was large, and Cestus one of his prodigal customers. Not a coin of the money he amassed in the practice of his trade but had been obtained by its spenders in the vocations of crime and vice. Learned as Cestus was in the secret history of his native locality, his knowledge was superficial compared with this man's. Without actually engaging in any unlawful pursuit himself he was the confidant of all others who did. He was receptive and silent as the grave. Without incriminating himself he aided his hideous customers, and they, in return, bestowed on him their patronage. His trustworthiness was his power, and Cestus had perfect confidence in applying to him for the little help he required. The publican was truly surprised to see his friend, for all clue to his whereabouts had been completely lost. Cestus speedily made him acquainted with the history of his disappearance, and wound up with a tremendous oath for revenge. The other tried to get at the relations of his friend with his patron, the knight, but the Suburan only smiled and put his finger along his nose.

'Some day, brother,' he said, 'but not now.'

'Well, well, as you please—I care little.'

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'All I want you to do now is to send and get to know, while I wait here, if my patron is in Rome and likely to be,' proceeded Cestus. 'I like to know where I have him, for I am going to take a holiday with a kinsman in Puteoli until I get strong again. The sea air will bring me round, and then I will return to pay attention to my worthy patron on the Esquiline.'

'Do you intend to knife him straight off?' inquired the publican.

'Humph! you are not very flattering,' returned Cestus; 'but haste, and let me have what I want to know, and along with it all the cash I left with you. I shall want all I can scrape together.'

The publican departed, and, in an hour, was back with what Cestus wanted. The latter stowed away his treasure safely in the breast of his tunic, and learned that his patron was in the island of Capreae, in the train of the Prefect.

'And when returns?' he demanded.

'That is more than any one can tell,' answered his banker.

'Capreae is where Caesar dwells?'

'It is, brave Cestus—has ever been there?'

'No; but it can be seen at times, like a speck, from Puteoli. He can't stay there for ever.'

'Who—Caesar?'

'No, you fool—Afer.'

'Ah!'

'Well, I can bide my time,' said Cestus, rising to go. 'No one was ever worth much that could not. He may rest where he will until I am strong—and then!'

The Suburan shook his fist, and, bidding farewell to his friend, took his slow way homeward.

With this daily increase of exercise his body began to gather something of its wonted firmness. His last excursion was down to the river bank, where he took passage in a regular trader to Puteoli. The vessel was to sail the following day, and Cestus took his farewell of his host with many expressions of gratitude.

The voyage to Puteoli is not long, and in that most important centre of commerce Cestus remained two days. He stayed at a public inn, and, on the evening of the second day, he left the town after dark, and took his way toward Neapolis.

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'Good!' he muttered to himself, as he quitted the gates; 'if any curious eyes have been watching me now they will be mystified. They may search Puteoli from end to end, and they will as soon find my kinspeople as myself;' the said kinsfolk being, in fact, a mere fabrication as far as Puteoli was concerned.

He did not think it prudent to strain his budding strength by traversing the whole distance to Neapolis on that night, so he put up at the first tavern he met with, at a convenient distance from Puteoli. The next morning he was astir early and entered Neapolis. Here he loitered for a day, and then proceeded on a leisurely walking tour of the bay. He ambled along through the towns and past the villas which lined that matchless shore, drinking in the pure air, and enjoying the scenery as far as he was capable of doing. He had a well-filled purse, and he took his ease at his inn, where he fed and drank of the best. He did not overtask his strength, and every day increased it, for, indeed, he could not have hit upon a better plan for that end.

In this way he proceeded through Herculaneum, Pompeii, Stabiae, the most considerable towns on his route, till at length, on one afternoon, he sat to rest himself upon the worn basin of the self-same ancient fountain, of which we have already spoken, on the verge of the town of Surrentum.

'Houf!' he sighed, as he seated himself; 'and here is the place at last! And now to find my potter!' He sank into a reverie, and then lifted his head and looked around him. 'The place looks the same as far as I can remember—it must be fourteen years since I was here. Fourteen years! How in the name of the furies do I know what has happened since then! Tibia, my sister, may be dead and dust by this time—her husband too, and—and the whole lot, and then what better shall I be? It is strange I never seemed to think seriously of this till now, at the very gates of the place—what if they are gone, flitted to no one knows where—Greece, Egypt, Africa, Gaul,—why, then I shall have only the small satisfaction of treating my patron to a taste of his own play—humph! No matter, I shall soon know.'

He arose from his seat and walked a few paces onward, when he called to a lad who was nigh.

'Boy, do you know a potter hereabouts, by name Masthion—if he be dead or alive? or——'

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The boy simply turned and pointed to the end of a narrow lane which debouched close to. Cestus, thereupon, looked more inquiringly about him, as if striving to recall some remembrance of the spot.

'I seem to have a sort of recollection of this place—up there is it?' The lad nodded.

'Alive?'

The taciturn youth nodded once more, and Cestus walked on with his mind considerably relieved. Once in the little street his memory served him better. 'Just the same,' he said, striding into the shop. No one being there he proceeded into the house, where he was equally unsuccessful in discovering any sign of life. He then tried the workshop, and, at last, stood in the presence of those within, as we have described.

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CHAPTER VIII.

The short sea-trip from Rome, and the few days' subsequent sauntering excursion, from the opposite side of the bay, had served to restore the face and frame of Cestus to a nearer approach to their native fulness of outline. Nevertheless, his broad physiognomy was yet pinched and shrunken, and his garments of rough woollen material hung sharply and loosely about his diminished bulk. The artificial colouring of his skin was yet continued, for the nature of the Suburan was cunning and suspicious, and did not deem the distance from Rome a sufficient reason to discard even this disguise.

On perceiving the occupants of the workshop he stopped short on the threshold for a moment, and surveyed them with as much surprise as they regarded him. Masthliion raised his face from his hands, and, taking one step forward, gazed at the new-comer intently. Cestus fixed his small keen eyes on the lovely face and form of Neæra, who, instinctively, inclined toward her lover. Then he withdrew his glance, and, marching up to Masthliion, clapped the potter on the shoulder with all his old swagger and assurance. 'How now, kinsman? How fare you after all these years? Do you not remember me?' cried he.

Masthliion's heavy brows were knitted: his eyes gazed, nay, almost glared intensely into his visitor's face. It would be almost impossible to describe the mixture of feelings which agitated his whole frame. Wonder and relief were dominant, and anguish lay numb beneath. Suddenly his visage cleared, and he clutched the arm of Cestus convulsively, with such a grasp of iron that the Suburan winced.

[pg 189] 'Marvel of marvels!' he gasped; 'what, Cestus, is it thou? From where? Thou art not dead, then—the gods be praised.'

'I'm glad on't, kinsman, if it hath pleased thee,' said Cestus.

'I have had you in my mind every day for months past—nay, as you entered, you were present in my mind.'

'That was love indeed, and means a warm welcome—thanks, brother!'

'Welcome—ay, welcome!' exclaimed the potter, seizing both hands of the Suburan and shaking them fervently, 'the very man of all I wished to see, and the least expected. It is the doing of the gods—praised be the gods!'

'Humph!' ejaculated Cestus, just a little doubtful whether his kinsman's joy was altogether attributable to personal regard; 'and, if you will let me have my say, I am just as light-hearted as you to find you on earth, and not departed to the land of spirits. Luck is with you, Cestus! But how of Tibia, my sister?'

'Did you not see her in the house?'

'She is breathing like yourself, then! No, I saw her not, nor any live being, though I looked in every room. More fortune, Cestus; for they are all just as you would wish them, even to—and this bonny wench, kinsman. This is the little lass I saw last, as a bit of a chit, with her doll of rags?'

'The same, Cestus—Neæra; she has grown,' said Masthliion.

'Grown! You say true. Neæra—I had forgotten your name—come, kiss your uncle, after how many years away, he dare not say, lest it make him feel so old.'

But the fair girl shrank back from the proffered salute, and offered her hand instead, saying she was glad to see her uncle.

'Well—well!' cried Cestus, with his loud rough laugh, 'I will dispense with the kiss—I will not press it. I would not rob that young gentleman of even one; and, truth to tell, I have not a kissing look about my figurehead. You are, at the same time, the finest lass I have seen for many a day—I give thee joy, Masthliion, of thy lovely daughter. And this noble gentleman, kinsman, has no doubt come to the same conclusion long ago—you do not make us known—he is no apprentice to thy pottery trade I can see.'

[pg 190] 'A friend, kinsman—and—and Neæra's betrothed,' explained the potter, with an askant look at the countenance of Cestus.

'Ho! ho!' cried that worthy, 'then 'tis all settled. Give thee joy—you have won a fair jewel, sir—but you give me no name, kinsman.'

Martialis had drawn himself to his full height, and his face was fixed in its haughtiest aspect, on the voluble, unretiring Suburan.

'My name is Martialis; and if you are indeed the uncle of Neæra I will take your hand,' he said, stretching out his fingers accordingly.

'I am proud to do so with such a free-minded noble,' answered Cestus, suiting the action to the word, 'for you are of knightly rank, I see, and as much above me as the eagle above a barn-door fowl. Nevertheless I can wish you happiness; fortune, without doubt, you already possess, so there is no need to wish you that.'

'I thank you!' said Martialis coldly.

'And you! I remember you being stouter in body and whiter in face. Whence have you come?' inquired Masthlion.

'It is a long story, kinsman, and I will tell you at leisure,' replied Cestus; 'enough for the present to tell you I have been at death's door, and have come to gain back my strength in the pure air of Surrentum. I have come to tarry a season in your house, Masthlion, if you are willing—it shall cost you nothing, save the infliction of my company.'

'Stop, and welcome, till you are hale and strong; but, for the rest, I can yet afford to house my kinsman, as a guest, without turning tavern keeper—no man who tastes my bread and salt under my roof must pay for the same.'

'Well, as you like. I am delighted to see you, by Jupiter.'

'And I thee—I have needed thee, and have much to say.'

'And I also; most especially to have my eyes gladdened with Neæra, my fair niece—but come, there yet remains sister Tibia.'

[pg 191] 'Ay, true,' said Masthlion, going to the door. 'Into the house! Haste thee, girl—take thy uncle's wallet! Prepare his room! Get water! The Centurion will excuse thee for a little time. I will go and get rid of my clay coating and be with you soon—come!'

They all, therefore, left the workshop, and proceeded into the house. The potter's wife, in the meantime, had re-entered, and met them. She looked curiously at the strange figure of Cestus for a moment, and then rushed forward and embraced him, giving vent to as many signs and expressions of astonishment and delight as her quiet mild nature was capable of. There was, indeed, a faint similarity between the character of their faces, but very little between their dispositions.

'Hark'ee, brother-in-law!' said Cestus to Masthlion, as the latter was withdrawing out of the little guest chamber, whither Neæra had conveyed the appliances wherewith the traveller was to refresh himself after his journey, 'tell me something more of that tall young fellow downstairs. 'Tis a gay young cock to be haunting a potter's house.'

''Tis a matter which has already given much trouble—nor am I yet satisfied,' returned Masthlion, knitting his heavy brows.

'Just so; the girl is handsome, and people tattle. One of his breed is a dangerous visitor to your pigeon-cote,' said Cestus.

'He has acted fairly and honestly, and is in haste to wed her.'

'Bid him wait, and be patient for a while.'

'What was I to do? I bade her tell him to come no more—to give her up as unfitting. He refused, and I went to Rome to find thee.'

'Aha! Hast been to the great city, Masthlion, a-seeking me—well?'

'I could not find you, nor yet Balbus, with whom you dwelt.'

Cestus grinned.

'No, it is not likely, for Balbus is not there.'

'I did my best; I was in despair, and could not but let things go as they were fated. You never came nigh all these years—it was reasonable to suppose that you were dead.'

'And nearly dead I have been.'

'Even as you were entering, he was pressing me for her marriage.'

[pg 192] 'I came just pat, did I not?'

'Thank the kind gods you have thereby relieved me of a heavy load, and I fear have—but that is for me alone.'

'But know you nothing more than the young fellow's name?' demanded Cestus.

'I inquired in Rome. He bears a high character.'

'He is a citizen then. What brought him here?'

'He is a Pretorian Centurion with the Prefect at present in Capreae.'

'Ho! ho!' murmured Cestus, 'this may be useful. I am sorry you had your journey to Rome for nothing, kinsman; but I am not too late, as it happens, to ease your mind. I can, as you know, help you in this matter, and I really came with much the same business in my head. It is a long story, and had best be entered upon when we have a flagon of wine between us, and the women asleep in bed upstairs.'

'Good; that will be to-night, if you are not too tired,' replied Masthlon, with a sigh of deep satisfaction.

'Meanwhile, fob the Pretorian off; it may, perhaps, be worth his while—who knows?'

Masthlon retired to make himself presentable, and when both men appeared below, they found a simple meal ready awaiting them.

They did not recline on couches to their food, after the luxurious manner of the higher classes, but sat round the table in the simple old-fashioned way. Cestus ate and drank vigorously. Nor did his tongue remain idle. Among many things, he informed them that he had met with a severe accident, in which he had broken some ribs, and in consequence of which his master had granted him leave of absence to visit his kinsfolk, as soon as he was able to move.

[pg 193] He had nearly all the conversation to himself. His sister was naturally silent, and her husband was too busy with his thoughts to speak much. As far as the lovers were concerned, Neæra's mind was divided between disgust at having her blissful day spoiled by the unexpected visitor, and the disagreeable feeling of knowing that his stay was to be more or less prolonged. Her nature shrank from this unknown relative—his appearance, his loud, over-confident, self-sufficient style of talk, not unmingled with coarse wit or impertinence. He was an unwelcome addition to her family circle, especially in the presence of her lover. Many a time did the warm blood flame in her cheeks, and the fire flash in her eyes, as the Suburan's tongue wagged on with its accustomed fluency; and, not the least, on account of the free and easy bearing of the talker towards her Centurion. Thus, when at length the Pretorian grew wearied of the pertinacity and familiarity of these attentions, and seized the earliest opportunity of taking his leave, the fair, indignant girl was relieved, even though the movement was to cost her the company of her lover. Angry, vexed, and ashamed, she laid her head on his shoulder as they stood alone before parting. He noted the red cheeks and the clouded brow, and he smiled.

'What think you of your new-found uncle?' he said.

'Would he had never been better known to me than hitherto,' she answered.

'You do not like him?'

'How could I?'

'And you never before heard of him?'

'Never; would it were the same now!'

'It is strange,' he muttered. These last words were not audible to Neæra, and after a moment's consideration he bade her bring her father for a few words.

'You are angered—you are vexed at this man?' she said anxiously.

'He can be of no consequence to me, nor need I ever see him again.'

'You will never come while he is here, and he may stay—oh, so long.'

'We will see,' he replied, smiling, as he took her in his arms again. 'But go,' he said, rousing himself; 'time begins to press upon me; it will be sunset ere I reach the island. Go, bring your father.'

'Lucius, what meant he when he said, "Not father!" in the workshop?' asked Neæra earnestly, looking up into the soldier's face ere she loosed herself from his embrace.

They gazed into each other's eyes. The black piercing orbs met the lustrous gray ones, shining with their lovelight, as if to read each other's souls, and then he shook his head.

[pg 194] 'I know not,' he said; 'it may be nothing—it may be something; you will discover in time, my beloved. Think no more of it.'

Nææra departed, and brought Masthlon. Martialis proceeded to impress upon him the desirability of fixing a time for his marriage with Nææra. He used all his arguments, but to no purpose, for the potter refused all negotiation.

'In a reasonable time you shall know, but not thus soon.'

'Good. The next time I come I will demand it,' answered the lover, in some heat. 'Farewell!'

Masthlon left the room, and the Centurion, as he embraced his betrothed, said, 'Your father is unreasonable,—of what use is it to delay?'

She murmured something to appease him, and he finally tore himself away.

In order that she might come into contact as little as possible with Cestus, she began to engage herself in household work elsewhere than where he was. This she managed to protract until near the time for retiring, which she made earlier than usual; and, thus, was almost altogether quit of the object of her dislike. By and by the dame Tibia thought fit to follow her example, so the potter and his brother-in-law were left together.

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CHAPTER IX.

The fitful movements on the floor of the room overhead ceased in the course of a few minutes, and Masthlon knew that his wife was in bed. During the last hour his nervous agitation had increased, and had been hard to hide; he now, therefore, hastened to put an end to this painful state of suspense.

'Are you too weary to talk now, Cestus; or will you that we should wait?' he said to his companion.

'I'd as lieve have a chat with thee now; in fact, I feel in the humour. I am in rare spirits at finding everybody well and happy,' replied Cestus gaily. 'Bring out the drink, kinsman, and shut the door; what better could one wish when we are alone together?'

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Masthlon quickly made the required dispositions and sat opposite his brother-in-law before the bright fire alluded to. He stretched his arm out at length upon the table, with his fingers nervously moving and tapping thereon, whilst he watched the Suburan pour out some wine into two cups. Cestus's keen perceptions had already observed the signs of his kinsman's inquietude of mind, and he, therefore, became just as deliberate and phlegmatic in his movements, following a natural bent in his humour, which, with equal satisfaction, would have watched the torture of a Sisyphus, or the wriggling of a maimed and terrified insect. The blaze of the logs threw their countenances into relief—the newly-grown shaggy beard of the Roman, and his swarthy stained skin, together with his blunt features, contrasted with the high, domelike, intellectual forehead, overhanging the deep-set, bright eyes of the potter, so anxiously, thirstily bent on the calm, lazy motions of his companion. No other light being present, their distorted shadows flickered and moved athwart the opposite wall in varied and grotesque forms.

'Kinsman, you are anxious,' observed Cestus, as he slowly dribbled the wine into his cup until the liquid bubbled on the very brim.

'I own it,' replied Masthlon.

The Suburan raised the brimming cup carefully to his mouth and took a deep draught, whilst the potter hastily took a sip which barely wet his lips.

'Yes,' continued Cestus, 'you are anxious because you have a very strong notion that the time has come when that rare girl, who is warming her pretty limbs in bed upstairs, is beginning to trim her feathers to fly from the old bird's nest.'

'I cannot deny it,' replied Masthlon briefly.

'Why, it is the way of the world. You could never hope for such as she to escape matrimony and go on, as a maiden, all her days?'

'It would not be likely; she is as good a child as she is fair. The point is already settled.'

'Well then, if she is fated to leave you with her husband, why should it trouble you the more to see me drop in? Did you think I was coming to carry her off? It would amount to the same thing if I did.'

'You are trifling, Cestus,' said the potter somewhat sternly. 'It is a sore trial to be bereft of an only child at any time, but that does not now constitute the whole matter. While she was a child all was well, but when she found a lover it behoved me to think that she and I were not all concerned in the matter. Had she been my own flesh and blood she could not have been more to me. Yet she is only a charge; and, although I thought you dead, I made the attempt to find you. When that attempt was vain, and you appeared so strangely and opportunely, I was agitated. I am anxious now, but in a different way—my load of responsibility has left me. The child is the dearest thing on earth to me, and what touches her touches me to the inmost fibre of my heart.'

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'And with a perfect right, Masthlon. You have reared her and tended her, and she is yours more than anybody else's,' replied Cestus, nodding approvingly; 'up to a few weeks ago I knew not whether she lived or not—whether you lived or not. You had her as your own, and you might have disposed of her according to your own ideas, but for circumstances, which, unexpectedly, occurring a few weeks ago, as I say, revived in me the greatest interest in the girl. I want no account of your stewardship, kinsman, for I cannot claim it—it is not needed; the girl bears it in her looks. I can neither claim any duty or affection—I want no sentiment—my concern is of a different nature. Nevertheless it is of sufficient importance to me to ask you to go into particulars about this gallant who has found the way to her heart.'

Cestus imbibed another good draught of wine, and after refilling his cup in readiness for the next, he settled himself to listen to the potter's account of Neæra's lover. When he had heard everything that Masthlon could tell him he ejaculated 'Ha!' and relapsed into deep thought as he gazed into the fire.

'Well! what is your opinion?' inquired Masthlon.

'Opinion!' echoed Cestus, 'my opinion is that they have already settled the matter beyond your interference, or mine. If they have taken such a strong fancy for each other that is enough for sensible people.'

'But the youth—the Pretorian—do you approve of him?' said Masthlon impatiently.

'That is a question more of sentiment,' replied Cestus, 'and, as the girl belongs more to yourself than to me, I will leave it with you—if you are satisfied I am.'

'One thing troubles me,' said the potter, knitting his brows and passing his hand across his forehead, 'I could wish he had been more on a level with her station—she has been humbly bred in this house—do you not think, Cestus, there is great fear of his fancy cooling as time goes on? He will for ever be contrasting her simple, plain ways with those proud dames of the city, and he will repent. Ah, Cestus, I fear he will!'

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'Humph!' said the Suburan, shrugging his shoulders, whilst a grin broke forth on his face, 'she must run the chance of that accident. Perhaps there may not turn out to be such a difference between them after all. To my eyes she seems as good as he is, and practice will alter her. You have a fancy that your daughter may some day tire of her elevation and return to her old ways under the same old roof.'

'Heaven forbid! I trust she may be happy with husband and children.'

'Just so. *I* have no objection whatever,' observed Cestus calmly, 'but there remains *one* who might, and, until that opinion is obtained, my tall young Pretorian must practise patience and restrain himself, even though he burst.'

'How! What do you mean?' cried Masthlon. 'Another—you never told me.'

'No, I did not; it was not necessary or wise at the time, which I think is some fourteen or fifteen years ago.'

Masthlon nodded, and his face betrayed the most intense eagerness. Cestus continued coolly, 'I brought that child to you as a yellow-haired brat, and told you she was an orphan of a poor workman, an old friend of mine. The story was a lie and I deceived you.'

The blood crimsoned the potter's face, and he drew up his form. Indignation glowed in his eyes, but curbing himself, he said with lofty reproach, 'A lie, Cestus—that was well indeed.'

'Nay, don't fluster yourself, kinsman,' continued the Suburan, with the utmost *sang froid*, 'it was as good a tale to tell you at the time as any. It did you no harm, for you knew no better; nor did I dream that the necessity would ever come that you should. You were without a brat, so I thought you would be glad of this one. I handed it over to you as a stray helpless fledgeling belonging to nobody, and your mind has consequently never been uneasy.'

'Well, and the truth?'

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'Did your mind never suspect as you looked upon the girl shooting up? Did you never wonder and say to yourself, what kind of poor swinkers were they from whom sprang such a brave slip? Why, it is the first thought which would have struck me, had I never known anything about her—a tall clean-made lass, like one of their goddesses in their temples. I have watched her, kinsman, these few hours—she has ripened just to what might have been expected. I have seen the turn and flash of her eyes, the working of her thoughts written plainly on her face—her whole bearing. Did they ever spring out of the den of work-a-day folks? No, her breed will show itself. Common homespun and ignorance cannot hide it from those that know it—but what can you know, Masthlon, of these proud aristocrats?'

'Aristocrats!' exclaimed the potter, springing from his seat. 'This is another deception—another of your tales!'

'That you will discover before very long, I hope,' replied Cestus drily.

'And her people yet live, say you?'

'One at least—that will be quite sufficient.'

Masthlon dropped back into his seat with a suppressed groan. 'Then if this be true I have indeed lost her!' he said, and he buried his face in his hands.

'Tis nought to grieve over,' remarked Cestus, shrugging his shoulders in contempt at his companion's want of shrewdness; 'on the contrary, you should be in a dancing mood with joy. You have reared up the youngster to as fine a filly as one could wish to see, and you may well expect to have your strong chest well lined—better than ever it was before.'

'Tell me not of money—who thinks of money!' cried Masthlon. 'All the gold in the proud city of Rome itself would never comfort me one jot for the taking away of the child. Why did you ever bring her to me, Cestus, and then I had been spared this?—but then, if you had not, I had missed the happiness of the child's presence these fourteen years.'

'Exactly,' replied Cestus, seconding that with alacrity, 'and then, kinsman, as we have already agreed that you must lose her whichever way it goes, it is, therefore, best to be rid of her on the best terms. Strike the balance and you have a great deal to thank me for. Cheer up, man; things are seldom so black as they are painted at first. You will not be left out altogether in the cold, maybe.'

'The Centurion and she have already pressed me to follow them to Rome,' said Masthlon dejectedly.

'Good! it is the only place fit for a sensible man to dwell in. You may be as secret as you wish, or as public as you think proper to make yourself.'

'I should be nearer to her of a truth,' muttered the potter to himself, 'and could get a glimpse of her from time to time.'

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'True again,' cried Cestus, overhearing; 'that is to be done quietly at any corner of a street; but it would be well to avoid possible disappointment and not build upon any nearer familiarity—knights and potters don't match very well.'

'I know it, Cestus, I know it! But yet it would be strange if she could forget,' murmured Masthlon.

Cestus took another pull at his wine, and looking across at his companion's troubled face, said briskly, 'Come, Masthlon, this is only speculation; let us get to the facts! Have you anything belonging to the girl which might serve as a token of her early years?'

Masthlon rose up without a word and left the room.

'That looks well,' muttered Cestus to himself, and he was once more addressing his attentions to the wine jar when he stopped himself. 'No! no! be careful, Cestus,' he said; 'you are only an invalid yet, and only need what will do you good. You must get strong again as fast as possible.'

Masthlon re-entered bearing a small bundle neatly and tightly bound. He untied and unrolled the package on the table.

'There, Cestus!' he said,—'there are the self-same things which she had about her when you left her here. They have been carefully kept.'

The small eyes of the Suburan flashed with joy as they rested on the contents. He lifted them up one by one and examined them. They consisted, as the potter said, of the tiny garments of a child two or three years old; and, in addition, there was a small bag of soft leather, not larger than the girth of a small-sized walnut, to which was attached a fine steel chain to encircle the neck. Pouncing on the bag Cestus extracted a carved amulet of polished stone. His face fairly beamed with delight as he gazed. 'Good!' he said, as he replaced the stone, and put the bag carefully

away in his breast, 'this is of the highest importance; taken together with yourself and Tibia they are enough for what I want. And now to let you into the secret. In the first place, Masthlion, that rare piece of womankind who is dreaming of her lover upstairs, owes her life directly to me, the rough bear, whose face she declined to profane her pretty lips with.'

'Her life!' exclaimed the potter.

[pg 201] 'Nothing less, kinsman,' continued Cestus. 'The same Balbus whom you knew as my master, was a man of great estates and wealth. I acted as a kind of bailiff for him in Rome, and feathered my nest very fairly indeed. There was a kinsman of this Balbus, a young man, and not very well off as regards worldly goods. In the course of events this person and myself had grown to be very intimate and confidential over various little matters in which I had served him on the sly. He was well born, well spoken, and well dressed—a gentleman born and bred; but, at heart, as great a scamp as any footpad and cut-throat that haunts the roadside. Being only very moderately supplied with money, in his own right, his mind very naturally dwelt upon the enormous amount which flowed annually into the coffers of his kinsman, old Balbus, my master. It is a weakness of human nature, Masthlion, for a poor man to speculate concerning a rich kinsman. But this youngster had a subtle brain beyond his years, and was not content to speculate. To wait on chance, in his case, was, in all probability, to wait and be no better; for, had he even been the next heir, his kinsman, Balbus, although got into years, was hale and hearty, and as tough as leather. That was bad enough; but what made it worse for his hopes, he was not the direct heir. There was one life between him and what he schemed for. That one was all the more closely and tenderly watched because it was all that my old master Balbus had left him. Of all his family nothing remained to him but this one life—a daughter's daughter; the mother, the last of his children, had died in giving it birth, and he was left, like an old oak, with this young slip budding beside him. That young slip, as I sit here before you, Masthlion, is the girl who calls you father.'

The potter sat still. His gaze was concentrated with painful intensity on the speaker. His fingers clenched the table like a vice, and his breast heaved and fell in a tumult of emotion.

'You can easily supply the rest,' continued Cestus.

[pg 202] Masthlion nodded without speaking, and his head fell on his breast. His heart swelled to bursting. He dare not trust himself to open his mouth to utter a sound. If this was true, and he felt it was, the figure of his Neæra's grandparent rose in his mind's eye—a haughty, stern, and aristocratical old man, extending a proffered reward and polite thanks with a lofty condescension which could not be mistaken for anything but a final dismissal; and there, beside him, the child herself, in her rich robes, seeming too full of delight at the novelty and pleasure of her new position to think very seriously of her separation from the old. He pictured himself refusing the proffered gold, and turning away to go back to his desolate and darkened hearth, far away and forgotten for ever.

His fancy was warm, and his sensibilities as keen as a sensitive woman's. The probability of such a scene as this, which leaped so swiftly and vividly across his brain, was almost too much for his nature to bear. His throat pained him, and the water seemed to burn its way into his eyes; so he sank his head gradually lower until his brow rested on the table.

'Well, the rest comes naturally enough after what I have said,' continued Cestus, seemingly taking no heed of his companion. 'The young man I speak of could act the hypocrite to a nicety. He was clever-tongued, sociable, and took great pains to make himself agreeable to his kinsman, old Balbus, who was, in many things, as simple as a child, so that they were always very great friends and companions, which was a great help to the plan which had to be carried out. It was very simple, and the first step was, as I need hardly tell you, the making away of the child which stood in his path. I know I cannot set myself up as a model of a man, but what follows will show that my heart was considerably softer in the grain than this young serpent's, which, if it exists at all—which I doubt—is like granite. It was bad enough to rob the old man of the only brat remaining, for he was so wrapped up in it—used to sport with it and tend it like a woman, and was scarcely able to allow it out of his sight. You remember the child then, potter—a yellow-haired big-eyed youngster, and enough to make a fool of any man who cared for such toys. Well, kinsman, I take no credit to myself for the part I acted. No doubt it was rascally enough, but I have no doubt in my mind whatever, that what I did, although unconsciously, was the means of saving the girl's life and position. Had I refused the temptation of his bribe, some other tool would have taken my place, and would have carried out his instructions to the letter, which were to strangle the youngster, drown it, cut its throat, smother it, or anything to silence it for ever.'

[pg 203] 'The monster!' exclaimed Masthlion, raising his head and shuddering with horror; 'and but a youth too?'

'Only a youth,' replied Cestus, 'but with a serpent's head. As I said, we had grown to be very confidential on account of some commissions I had quietly done for him, and he gradually began to sound me with a view to getting my help in his operations. He found me willing, and we soon came to terms. I was to kill the child, and he was to give me a very handsome sum. Where he raised it I don't know, but that did not matter. It required no small amount of patience and skill to get the child away without notice, and weeks passed ere I was able to do it to my satisfaction. There was no use in doing the thing desperately so as to leave the least suspicion. A favourable time came at last, and I managed to take the child away without attracting the least attention;

but I could never make up my mind to kill it, so I left it in secret and safe hands for a few weeks, and then begged leave of absence to make a visit. That visit was to you, and it was to bring the child here, where I never thought to see or hear of her again. I told a tale to my young master—how I drowned the child out of sight in a marsh, and he was satisfied; and remains so, as far as she is concerned, to this day. So far all was well. There was not the slightest suspicion attaching to us. Balbus went nearly out of his mind, and money, without end, was spent in searching after the lost brat. My young master was foremost in the hunt, of course, and I have heard the old man bless him many a time. Not a little of the wasted money went, as I know, into his purse at last; for it grew to be a common practice for cunning rogues to say they had found the whereabouts of the child, and then demand a price. It was freely given, and of course ended in nothing but disappointment. After some time my young master got this business transferred entirely into his own hands, and all such discoveries were left to him to deal with. I have reason to believe he invented a good many of them himself, and always took the best part of the money into his own fingers. And so he waited until the old man should die; and has waited until now, because he has not the pluck to finish the business promptly, and get the old man out of the way as well as the child. Had he had as much courage as cunning, he might have been rolling in the wealth of Balbus these ten years; but he cannot screw up his pluck, so he dallies on, and hopes for old Saturn and his scythe to help him—the fool! His prudent farming of the funds spent in searching for the lost one has considerably improved his stock of money; but the matter of late years has almost died out. Balbus went to dwell on his country estates, and took me with him. About six months ago I received a letter from my young master, begging me to repair to Rome to see him. I readily got leave and went to his house. He gave me a commission to execute, which he professed to be very secret. Whilst on my way one night late, in a lonely part of the city, whither I had gone on his account, I was beset by a gang of ruffians, and left for dead. There was life, however, left in me when they had done, and, as luck would have it, I was picked up and taken charge of. I since have discovered that the whole was only a cunning plot to remove me and my knowledge out of the world. I have been all this time recovering, and here I am. Balbus is a saddened old man, but hale. My young master walks about, relieved in the thought that he has cleverly got rid of me, who knew enough to utterly confound him. He shall be disagreeably surprised. You, kinsman, will befriend me, as well as my sister Tibia. These few traps will confirm the matter. The girl will get her own again, and I shall be revenged on a paltry, white-livered knave as ever stepped the earth.'

Cestus ceased, and a long pause ensued.

'Is all this truth, kinsman?' said Masthion at length.

'That you shall presently know beyond all doubt,' replied the Suburan.

'It seems all so strange to think that my Neæra should prove to be nobly born.'

'The grandchild of a senator, no less!'

'Ah me!' sighed the potter dejectedly; 'then are we parted indeed.'

'That question of difference, between the Centurion and her, will trouble you no longer, kinsman,' said Cestus.

'Nothing will trouble me now concerning her, except that I shall never see her more; she has passed beyond my care, alas!' said Masthion, with deep emotion.

'Take a draught of wine, kinsman,' observed Cestus; 'it is a wonderful balm for scratched feelings.'

Masthion, with a sad smile, filled up his cup—'I drink to the child's happy restoration and her future welfare;' and he added, after a pause, 'May she be tended as lovingly and tenderly as she has been under this humble roof.'

'I will drink to that with pleasure,' cried the other; 'restored she shall be, without doubt, but, for the rest, I cannot say.'

They both drank and set down their cups, and Cestus remarked that it was time he was in bed.

'Enough for to-night; it has given you something to ponder over, and we can have some more to say presently. But, until the time is ripe to act, potter, you must keep all this secret. Not a word to the child, or to your wife, until fit time.'

'I will not,' answered Masthion.

'Swear it, kinsman, for we may have to wait long yet.'

'I never broke my word,' said Masthion proudly.

'Enough; then I will trust to you,' said Cestus. 'Roll up those traps and keep them safe; and, on your life, breathe not a word to a living soul. Good-night!'

Cestus departed to his pallet bed upstairs, but Masthion remained sitting before the fire for a

long time in deep reflection. The small hours arrived, and his wife awoke to find her husband still missing from her side. She stole downstairs to find him musing and sighing, deeply and heavily, from time to time. The fire had smouldered down to a few red embers, and the room was chilly; but the heartsore man did not know. His wondering wife's hand on his shoulder roused him, and he followed quietly to bed, but not to sleep. Tibia saw instinctively that something was wrong, and she, just as swiftly, ascribed that something to her brother; but, failing to gain anything satisfactory by her inquiries, she wisely allowed the matter to slumber the while.

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CHAPTER X.

Dusk had already fallen on island and sea, when Martialis returned to his quarters at the villa Jovis. He had departed in brilliant spirits, and with the brightest anticipations; but the latter had not been realised, and his mood had suffered. The untimely and unexpected advent of the Suburan had been by no means welcome; added to which, the failure of his purpose to exact a settled arrangement for his union with Neæra had further irritated and annoyed him. The parting caress of the laughing, lovely girl had hardly relieved his chafing spirit, and the journey home was performed at a prodigious speed both by land and sea. The violent exertion allayed the sting of his feelings, but his mood was far from smooth when he saw and lifted the ill-fated missive of Plautia from the table, where the slave Lygdus had finally left it.

His first exclamation, as he read its brief lines, was contemptuous and irritable, and he threw the paper impatiently back on to the table. In another moment curiosity had its turn, and he lifted it again for a further examination. The handwriting furnished him with no clue to the writer, and he was equally at a loss to imagine who could have occasion for summoning him in such a mysterious manner. He remained in doubt whether he should give the anonymous epistle any further attention or not; but his little chamber seemed oppressive to him, and his ruffled thoughts inclined towards any occupation which might relieve and turn their current.

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He scarcely thought it necessary to arm himself; but, being in utter ignorance of what kind of entertainment he was invited to, a moment's reflection told him he had best be on the safe side. He, therefore, put on a light, flexible cuirass under his tunic, and took a sword, of the usual short, straight Roman pattern, under his cloak. Thus prepared he once more took the way down to the south landing, glad to be quit of his dark, cheerless rooms.

The white rock, which Plautia had specified, was one she had particularly noticed on her way from the boat. It was of chalky formation, and was embedded in the side of a craggy eminence, around which the rough path wound on its way down to the narrow little beach below. This eminence, which was an irregular spur of a hill, was very rough, and thickly covered with trees and underwood of all kinds, thus affording an excellent shelter, which, in accordance with our story, had already been taken advantage of. On the other side of the footway was only a narrow strip of green turf, fringing a precipitous descent to the sea below.

Night had now quite fallen, and the young moon shed a hazy light from its narrow crescent. The Centurion paced leisurely onward, keeping instinctively on the outer edge of the path, and from under the shadow of the rocks and brushwood which walled in the land side. He was well muffled up in his large cloak, and, whilst his hand kept a ready grasp of his sword beneath, his eyes maintained the keenest scrutiny of every object and shadow as he paced along. Not a sound nor a movement, except the light fall of his own feet on the short mossy turf, broke the perfect repose of the spot, and he had now arrived opposite the mass of white chalk or limestone in question. Concluding that this was the appointed place, he stopped and waited, whilst he cast a curious glance around. He looked and listened in vain for a few moments; there was the faint murmur of the sea below, and the fitful breath of the night breeze ever and anon, and that was all. 'Um!' he muttered doubtfully.

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As he spoke, something moved out of the black shadow of a thicket, and stood partly athwart the ghostly white face of the chalk rock. He perceived, by the flow of drapery on the form, that it was a woman, and surprise and wonder took more possession of him than ever. He remained motionless for a space, and finding that the strange figure did not move, he stepped forward two or three steps; upon which the mysterious shape drew back into the dark shadow of the thicket whence it had appeared.

'This is the white rock,' said the Pretorian; 'who wants me?'

As his voice fell quietly on the calm air the female figure came forth and confronted him.

'Martialis!' said the voice of Plautia, with a faint tremor in its rich tones.

He started and scanned her keenly. 'That is my name,' he replied 'Was it you who bade me come?'

I seem to know your voice. What can you want with me, and who may you be?’

‘Accept the grateful thanks of Plautia for your kind and ready obedience to her wish.’

‘Plautia—you—here! And yet I was sure of the voice!’ he muttered.

She put back the hood of her cloak, and turned her face to him full in the light. He surveyed, indeed, to his intense astonishment, the beautiful face of the adventurous damsel; and, although the feeble rays of the thin moon overlaid with their own wan paleness the tell-tale tints of her rich flooding cheeks, they rather, on the other hand, lit up the liquid brilliance of her dark eyes. Her white hand stole from the folds of her cloak, and rested gently on his arm. Young, high-spirited, warm and impressionable, the look and soft touch of this lovely woman thrilled him through in despite of himself; but his lips closed a trifle closer, and his form stretched aloft almost imperceptibly.

‘Yes, ’tis I, Plautia!’ she murmured, with her haughty head drooping downward, and her hand falling from his arm at the same time.

‘I am wonderstruck!’ he said in a colder tone; ‘in the name of heaven, Plautia, how came you to be in such a spot as this—such a place as this island?’

‘No matter how, Centurion; I am here—that is enough.’

‘But yet it is incomprehensible—have you been here long?’

‘No.’

‘Did you come alone?’

[pg 209] ‘I have said it is enough that I am here, Centurion; you will not oblige me to ask you not to be so uncourteous as to question further?’

‘I am, to a certain extent, responsible for the careful guard of this island retreat of Caesar,’ he replied rather grimly, ‘and the unexpected presence of a stranger on its Argus-eyed shores renders me naturally curious. Scarce the flight of a bird to or from these rocks passes unnoticed—much less the arrival or departure of an individual without authority.’

‘How know you that I am here without authority?’

‘Because were it otherwise, it is more than likely that I should have become acquainted with the fact; and because no honourable woman would openly seek the polluted air of this island. You cannot have known this—or you have been misled, most likely. If it be so, quit the spot without delay, for it is fraught with danger to such as you. Did you send for me to help you? It must be so.’

‘No. I know all you tell me. I am here in secret.’

‘If you are sure of that, it mocks our watch and ward. But rest content that you cannot hope to remain long without discovery, in whatever nook you have found; at least you will tell me one thing—whether you have been decoyed here, or whether you came of your own free will.’

‘Of my own free will.’

‘It is extraordinary—some matter of huge importance must have impelled you.’

‘Of the most vital importance—to me.’

‘Why then have you summoned me, a comparative stranger to you and your affairs?’

‘Do you begrudge me the time and trouble?’

‘Thus far surely not.’

‘Have no fear that I will interfere with your duty.’

‘Good! Then I am at your disposal.’

[pg 210] The breast of the lady heaved and fluttered unwontedly; her native characteristics of haughty self-possession had given way to an unusual tremor and discomposure; and this in the presence of a Centurion only—a simple soldier. She whom the crowd of the highest and mightiest in Rome had dangled around, without causing her cheek to change its hue or her heart to throb a whit the faster. Then, as if a sudden shame for her weakness flashed across her mind, she drew up her ample form, and braced her quivering limbs, at the same time raising her countenance to his with an effort at her accustomed imperious nonchalance. But it proved an empty piece of bravado which she was unable to sustain. The young man, despite his expectant curiosity, remained motionless, cold, and unsympathetic, and she shrank again before him, with trembling joints and down-dropped head, like a leaping wave from the hard stern face of a rock.

The uncertain light was friendly to these signs of perturbation, and shrouded them so far from his

observation, as to merely impress his mind with the idea that they were nothing save the symptoms of a little hesitation. A slight noise among the rocks of the hillside struck their ears, and they both turned to listen.

'What was that?' she whispered.

But all was as quiet as the grave; it might have been nothing but an animal displacing a stone as it prowled in search of prey, and thus Martialis replied.

'Come more into the shade,' she said hurriedly, laying her hand once more upon his arm; 'some chance passer-by may see us here.'

He followed her a few paces into the shadow of the brushwood which lined the path, and, at the same time, carelessly threw his cloak from his right shoulder, so as to leave his right arm free and unhampered. It was a significant action to the initiated, and seemed to say, that his explanation of the probable cause of the slight noise in the bushes was not exactly in accordance with his inmost conviction.

The quick eye and wit of Plautia perceived it, and she said reproachfully, 'Are you afraid, Centurion? You are armed!'

She had, in passing her hand over the folds of his cloak, felt the hilt of the sword which he held in his grasp underneath.

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'I have a weapon with me, truly,' he answered; 'but as to being afraid, I think I may say I am nothing more than cautious, as we soldiers are trained to be. You must surely admit, Plautia, that I am neither blamable nor foolish in preparing myself somewhat; for, when a man receives a request to meet an unknown person, in a mysterious manner, after dark, in an unfrequented spot, he is only acting prudently when he does as I have done. It might have been a throat-cutting assignation for all that I could tell. There are even some persons who would not, probably, have cared to attend at all.'

'But you know now who has brought you—do you think that I would lead you premeditatedly into harm?'

'No! I know of no earthly reason why you should do such a thing. I have certainly never done anything to merit your wrath or revenge, and such a thing could never enter your mind.'

'There is not a soul here but you and I, and it was to be thus that I asked your presence. The toil—the danger is on my side, believe me, Centurion.'

Whether it was the shade in which they stood gave her increased confidence it would be hard to say, but her low rich tones grew steadier and more fervent, and both her white hands sought and clasped themselves upon his brown sinewy fingers.

'Yes, Centurion, the toil and the danger,' she repeated, speaking rapidly and fervently; 'you saw me land last night, and in what company.'

'Last night!' said Martialis, starting. 'What—was it you who came with that—?'

'No other—I and my slave dared and endured even the contact of the wretch, and thus obtained a landing, in secret, on this haunt of Caesar.'

Martialis withdrew his hand from her enclosing fingers, and placed it in his bosom with a haughty gesture. She reared herself up at this eloquent movement with a flash of her imperious fierceness.

'What! Do you think that I came as one of the train of that vile slave of Tiberius? I, Plautia!—do you think it? Speak, Martialis!'

'It would be the easier and more probable thing to believe that Plautia had embarked in ignorance of her fellow-voyagers,' returned the Centurion calmly.

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'Yet why did you draw from me?' she said fawningly; 'it was even as you say. It was an expedient arranged by another for landing on the island, and I simply followed my instructions, knowing nothing further. It has achieved my purpose—here I am!'

'You are in the tiger's lair, and the man who conducted you hither is a creature of Caesar, and a vile reptile who fattens on his patronage.'

'He dare not break his trust, knowing who gave him his charge.'

'I can guess who that same person is; nevertheless it does not abate my opinion one jot. I dare swear your secrecy will be hardly worth the name in a few hours—perhaps even now. There is no trust to be put in such a wretch. Lose no time in putting the straits between you and the island, let me commend you. Whatever business has brought you hither, despatch it at once—this night should see you away if possible.'

'I have no fear.'

'Because you are ignorant of the danger you stand in. To such as you, of all people in the world, the pestilential air of this island is fraught with dire peril.'

'I care not, for I am with *you*.'

'Your position admits of little jesting, believe me,' said Martialis, in a voice which exhibited an amount of stern impatience; 'you are wasting precious moments—I am here at your request: let me know in what I am to serve you, and I will at once answer whether I can be of help. Were the hand of Caesar to drop upon us now you would find your safeguard in as sorry a plight as yourself. That you know right well, Plautia, and you delivered the raillery with effective gravity. I neither ask nor desire to know the cause of your extraordinary presence in this spot, but my apprehension certainly is that you wish me to assist you to leave.'

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'Your apprehension is wrong,' replied the Roman beauty, in low, nervous tones, barely to be heard; 'I came hither impelled by a feeling against which it was impossible to strive. It urged me through the hideous fatigue and disgust of the voyage hither, and it upholds me, undismayed, at the presence of danger. You impress upon me that I am beset with dire peril. It may be so—I can well believe it; but I am careless of it. Fear I never knew, and in this hour of all it can find less room than ever in my heart.'

Her head sank down, and her murmured words seemed to struggle with her hurried breathing, begot by a state of extreme tremor.

The Centurion knitted his brows, and, for a few moments, he remained in silent embarrassment. The deep shade of the thicket was friendly to his companion, and shrouded the outward symptoms of her feelings from his glance, but what his ears drank in was sufficient to make his mind uneasy and suspicious. He had really been under the impression that his companion's presence in the island was probably due to some affair of intrigue, and, indeed, if her explanation had not seemed to so fully confirm the protection or connivance of Sejanus, he would at once have arrived at that conclusion, from the well-known fact of her intimacy with him. In expectation, therefore, of some political plan or plot in which she required him to join, he had been anxious to bring the interview to an end, being utterly averse to entangle himself in anything of the kind, or even to run the chance of being discovered in her company. But now he was as little disposed to force the matter to a conclusion, as before he had been anxious, and, in uncomfortable doubt, he began, very naturally, to chafe for having allowed himself to be so carelessly led into such a position. Had he only been prudent enough to consider, he might have at once concluded that nothing but mischief lay planted between the lines of an anonymous letter.

But the lady vouchsafed no other speech, and, anxious to appear quite unconscious of any particular purport in her words, he hastened to break the silence, in an assumed manner of artlessness and lightness, which is often used, alike to stave off an unpleasant subject and to play with one as delightful.

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'Fear, I am well assured, is a weakness unaccustomed to your breast,' he said, 'and, if I gather rightly from your words, you confess to be in subjection, no less than the rest of your sex, to the passion which they say rules feminine nature. Nevertheless I wish, on this occasion, for your own sake, fear had tempered curiosity a little.'

'Curiosity!' she returned with passionate scorn; then her voice sank to its former nervous intonation. 'And yet I said false, Martialis, when I boasted of my fearlessness. I thought I was proof,—thus far without it, and now, lo, it has found me out.'

'No! no!' she continued rapidly, as he uttered some halting commonplace, 'not business of Prefect, nor of Caesar, nor yet whim, nor curiosity, but only my heart and thee, Martialis,—Lucius! Have you not seen? Do you not see?'

'Plautia—'

'It might have been months ere Rome could see you again. The city seemed void. I loathed it. My house seemed turned to a dungeon. My occupations palled upon me. I was weary, and everything was distasteful. I was no longer mistress of myself, and where my mind dwelt, thither I was fated to follow. What could stay me? Not toil and fatigue, nor yet the risk of the lynx-eyed warders of this rocky hermitage of Caesar. Where the will is there is the way, and what were a thousand times the obstacles in the way of mine? I am near thee, Martialis—I have accomplished my purpose. I have come and I confess to thee the reason, and I a woman. To you the world would apportion the voice, and to me the silence; but I own no law, no guide, but you and the promptings of my own heart. I have broken the cold forms and rules which bind a woman's unsought secret within her breast, even at the risk of her life. I make no excuse—I crave no pardon. Wherefore should I hide the truth? Could my lips alter it, or you blame it? You cannot chide me. Am I less a woman now than before? I have bared my heart to thee, Martialis, but it is still a woman's, and it has never bent to any sway but yours.'

Could the young soldier's senses have been more subtly stirred had he been a mariner of old, rousing himself in his idly-floating boat to listen to the fatal, sweet ditties of a siren song stealing

into his ears through the tranquil, yellow mist of evening?

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He felt his hand imprisoned tightly within the warm grasp of her soft, white palms. Her breath played upon his cheek, and the gloom of their leafy shelter could not hide the shadowy, star-like lustre of her eyes close upturned to his. His ears drank in the rich, thrilling tones of her voice, quivering, like her glorious form, with excess of passion. The delicate perfumes of her attire welled around him, and invaded his faculties like the very essences of her overpowering loveliness. The touch, the eloquent motions, the soft abandon of this creature of superb womanhood: the strange, bewitching phenomenon of her haughty imperiousness sinking into the overwhelming flood of passionate love and tender submission beglamoured his mind. His senses seemed overcharged. As one might seek relief from a choking sensation, he reared his head backwards, with a deep, noiseless breath, and swept his eyes athwart his shoulder round the sea and star-lit heavens. Extraordinary and dream-like as his whole experience of that night was, it was no illusion, such as he began to think it might be. There was the horned moon, bright and tranquil in the dark sky; and there was the track of its silvery radiance dancing on the softly-rippling waters below. The night-air, too, palpably rustled the leaves around his head, and a soft, velvety touch at that moment quivered through him. It was the delicate pressure of her ripe, warm lips on his hand. It awoke the Pretorian to himself and brushed away the brief mist of sensuous sweetness which had enthralled him. To have remained wholly indifferent to such a passionate revelation of the loveliest lips—to have rested unmoved by the soft contact and surrender of the richest wealth of female beauty Rome could show, would have been to renounce all in common with human nature, even on the part of one bred with the phlegmatic coldness and self-possession of a northern clime. But Plautia had cast herself before one born to the same native characteristics of ardent and impulsive blood as herself, though not perhaps in an equal degree of intensity. With his pulses yet tingling he recalled, by a flash of thought, all the evident signs of pleasure and satisfaction with which she had hitherto greeted his presence when chance had thrown them together for a brief period. Her relaxed haughtiness, her glances and smiles were now, it seemed, only too well fraught with real meaning. Her excuses and pretexts for companionship, and a hundred little arts, which had never caused him more thought than an amused gratification, down to the latest evidence of all, in the gift she had sent to the camp, were now supplemented and concluded with a startling explanation. In common with the rest of Rome he had admired her magnificent beauty of face and form, and, by a most natural process of a man in love, he had as often criticised her by the standard of the maiden enthroned in his heart of hearts. He ever found the contrast, morally and physically, to be wellnigh complete. As before, but now with tenfold more vividness, his mind spanned the intervening distance and dwelt upon the fair girl he had left but a short time before. It acted like the sudden transition from the oppressive glow of a tropic dream steeped in narcotic odours, to the waking freshness and cool relief of a breezy dawn. Neæra's image, ever ready to his invocation, rose before him in its changeless purity and sweetness, its noble dignity and calmness, and purged his spirit of the grosser intoxication which burdened it.

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While yet his mind was agitated by such fleeting emotions and reflections, it was vaguely burdened with pain and dread, on account of the vehement nature of the self-willed woman before him. He was simple and chivalrous; and as he thought how she, who could command so much, had dared everything to follow him to this spot for the sake of an unfortunate attachment, his heart ached with pain and pity—all the more as she was doomed to disappointment. The only return she could accept he was unable to make, and the fact of his entire innocence brought him no comfort.

Such was the main current of his thoughts in the short pause which followed on the passionate words of Plautia. In his simple, soldier way, he would rather have been summoned to face a legion single-handed than be under the necessity of administering the *coup-de-grace* to the dearest hopes and wishes of a woman. Her posture was at the moment half-reclining against his breast.

'You are cruelly silent,' she murmured in his ear. 'Shame! Would you have me say more?'

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'You have done me great honour—great and unexpected,' he answered, stammering with embarrassment; 'but I was not prepared to meet such a surprise. If I am confused there is an excuse for it. I thought—and yet, no—I do not know. That I should have held such place in your regard is almost beyond my belief, and I should be little surprised to discover that Plautia is beguiling a tedious evening with a frolic. If so, I shall laugh with as much zest as herself.'

'O brave frolic for a shallow wit!' she cried vehemently; 'and how am I to go about to convince thee, if thou hast not already been convinced? Do I merit no worthier words than those, Martialis?'

'I made no assertion,' said the Centurion. 'If I am answerable for my utterances just for the time, I probably meant no more than to point out more effectively my feelings of astonishment and incredulity as to what has befallen me this night.'

'But that has passed,' she said, in a low voice, and inclining herself again closely to him. 'Though surprised, Lucius, why unbelieving? Can it be so beyond belief? Had you been hideous, deformed, and as vile in mind as person,—a base negro, or Numidian slave, it had been then time to wonder! But thank the gods for being what you are—then why do you so undervalue yourself? Have women the eyes of bats and hearts impenetrable as granite? Have I not said enough? Would

you have me plead? No—you cannot!’

‘What of my brother Caius?’ said he, with a sterner accent in his voice.

‘What of him—why, what of him?’

‘He loves you—nay, more, he is infatuated with you. It is public knowledge.’

‘And am I to blame? Can you reproach me? I have never wished it nor desired it. I have scorned him. I would have driven him away from me, but he would not be driven. Can I help his misfortune? It is impossible. It must be a task for himself. I can never love him, nor can he demand it, nor any force compel me.’

‘You say true. If it be his own misfortune to love without return there is no law or force to help him. The same law, Plautia, stands good between all. Poor Caius! there are more than himself in the same unhappy plight.’

[pg 218] The Centurion gently withdrew his hand from beneath hers, and, turning half aside toward the sea, folded his arms across his breast. Her hands fell down before her, and her eyes contracted on his profile. The deep gravity of his manner alarmed her and grated ominously on her mind.

‘But you are in no such wretchedness?’ she said, with painful earnestness.

‘I—no! the gods be thanked, far from it,’ he replied quickly, almost lightly and gladly.

‘Then why speak so meaningly? Such a common truth hardly needed it.’

He did not respond, but remained stolidly gazing over the cliffs upon the sea.

‘Will you not speak?’ she said, after a pause.

He turned upon her and took her hand.

‘Plautia, I would you had never come to this spot. It had been better if you had never left home. Return at once. Let me see you safely away, this night if possible.’

Her face grew as ghastly white as the limestone rock bathed in the moonlight, and a deadly sickness seized upon her heart and numbed her faculties for a moment.

‘You wish to be quit of me—you spurn me!’ she cried, catching her breath.

‘I wish to seek your safety and—and, Plautia, it is impossible that I can love you,’ returned he, wringing the tardy words out of his heart.

She caught her hand away and struck it against her breast, and reared her form aloft in a moment’s ominous silence.

‘I have demeaned myself, then,’ she gasped, ‘to a man without a heart. I have stooped myself, most likely, to be the butt of a guard-room, and thence of the city—O miserable, weak, blinded fool!’

No tornado ever broke more fiercely and suddenly on a peaceful landscape than the fit of fury on the dull torpor of her disenchanted mind. Shame and the keen anguish of disappointment resolved themselves into a whirlwind of rage. It choked her voice.

‘Fool—fool!’ she reiterated hoarsely. Her jewelled hand caught at the drapery about her throat, and rent it away from the gleaming beauty of her neck and wildly heaving breast, as if to relieve a horror of suffocation.

[pg 219] ‘Not so—not so, Plautia!’ cried the startled Centurion, ‘you wrong yourself and me—you have demeaned yourself in no way—you have honoured me with an affection it is out of my power to return. Your secret shall be ever sacred with me. As to my heart, Plautia, it pains me too sharply for the unhappiness it would have avoided, but cannot. All the love it can hold is given to another.’

‘To another—another woman! Who is she?—Where is she?—What is her name?’ was demanded, with something of the manner of a tigress.

‘You have never known her, seen her, or heard of her, and to speak of her will do no good.’

‘I will know!’

‘You may know some time hence, but it is to no purpose now.’

She gazed at him for a moment with a furious glance, her head thrown back, and her figure drawn up to its utmost height. Then, strange to tell, in the next brief second every strained fibre of her body seemed to relax, and, with a kind of hysterical gasp or sob, she fell on his breast and gave way to an uncontrollable burst of weeping. Her brief madness, burnt out by its own fierceness, and departing as rapidly as it had come, had left her at the mercy of the reaction,

drained of strength and weak in spirit. Nor was the expression of her changed mood of helpless wretchedness in any degree less accordant with the vehemence of her nature. Her frame was shaken with convulsive violence, and the Pretorian was enabled to contemplate another phase of the volcanic passions which had hitherto lain hid, to him at least, beneath the crust of her calm unruffled haughtiness. The frenzied storm gust had startled him, but the sudden drop into the depth of hysterical woe and feminine weakness quite unmanned him. He had witnessed the anger of men and the weeping of women ere now, but here was a revelation. His heart turned chill at suggesting the hate of the lava-blooded creature on his breast.

It was useless to attempt to stop or soothe the tempest of her feelings; like her wrath it was too fierce to last very long. It began to abate in a few minutes, to the intense relief of his agitated mind.

'Come, Plautia, courage! This is too terrible—courage!'

[pg 220] His voice restored her, and she lifted herself at once from his bosom with the same proud mien the world knew, as if the teeming moments had thoroughly purged her veins clear and cool of the riotous fires of passion.

'You say well,' she said, with stoical coldness. 'My miserable part being played—I will return.'

'To the opposite shore? It must be—I will try to aid you,' he began, with alacrity at the welcome change to action, however hazardous.

'No!' interrupted she; 'to my lodging at the old wine-grower's hovel. I have brought you here to-night from, perhaps, a more pleasing occupation. Accept my thanks for your patient indulgence of a foolish woman's folly. More I cannot suffer you to undergo; much less the loss of your night's repose, in the dangerous operation of smuggling me away from here, in direct opposition of your duty.'

'That is nothing,' he returned. 'It would be more to the point if I could impress upon you the danger of your sojourn here. I have been the unfortunate, although unwitting cause, of your presence here. That gives me grief enough without the fear of further evil. As soon as the moon sets, which will not be long, I—'

'No, Centurion, I will do as I have said. Be the consequences on my own devoted head—I care not. I absolve you from all blame on my account, therefore be at rest.'

'It is sorely against my will,' he said sadly, for he could not but feel a new and softened regard for her as one result of the night's experience.

'It is in full accordance with mine,' she replied; 'nay, leave me to go alone, for it is but a few hundred yards. I wish it. Good-night!'

She gathered her drapery around her, and, stepping out into the path, proceeded in the direction of Tucca's dwelling with all her accustomed stateliness of gait.

[pg 221] After her disappearance, the Pretorian yet lingered on in deep reflection. The soft seductive spell of her beauty, and the delicate perfumes of her person still lingered in his senses, and his mind was full to its uttermost with speculations on the fate of such passions as he had seen displayed that night. He pondered on the transformation of the haughty, unemotional lady of indolence, luxury, and refinement, into the daring, undissembling woman of a secret assignation; and tried to realise her despair by endeavouring to picture his own, had his love for Neæra been as misplaced. So, with a mind saddened and agitated, as to bode ill for his night's slumber, he turned slowly away, at last, in the direction of the villa Jovis.

When the sound of his footsteps had died away, there was some rustling in the thicket above the spot so lately occupied. Creeping cautiously downward over the rocky surface, a man reached the edge of the road, and, peeping out, satisfied himself that the coast was clear ere he stepped boldly forth.

'Tis all right, Prefect, the road is open—the play is over, and the actors have clean departed,' he said aloud.

'Then let us begone likewise, Afer, in the name of the furies,' returned Sejanus ill-temperedly enough, as he reached his companion and stretched his cramped limbs.

'Yes, it is quite certain that the Centurion has been more highly entertained than ourselves,' responded Afer drily; 'but unbidden guests must take their chance. In the meantime, let us fix such scraps of speech, as did reach our ears, firmly in our memories, and exercise our ingenious fancies in supplying matter to fill the vast gaps in the scene. It will be just as amusing as the original, and the lovely Plautia will correct it if necessary.'

'I'm agreeable, if you will undertake to obtain the correction yourself from the damsel,' snarled the Prefect, brushing his cloak with his hand. 'I think the result would repay any such trouble.'

'At least you have proof of the sublime virtue of your Pretorian,' continued Afer; 'that must be

gratifying. Such a marvel of resolute integrity could fearlessly brave a host of Sirens, without stuffing his ears with wax as did Ulysses. Ill-starred Venus dashing herself against this incorruptible Adonis!

[pg 222] 'Now the better time, therefore, for you to persuade her to turn to warmer sympathies for consolation,' remarked Sejanus sarcastically. 'The Centurion has followed his own idea in a matter which will never offer itself to your choice, and it is of no further consequence to you or to me either. But as to the lady herself, she must go to-morrow night, and you must contrive to acquaint her with that fact early in the morning. I will arrange about the means of departure. If she fails to obey and keep within-doors till she is bidden to come forth, she does it to her grievous peril. Give my cloak a brush with your hand, Afer, and let us be off.'

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CHAPTER XI.

Plautia walked homeward with a sweeping haughty step, leaving her head and face exposed to the dim rays of the moon as if contemptuously careless of risk. When she reached the middle of the dusky orchard which flanked the dwelling of Tucca, she stopped short, with her head cast down, as if struck by a sudden thought. It may have been a cruelly acute flash of reflection piercing her pain-drowsied mind with spasmodic rigour, for, the next moment she sank on her knees with a smothered groan, and thence on to her face, with her arms outstretched and her hand clutching the turf. Here, in the solitude and silence of the night, the most dread hour for unhappy thoughts, she lay prone and helpless in the very lap of mental torture. Every external condition was absent which, in the light of day, might have lent distraction and relief. Her face, buried in the mossy turf, was dry-eyed; nor could the stinging pangs of wounded pride arouse a momentary diversion from the horrible oppression and stupor of despair by a fit of frenzied rage, to which her inflammable nature was at all times prone.

The time flew on. The moon sank nearer and nearer to the horizon, and was suddenly swallowed up in a craggy mass of cloud, rising and spreading upward from the western sea. It moved on swiftly and massively. Myriad after myriad of bright stars disappeared behind the hurrying edge of its pitchy mantle rolling onward, in a serrated line, from north to south. Before was the fast narrowing expanse of glittering radiance; behind the unfathomable blackness of Erebus.

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Fitful, but louder murmurs swept up from the sea in place of the gentle uniform breathing of the early night, and the darkling waters shook with a brisker frolic of dancing frothy combs, and dull shimmering streaks and flashes of phosphorescent light, as if exultingly waking to the dim watchword of a twinkling storm spirit.

Still Plautia remained motionless, as if bereft of life. The gathering gloom of the outer air had thickened, amid the grove, into inky blackness impenetrable to the eye. The tree stems and boles were entirely obliterated, as well as the shape of the woman lying prostrate amid them, steeped in oblivious anguish. A sharp short gust of wind swayed the invisible branches above, and dashed noisily amongst their leaves; after which a lull, and a dreamy rustling, as in the calm depth of a summer night. Then came the fierce rush of a blast roaring amongst the branches and bending them over as with the flattening pressure of the hand of a Titan, whilst a whizzing tempest of rain and hail swept along in company, and made its shrill rattling on the leaves heard amidst the bluster. It made its way freely through, and fell, with its icy coldness, on to the bare head of her beneath. It roused her. She lifted her head; and raising herself slowly, so as to lean upon her hands, she gazed stupidly into the Stygian blackness which enveloped her. The roar of the storm filled her ears, whereas her last remembrance was of the calm stars and moonlight. Her mind re-asserted itself, and recovered from the bonds of its torture-bed for the present, as from a dread nightmare.

Shivering, she raised her chilled limbs from the ground, and, pulling her cloak around her head, she stood, amid the roar and dashing of the elements, striving to pierce the darkness and determine in which direction to grope her way from the grove. Failing in this she stooped to feel for the narrow footpath worn in the short grass. She was successful, and, assuming that the storm proceeded from the open sea, and consequently more or less from the direction of Tucca's cottage, she commenced the tardy, troublesome, but necessitous process of following up the path, in the face of the wind, by the assiduous touch of her fingers, in a stooping and sometimes creeping posture.

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When she had gone a few yards in this toilsome manner she caught sight of a glimmering light. It disappeared, and she called at the top of her voice, but the furious roaring of the wind amid the trees rendered her tones inaudible to herself. The light reappeared much closer, and as she saw it coming to meet her she stopped. It proved to be carried by the ancient husbandman himself, attended by her faithful slave, a woman of middle age. Tucca held the lantern as much under the shelter of his sackcloth storm-cloak as was possible, in order to save its feeble flame from the

wind; and as it barely gave light to their feet, and their senses were pre-occupied with the bluster of the elements, they failed to perceive the form of Plautia standing motionless in the path awaiting them. Speaking being useless, the latter stayed their steps by laying her hand on Tucca's shoulder, so much to that individual's sudden consternation that he very nearly dropped the lantern. Turning the struggling candle-rays up to her pale, stern face, he heaved a sigh of gratification, and, scarcely waiting for her sign to return homeward, he doubled on his track with alacrity, being too well satisfied already with his experience of the night. To cover the short distance to the house was a labour of no small difficulty in the teeth of the tempest. The light was extinguished at once, but that was of no consequence to the old man, who knew as well by night as day every inch of the homestead, where he had passed the whole of his lengthy days. Plautia held to his shoulder, and her cloak was gripped by her slave, and, in this manner, they gained the cottage, with their garments dripping and their faces smarting with the wind, rain, and hail. As soon as her voice could be heard, Plautia's attendant began volubly to testify to her delight at the success of her expedition, in which she had almost compelled the grumbling Tucca to join; but Plautia curtly checked her and called for some wine, which she drank copiously. Tasting a mouthful of food she then retired to her room, followed by her faithful retainer, who would have given her chance of freedom to have had her burning curiosity satisfied as to the errand of her mistress that night. But the pale, pre-occupied, stern face of the lady, together with an ominous, fretful impatience of manner, daunted her, so she proceeded in silence with her duties of disrobing and preparing for rest.

[pg 226] Plautia lay and tossed the night through, till nearly dawn, in sleepless wretchedness. The shrieking of the storm around the creaking, shuddering cottage seemed a fitting accompaniment to the incessant gnawing of her bitter disappointment, and it was long ere sheer exhaustion brought an uneasy slumber to her relief.

A loud knocking at the outer door of the house awoke her. She could scarcely realise that her eyes had closed at all, and sat up to listen. The narrow little window, near the ceiling, was faintly luminous with the struggling light of very early day, and, though the wind was still high, it had palpably moderated. She could hear the loud, regular snore of Tucca within, as yet undisturbed by the early caller, whoever it might be; and it was not until the pounding of the door had been repeated thrice, that the slumberer's voice was heard demanding the name and business of the visitor. Plautia's suspicions were keenly excited, and she rose from her pallet and placed her ear to the crevice of the door.

'Who is it, and what do you want at this time?' asked Tucca.

'Open the confounded door and see!' was shouted in reply.

'Is it you, noble Zeno?'

'It is, noble Tucca.'

The bar of the door was undone, and Tucca said, 'I thought it was your voice, good Zeno—come in, but don't speak so loud lest you waken—'

Plautia could hear no more, but she easily supplied the remainder of the speech.

'It is just what I came to do,' returned the other; 'I am grieved to do it at such an unseasonable hour, on such an unseasonable morning, as well for my own sake as hers, but I have no option. Go, knock her up, and tell her who waits to speak with her. While you are doing that I will keep the cold out with a drink of your best, Tucca.'

Plautia heard the old man remove the trap-door, which covered the steps descending to his cellar, and upon his return he came and tapped at her door.

'Well!' she asked.

'So please you, noble lady, I am loth to disturb you, but I am bidden to it by Zeno, Caesar's steward, who has come to have speech with you, and waits even now.'

[pg 227] These words caused her an involuntary thrill. Martialis was right, and she felt that she had been betrayed. Her suspicions were confined to a very narrow range, and the angry flash of her eyes, and clenching of her hand upon her bosom, were eloquent indications which boded ill for Tigellinus. Her native dauntlessness impelled her instinctively to adopt a bold, unshrinking policy. A woman of weaker nature would probably have been tossed and whirled hither and thither amid the eddies of shuffling timidity, and finally stranded on the doomed reef of hysterical stubbornness; but Plautia's high spirit rose with danger. The recklessness of unhappiness and despairing thoughts, moreover, is a stimulant which is apt to outrun calm fearlessness into temerity and bravado.

'Tell Zeno, Caesar's steward, to come again at a more fitting time of day,' she said loudly and peremptorily.

The Greek heard, and, approaching the door of her apartment, answered for himself in the softest and most persuasive of his tones.

'I have to crave your pardon, most gracious lady, for the untimely interruption to your sweet slumbers. But, alas! I have no option but to obey my instructions, which were to have a few words with you on behalf of Caesar.'

'I will come.'

She quickly enveloped herself in a loose mantle and stepped forth into the main apartment, where Tucca had lighted an oil lamp to assist the gray, uncertain light of dawn. The old man himself was down on his knees, vigorously blowing at a fire he had placed in a brazier on the hearth, whilst his wife was invisible in the depths of the sleeping box or crib, opening from the other end of the room.

Zeno had withdrawn more into the centre, and saluted the appearance of Plautia with an obeisance of extreme deference. It partook of the profound humility offered to an oriental potentate, and had the dexterous Greek searched the world through he could not have found a more perfect incarnation of haughtiness than in the youthful beauty before him, who trod the earthen floor of the hovel in her deshabelle, as if she were a Semiramis clad in splendour and stepping to her throne of state.

[pg 228] She regarded him for a few moments with a gaze such as a sovereign might have fastened upon a trembling wretch waiting for judgment. Zeno, having recovered from his deep inclination, stood with his head slightly bent and his eyes cast down to the floor with an expression of respectful attention. He was of that race so notorious in the Imperial city for its matchless facility and address in framing its face for all occasions; and it cost him no more effort to play the lowly vassal to the imperiousness confronting him, than it did to assume the petty tyrant among the frightened scullions of his household. His dissimulation, at the same time, did not interfere with the indulgence of an amount of personal vanity before the eyes of a lovely woman. He posed his slender figure in its most graceful attitude, and turned his face in the best light for the display of its symmetrical beauty and soft complexion.

'You are sent by Caesar to me?' began Plautia.

'I am, gracious lady; I am the steward of his household,' replied Zeno, in his softest voice.

'And a Greek?'

Zeno bowed.

'Of Athens,' said he.

'You must be mistaken in coming here to me.'

'I was bidden to come to Tucca's cottage and address myself to the noble Plautia, newly come from Rome,' was the bland response.

'Most strange! How could Caesar know my name and my presence here?'

'I know not, lady, nor seek to know.'

'I am a stranger to Tiberius in every way. There is no more about me and my business now, than there has ever been to concern him. What can he want with me?'

'What is in Caesar's heart Caesar's servants dare not seek to know. To hear is to obey. But the ruler of the world has a heart for every one of his subjects; why then should Plautia, one of the most beautiful, be surprised at receiving the Imperial notice?'

Plautia smiled in lofty scorn, but the gravity of Zeno's face was unmoved.

'Say, then, what you have to say without further question,' said she.

[pg 229] 'My master's own lips bade me say that, having heard of your arrival, it was neither to his credit nor to his own satisfaction that so lovely and accomplished a visitor to the island of Capreae should be allowed to remain lodged in the hut of a husbandman,' said Zeno, sweeping his hand and eyes round with an expression of disgust and contempt; 'he therefore despatched me, at the earliest, with his greeting, and instructions to convey you to the villa Jovis, where you may command such attention as befits your position, until you think fit to bring your visit to Capreae to a close. May it please you, therefore, to attire yourself, that Caesar's bidding may be fulfilled as quickly as possible, and that your gracious self may be rid of this vile place. The morning is stormy, but the rain has ceased, and a covered litter waits outside, in which the slaves will bear you under the shelter of the palace roof in but a few minutes.'

'You may return at once to the palace, and tell Tiberius that I thank him for the proffer of his hospitality,' said Plautia, in the same calm, lofty manner; 'but my stay in Capreae is so short that this cottage will amply suffice for my accommodation for the remainder of the time. I am no less grateful to him, however.'

The steward's face assumed an expression of deeper gravity than ever—of palpable sorrow indeed. His fingers restlessly played with the hem of his cloak during a few moments of silent

hesitation, and his eyes moved uneasily from one object to another, until at last they rested, with an appealing look, upon the face of Plautia herself.

'To do as you tell me,' he said,—'to return to the palace, leaving you here, would prove my instant disgrace and ruin.'

'What have I to do with that? I sought not to have anything to do with you or your master.'

'I crave your pardon for speaking of my unworthy self,' said Zeno humbly, in a lower tone. 'It is indeed of little consequence what happens to me; but if Plautia will understand me, what I sought to impress upon her was, what she probably fully comprehends already, that Caesar's word must be fulfilled at the cost of anything and everything if need be. I dare not return without you.'

[pg 230] 'Which means that my desires were never meant to be consulted—that your orders were to take me, willingly or unwillingly,' said Plautia disdainfully. 'Why did you not deliver your mandate at once, without all this false mockery of deference?'

'Alas, no, by your leave, gracious Plautia, neither mandate nor mockery!' cried the Greek, who seemed struck with horror at the idea. 'I should deserve to die like a dog if my clumsy tongue had caused you to harbour such a thing in your mind. I should be flung from the cliffs had I dared. Ah no, therefore, I beseech you in mercy to your servant, dismiss those fatal words. Deference and homage are the natural prerogatives of Plautia; and is it possible, that a nameless slave could make a mockery of what will flow sincerely from Caesar himself? No, it cannot be!'

'Psaw!' uttered Plautia, impatiently turning from the histrionic abjuration of the steward. 'Whom have you with you?'

She swept to the door, and, unlatching it, looked out upon the dismal landscape. A raw, cold wind dashed in her face; the trees tossed and waved, and the foam-streaked sea and sky seemed to mingle in a cheerless, dismal hue of gray. Under the lee of the cottage was a covered litter set down, whilst a dozen or more slaves were huddled close by, making the most of their rough woollen cloaks and the shelter of the friendly wall.

The half-closed eyes of the Greek followed her, and his lips curved in silent laughter. As she stepped back he sprang to close the door for her.

'A few slaves only,' he said apologetically.

'I expected to see a gang of Pretorians with swords and chains,' she replied, with as much sarcasm as her hauteur would admit.

Zeno suffered his humility to make bold with a smile, which disclosed his white teeth.

[pg 231] 'Ah no!' he softly said, ignoring the biting allusion to swords and chains; 'I and my slaves had the better fortune. Centurion Martialis and his Pretorians would have been as rejoiced as I am to have had the honour of escorting you, but they have privileges enough, without robbing your humble slave of a grateful task; they are even now hard at work with their exercises, as is their custom, within the walls of the villa Jovis.'

'It is enough that I am to go with you, most worthy steward,' returned she coldly. 'You have more than sufficient force with you to compel me, as well as to guard me, if need be.'

Her mention of the Pretorians suggested to the Greek the artful introduction of the name of Martialis, and he raised his eyes to her face with an unconcerned glance to try and discover some effect of his words. But he was totally disappointed, and she retired at once into her own apartment.

During the colloquy the ancient Tucca had contrived to allow the fire to retain his attention, blowing a few puffs now and then to excite the sluggish flames, and piling here and there an ember, being to all appearances absorbed in the task. As the door closed upon the Roman beauty he turned up his shrivelled, leathery countenance toward the Greek with a leer, which seemed to extinguish his eyes in the dirt-engrained wrinkles of his face.

'Worshipful Zeno!' he chuckled, rising from his knees and lifting his filthy hands in exceeding admiration; 'worshipful Zeno!'

'It is all fair and smooth now, old wine-presser,' returned Zeno in a guarded voice, giving him a playful buffet on the shoulder in high good humour. 'What a high and mighty goddess it is! Why, the granddaughter of old Tiberius up yonder is a mere cottage girl to this! But the villa is a rare mill for such! She leaves Capreae soon—ha, ha!'

'And you know how I helped you?' rejoined Tucca.

'Truly!' replied the other, and he went to the door and signed to his slaves.

Returning, he finished his wine, and then paced thoughtfully up and down the floor till the object of his care should make her appearance. In a few minutes she entered, attired for her short journey and followed by her female slave.

'I am ready,' she said briefly, and Zeno opened the door.

The litter was set down opposite, and his hand drew back one curtain, whilst a slave, on bended knee, drew back the other.

As she set her foot inside a whining voice bade her 'A fair journey.'

[pg 232] 'Ah, I forgot!' said Plautia, turning back to the cringing Tucca in the doorway; 'here is payment for my lodging.'

'By your leave, gracious Plautia, not a sesterce!' interposed the vigilant Zeno; 'he shall receive his due.'

'Yes, from me—Caesar may add what he please!' rejoined she haughtily. 'Stand back—I would speak with him!'

They retired a few steps at her bidding, and she held out a gold coin toward the old man.

'Here—this for your trouble!'

He clutched the shining piece in his filthy, horned fingers with a grasp of surprise and delight, and thereupon she added in a lower tone,

'You have betrayed me, wretch!'

'I—most bounteous lady?' he exclaimed, starting. 'Not a word—not a whisper, or may the gods strike me dead at your feet!'

His wavering glance wandered from her stern, penetrating eyes to the form of Zeno, who stood apart with folded arms and frowning gaze fixed upon him.

'No—no! May the gods strike me dead at your feet!' he repeated.

'Enough—I shall know—and beware!'

She turned away from him feebly iterating, and without more delay entered the litter and reclined therein. The slaves lifted her up and proceeded on their way, at a pace, which was somewhat retarded by the company of her faithful attendant, who walked by her side, and without whom she refused to move one yard, in spite of all Zeno's efforts to the contrary.

The bleak morning wore on, but was as yet young when Afer, cloaked and hooded against the raw, blustering weather, knocked at the door of Tucca's dwelling, and demanded to see Plautia. When the grimy, greasy wine-grower explained her departure to him, with much obsequious cringing, the knight was so incredulous that he stalked into the hovel to examine for himself. Finding the state of the case to be as related, he desired to be informed whither the lady had gone.

'I did not inquire—not I,' said Tucca cautiously.

'Went she alone?'

'Well—no!'

'With whom, then?'

[pg 233] 'Her slave was with her.'

'And no one besides?'

'Well——' drawled Tucca.

'Come, be speedy!' cried the knight impatiently.

'There were others, most illustrious, for certain, but——'

'Do you dare to play at words with me? What others?'

'Slaves!'

'What slaves, and whose? Must I beat it out of you, wretch?' angrily quoth Afer, taking a step toward the reluctant husbandman.

'Caesar's, most worshipful!' cried Tucca, hastily retreating a corresponding step; and then he continued, in a whining tone, to bemoan the hard fate which delivered him and his house over to the anxieties and responsibilities attached to the visits of nobilities and highnesses.

As he whimpered and hoped he had not said as much as might bring him harm, Afer swept past him, with a contemptuous exclamation, and left the house. He pursued his way through the town, toward the villa of Mercury, which crowned the hill overlooking the north Marina. Climbing the

ascent, he entered the gates of the palace, and sought the Prefect in an inner apartment, with the freedom of a favoured confidant and friend. Sejanus was alone and busily engaged in writing. He nodded to a couch, and bent his attention again to his writing. His stylus continued to move busily along for about a quarter of an hour, during which period Afer's attention was divided between his own thoughts and schemes and the absorbed countenance of the minister bent over his work. Then the latter laid down his stylus, and, reading over his epistle, closed it up and sealed it. Then he put it in the bosom of his dress, and left his seat.

'Well,' said he, stretching himself and yawning, 'now I am at liberty; so let me hear of your business. You are late, so I presume you have already followed up last night's folly. In what sort of a humour did you find the fair Plautia this morning after her repulse, and in what sort of humour did your tact and eloquence leave her?'

'I have not seen her,' replied Afer.

[pg 234] 'Wherefore! You are remiss, Afer,' rejoined Sejanus, with a slight wrinkle of his brows; 'it was somewhat important, as I hinted. You ought to have gone at your earliest.'

'I have been. I have come straight away.'

'How then—is she sick and bedfast?'

'No; the matter has been taken out of our hands, and all trouble spared to us—she has already taken flight.'

'Ah!' said the Prefect, with great gusto, 'that's well—nothing could be better! Sensible woman!'

'But she has not gone alone, I find.'

'How then—has my Centurion changed his mind?' demanded the commander, with a tone of disgust.

'No; but some of Caesar's household visited her and escorted her hence before my arrival.'

'Phew?' whistled the Prefect softly. He rubbed his chin slowly, and they gazed at each other for a few moments in silence.

'Ha!' ejaculated Sejanus, regarding the bare wall opposite and still smoothing the lower part of his face, 'this is taking the load off our backs most effectually.'

'Tis as good a way as any for you, Prefect, though not perhaps for the sweet lady herself. She is in excellent keeping.'

'Well, let us hope so—it must stand as our Imperial master has arranged it, at all events. She has only her headstrong folly to thank for her fate. She cannot say but that she had ample warning.'

'The fact, nevertheless, remains, that with her subtlety and good looks, she may worm her way into the Imperial favour, and be pleased to make mischief if she be so inclined.'

'Hm!' said Sejanus, 'we will see. Come! Tiberius has arrived at the villa above and I go to him at once. If he should open his lips to tell us anything of this it would be as well to be truly astonished to hear it.'

'You would not be very prudent to play a part, Prefect,' said Afer drily. 'If Tiberius has had such prompt information of the lady's presence, depend upon it there will be not much more that you or I could impart to him. The best course will be a candid one, without any disguise.'

[pg 235] 'Disguise, Afer!' ejaculated the Prefect scornfully; 'am I a truant schoolboy fearing the rod of the pedagogue? What atom of concern is it to me? Had she been mine, and of interest to me, I would have demanded restitution from Caesar himself, and he would not dare to retain her. I will tell him all, or little, or nothing at all, just as I am inclined. Go, bid the people prepare and we will start.'

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CHAPTER XII.

Things were changed in the small household of Masthlon. The same daily routine proceeded, but it was carried on under the depressing shadow of a cloud which darkened the brow of the potter. He was no more than human, and transient shadows had been there before; but, in the memory of the two females who shared his home, never such an unwelcome symptom of abiding care as that which now haunted their eyes.

He was their self-imposed autocrat, and it was natural that the gloom of his mind should be reflected on their own, just as the landscape takes its hue from the skies. Their sleepless solicitude, rooted in tender love, outweighed even the fear-quicken service of the trembling slaves of Caesar; and never was man less exacting in his demands upon such a boundless store of devotion to his needs, or yet more innocent of direct effort or intention to deserve it. It was the simple tribute to his nature, which bore not a ripple of vanity or self-sufficiency to break the unruffled flow of his cheerful serenity.

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Living in the full gratification and contentment of mutual affection, he yet never suspected the depth of reverence which lay rooted in the minds of the two women and sanctified their love. He was incapable, by nature, of arriving at such a pitch of self-consciousness. His was the disposition which would have been the touchstone of a termagant's foul humours, and a standing invitation to her persecutions. Fate had blessed him in averting such misery by giving him the companionship of two gentle natures the reflex of his own. The current of existence in his own nest had, therefore, been uniformly calm and quietly happy, even through his early struggles. Bitter reproach, the frequent adjunct of poverty and privation, had no existence in his poor house, for Tibia, his wife, was too devoted and worshipping to harbour an adverse thought. Nor was there any ground, had she been so minded, for he had toiled like a Titan, and ever maintained his native cheerfulness. The trial of those days had long passed, and, with a surer footing and a better competence, the child Neæra had come to fill the void in their childless home. She needed little of the example and training of her supposed mother to follow in the same path of devotion to the potter. His nature asserted its sway over her mind and heart, and they were inseparable companions from the first. Indeed she cared for no other when he was by, and even in her childish ailments would suffer no other nurse than the rough-handed, toil-worn man. Often he had been brought out of his workshop to the side of the child's pallet, after his wife had exhausted all arts and contrivances to soothe her fretfulness; and it was strange to see the sudden composure steal over her as, begrimed with clay and the furnace, he took up his place beside her and clasped her tiny hand in his. And yet, perhaps, not so much to wonder at, when one perceived the tenderness which welled in his dark, deep-set eyes, and crooned in the soft, soothing tones of his voice, as it poured into her eager ears some tale of wonderland. Of such superlative divinity is the gentleness of strength.

The trouble of Masthion's mind was borne, in obedience to his nature, silently and patiently, but was none the less evident to the keen anxious eyes of the women. Always devoted to his workshop, he now passed more time than ever in its smoky walls, rarely appearing save for meals. He spoke little and his look was absorbed; but, many times, Neæra caught his glance resting upon her with a haggard expression which smote her with poignant pain.

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All this upon the simplest reasoning was ascribed to the influence of Cestus—because the change was simultaneous with his appearance in their midst. It was hardly possible to make a mistake in the matter. Tibia, at least, was certain. We have seen her stealing downstairs, to find her husband sitting, steeped in grief, before the cold ashes in the brazier, after his first interview with his brother-in-law. She had subsequently endeavoured to obtain an explanation from him, but, though his heart ached as well as feared to tell her, he was obliged to preserve his promise to Cestus, and undergo the additional pain of bearing his trouble in secret. Nor was she any more successful when she applied to Cestus himself, who, with his usual readiness, disclaimed all knowledge, and in fact looked rather surprised. Thus she was constrained to remain with a disagreeable shadow of a mystery hanging between her and her husband—the first experience of the kind since their companionship; and, perforce, in such a position as rendered her painfully helpless to give him any sympathy and help whatever. Neæra's concern for her father, on the other hand, was mixed with a guilty feeling which pricked her sorely and would not be argued away. Those glances, which she caught at times fixed upon her, seemed full of reproach, and were well-nigh insupportable. To her exaggerated fancy they seemed to say, 'Look what you have done! Thus have you repaid my love and care by your wilfulness.' In this way she connected his trouble with her relation to Martialis, and no more bitter conclusion could be arrived at, since it placed in direct antagonism the two beings she most loved on earth. She reflected how gradually and reluctantly the potter had given way to her betrothal. How, at first, he had almost absolutely refused to listen at all; his journey to Rome, and final, tardy assent—given, as she felt sure, not because he approved, but because he had not been able to discover any tangible ground or excuse for objection. But, she further reflected, even then, at the worst, his anxiety took no such dark shape as at present. He never avoided her, as he appeared to do now, to her unspeakable sorrow. Then he conversed freely and without restraint on the matter, and, if more anxious and earnest at times, he never entirely lost his customary cheerfulness. It was with the arrival of her uncle from Rome the change had at once become manifest, and one day, when alone with the Suburan, she taxed him with it, and desired him to explain the coincidence, if possible.

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Now it happened that Cestus, in the course of his sojourn in the house, had yielded to a feeling of admiration for the beautiful girl, which was really sincere; and the feeling of respect which accompanied it was not only derived from consideration for the future, but actually due to her qualities themselves. He had very early changed his customary, bold, impudent manner of address in her presence, and relieved it of as much vulgarity as possible, with the effect of gradually lessening the aversion with which she at first had regarded him. He took pains to still improve the position, and with success. His fluency of tongue and natural ability for description stood him in good stead; and Neæra began to incline very readily to hear him talk to her about the great city and its people—a subject of which he was a profound master. One day he made her

a gift, and, as he had the tact to make it unostentatious as well as seasonable, it was very well received. Thus, artfully, and by degrees, her early repugnance to the Roman was conquered, to the latter's genuine satisfaction. He secretly took a profound interest in her, and was never tired of observing her ways. It gave him pride to reflect what an important factor he was in her career, and to think that, save for him, such a beautiful creature had been entirely lost to the world. These feelings were inspired and lifted beyond mere mercenary and selfish considerations by the same native superiority, which seemed to command his deference, and assign her to a higher sphere. Nor did the effect of his intercourse with her end here. Her beauty and purity were unconsciously leavening the dark depths of his mind, and quickening unaccustomed thoughts with a new spirit of nobility and refinement.

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With these influences silently at work, the time which the Suburan was spending, in his sojourn under the roof of his relatives, was productive of more good, even morally than physically; whilst Neæra's presence easily reconciled him to the lapse of time which, as day after day passed on, seemed to bring him no nearer to the proper accomplishment of his great end. Whatever kindly metamorphosis was taking place in his thoughts and disposition, that one resolution which had brought him hither suffered no change or modification. It rose superior to the rest—the gloomy, immovable mountain of his mind, to the dark bosom of which all meditations tended and circled, and beyond which speculation never ventured a step, as if existence had there an end. One of his favourite excursions was to the nearest headland on the western coast, whence the island of Capreae could be seen afar resting in the waters. There he would sit and gaze upon its rugged outline; amusing himself by imagining the movements of his patron, hugging himself with delight, and chuckling audibly, as he conjured before his mind's eye the fancy picture, oft-repeated, of the confusion, the rage and despair of the knight, on that joyous day of revenge, which was hurrying on. At such moments, which were very frequent, the Suburan's blood would tingle in his veins, and his spirit chafe in vehement impatience at the tardy approach of his wished-for opportunity. He would stretch forth his fist and shake it, in helpless wrath, at the rocky isle which afforded his enemy an asylum, and where he himself was unable to enter,—nor dared, had he the opportunity. So often as he felt impelled, though against his reason, to the same fruitless survey, so often the island seemed to mock him with its changeless form, its very sloth amid the waters, its silence, its impenetrable rocks and impervious mystery. It emitted nothing from which he might glean a reliable idea of the disposition of affairs within its jealous bosom. He could do nothing but gaze at the irritating sight with a kind of fascination, and anathematise it, with all it contained, from Caesar downward. His cunning and vigilance were helpless, and he was compelled to realise that nothing was left to him but patience and watchfulness. As long as Afer remained in Capreae he could not work out his plan. He was, therefore, eager and anxious for every appearance of Martialis from the island, in the hope of learning of the early departure of the Prefect and his friends for Rome.

He was revolving the possibilities of such an appearance one afternoon, whilst lending Neæra some assistance in carrying a basket of new earthenware into the front shop, and arranging them on the shelves. When he had finished, he leisurely swung his cloak around him before he set forth on his usual stroll to the Marina, and admiringly watched the graceful movements of the maiden's tall figure, as she put the finishing touches of arrangement to the wares on the shelf above her head. With a final, critical glance, she turned round and met his gaze.

'Well,' she said smilingly, 'are you not gone?'

'I was doubtful which way to take,' he replied; 'but if you have anything more for me to help you with I would as lieve stay.'

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'No, nothing at all; but wait one moment, uncle,' she added quickly and softly, whilst her face at the same time assumed an earnest look as if struck by a sudden thought. 'Tell me what ails my father?'

As she stood upright, with her head poised a little backward, her stature equalled his, and her calm, gray eyes looked full into his own. With another questioner, those small orbs of his would have twinkled keenly, as his tongue rapped out a ready evasion or bantering retort. But now they wandered to the pots on the shelves, during a moment of unwonted embarrassment and silent indecision. It was only for a brief moment, however, and his glance met hers again.

'What ails your father, Neæra?' he said quietly; 'I don't see that he ails anything. He seems as sound in health as ever, to my eyes. Why, what is the matter with him?'

'That I am asking you—not as regards his bodily health; that is sound enough, as you say, thank the gods. But there is some trouble—something preying on his mind: have you not noticed it?'

'I am sorry to hear you say it,' replied Cestus, slowly shaking his head; 'but I am not so well acquainted with his ways and humours as you are.'

'He has no ways and humours,' she retorted swiftly, with a slight but significant rearing of her form—'at least no strange ways or humours. He is ever open, cheerful, and light-hearted, without a shadow of ill-humour. Now he is silent and gloomy, and hides away from us—what is it?'

There was a tremor in her voice, and in the eyes, which still were steadfastly fixed on his face, he saw the trembling gleam of tears.

'Nay, how should I know better than his daughter?' he said, looking uncomfortably at the pots once more.

'His daughter knows nothing save this, that this trouble, whatever it may be, which weighs upon him, began at the time you came here from Rome.'

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'Ah, then,' said Cestus, shrugging his shoulders and drawing a deep breath as if relieved, 'if that is but the measure of the evil, it is easily mended by my shouldering my wallet and tramping back to Rome. You should have told me this before. I wouldn't be a burden to the house, and be the cause of bringing a shadow on your pretty brow for all Surrentum.'

'Ah! I meant not that,' she said hastily, with a delicate colour flushing her cheeks.

He shook his head, and his broad face expanded still more with a grin.

'I've noticed that you usually say what you mean, Neæra; so tell me now plainly to go, nor shall I be offended at your plain speaking.'

'If you put that meaning on my words you are wrong, and I ought not to have spoken them. What I thought was, that you might have brought him ill news, or something which weighs on his mind.'

'I! why I have not seen or heard from him for fourteen long years! We might as well have been dead all that time. What could I have brought with me to trouble him? Like enough, it is as you say. He's bothered to have a ne'er-do-well about him and his. I'll try and find out; and, if 'tis so, I'll march straight away.'

'I remember that he was strangely overjoyed to see you,' replied Neæra, gazing steadily at him.

'And without doubt he was, for he is too good-hearted to be sorry to see even a vagabond like myself turn up again. But I will do my best to try and find out the trouble and move it, and, failing that, move myself.'

'If you are so determined to find yourself in fault I cannot help it, since you will not believe what I say.'

'The best of guests can outstay his welcome; what then must it be with me?'

'As you will,' ejaculated Neæra curtly, and she turned again to the pots on the shelves with great dignity.

Cestus grinned and his eyes twinkled.

'At least you couldn't deny that if I went to-day you would feel as if a load was off your shoulders, and you would sit down to your supper with a better appetite.'

'You know that is not a fair way of speaking, and I shall not answer,' she said, turning round with reproof in her eyes.

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'Well! well! I am not so foolish as to expect that I can be like one of yourselves in the house,' he replied, not caring to push the matter any further. 'It is your good treatment which has made me selfish. However, I may be able to do you all a good turn some day, and show you that I can remember a kindness.'

'There is no need, and you have no right to persist in talking like this; we have given you no cause—our house was never so shamed as to turn a guest from its doors.'

'Nay, that I will swear,' said Cestus humbly; 'I am a good deal in jest, but my conscience is not altogether easy. The fresh air of this place has pulled me round, and I am as strong as ever. I will go back to Rome like a giant—why should I cumber you any longer? It would be bad manners. Moreover I am city bred, and the peace and quiet of this place, beautiful as it is, begins to make me fret after crowded streets. Such is nature. The roar and bustle of Rome would weary you just as soon, and you would be thankful to return to your fresh air and sleepy town. Would you like to go to Rome, Neæra?'

'Ah!' she said.

Cunning Cestus to put such a question to a young provincial girl. It was for nothing but the mischievous curiosity of watching the sparkle in her eye, and the deep heave of her bosom at the very mention of such a thing.

'Will you go back with me for a time?' said the voice of the tempter. 'No one would take better care of you than I: no one knows the city and its ways better than I—every day for weeks could I show you new sights.'

But Neæra could only say no, and shake her head in a despairing way.

'I would not be happy to leave my father.'

'Let him come too.'

'It would be useless to ask him.'

'For your sake he would come.'

'For the sake of a pleasure trip?—No! Besides he has been there, and not long since returned.'

'And was not that on your account? What he has done once can he not do again? You know right well that he is never so happy as when you are pleased. His own enjoyment would be as great as yours.'

[pg 244] 'It is out of the question,' said Neæra firmly, though her cheeks flushed; and Cestus, who had seated himself on a stool, regarded her with evident, though restrained enjoyment.

'Yes, it is quite true he has been to Rome on your account and no other,' he continued, 'and it is just as true, in my mind, that he will go there again on your account.'

Neæra raised her eyes to his and the wondering expression was sufficient demand for explanation without speech.

'There is no need for me to take you. You will go there by and by in better company, and your father and mother, mark my words, will follow to be near you.'

Her cheek gathered a faint colour again, but an expression of deep sadness stole over her face, and she turned her head aside. The Suburan pored keenly upon the perfect loveliness of her profile, which showed in singular relief under the white light streaming upon it from the open-fronted shop. He studied it intently, and, to judge from the expression of his countenance, with great satisfaction. Not altogether with the ordinary gratification which naturally arises from the contemplation of beauty, but, in this case, a particular satisfaction proceeding from the powerful recollections which her face inspired. A similar sweetness, a similar pure symmetry and nobility, was recalled to his mind, and he admired, therefore, with a double pleasure.

'Have no fear, your father will follow,' said Cestus assuringly. 'One need not be an augur to foretell that.'

'Alas, I think it is only I myself that give him this trouble,' replied Neæra, with a heavy sigh.

'Not at all!' responded Cestus, never telling a lie with more pleasure. 'I don't know what's the matter, but it isn't that. It will all come right—it isn't sunshine every day. Wait till I'm gone—I only want to see one person before I go, and perhaps you will tell me how long I shall have to wait.'

'Who do you mean?' said Neæra absently.

'Why, the man who will, before long, take you to Rome—the Centurion.'

'I know not that he will take me thither, and what can you want with him?' said Neæra.

[pg 245] 'Merely a question or two—you see he has but a poor opinion of me, I am afraid, and I would like to part better friends. I may be able to do him a service some day—who knows?'

'He comes when he can,' said Neæra.

'Humph!' replied Cestus, 'that's as sure as death; but can you give me nothing nearer?'

'Nothing—he might be here to-day, or he might be a month. But what do you want to ask him?'

'Nothing, except for a little information connected with some business of my own; and to tell him to get you away from here as soon as possible, so that I may be able to get a glimpse of you again before long in the city.'

He laughed and rose from his seat about to go forth into the town.

'The proud dames of the Centurion's order will perhaps pretend to sneer at you,' he went on, 'but you need not mind—you will have the laugh of them, for you will be the handsomest wife in the city. 'Twill be a great change from Surrentum to Rome—from a potter's daughter to a noble name. But never fear; you will be as pat in the place as you are here. Proud dames and damsels! the handsomest wife in Rome—you will have the laugh of them.'

'I seek to interfere with none of them,' said Neæra; 'you talk idly, uncle; I am still the potter's daughter.'

'That is so!' said Cestus; 'now I'm off!'

He stepped to the door of the shop, and, after the manner of many people, and more especially those whose time is not too fully occupied, he hesitated when he stood on the step, as if to collect his thoughts into a single steady current of deliberation before he finally advanced. This momentary halt for reflection was accompanied by an abstracted glance round the familiar

objects out-of-doors. To the left was to be seen nothing but the moss and creeper-grown wall of the road, which crossed at right angles, some fifty yards away; to the right, the sparsely built and quiet lane trended away toward the town. The only signs of life therein, at that moment, were two or three groups of children playing, a couple of dames standing in the roadway to gossip, as they met carrying their water pitchers, and, at a distance of a hundred yards or so, two men leisurely advancing. Turning from the blank prospect on the left to the sight of these two individuals on the right, the lack-lustre, pre-occupied gaze of the Suburan snapped electrically into acute attention. Instinctively he shrank back behind the shelter of the broad doorpost, and, for the few brief moments, he assumed the functions of a savage animal, or its imitator, the savage hunter. His ears seemed to prick up; his body took an attitude bent slightly forward, with muscles braced and corded, and head thrust prominently out. His heavy thick brows were knitted down so low as almost to obscure his intense gaze, and his stiff stubbly-bearded lips were clenched and protruding. Altogether the change was so rapid, and his present appearance so menacing and absorbed, that Neæra, about to resume her occupation, was struck with surprise.

Her eyes naturally followed in the direction of his concentrated gaze, but owing to her backward position inside the shop, nothing met her view.

‘What is it?’ she said, stepping to his side to look.

Her voice recalled the Suburan to himself, and straightening himself up, he cast a parting glance at the new-comers, now close at hand, and turned away into the house, saying hurriedly he had forgotten something.

The strange behaviour of Cestus stuck in the mind of Neæra, and she stood in the doorway puzzling her brains for a reason. Suddenly she became aware that the two men had drawn within twenty or thirty yards, and were regarding her with a direct gaze. Recovering herself abruptly, she turned away inside, and remained with her back to the road, until they should pass on. But in this she was disappointed, for a foot sounded on the step, and a voice said, ‘You can wait, Erotion!’

In the meantime, Cestus left the shop, and rushed into the little room, previously described as a kind of state apartment, which lay between the shop on one side, and the kitchen on the other. Into the wall dividing this room from the shop was let a small square window, unglazed, which admitted air and light at second hand. It was rather high up, and a couple of small statuettes stood in the opening. Cestus bounded on to the couch which stood underneath, and, stepping unto the topmost pinnacle of its framework, he was enabled to bring his eyes sufficiently high to overlook what passed in the shop. He furthermore arranged the little statuettes closer together, in order to still more shield the small portion of himself from any possible chance of observation. All this was inspired by instinct, which never admitted of any doubt, and he had only just taken up his post, when Afer, and his Greek, Erotion, stopped before the door of the shop.

‘I knew it when I caught sight of them,’ muttered the Suburan, with burning eyes and tumultuous breathing. ‘What brings him here, of all places in the world? What is in his brain now? What does it mean? Does he know anything?’

He was quivering with intense excitement, and, but for the dark stain which he still used for his skin, his face would have been ashy white. A thousand fears and forebodings tore his mind, whilst nervous dread and hate shook him till his frame quivered like a leaf. With his faculties at their utmost stretch he watched and listened for what should follow.

After a close scrutiny, as if to assure himself, Afer entered the shop, and Cestus observed, with satisfaction, that the lynx-eyed Erotion remained in the roadway. The further the Greek was away the freer he breathed, for he knew his profound subtlety of old.

Neæra heard the leisurely step of the knight behind her, but did not turn until he spoke and called her attention to his presence. Then her gaze rested on the visitor, whose person was clothed in its accustomed perfection of style and taste, even to a fold, and whose white and carefully-kept hands glittered with gems. Customers of rank and position were not altogether new to her, since Masthlion had a certain reputation for the character of his work, so that she was in no wise disconcerted on account of the superior grade of the comer; but there was that in the expression of his closely-set, glistening, black eyes and supercilious lips, which affected her uncomfortably. He, moreover, treated her to a leisurely survey, which might have passed without remark, had its object been the merits of a horse or dog, but which the beautiful girl resented inwardly for its impertinent freedom and boldness. The half nodding, condescending approval which plainly showed on his face, roused her indignation even more, and, with a flush on her cheeks, she drew up her tall frame, and returned him a glance of high displeasure. Afer faintly smiled, evidently amused thereat. He curled his thin lips, and spoke again with a faint drawl in his tone, whilst Cestus, above at his post, ground his teeth in suppressed rage.

‘This is the shop of Masthlion the potter?’

‘It is!’ replied Neæra, briefly and coldly.

Afer scanned her over and smiled again—the girl was certainly favoured with good looks, but, at the same time, it was amusing to observe to what great extent the knowledge of the fact had

increased her importance in her own eyes.

'I have heard that he is skilful in his work, and I came to see for myself; these are his handiwork, I presume?'

He nodded to the ware with which the shelves were filled, and his query was answered in the affirmative.

'I will look at them. You are his daughter; is it not so?'

'I am,' replied Neæra, and resolving to be rid of the company of this individual, whose impertinence and patronising air were so irritating, she added that her father should attend to his wants himself, and she accordingly turned to go to the workshop and fetch him.

'No! no!' exclaimed Afer, detaining her with his hand, and giving a slight laugh, 'I have no consuming desire to make your worthy father's acquaintance; and, besides, there is no occasion to take him from his work. He is industrious, and would not like it, and, moreover, knows very well that the care of his customers is in better hands as it is. I prefer—and who would not—to have your own fair hands submit these specimens for my approval, and your own fair lips to sound their praises.'

'Will you please to look for yourself, noble sir, and see whether there be anything suitable?' answered Neæra, curtly and loftily.

'Naturally,' he replied, with a cold smile, 'but am I not to have your aid in my selection?'

'I cannot perceive how I can be of help; you know your own taste better than I.'

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'It is true I have been thought to have some small share of taste in such matters, and to comprehend thoroughly what little I possess; but in the midst of such a bewildering collection of treasures as I see here around me, my perception is at fault, and requires strengthening. I require one specimen, and I leave the selection to your superior judgment.'

The knight allowed his eyes to sweep round at the 'treasures' with infinite scorn. Surrentine ware was well known, but it was only of a lower order, and held no place in the eyes of the art critic, or on the shelves of the wealthy.

Whether Neæra comprehended her customer's tone or not, her face gave no sign; but, without the least hesitation, she stepped before him and reached down a vase, about twelve inches high, and held it to his hands. It was more elaborate in design, and more highly finished than any in the shop, and a fellow to it remained on the shelf.

'This pair, then, is the best and the handsomest I can offer.'

'I am content,' he replied, with the faintest little sneer, as he touched the vase with the extreme tip of one of his white jewelled fingers, and turned it slightly to one side and then to the other; 'they shall have a niche in my atrium on the Esquiline, and the rest of my wretched little Roman pots and pipkins shall bow down before them. And the price thereof, the paltry equivalent to such masterpieces?'

We have no record of the market price of Surrentine industry, but with the utmost readiness and *sang froid*, Neæra calmly named a price that caused the knight to start and frown portentously, being an undoubted authority on such matters, and a keen bargainer by nature as well as necessity.

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Cestus, in his observatory, opened his mouth and eyes in blank astonishment for a moment; for, having passed no small portion of his idle time in the shop, he had learned tolerably well the prices of the simple goods, and of these articles now offered in particular. They had remained unsold since his arrival, whilst ranks of others of simple utility had found owners, in the meantime; so that Cestus, well acquainted with them, was amazed to hear the girl ask a price at least ten times greater than that which he knew to be their fixed value. He stared down from his loophole upon her, but she stood calmly waiting before her customer, and when the glance of the Suburan wandered to the expression on the face of the knight, his former patron, his delight was such as nearly caused him to laugh outright. 'Now stand to your bargain, you cur,' he muttered, amid many chuckles. 'By Hercules, she's touched him; she couldn't have thrust deeper; she might have known him as I do—clever wench!'

'You approve, then?' said Neæra. 'Shall I call your slave to take them?' She made a move as if to take down the vase remaining on the shelf, but he raised his flashing fingers deprecatingly.

'Stay,' he replied, as his look of disgust relapsed once more into its former superciliousness; 'I don't question your taste for one moment, but I take leave to challenge your memory—you must surely be mistaken as to the price you put on these wonderful specimens. In my humble opinion it is quite prohibitive, and out of all proportion to the intrinsic value of the things.'

'I have done as you desired me to do.'

'Yes, yes; but the cost?'

'Is what I have already told you, and I cannot alter it one penny.'

'It is out of reason, and on that account, much as I would wish to profit by your judgment, I shall be compelled to forego it.'

'Ah!' snarled Cestus.

'And truly,' continued Afer, 'the sum required is so large, that I doubt whether my slave's purse contains sufficient to discharge the debt, even supposing I think right to incur it.'

'Pah!' was the muttered commentary of the Suburan, given with fathomless contempt, 'the liar! He knows to a farthing what the fellow's pouch has in it—nothing beyond a few copper coins, I'll warrant; and woe betide him if he can't square his reckoning when he gets home.'

'In that case, I suppose, I should be right in saying that such a poor wretch as myself could never hope for credit,' continued Afer, with a sneer.

'You are a perfect stranger, sir,' replied Neæra.

'Exactly—with no recommendation. I shall, therefore, be compelled to select something more in keeping with my humble resources of ready coin, which, I am afraid, will be an impossible task, if prices are all levied at the same modest computation.'

[pg 251] 'This, then, perhaps you may approve of,' said Neæra promptly; and going to the opposite end of the shop, she took and handed to him a small brown vessel, two or three inches high, without any more pretension to beauty than any ordinary glass bottle.

'Ah, now you have hit my taste exactly,' exclaimed Afer, receiving the plainest of plain articles in his hand with the blandest smile of exquisite irony; 'you have indeed gauged my ideas to a nicety. The other articles were really as much beyond my artistic appreciation as their cost was above my poor purse; but this is delightful in its beautiful simplicity—I wait to hear you name its price.'

Neæra informed him. 'Good! I accept,' said he; 'it is modest indeed. It is, I think, within my means, and I am relieved in mind. Hither, Erotion! Take this, and pay what is asked of you.'

While the young Greek was producing the two or three copper coins which were needed, his master arranged his cloak and took his leave. Neæra took the money from the slave, who bestowed upon her an admiring gaze, with something of the same license as his master.

'I am glad to find your father's fame has not been belied,' observed Afer; 'it is only too evident. The next time I come I shall come better provided; yet, even with this little treasure which I have been fortunate enough to secure, I shall no doubt be able to induce many others to follow my example.'

So saying, and showing his white teeth with a smile, he left the shop followed by Erotion, who, on his own account, turned as he passed through the door, and smirked behind him, leaving Neæra standing with the deepest indignation in her face.

They had scarcely passed from view when Cestus hurriedly re-entered the shop, and going to the door peered after them.

'Did you see them—do you know them?' exclaimed Neæra.

'Yes, yes, I saw them come along—I have seen him somewhere before—I will try and think before I come back,' answered Cestus hastily. 'I will go through the fields, I think, for a stroll.'

[pg 252] He retreated through the house, and crossing the small patch of garden in the rear, emerged into a cart-track. This ran more or less parallel with the street, and skirted the gardens and little fields belonging to the houses. Here and there was a path for convenience of communication between the main and back thoroughfares, and Cestus ran ahead until he reached such an one which commanded a ready view from end to end. At the bottom of this he waited a few moments, until he saw the forms of Afer and his slave cross the upper end, and then, being sure he was in their rear, he walked up into the street. He either forgot his altered appearance, or had such small faith in its ability to mislead those whom he was now dogging, that he followed with the extreme care of a hunter tracking a wild animal through its native woods. He kept them in view at the furthest possible distance; stopped when they stopped, and cowered behind walls or anything which came handiest, to avoid the slightest chance of being noticed. One of the first actions he observed was that of Erotion, who, in answer to something which his master said, threw away to one side an article he carried. Cestus instinctively guessed what it was, and following on, passed the fragments of the small, recently-purchased pot lying at the foot of a wall. This act confirmed his suspicions, that his former patron's object in visiting Masthlon's shop was distinctly not that of buying of the wares it contained. The Suburan, in consequence, plunged still deeper into an agony of suspicion, and as often as he soothed himself with the fact that it was impossible that Neæra's identity could be known, so often he plagued himself afresh with the question of its probability.

Step by step he pursued the leisurely track of the knight until they reached the centre of the

town, where Afer visited one or two shops. After this they entered the baths, and Cestus was left to cool his heels for a considerable time outside. He was a sleuth-hound of undaunted mettle, however, when once on a scent, and there being a wine-shop at no great distance, whence he could watch the door of the building his quarry had entered, he proceeded thither, and sat patiently over a bowl of thin wine. He was determined to see the last of them, since he could neither live nor move in peace, if haunted by the possibility of encountering them at any chance time face to face. After a long delay his patience was rewarded by the sight of the knight issuing refreshed from the bath, and taking his way, followed by his retainer, toward the Marina. Here they perhaps meant to take boat to the island, thought Cestus, with a sigh of relief. But no, he was disappointed; for they entered an inn of considerable pretensions, and the Suburan was doomed to another lengthy delay, whilst the knight was most probably dining. The afternoon was wearing on. The dusk was beginning to thicken when the watcher's eyes were once more gladdened by the appearance of master and slave. He rejoiced to see them saunter across to the steps which led down to the Marina. Thence he had no more need to follow, but, leaning over the cliff, observed their movements without difficulty and danger, and ere long watched them speeding over the darkening sea before a fair breeze. Cestus gave a deep sigh of relief. When they were nearly out of sight he turned homeward, and, for a season at least, was at liberty to devote his attention entirely to his own deliberations.

CHAPTER XIII.

Away from his haunts in the Imperial city, where his wits were kept ever bright and sharp by the friction of crowded humanity, the Suburan had fallen under the lethargic influence of utter inoccupation in a comparatively lifeless provincial town. His mind, latterly, may be said to have only smouldered.

It has been seen how instantaneously and unexpectedly it was roused into high excitement and activity from a state of mere passive existence. Just as the blast of a forge-bellows kindles, in an instant, a dull smoking heap of black ashes into a glowing fiery mass, so the sight of Domitius Afer inflamed the listless spirit of Cestus.

Fearing lest he should betray some symptoms of his perturbed mind to the keen eyes around the supper-table at home, he wandered along aimlessly until the time for that meal should pass, and his thoughts become more serene. To assist the latter process he visited one or two wine-shops which crossed his random path, and fortified himself with some hearty draughts of liquor. Thence he passed on to the outskirts of the town and sought the silent roads and darkness. Here were solitude and the brooding stars, circumstances most apt for philosophising.

His ignorance of the actual position of affairs left him a prey to the most distracting surmises. It was in vain he argued and proved to himself continually, that his secret lay, for the present, safe with himself and the potter only; and that Afer could no more have any knowledge or suspicion of the girl's identity than a bird of the air. This was assured, he said; and yet what was it that brought his quondam patron to the potter's shop? Was it to buy? No; that was a mere pretence. What did he want with such wares? What he had bought he had thrown away. Even in his harassment the Suburan's face twisted with a grin, as he recalled the scene in the shop, and the expression of the knight's face when acquainted with the price of the vases.

The conclusion, therefore, forced itself on the mind of Cestus, and would not be dislodged, that Neæra was the object of the ominous visit. And, again, how was it, and from whom had he learnt of the existence of the girl in such an out-of-the-way corner of the town, where his foot was never likely to tread of its own accord? It was true that Masthion had a certain reputation for his work, and that the beauty of Neæra being known, it might have reached the knight's ears amidst other tattle. This might have prompted his curiosity; but the coincidence was too strong for the reasoner's peace of mind, and no argument was potent to comfort him. His thoughts, restricted to such a narrow field of inquiry, writhed and twisted in torment. Then at length, exhausted and chagrined with the fruitlessness of his efforts, he gave way to a paroxysm of rage. He shook his clenched fists, and his mouth vomited the most frightful curses on the head of his treacherous patron and all appertaining to him, including the impenetrable island, whose sealed silence held him at bay. The first glimpse of his would-be murderer had aroused and added fuel to his mingled fear and detestation. This, combined with the sense of his insecurity and comparative powerlessness in his present situation, put him almost beside himself for a few delirious moments. No one passed him at this point, or they might have been superstitiously affrighted at the fierce gestures and the shrill, hissing notes of this shadowy form in the dark road.

The short frenzy, however, sufficed to purge his veins somewhat, and when its fury had fled it left him comparatively calm and collected. He became aware of an appetite which needed appeasing, and he turned his steps homeward. When he entered the house, he found that the time had flown

considerably beyond his reckoning, and that the family were all in bed. He was not sorry, however, at this, and, after eating the supper which had been left standing for him, he went to bed, where his excited thoughts kept him from sleep till nigh the time when early risers were beginning to stir between the bedclothes, and collect their thoughts for a new day's labour. Then indeed he slept heavily, and came down late, to find every one busy in their daily occupations—Masthlon, as usual, locked in his workshop.

Whilst eating his breakfast Neæra came in, fresh and fair as the morning itself, but with anxious thought in her lustrous, gray eyes.

'You did not return yesterday until we had all gone to bed,' she said. 'It was because you are persisting in what you said about your presence being the cause of my father's trouble of mind.'

'Not at all,' replied Cestus, whose mind was too fully weighted with other matter to trifle with this question, 'I met with an old friend, and we sat talking about old times till late—that's all.'

'You vexed me by saying what you did.'

'I was rude,' replied Cestus, as he rose from the table, 'and I am sorry. Your father cannot do without me for a time yet, and I do not intend to quit you. I was joking—I am too comfortable and you are too kind.'

'Ah, then you know what ails him?'

'I have been thinking, and I have an idea; but I will find out and tell you. It is a fine day—I must be off out into the sunshine. What a pleasant morning for a trip from Capreae.'

He looked sidelong at her, and marked the faint tinge which rose to her cheek.

'You remember that man who came into the shop yesterday,' she remarked.

'Yesterday!' murmured Cestus, with lack-lustre eyes.

'Yes! you looked at him and his slave as if you took an interest in them; then you hurried away and came back when they had gone.'

'Oh—ah!'

'You said you knew them.'

'I know that I have seen him in Rome, and that he lives on the Esquiline; but what he does here I don't know. Very likely on the same errand as my poor self—change of air and a holiday.'

'Is he a great man?'

'In his own estimation, doubtless—he is of knightly rank, I believe.'

'His behaviour did not keep pace with his rank then—I hope he may not pay us another visit.'

'Tis very likely he may if he has come to sojourn here for a time. If he does don't fail to tell me of it, and of all he says. He is one of your well-dressed scamps, and thinks that every good-looking poor girl is fair prey—the city swarms with such. But let me know, and don't be afraid. I am city-bred like himself, and know a thing or two, and will soon put an end to his little game if he means anything.'

Cestus squared his shoulders as he uttered this brave speech, and went, with something of a swagger in his gait, to reach down his cloak.

'Oh, I'm not afraid,' replied Neæra calmly, 'and I have my father at hand.'

'Ay, that's true!' said Cestus slyly, 'and another still better, who could tear the cur limb from limb—nevertheless, don't fail to let me know. I have some previous knowledge of the fellow, which makes me curious, and I may easily be useful.'

Thus delivering himself he went forth into the bright sunlight and the crisp keen air. Instinctively his feet turned in the direction of the road which led to the southern promontory of Minerva. It was a customary route of his, but it was also on a main line of communication with the island, and the desperate chance of meeting with somebody, or something, which might afford a glimmer even of news, burned stronger than ever in his breast. This something was, however, painfully vague, and the somebody really limited itself to only one person. The sight of Martialis would have been as joyful to him as rain to the thirsty in the desert, taking even into consideration, that what the Centurion could impart, even if he should prove to have the inclination, would hardly be likely to throw any light upon his peculiar needs. Added to this was the fact of the young soldier's aversion. But Cestus was not easily abashed or discouraged, and had no fear of being able finally to command attention.

He reached his observatory and sat down to rest and deliberate. Capreae lay before him amid the blue sea, with the white gleam of its palaces tipping its rugged peaks and peeping amid its

terraced groves. With this lovely picture filling his vision, he sat for full an hour absorbed in thought, and then noting the position of the sun, he rose and walked away homeward. He had reconciled himself to his position, and had come to the conclusion that his only policy was to wait and be watchful. He also determined, on the least suspicion of danger, to carry off the potter and his family to Rome—Neæra at least; if, however, he could persuade them to go at once so much the better. He could do nothing at Surrentum; he was tired of it, and he would feel safer in the city, whither he would eventually be obliged to go to carry out his scheme. Why not, therefore, go at once and wait there? The thought also tormented him, that something might occur which might rob him of his revenge. He burned and itched to set the wheels of his machinery in motion, however slightly, and he resolved that day to take the first step for that end. If it was no more than a mysterious hint to certain people, that something was in the wind, it would be sufficient for a commencement. His spirits rose and his steps quickened as this determination was arrived at, and, re-entering Surrentum, he proceeded to the dwelling of a professional scribe near the Marina. He entered and found that individual busy at his table, inditing an epistle to the dictation of a young and good-looking woman, who instantly became silent and turned away her head at the Suburan's entrance. The writer, who was a bald, shrivelled, and short-sighted old man, did not immediately perceive the cause of the sudden stoppage of his customer's eloquence, and casting a longing look at a large open book at his elbow, cried out testily, 'Well, well, what next?—oh it's you, is it? you'll have to wait outside till I've finished!'

'A love letter, eh! All right, I'm sorry to interrupt,' replied Cestus, giving a leer at the young female who tossed her head.

He went outside and waited till she came forth, and then returned to take her place at the scribe's table.

'Well!' snapped the old man, tearing his eyes from his book with a vicious wrench, as if the patronage which brought him his livelihood were a nuisance instead of a thing to be thankful for.

[pg 259] 'Tablets, wax and thread of your best, old man; bring them out and let me see them,' answered Cestus. 'I and a comrade have a good joke in hand, and I want you to write a line or two of mystery. You must put your best finger foremost, and shape your letters so as to make them look as if they came from some aristocrat.'

He drew a piece of silver from his pouch and threw it across the table to the scribe, whose watery, old eyes glinted as his grimy fingers caused the coin to vanish with an astounding celerity. Cestus laughed, and the same grimy talons selected the articles required, which the Suburan took into his hands. He examined them carefully, not with a view of satisfying himself of their quality, about which he knew nothing whatever, but for the purpose of assuring himself that they bore no mark or impress which might afford a clue to their origin. This proving to his satisfaction, he told the old man to go on with his reading, whilst he considered upon the style the document was to take. After a few minutes' deliberation he bade the scribe take his pen and write the following with every care:—

'You may praise the gods and rejoice, Fabricius. When thieves fall out then may honest men look to get their own. The treasure you lost shall return to you. Prepare to receive it and deal vengeance. These tablets ere you receive them shall touch her very hand. You have often been deceived, but now wait the truth. Do you recognise this ribbon? Keep it carefully till the remainder is forthcoming. Patience and, above all, silence! I am beset; and to breathe a word would be destruction to me and to her. Beware, therefore!'

'That's all—now read it out!' said Cestus; and the old scribe did so accordingly.

The Suburan laughed in his most boisterous style, and rubbed the palms of his thick, strong hands together vigorously with every appearance of satisfied delight at his composition.

'Bravo!' he exclaimed; 'that's just it, to the very letter—tolerably plain and tolerably mystified. If this don't turn out the best frolic of my life call me a chuckle-headed fool. Get you the thread and wax ready, father!'

[pg 260] He stepped aside meanwhile, and took from his bosom a small package. Out of this he drew a faded piece of ribbon and cut off a small portion, putting it between his teeth, whilst he tied up and replaced the package again.

He laid the piece he had severed on the table, and said, 'Put that inside and seal up carefully.'

'There—that's all right!' said Cestus, thrusting the tablets into his breast. 'Farewell, father!'

The scribe, who was already poring over his book, with his long peaked nose nearly touching the leaves, gave merely a rusty grunt as his customer stepped out into the passage.

'Stay!' cried Cestus, coming back, 'Hark'ee, father!—would you not like to hear this pretty joke of mine?'

'Pish!' snapped the scholar, with savage contempt; and with an indescribable series of shrugs of his lean body, he huddled himself irritably over his book. The Suburan's guffaw shook the small

dwelling as he turned away and proceeded to the nearest wine-shop. Small as was the commencement, he had, nevertheless, entered on his campaign. So he drank his wine and water with unusual satisfaction and elation.

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CHAPTER XIV.

The Suburan had the letter written and completed to his mind, and the next step was, of course, to have it delivered. For safety's sake this was an arrangement to be carried out with due circumspection; and, as he already had an idea in his mind, he determined to put the missive away safely for a time, to see if the opportunity he hoped for would present itself. He came out of the wine-shop, took a turn on the Marina, the favourite lounge of the townsfolk, and then turned homeward. The direct thoroughfare suited him no longer. Avoiding the street he made his way to the rear of the potter's premises. He resolved there should be no awkward meeting of unwelcome faces if he could help it. As he drew near, passing through the irregular patches of garden and pasture, he heard the sound of horses' feet. He looked toward the main road, already described as running nigh to Masthlon's house, and saw a horseman garbed in military dress galloping at a swift pace northward. He was already at some distance, and a few yards further on his course the road dipped out of sight. At this point the rider suddenly reined up, waved something white, and then was gone. Cestus, with something like an oath of disappointment between his lips, hastened on a few steps, till the little workshop of Masthlon, with its smoking chimney, came into view. Then the struggling anathema rolled forth in full and hearty distinctness, for there, on the little low wall surrounding the garden-patch of the potter, was Neæra, standing motionless, with her white answering signal in her down-dropped hand, and her eyes yet fixed on the distant road. He had arrived just in time to witness the disappearance of Martialis, the Centurion. He whom he had expected and watched for with such restless anxiety, and to whom he had mentally arranged to consign his letter for the safest delivery to its destination. His extreme disgust and disappointment found its customary relief in a furious spasm of frightful language, all the fiercer in that he was obliged to suppress it, because of neighbours sprinkled here and there nigh at hand in their little plots of garden ground. When he looked again for Neæra she had disappeared. He followed into the house with a visage dark and sullen as a thundercloud. The first to meet him was Neæra herself; a strange contrast, inasmuch as joy sparkled in her eyes and bloomed on her cheeks. It was testimony enough to the glance of Cestus.

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'Hath not the Centurion been here but now?' he asked, gloomily enough.

'Yes!' replied Neæra, with yet more colour in her cheeks. 'What is the matter?'

'Matter enough,' was the sulky answer; 'I have been dying to see him and to have speech with him. I was even on the road this morning, thinking that he might pass by chance, and if I had not gone into the town I should have caught him. He must have followed me almost on my heels. Curse my luck, why did I not come straight home?'

'You were unlucky indeed, uncle; but he will not be away more than a few days.'

'Even that may prove too long,' growled Cestus. 'Said he anything about affairs in the island that you can remember, Neæra? That the Prefect was intending to return to the city before long?'

'No, nothing. But had it been so, Lucius would scarce have been returning to Capreae again.'

'Humph!' grunted Cestus, as Neæra glided away about her business, well satisfied with the existing arrangements of the Centurion's commander.

Cestus sought the little upstairs chamber, where he slept, and, having hidden the letter to Fabricius in a safe place till required, he cast himself on his pallet, wearied in body and intensely irritated in mind. Here he fell asleep and found the day far gone when he awoke. His precious missive occupied his first thoughts, and he went down into the town to try and discover some chance of sending the same—a public post system being unknown. In this he was lucky. A trading vessel had touched on her voyage to the Tiber, and he found the master thereof perfectly willing to do as he required. Cestus went and brought the letter and delivered it into the seaman's hands, with full instructions and a liberal subsidy. A visit to a wine-shop, where the liquor flowed plentifully, completed the transaction, and then Cestus took leave of his new friend with many parting injunctions. A couple of days passed, during which Cestus never left the immediate vicinity of the house for any great length of time. He felt constrained to the exercise of vigilance, but the restraint upon his accustomed habits of liberty and self-indulgence soon began to prove very irksome. Nor did anything happen during that time to hinge the least interest upon.

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'If I had chanced to leave the place for two or three hours, something would have been sure to have turned up,' he grumbled.

But what little had occurred had permanently unsettled the equilibrium of his mind. He was beset with a certain kind of vague uneasiness, dull, intangible, but sleepless; of the disagreeable nature of an ill presentiment, which set the profoundest intellectual subtlety at defiance. His restlessness increased, and the current of his thoughts set, with increasing constancy and eagerness, toward his native Rome, till the longing resembled that of a sick man or exile. The feeling rose so strongly, that the early removal of himself to the great city took its place as the first and most absorbing care of his mind. The family of the potter, of course, he, of necessity, included with himself.

On the third day after the departure of Martialis, he was sitting alone over the fire in the house, with his elbow on his knee and his hairy chin on his hand, deeply occupied in arranging his method of procedure, or rather in deciding on the manner of approaching Masthlon on the subject, since the potter's assent was the only real difficulty to be met. His meditations were interrupted by the touch of a hand on his shoulder. He looked up and saw Neæra standing beside him. He made as if to rise, with the deference he had acquired in her presence, but, without removing her hand from his bulky shoulder, she pressed him gently down in his place.

[pg 264] 'You were very deep in your thoughts, uncle; you never heard me come.'

'That's true enough,' he replied, with a smile; 'but your footstep lacks weight to rouse a sleeper or day-dreamer.'

'You were not asleep, unless you sleep with your eyes open,' said Neæra. 'You were deep enough in a day-dream, therefore. I can guess—was it not of Rome?'

'Well, that among other things, I am bound to say,' replied Cestus.

'I have come to ask you about my father. Have you ever thought of him since we last spoke?'

'I—I have not had a convenient opportunity,' said Cestus, with hesitation.

'What, not in all this time? Ah, that is a poor excuse!'

'To speak truth, I was thinking of him when you came in,' said Cestus, guiltily dropping his eyes to the fire; 'I was making up my mind to talk to him before night.'

'It is dusk already,' said Neæra, shaking her head gently as if scarce believing him.

'That is so,' replied Cestus, sweeping his glance round the little room, where the shadows were gathering thick, and the flickering flames of the fire in the brazier were beginning to define themselves on the walls; 'but there yet remains plenty of time. I am going to open a weighty subject with him, so I am taking time to consider.'

'And what may that be?' asked Neæra, seating herself on a stool beside him and looking into his face.

Cestus kept his glance on the fire as he replied:

'It is not indeed so grave a matter after all, but he is sure to make it so. I want him to cut loose from this tomb of a town and take up his abode in Rome. It is the only place for a man of skill. Here he is buried.'

'Here we have been very happy and content, until lately,' responded the fair girl, with a sigh. 'I don't think you will succeed.'

'Yes, if you would help me,' observed Cestus.

'My father is the best judge, and I will abide by what he says.'

'He must go eventually,' said the Suburan, emphasising the word *must*, 'so that you might as well persuade him to move with me at once.'

[pg 265] 'Must go! And what is there then to compel him?' said Neæra quickly, in surprise.

The Suburan's eyes twinkled as he shot a sidelong glance at her beautiful face.

'Nothing but yourself,' he said quietly; 'that is why I asked you to persuade him now rather than leave it later.'

Neæra wrinkled her pretty brows and perused her companion's dark-hued shaggy face with an anxious, inquiring look. Then she shook her head.

'I cannot understand,' she said; 'to say that of me seems to be nonsense.'

'Don't you see?' exclaimed Cestus, reaching out his arm, and laying his thick forefinger on her hand, as it rested on her knee, 'don't you see? When you become the wife of Martialis he will take you to Rome, and by and by your—Masthlon will be unable to live without the sight of you, so he will assuredly follow. It is as plain and sure as the sun in heaven.'

The faintest shadow of a smile rested on her lips, and she dropped her gaze from his face to the burning logs. The delicate lids drooped over the lustre of her eyes, and a warmer tint suffused her skin.

'It will be time when I go to Rome,' she murmured; 'wait till that comes to pass.'

'Therefore you will not help to persuade him to go now, as I recommend?'

'I will not say a word.'

'Think of the blessed change—the sights and shows, such as you never dream of. When you are there you will say, "How did I live in such a dog's hole as that?"—meaning Surrentum.'

'I think I have passed too many pleasant days here to think that ever,' replied Neæra; 'but my own inclinations have nothing to do with it, nor shall they.'

'Then again,' continued Cestus, more artfully, 'the Prefect has been a long time in Capreae, and cannot be expected to remain there much longer. He will return to Rome, and with him Martialis.'

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This was a subtle stroke, but he got no reply, save only a low rippling laugh and a shake of her head, which was turned persistently towards the fire. Whereupon he shrugged his shoulders, and silence fell between them for a considerable space, which he employed in fixedly watching her as she sat with her hands clasped across her knee, apparently lost in a reverie.

The bright glow of the fire bathed her face and figure, and threw them into striking relief in the now dark room. The Suburan, with his elbow on his knee and his head dropped sideways on his hand, feasted his eyes with the lovely picture she made, which drew no small portion of its charm from the grace of her unconsciousness. It awoke his mind to a strange activity. Out of the dim past he conjured up scenes which remained engrained in his mind as sharp and distinct as events of yesterday. Amongst these was a bright and vivid morning on the Janiculum Hill in Rome; the glorious city spread beneath glittering in the morning beams.... A beautiful child dancing and skipping in pure delight; a hasty dash under a high garden wall, and down a narrow obscure lane.... Then again the depth of a dark, rainy, hot, summer night, when he entered that self-same room, weary with travel and prolonged toil of search for his destination.... The deposit of his tiny sleeping burden, and the astonished faces of the two inmates of the room.

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Fortune had favoured him; it was the reward of his humanity. As he looked on the heedless maiden, his heart warmed with satisfaction; and for some brief moments, he felt at peace with all and everything. How exquisite she would look clothed as a white-handed patrician and set in the marble halls of a palace. Her beauty had utterly conquered him. It was a new and novel experience to have lived in daily contact and companionship with a being so delicate. Her sprightliness and spirit charmed him, whilst her purity and gentleness softened and quelled him. It was no ordinary degree of pride which tingled in his breast at the fact, that she was more indebted to and more dependent upon him than any one, although she knew it not. Should she learn now from his lips? The heart of this rough, vice-sodden, crime-laden man beat like a girl's as he contemplated the action, and gazed on the exquisite profile before him. How those deep-fringed orbs would glow and flash in wonder, and the delicious curves of her lips tremble with emotion! His cool reason was fast departing, and his tremor increasing, as the fascination before his eyes hurried him on to the consummation of his sudden desire. In two or three minutes more he could not have resisted the temptation to hold the heart and soul of the fair girl breathless at his disposal. All question of policy had fled, and he was preparing for his task, when the grate and thud of a bolt being drawn, sounded on their ears through the open door.

'That is father!' exclaimed Neæra, rousing herself suddenly and turning round in expectation.

A deep sigh, either of relief or disappointment, escaped the lips of Cestus, and he straightened up his body.

The creak of the potter's workshop door was followed by his step, and the next moment he entered the room and advanced toward them. They looked at him in astonishment, for a wonderful change was in his aspect. He was clearly in a state of great mental excitement, not to speak of evident delight. The soot of the furnace on this occasion rather overspread and subdued the reddish incrustation of clay on his person, and in his hand he carried a globular vessel of dull, coarse-looking glass. He held it up before him as he entered, in such an eager manner, as to draw their attention to it at once, without a word from his lips. His deep-set eyes sparkled in the firelight with infinite vivacity, as they flung their flashing glances first from one to the other, and then to the cup in his hand, and back again. His eager hurried step brought him up to the Suburan and the maiden almost at a run, and then he stopped short, with the vessel uplifted in one hand, and the forefinger of the other pointing to it. A strange laugh, or chuckle of supreme joy or exultation, escaped him, and he moved the article, with its accompanying index finger, first before the face of Neæra and then of Cestus. They arose silently from their seats and stared at the potter with strange wonder, and something of alarm, at this unusual proceeding on the part of a man of habitual reserve and serenity. It was a spectacle almost as little to be expected, as for a statue of the grave goddess and her owl to step down from its plinth and cut a caper on a temple floor. They saw that his features and his frame were trembling with extreme agitation;

[pg 268] and failing to comprehend its cause in a glass cup of not the slightest pretensions to use or ornament, they remained, with anxious gaze, to await some further development of such unwonted symptoms.

'Look—it is done—it is found—I have found it—I, Masthlion!' gasped the potter, with another laugh. 'At last—at last!' he cried, rolling and smoothing the vessel in his grimy hands, with the ecstasy of a miser fondling his treasure heaps.

Grave doubts arose in the mind of Cestus as to the actual state of his kinsman's mind; and giving him a glance of suspicion, and another of contempt on the paltry object of his delight, he growled as follows—'As far as I can see, potter, it is a thing that ought to be well lost beyond redemption, and a thing of regret, if found again in any dusthole.'

Masthlion vented another chuckling laugh, and turned his eyes on the face of Neæra, who rested her hand on his shoulder, and touched the glass with the slender fingers of her other hand. Timidity and doubt were in her actions and on her countenance. She returned his gaze with affectionate concern and said soothingly, 'You seemed pleased to have found it, father. Had you lost it long? Why do you prize it? Tell me!'

'It has never been lost; nevertheless I have but now found it. Ha, ha! Child, do you think I have taken leave of my wits? And, indeed, I think I have, for joy,' laughed Masthlion, straining the girl to his breast and giving her a fervent kiss. 'Go, bring your mother!'

Neæra glided away into the upper regions of the house on her mission; and, at the request of Masthlion, Cestus took a brand from the fire and lighted an iron lamp which hung from the ceiling. By the time the feeble flame threw its cheerless light upon the scene, Neæra returned with Tibia. The latter, with probably a hint of her husband's unusual humour, came forward in a peculiar roundabout fashion, as though she were describing the segment of a circle with the potter as a centre. Her face, wreathed in wonder and some fear, was riveted on his, throughout her course, as if her head were magnetised. When she arrived finally on the opposite side of him, she stopped. Masthlion regarded her with an amused smile, and Cestus grinned, almost audibly. Neæra, standing at one side, glanced from one to the other, with a slight wrinkling of her brows, and drew a step nearer Tibia; but the dame remained absorbed in her husband, and indifferent to the amusement her odd manner had caused.

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'Husband!' she ejaculated at last. 'What is the matter?'

''Tis what I sent to tell you,' he said, laughing. 'Look!' He seized her hand, and held up the vessel before her eyes in the same way he had done to the others. 'Here is the result of twenty-five years' toil and patience. Here, at last, is success, after disappointments and bitterness beyond my tongue to tell. Do you remember the old times, wife? Ay, can you ever forget them? They were too well ground into you—starvation and rags are not easily forgotten. I was the cause; and though you often blamed me and reproached me in your heart, you never murmured.'

Tibia shook her head gently.

'Well, well, I deserved it, at least. I was a man possessed with an idea and no money—an unlucky combination for mortals who are obliged to eat to live. I learnt my trade as a youth, and one day in my master's shop I chanced upon a piece of refuse glass of peculiar quality. I showed it to my master, but he scarcely looked at it. He was a man of no ideas beyond his daily work. There was that about this piece of glass, however, which set me thinking, and filled me with an idea of such strength as to be called infatuation. It has been like a stone of Sisyphus to me till this day, and now I have conquered it. For twenty-five years I have worked to discover the secret of that stray piece of glass, more or less madly—eagerly—according to circumstances, but always constantly. My father, when he died, left me a little hoard of money. Then I left my master and built a workshop of my own. It was then, too, I married my sweetheart; and like a young, eager, hot-blooded, thoughtless lad, would have laughed to scorn the notion of a space of twenty-five years being necessary to the working out of my problem, had it been told to me at that time. "Come," I said to myself, "my money will keep us a couple of years, and by that time, I shall have found out my secret, and fortune will lie before me." In two years I was as far off the end as ever—do you remember, Tibia? In three years I was further still, for we had struggled on, in vain hope that each day would solve the mystery, and my patrimony had come to an end in the process. Every experiment was as futile as the one before it, and I had become numb even to bitter disgust and despair. Ah, and how I worked! Night and day—it was like a fever dream. And you, Tibia, would come to help—it was your presence that helped more than your hands, wife. Then came the day when the last coin had been spent in fuel for the furnace, and the experiment had failed as miserably as all the others before it. It was dusk as I tested my work and found it wanting, and I sat down stupid and sick. I began to dream horribly, or else a fever had reached my brain. I sat there like a helpless log, as if bound hand and foot, whilst the walls seemed to dance around me in a giddy whirl, and the roof to rear up and swoop down upon me with a frightful sensation that will live in my memory till I die. Then in that dread hour it was you who crept in beside me. Yet you did nothing but lay your hand silently on mine, and that saved me. You remember it, Tibia?—I cried like a girl. I was overwrought in mind and body. I was like the steel blade which is strained in a curve beyond its strength, and then snaps, to spring and quiver no more. That night we begged our supper, and next morning I rose another being. I was a dreaming youth no longer, and I set to work to make pots like my dull master, and allow my phantasy to find its

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opportunities for indulgence, when time and means allowed. I did not do this from change of inclination, for my ambition burned as strongly as ever; but to live was a necessity. The gods gave me patience, and I toiled for livelihood, and for means to give me leisure to resume my search. The gods have blessed me in both: we are beyond fear of want, and I have, at last, discovered the secret which led me on, like a will-o'-the-wisp, for all these years. Here it is to bless us—me, for my toil, and you, wife, for your patience and long-suffering! I was cruel in those early years. Many a time since then have I acknowledged it. But I was possessed—eaten up too much with my own mad hopes and visions to be able to see a wife pinched and starved. Heaven knows, wife, what your thoughts were in those days! You never spoke, and I dare not ask. Now I may be able to repay—who knows? At least the secret is found, whatever it may lead to. If it was ever known to the world before I know not; but I have heard the scholars say, that the most ancient people, the Egyptians, in their days of power, were skilled in works beyond the comprehension of these days. Yet their knowledge is all buried, forgotten, lost, like their temples and cities. What they knew and discovered will have to be sought for again. Thus this matter of mine may once have been known well enough, when the world was ages younger, in the days of the giants. Let that be or not; it is of no consequence to me or any one. It is enough for me to think, that no one lives and breathes who saw, or ever heard, of such a glass cup as this which now I hold. What would you say, now, if it were impossible to break this vessel? What would the wealthy patrician think, if his costly glass treasure, goblet, or heirloom should be of such composition that his careless slaves should be powerless to harm it?—that the delicate fabric, exquisitely cut and designed, brilliantly pictured and tinted, instead of being dashed to fragments on his floor by the clumsy fingers of a slave, should be so durable as to survive the mishap, and be lifted again, with nothing worse than a dent, which a skilful artist could restore? And of the priceless gem of the artist, so of the humble vessels of the kitchen. That stray fragment of glass which set my brain on fire, and gave me five-and-twenty years of toil and unceasing thought, by some strange trick of chance, had been fused with certain properties in certain proportions. Chance had accomplished what it has taken me all these years to find out, and there, at last, its composition is developed. Watch now and you shall see how this piece of glass is matched by none in existence!

Masthlon's face was flushed with tumultuous speech. His trembling hand pulled his wife aside to give himself more room. Then he lifted the glass bowl as high as possible above his head, and threw it down on the floor, with all the force he could command. There followed no crash and flying of countless splinters, but only a dull thud, and the hardly tried glass rolled over lazily two or three times with a flattened side; otherwise it had suffered no damage. The potter drew himself up and looked round with pride and triumph in his eyes.

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Neæra clapped her hands and kissed him. Her face reflected his supreme joy and satisfaction. Tibia stood silently, with her hand still grasped in her husband's, as it might be in the manner of those bygone days of trial he had told them of. She said nothing; but her eyes passed from the object on the floor to her husband's face, and there remained. She was a silent woman, and spoke no word of congratulation; but the pride and devotion in her face were eloquent enough. Masthlon, looking down into it, read it there. Both females regarded the wonderful piece of glass with no small amount of curiosity; but it was little else than mere curiosity. As an extraordinary discovery it interested them but little; as the means of bearing rapture to the breast of the discoverer it was precious beyond compare. Their eyes indeed visited it, but straightway left it to dwell on the recovered radiance which beamed on the face of its maker.

The attention of Cestus, on the other hand, was absorbed in exactly the reverse way. With great interest he stooped to pick up and examine the flattened glass vessel. He turned and twisted it about with the most minute scrutiny. Then, with his thick, powerful fingers, he tried to straighten out the dint. But in this he was unsuccessful, so he began to shake his head and hum disbelievingly through his pursed lips.

“Tis not clay,” laughed Masthlon; “it needs a mallet and a tool or two. Come, I will show you!”

They followed him to his workshop, where he took a piece of wood rounded at one end like a pestle. With this and a mallet he pounded the injured side of the glass back into its original shape—the glass yielding to the heavy blows like a piece of plastic metal.

“There!” he cried, throwing down his tools and holding forth the restored glass in triumph, “it is neither pretty nor useful, I admit; but the principle is there, which is everything. One must first find the precious pebble before it can be carved and polished. So enough for the present. Haste, wife, and get us our supper—I must be at work again to make a more sightly cup, as quickly as I can.”

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The women vanished. Their voices could be heard in animated chatter as they passed hither and thither in the gladdest preparation of a meal they had known for some time.

“Well, kinsman, you say nothing. What do you think of my bantling in glass?” said Masthlon to the Suburan, who stood leaning against a bench with folded arms and knitted brows.

“Tis something undoubtedly new, potter,” replied Cestus. “And do you say you can make clear glass and fancy cups and vases, such as one sees in Rome, in the same way—unbreakable?”

“Certainly—why not?” answered Masthlon. “No shape, colour, or fashion whatever can make any difference to its principle of indestructibility.”

'Why then, potter, I may safely give you joy of your new fashion. It has been a long time coming, but it has come at last. And provided you can keep your secret, and deal sensibly with it, I should say you ought to coin money. Give me your hand, kinsman—you'll be as rich as Caesar! And recollect when your secret has two in it, it is no secret at all.'

'Trust me for that!' laughed Masthlion, as Cestus gripped his hand.

'And yet something more, potter. This little affair must needs take you to Rome. You may as well wrap up your piece of glass, with the secret of its making on a parchment inside, and go bury them in your garden, as stop in this place to make wealth.'

'There is nothing to prevent me going on making glass here as heretofore,' replied Masthlion, with a shadow stealing over his face.

'Nothing!' returned Cestus energetically, 'even if you lived for the next hundred years. But what an ending to your twenty-five years' work! Cradled and buried in these hills for the benefit of housewives and kitchen wenches round about Surrentum! No; you must have a wider market for your wares and your name. Rome is the market of the world, and to Rome all the world looks for the latest fashion. There is where name and fame is to be had, and everything which follows name and fame. There you will find the powerful patron to father your handicraft—and a powerful patron is everything, kinsman, even in the matter of glass cups.'

[pg 274] 'What I have toiled for so long, and at last brought to light, will be to the direct use and service of the world. So much so that the world will find it out and accept it. It will matter little whether it goes to Rome or to Surrentum to obtain it.'

'Ha! ha!' laughed Cestus sarcastically; 'much you know about the world and its people to say that! Do you think they will come and kneel down when you lift your finger? You have enough to bring you fortune if you go the right way to get it. The wrong way is to stay here and dabble, or, perhaps, let some one else worm your secret to better purpose. This is what you are bound to do. Go to Rome. Make a cup or vase, of the finest workmanship you can turn out. Then choose you out a great man, and show him your curiosity. The more people about him at the time, the better chance of being talked about. If the noble will buy your vase, so much the better. At any rate be assured that it shall have a place on his table. To effect all this is to bring success, if there is anything in your discovery at all. But, however, there is luck about all things. The best schemes, at times, fall flat—no one knows why, whilst the worthless send people crazy together. You must do your best and take your chance of the humour of the time. This is the way to push business—the only way—'tis done every day—pooh, man! If I knew what you know, and had your handicraft at my finger ends, should I stop here? Not I! I should be off into the world and tap a gold mine. Then, if it suited my fancy, in a few years come back to the old nest and build myself a palace.'

'Even with my plain, simple country ideas, Cestus, I think I have something of good sense beyond your own,' said Masthlion quietly, at the end of his companion's speech.

'Really, in what way, kinsman?'

'In that I have not yet allowed my mind to measure the extent of my palace, or the worth of the gold mine that is to build it,' said the potter grimly.

'Ah!' said Cestus, 'but observe, I spoke only assuming you to be successful. If you haven't enough faith in your own discovery to give you hope, then, of course, there is an end.'

[pg 275] 'I have faith, and great faith! Else would I have toiled so long and wearily? Its worth is plain to the dullest sense; but when success comes, then it will be time to allow the mind to run riot. Nevertheless, Cestus, it may astonish you to know, that ere you spoke, I had already resolved on a plan of making my discovery known, which very much resembles the plan you advise—and without need of leaving my home.'

The Suburan shook his head.

'Simple being as I am, I have already the idea that a good patron is necessary.'

'Of course.'

'Then, since that is settled, I have resolved that my patron shall be the most powerful of all—the ruler of the world, in fact. To-morrow, if I can be ready, I will go and show the fruit of my labour for the approval of Caesar himself.'

'What—Caesar!' cried Cestus, starting violently.

'Caesar—Tiberius Claudius Nero Caesar,' replied Masthlion, with a quiet smile at the blank amazement on the features of his companion.

'Biberius Caldius Mero Caesar—phew!' muttered Cestus, mechanically giving the Emperor his well-known nickname, which his Imperial wine-bibbing propensities had earned for him.

So murmuring, the Suburan sank back again into his reclining posture against the bench, glaring at the potter.

'Why, it would seem that I have taken a bolder flight than even the city wit and cleverness of my Roman kinsman could devise.'

'There is such a thing as taking too bold a flight for one's welfare,' replied the other, recovering his voice; 'and country ignorance will plainly do many a thing which city wit would call folly. Had it been the last Caesar now—had it been Augustus, perhaps you would have been sensible. But this one! To go to Capreae—to run the risk of being drowned, or spitted, ere you set foot in the tiger's lair—or, failing that, to be hauled before the tiger himself, and straightway hurled from the cliffs into the sea for a mad-brained potter! Gods preserve us, Masthlon—have you taken leave of your senses?'

[pg 276] 'I may have seemed like it some minutes back, but I have returned into my usual sober spirit now. At all events, I have the wit to see clearly what I intend to do.'

'You would never see Caesar—you would never be allowed to approach within eyeshot—not even to set foot on shore!'

'Nonsense, kinsman! Do you think we of Surrentum know not better than to believe an idle tale such as that? Do you think we are not better acquainted with our neighbours in Capreae, at our very doors here, than to be affrighted at such an ogre's fable as yours? I will both set foot on the island and see Caesar to boot. Is it not often done by the folk along the coast here, whenever business demands?'

'And who never return. What of the dozens who are tortured and strangled and flung to the sharks by the blood-thirsty old hermit?'

'Would the people ever continue to go if that were the case?'

'Do you say none are treated in the way I say?'

'There may be some so unlucky if they have offended; and Caesar is somewhat harsh and imperious as tyrants often are. But I am a neighbour and a Surrentine, and can make a fair reason for permission to go into Caesar's presence—I have no fear or uneasiness. Stercus of the vineyard up there, frequently goes to Capreae and enters the Imperial presence.'

'By Hercules! I would I had known this before,' quoth Cestus eagerly; 'would it be possible for me to do the same thing?'

'I should not like to say,' answered Masthlon, shaking his head; 'strangers, from a distance, seem to be out of favour on the island. We natives have more license. Why, I know not; but strangers—especially those who go without authority, or business—will most likely rue their boldness. If you, a Roman, were to make a visit, out of sheer curiosity, you would, most likely, meet with rough handling.'

'Humph, then there is some advantage in being a Surrentine and not a Roman,' said Cestus ironically.

'So it would seem, in this instance,' replied the potter.

[pg 277] 'Then you may claim it with pleasure. It is hardly worth having when it includes the probability of becoming a meal for the fishes. And even what I have heard the Surrentines themselves say of old Tiberius, gives me no better relish for him than I had before. Therefore I say, don't go! Take your wares to a safer market. Even suppose you were safe enough in the ordinary way of things, as a native, a little matter might upset the Imperial humour—a slip, a word, heaven knows what! The royal humour might be upset even before you had the first chance at it, and then what next? What glass pot would save you then?'

'I would never run the risk. I have the means of lying by till the sky is favourable,' returned Masthlon, with a calm smile.

'You are resolved then?'

'Quite.'

'A wilful man will have his way,' growled Cestus, pulling at his beard nervously. He was very ill at ease, and he knew enough of the potter's nature, to be well aware of the uselessness of any arguments to turn his determination when once arrived at. He felt no confidence in what he had heard concerning the peculiar privileges in Capreae toward the natives of the district, and, in fact, was more than half assured, in his own mind, that his kinsman was running as great a risk, as if he were going empty-handed to a lion in its den. What if he never came back—if he was never heard of again? It would be to lose the most important witness in his case. That would be a terrible misfortune. The Suburan's heart was a load within him for heaviness. Perplexity worried him very soon into a temper, and he stood with brows clenched, and teeth grinding under his bearded lips, whilst Masthlon proceeded calmly with the preparations for his expedition.

It seemed to increase Cestus's irritation to watch his tranquillity.

'You seem to be tolerably easy, in your own mind, I must confess,' he snarled at length.

Masthliion looked round, and noted the ill-humoured expression of his companion's countenance with some surprise.

'Easy in my own mind,' said he; 'I am, truly enough—I feel more contented and happy than I have done for many a day; and I have good reason too, I think.'

[pg 278] 'Be sure it is not an evil omen,' said Cestus.

'Of what?'

'Ruin—death!'

'Tush—you are talking nonsense. Set your mind at rest; I know what I am about, and nothing shall stop me from carrying out what I have fixed upon.'

'Then if I cannot teach you common prudence, perhaps you will listen to some one else. Your life and your carcass are your own, and you can do what you like with them; but there are matters other than your own, and also people dependent on you, who ought to have some consideration. Have you told your wife and the girl what you mean to do?'

'No; but it means only the telling,' replied Masthliion, with the faintest hesitation.

'I am not so sure of that; and besides it is your duty not to run any risk on their account.'

'Nothing venture nothing win. As I have told you, you have got silly fancies into your head. The risk I run does not trouble my conscience on the score of those I leave behind me; so have done, Cestus, and trouble me no more.'

Cestus approached him, and taking his arm with one hand he pointed to the door with the other. 'Do you forget, also, what duty you owe to the girl singing within there? You say you love her like your own child—do you forget that you are one of the chief witnesses in the task of restoring her to her proper station?'

A shadow fell on the potter's face and his frame shivered. 'No, I do not forget—how could I?' he murmured, as his head fell on his breast. 'You will take her from me.'

'I will take her to Rome—it will be necessary for you and Tibia to accompany us. Where, then, is the separation? You settle in Rome, and carry on your work nigh at hand. The matter is ripe and will wait no longer. Within these two days I had resolved to tell you. I have written to her grandfather to expect her, and we must go. Come, let us go in to supper and settle it; but without, as yet, telling the reason. You cannot but see that all this suits you in every way—nothing better.'

[pg 279] Masthliion remained silent for a few moments, with his head cast down and his fingers twining themselves nervously. Then he went apart, and stooped low on his bench, with his face in his hands. Here he remained for several minutes motionless, during which time Cestus began to pace impatiently up and down the floor. At length the potter stood up. The old care and heaviness was back on his face once more, from the burden of which he had had such a brief respite.

'Cestus,' he said huskily, 'for my sake and my wife's, and it may be for hers for all that I can tell, I wish occasion had never been to have brought you back again. We must suffer; but that is nothing if it be for her good. I have of late thought over what you have said. In one way and another it seems fated that she must leave us. I have also thought that our home here would be very dark without her, or even the consolation of knowing that she was within easy reach. I had half resolved, therefore, to follow to the city. She may be lost to us, it is true; but still they could not rob us altogether of the sight of her. That—that, at least, would be a comfort. This will decide me then. As soon as I return from Capreae we will go, and, at least, make a trial of a new home—though it is a hard task to transplant old trees.'

'As soon as you return from Capreae!' echoed Cestus, his incipient satisfaction giving way in a breath to disgust. 'You will still persist in that madness. It must never be! You have no need of Caesar—what benefit to you is a man who lives like a hermit on a rock? The rich nobles in Rome will be a thousand times the service to you—you shall not go!'

'I will!' cried Masthliion, stung into anger and despair by the fierce tone of his kinsman; 'I will do my duty to the labour of my life—its fame shall be mine and shall cling to me though everything fall away.'

'Life included,' sneered Cestus.

'Let it, if it be so fated. It seems less bright than it did.'

When they were called in to supper the two women were awaiting them, bright-eyed and radiant, at a modest, but well-filled table. Their new-found cheerfulness, however, was doomed to a brief existence. Cestus remained silent and gloomy; and Masthlon, equally taciturn, despatched his meal rapidly, as though it were a task to be well rid of. Their dampened spirits were still more depressed, when the potter, immediately on swallowing the last mouthful, announced, in a blunt, matter-of-fact way, his intended visit to Capreae. With a certain amount of dismay they at once expressed their disapprobation of the undertaking. It oppressed them with a sense of dread—it was of too great a magnitude. The very name of Caesar filled them with awe. They used their best efforts to dissuade the potter, assisted by the interjectory remarks and sarcasms of Cestus; but they plainly saw that their efforts were doomed to be vain. Masthlon bade them put away their fears, and, with something of his natural manner, clapped his wife gently on the shoulder as he went back to his workshop. Without being reassured, the women went silently about their work of removing the supper things, their hearts as heavy as before they had been cheerful.

'Have *you* put this into his head?' demanded Tibia suddenly of her brother. Her glance was suspicious and her tone unusually sharp.

'Have I put it into his head?' replied Cestus, with concentrated scorn. 'Oh, to be sure. Had I put it into his head, in the first place, I should hardly have taken the trouble I have to drive it out again.'

His sister being silenced he said no more, and sat tilting himself backward and forward, in moody silence, on his stool.

[pg 281] Neæra bestowed on him one or two lofty glances, which plainly showed that her ideas flowed in the same direction as the dame's. She said nothing, however, and glided hither and thither, in and out, in her occupation. Presently she went quietly to the door of the workshop, and, tapping gently, asked for admission. Cestus caught the sounds and stopped his restless motion. The door creaked open, and by and by it closed again, and Neæra returned into the passage. The Suburan's quick ear heard the voices of the two females mingling outside. There was a smothered sob, and presently a light foot sped up the stairs. Tibia then came into the room to give a parting touch to its arrangements before retiring for the night. Her face was more dejected than ever.

'She has been in to see him,' observed Cestus.

Tibia nodded yes.

'And did no good, I can tell.'

The dame this time shook her head, and remained standing, with one hand on her hip and the other underneath a kind of apron which she wore over her gown, as if ready to lift it to stanch the drops which struggled into her patient eyes.

'Very well, then,' continued her brother, 'we may as well give the matter up, for the man will go his own way. It's of no use to show him his madness. That being the case, there is something you must know without any further delay, since he is determined to throw himself away. Wait and I will bring him in.'

'He is busy, Cestus,' dissuaded she.

'He will have to make a few moments' leisure, however,' was the reply, and the Suburan went accordingly to summon the potter.

The latter obeyed without demur on learning the reason for his required presence. Cestus shut the door and took his former position on his stool.

[pg 282] 'Brother-in-law, since you will not listen to reason concerning this errand of yours to Capreae, and since I have small hope of ever seeing you return, Tibia must hear, in your presence, what I have already told you alone. Your life is your own, and if you are determined to shorten it at once you can do so, I suppose. That is your own matter, and you can settle it with or without your wife's help. But in the matter of the child called Neæra, I am concerned; and as you are about to rob me of my best witness in her case, I must arrange matters as best I may, so as to be able to do without you.'

'You put it in a pleasant way, kinsman,' returned Masthlon, smiling; 'but as you are bent on putting me to death I won't argue the point. Nevertheless I agree with you that it is time Tibia should know what we know about our child—I still call her ours, you see. It was only at your wish that I have kept silence as long as this. Tell her the story—I cannot.'

Tibia sat looking from one to the other in her mute way, her hands lying folded in her lap, and her eyes full of anxious curiosity. What new trouble was this which was about to be launched upon her? Was it the secret which had darkened her husband's face so long? Was it not enough to be

told that he was about to throw away his life on the morrow? Cestus, her brother, was the cloud upon her house. It was time he left it, since matters had seemed to go strangely wrong with the hour of his arrival. What of the child Neæra? He had brought her there—did he want to take her away again?

Her gaze fixed on the Suburan as this thought broke upon her slow brain. Her brows knitted slightly, and her eyes seemed to contract and congeal, for a moment, into lifeless glassy balls. She had a manner of meeting bitter trouble, as it were, with a motionless, voiceless, passive numbness. It resembled the action of some animals and reptiles when seized in the grip of a ferocious enemy. The functions of body and brain seemed withdrawn into an impenetrable inner casket, leaving all else relaxed, lifeless, and torpid. It is the supreme effort to resist exquisite torture, this power of self-paralysation, this contraction of all sense into the numbness of oblivion; whilst to the beholder the spectacle of mute suffering is the most heartrending of all.

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Cestus, without further delay, began the same narrative he had already related to Masthlion. Tibia sat like a carven image, with her hands clenched in her lap and her head half bowed. Once only during the recital she started slightly, when she heard the noble parentage of the child she had tended, and she gave a swift, half-startled glance, first at Cestus, and then at her husband. When the end came and the speaker's voice ceased, and she heard the decree that Neæra was to be given up to her own people, her fingers twitched nervously for a time.

'This, then, is what has haunted thee and darkened the house!' she cried out sharply to her husband, as she threw her apron over her head.

The anguish of her glance cut the potter to the heart. A silence fell on the room for a minute. Masthlion could not summon a word, and Cestus swung uneasily on his stool. Then the latter cleared his throat and tried to smooth matters, with arguments already familiar to the reader.

'Why, Tibia, you have tended the child till she has become like your own, and it is hard, I admit, to hear she must leave you. But consider, she was bound to go, for the Centurion will marry her and take her away to Rome, at all events. Why trouble them? The only way, if you cannot abide without being near her, is to go after her. I have already told Masthlion this, with all the common sense one can be capable of, and shown him how it is the best place for employment in all his work.'

'I have already agreed; if Tibia is willing we will go to the great city,' said Masthlion.

'Ay—but not now—not at once!' replied Cestus sharply. 'Only, as you say, when you come back from Capreae. That is another thing altogether. It is a promise on condition with a vengeance, when there is every chance you will not be alive to perform it. Hark'ee, Tibia, I am eager for us all to go at once, for this reason, that I am anxious concerning the girl. There have been a couple of fellows from Capreae in the shop lately, for nothing in the world but to see the child herself. I saw them, heard them, watched them. What does this mean? Why, that some fine night your house may be broken into, and the girl carried off to the island by a gang of Caesar's blackguards. Once there, you may cry for ever to get her back. Is it not time, think you, to be moving such a good-looking lass out of the reach of the tiger's claws? Will you leave her to the chance of such a fate, for the sake of a fool's errand, on the score of a glass bowl?'

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'The fool's errand shall be carried out, look you,' interposed Masthlion sternly, 'so no more of that. Nevertheless, if you scent danger so close, there is nothing to prevent you all taking ship or horse to-morrow, if need be. I will follow when I am ready to bid farewell to Surrentum.'

'And that is your determination?'

'It is—I leave the rest to Tibia.'

'Then she and the girl and myself will go hence without delay.'

'Speak for yourself, brother,' said Tibia, standing. 'When I go my husband goes also.'

'The girl, then, I shall take alone,' cried Cestus furiously.

'If she will go with thee,' said Tibia.

He started up so violently that he upset his stool, and he stood, for a moment, stuttering with passion. Failing to produce an intelligible sound, he stamped his foot savagely and rushed out of the room.

Masthlion gave a grim sort of a smile and went to his workshop. Ere he could shut the door, Tibia slipped silently after him.

To return to Plautia, whom we left on the way from Tucca's cottage to the villa Jovis, in the stormy, gray dawn.

Her litter was set down at a side door of the palace, and Zeno, the steward, stood by to hand her out. His proffered courtesy was loftily ignored, so he turned on his heel and led the way inside.

Not a living soul was to be seen; it was, doubtless, before the usual hour for any one of the Imperial household to be astir about the duties of the day.

The Greek brought them into a small peristyle close at hand. He threw open the door of a handsomely appointed room, and the noise brought forward, from within, three or four young female slaves, particularly noticeable for their good looks.

'My prison?' ejaculated Plautia grimly.

The Greek's face grew pitiable with an injured look.

'Caesar has ordered these apartments for your use; and these slaves will be under your orders,' said he, bowing her in with a deep obeisance. Plautia gave a haughty nod and passed in with her own attendant. Zeno gently closed the door upon them, and his deprecating look gave place to a satisfied grin, as he hurried away to a different portion of the palace, in order to report to his master.

Plautia found that the room formed one of a suite. After the unwonted experience of a husbandman's kennel, the space and luxurious arrangements of these apartments could not fail to draw from her a sigh of satisfaction, in spite of her position.

The state of her mind was indeed unenviable.

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After the horror and misery of the night in her wretched quarters, the brief moments of slumber, which fell, finally, on her exhausted senses, had not sufficed to relieve her fevered mind. They had seemed, instead, to have only sunk her faculties into the first leaden state of suspension,—to have lulled the wakefulness of her tortured brain, and plunged it into the horrors of a narcotic sleep, amid whose heavy vapours, her struggling reflections became the distorted phantasms of an oppressive dream.

Even yet her mind had not recovered sufficient elasticity to entirely throw off this soporific load. Stupor still seemed to clog her senses and maintain her in a condition of waking sleep. The scenes of the past night still floated through her brain and mingled with what was actually occurring, as if on common ground of unsubstantiality. The pale, soft crescent of the moon hung phantom-like in her distempered mind, just as it had struck upon her gaze over the Pretorian's shoulder; save that now its bulk swam magnified, and its paleness shone intensified to ghastliness. Then the play of his warm breath on her forehead, and one or two of his gestures, which lived, as if fire-impressed in her brain—all the sharper, in relief to the dark, blurred, frenzied moments of sudden agony and despair which had followed, like a gulf of blackness. After this her mental awakening in the pitchy darkness and crash of the sudden storm, the misery of the night, the phantoms of her short drowsiness, the coming of Caesar's messenger, the cold gray of sea and sky, the palace—it was all like the unbroken course of a shadow-play.

She moved through the rooms, and, in the furthest, found the marble basin of a bath with all appliances. With more animation, she turned instantly, and bade the flock of young slaves prepare it for her immediate use. To have been obliged to forego, for a considerable period, this luxury so necessary to a Roman, had been not the lightest privation she had incurred in her headstrong expedition.

The crystal water, foaming and flooding out of the brazen dolphin's mouth into the polished basin, was so welcome a sight as to rouse her not a little. Whilst preparing to enjoy it, one of the slaves answered a summons at the outer door, and brought back a message, saying, that Caesar would pay her a visit in an hour.

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Infinitely revived and invigorated, Plautia returned from the bath to eat and drink. She had recovered also so much of her ancient humour, as to visit with a sharp word and a frown, a slight clumsiness on the part of the trembling girl who served her on bended knee. The lady's face had lost some of its customary richness of colour, whilst dark rings showed under her eyes, as evidences of the night's passionate tumult; but to one of her physical robustness and wanton health, it required an enormous and continuous strain to make any material inroads on her outward appearance. The slaves apportioned to her, who had dwelt in secret on the splendid form and beauty of their new mistress, wondering what princess she might be, and whence she had come, now marked the imperious flash of her eyes with inward quaking.

Plautia dismissed them, and awaited the coming of her Imperial visitor. The thoughtful knitting of her brows and lips were beginning to relax under the drowsiness which crept over her, when the pale, blotched face, and tall, stooping form of Tiberius glided slowly into her presence.

He stopped in the middle of the room, and his brilliant eyes fixed themselves upon her with a scrutiny which she seemed to feel in every part of her frame. Not a sign, however, glimmered in their depths, or stirred the gravity of his countenance, to show that her appearance in any way moved him.

She rose from the couch and gave a slight obeisance of her head, which he returned. He was familiar enough to her by sight; but now, on close personal contact, there was something which struck her uncomfortably. Whether it was the piercing ruthlessness of his gaze she knew not. She began to think uneasily, that she had been wise if she had listened to the advice she had scouted more than once already. Her keen feminine perceptions flashed out upon him. It was the odour of the tiger of which she had been so heedless; and yet, withal, an old, stooping, emaciated, unsightly man. Her thoughts, from some curious fancy, momentarily left her own concerns, and conjured up alongside Caesar the form of his handsome, ambitious, dashing Prefect. The comparison left its mark on her mind. Returning to herself, her indignation and her courage, she awaited to hear him speak.

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'Plautia, I bid you welcome to my house,' he said, in his slow way. 'Not until last night did I know you had favoured the island with your beautiful presence. I have hastened, therefore, to give you a more fitting reception than the hovel of a husbandman can afford. It was unkind thus to steal upon my island home with the intention of leaving it again as silently.'

'I have no claim upon your hospitality, Caesar,' replied Plautia; 'I came hither on a trifling concern of my own, and sought to disturb no one. The poor house in which I lodged was freely chosen, and willingly endured for the short time of my stay. To-day was to have seen my departure, and indeed will do so. I am grieved that you should have learnt of my presence, and so caused you kindly trouble on my account. If my intrusion into Capreae is wrong and impertinent, I crave your gracious pardon and indulgence. Indeed, no disrespect was intended.'

'Dismiss all that from your mind,' said Tiberius; 'the only fact which gives me pain is, that you should have sought to deprive us of the delight of your fair presence; I repeat, it was unkind.'

'It is not for me to thrust myself upon a stranger's hospitality—much less upon Caesar's.'

'Hospitality despised is the grievance, Plautia.'

The old Emperor's manner was highly-bred, perfectly graceful, and polished, and a smile gently parted his lips. Nevertheless, in spite of the delicate, deprecating speech which fell so softly, slowly, but fluently from his honied tongue, every word seemed but the tinkling of artifice. Had she dared to retort as she felt, she would have said that hospitality enforced was as grievous a burden as hospitality despised.

With this idea firmly in possession of her mind, she recognised her jailer before her, and felt the grim hardness of the captor's hand toying with her through the soft sheathing of ceremony and politeness. Nevertheless it was not her nature to feel fear, and she never quailed.

'That is all past,' continued the Emperor; 'youth and loveliness are right and might in themselves. In their presence it is possible for no ruffle of the mind to remain unsmoothed. Now that you have graciously honoured my house, all is well, and—'

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'Pardon, Caesar! I was brought hither, favour or no favour,' interrupted Plautia majestically.

'But now since you have honoured me,' continued he, with the same unruffled smile, 'my spirit is at rest. Be pleased to use my house and all it contains, as if it were your own. Your will shall be law within the limits of Capreae. Small as this island is, it contains some beauties, which we shall be eager to show, and which have been deemed worthy of notice. It may be you have never visited them before.'

'Once as a child, I think,' replied Plautia, with a rigid aspect. 'Your proffered kindness is beyond words of mine to acknowledge, but I regret that my engagements will not allow to take advantage of it. I must return home without further delay—it is imperative.'

Tiberius shook his head and forefinger at her playfully.

'I could not allow you to carry out a determination which you would regret to your dying day. The island would grow black with scowls were I to suffer the fair Plautia to quit it in such haste. Besides which, the furious wind and sea renders it impossible. Hark, how the storm roars!'

'I will risk the sea and the wind—I fear them not!'

'Possibly; but it is otherwise with those whose business it would be to transport you to the opposite shore. Nor would I consent for one moment to the hazard—and though a feeble old man, I am obeyed somewhat.'

'No one shall run any hazard for me, if it come to that. I will pay any fisherman the cost of his boat twice over, and go myself.'

Tiberius suffered an expression of admiration to gleam on his face as the deep colour flushed in

her cheeks, and the mettle sparkled in her eyes.

[pg 290] 'Permit me, fair Plautia!' said he, stepping forward and raising her hand to his lips; 'what have I lost in not knowing you before? What so delightful to aging eyes as the spectacle of youth and beauty and high spirit? Doubly grateful to me the assurance, that the spirit of my people will hardily live and flourish. 'Tis such women as you who have nourished the masters of the world, and with such as you left behind me, I may die in the comforting knowledge that dominion will not leave them. But to cross those miles of stormy water alone! Ah, it is wonderful courage—it conquers me! But it cannot be—it is madness! Were I to allow it I would esteem myself your murderer. No, no, you must live, and be the mother of heroes!'

'It is imperative that I return home immediately, and I entreat that you will not seek to detain me,' said Plautia, with fierce rage eating her heart.

'It remains a marvel to us how you came to land here without the fact being duly reported,' said Tiberius, as if he were stone deaf; 'it was a feat quite in accordance with your spirit, to be able to cheat the vigilance on which we pride ourselves. Can it be possible that you alighted in our midst as the soft goddess herself would do?'

'Had it been so, I would have retired in the same manner ere this,' she replied, with scarcely veiled scorn.

The Emperor laughed silently.

'Thank heaven,' he said, 'which leaves you dependent on mortal means of locomotion like the rest of us, and so preserves your presence to us. I, myself, prefer warm flesh and blood to these airy immortals whom we never know, save in the fables of the poets. I leave you, therefore, for the present, lady, with the satisfaction that you cannot depart through the air. I am the richer in your acquaintance, which must be extended. Now that I have the assurance of my own eyes of your comfort, I will intrude no longer at present.'

'For that receive my thanks, Caesar,' she cried, advancing, as he retired; 'but circumstances make it impossible for me to remain—at all hazards I must quit the island.'

'To-day it is quite impossible,' returned Tiberius, gliding nearer the door; 'to-morrow, I am satisfied, your mind will be changed. Till then, farewell, fair Plautia!'

As the last word left his lips he contrived to retreat, and summarily close the conference by shutting the door upon it, yet so dexterously as to leave no impression of unseemly haste. Plautia sprang after him, but her devoted slave seized her skirts and besought her to be prudent.

[pg 291] 'Fool!' cried her mistress in a fury, flashing out at the same time a superb oath and a blow. Her retainer started back in affright, and Plautia rushed out into the peristyle. Not a sight or a sound of a living being were distinguishable. She flew along what seemed to be the Emperor's most likely line of retreat, and boldly called upon him in loud tones. But nothing answered save the short echo of her own voice: the place seemed deserted. Passage ran out of passage in bewildering intricacy. Again she stopped and called, and again the echoes sank around her into dead silence, as she stood with her senses strained to their utmost. Was the palace really inhabited? If so, what part? She pressed on again, keeping to what she assumed was the main corridor. Suddenly her course was stopped by a door. In the dim light she sought in vain for a handle or latch, or anything which might cause the door to yield. Nothing but a smooth hard surface met her touch, wherever it strayed: there was not even a keyhole. Wasting no time, therefore, she instantly turned back. On either hand she had passed the entrances of room after room. She darted in and out, exploring them with wonderful energy. She was fully roused, but more with passion than sense of danger. Her explorations, however, availed her nothing. Some of the apartments were furnished, and more were just as the workmen's hands had left them. All alike were uninhabited. Forming another resolution, she relinquished this task, in order to make her way back to her own apartments. The time to be consumed in this, however, was a matter dependent on chance, since her movements had become merely at random. With nothing to guide her she hastened along, doubling on her track now and again when she considered herself to be wrong, or when her flying steps led her into a *cul-de-sac*. At last she struck the right path, and finally ran out into the peristyle of her own rooms, very much relieved in mind and temper, and scant of breath. She found she had made a circuit of the maze. Nearly opposite, her slave was standing by the open door, where she had been left in the agonies of doubt and fear.

'Tis nothing but a maze of empty passages and rooms,' exclaimed her mistress, bursting on her savagely. 'Where the people dwell, I know not—nor where the old dotard has disappeared to. I had caught him if you had not held me, fool. Come, let us see if we cannot find the outer door through which we entered, and so let us begone; it was nigh at hand somewhere.'

[pg 292] Plautia had no recollection of the way, but her companion had been more attentive. They went almost straight to the narrow outer door which they required. To their joy it opened to their touch, and they passed outside. Before them was a long stretch of ornamental garden of irregular shape, but rectangular in the main. It was picturesquely laid out with artificial mounds, grottoes, and groves, in the miniature semblance of a sylvan wilderness, and the whole was encircled by a wall. In this outside domain, as within-doors, no living being was visible.

The storm still roared and blustered. The winding irregular parapet of the wall was the horizon, and above it the gray watery masses of clouds drove across the sky. Even, sheltered as they were, the trees and shrubs of the tiny thickets and groves bent low to the blast.

It had, of course, been previously necessary to pass through a portion of this garden to enable them to reach the door of the palace. They proceeded at once to search for the entrance, and found it amid the winding depths of a grove and ornamental rockery-work. It profited them nothing, however, for the door was as fast and firm as the wall in which it was embedded. They hurried on, looking for an opening, or a weak spot in the ring of masonry, for it was too lofty to afford any hope of surmountal. To hide it from view had taxed the utmost ingenuity of arrangement; but the efforts of the gardeners had met with considerable success.

When the two females had swiftly threaded a succession of miniature alleys, glades, groves, and rocky glens, to the furthest end of the garden, and were skirting along the opposite side, on their return journey, their eyes were suddenly gladdened by observing the forbidding wall slope abruptly down, and continue at a considerably lower level. Moreover, here and there the earth was heaped up in grassy mounds, within three or four feet of the top. Up one of these Plautia sprang with a cry of joy. Reaching the summit, she stood aghast, for, as she peered over the parapet, nothing stood between her and the gray foam-streaked water, more than a thousand feet below. Leaning over, she looked down the smooth wall, cunningly faced with the verge of the sheer cliffs, right down into the waters, roaring and dashing into spouts of foam against the rocks far away at the bottom. Nothing but a sea-bird could ever set a foot there.

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She shivered and drew back, and the slave gave a cry of dismay. One or two observations more, where opportunity offered, gave the same result, and thus they arrived back at the palace. There was a wall of smooth-dressed stone on one hand, high and unscaleable, and on the other was a leap of a thousand feet, plumb down into the foaming sea.

The Roman damsel looked from one to the other with a fierce glance. She was entrapped, beyond doubt, and like a trapped animal she stood for a few moments, as if at bay, with scowling brows and labouring breast.

The slave observed, and stood discreetly back.

‘Come!’ said Plautia, suddenly wheeling toward the entrance of the villa, ‘we can do nothing out here but starve ourselves; we must play the fox and not the lion; let us get in again and wait for a fool’s face.’

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CHAPTER XVII.

Baffled and chafing, Plautia stretched herself on the couch again, and, this time, fell into a profound slumber, whilst her slave nodded and dozed, in company, upon a cushion at her feet.

No sooner did the former awake, greatly refreshed, than one of her attendants glided into the room, saying that the Emperor’s steward was awaiting admittance to deliver a message. The handsome Greek was brought in, and he handed her the tablets he bore. Plautia opened the missive, and found it to be a scrawl in Caesar’s own hand, desiring her company at breakfast, or luncheon, by whichever term the Roman prandium may be called.

‘His highness honours me,’ she said frigidly; ‘but I am not well, and must be excused.’

‘Does your ladyship wish me to take that message to Caesar?’ said Zeno, with subdued regret in his tone.

She nodded, and swept majestically into her dressing-room, where the mirror gave her the satisfaction of beholding a recovered bloom in her cheeks. She had never been prostrated a day with sickness in her memory. Yet to accept a place of her own free will at the table of her jailer was monstrous—at least so her indignant thoughts ran at that moment.

With recovered mental tone, her feminine curiosity began to indulge itself in a more minute inspection of its surroundings than it had hitherto found inclination for. In a small closet she came upon an array of female vestments. Caesar and Capreae were in general forgotten for a period, amid the rustle of beautiful and costly fabrics. Presently came another message, that Charicles, the Emperor’s physician, was in attendance, and would see her at her convenience. Plautia gave a grim kind of smile, and directed inquiry to be made who had sent the physician, and why. The answer was that it was by command of Caesar himself, who was much concerned to learn of her indisposition. He also said, that if sufficiently recovered, he would expect to see her at the Imperial supper-table.

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'Say to Caesar I am grateful for his thoughtful attention,' said Plautia; 'but my illness will not require a physician's aid, and will amend itself by and by.'

Contained in the rooms was a small library of books, and to these Plautia at last turned her attention, when everything else had yielded its full amusement. She lacked the fanciful and imaginative powers which are enslaved by books. She had no resources, no world within to draw upon, like the solitary dreamer or student, who usually finds his own company the most entertaining. Her temperament was practical and her habits active. The resources of the great city, with its variety and bustle, had never failed to provide occupation to fill her time; but here, cooped in the corner of a house, on an island, the situation was wholly different, and already loomed as a serious matter.

She read for some time, and then was wearied. Her own thoughts had remained passive too long, and began to reassert themselves very actively to the subjection of her author. The book was finally tossed aside, and its reader betook herself to pacing ceaselessly and aimlessly through the rooms, with her hands behind her back and her eyes bent on the floor. She gave full rein to her thoughts, and they sought the deep-worn rut of their former fierce torrent, as naturally as the quivering needle-point seeks the pole. Her brows grew dark and heavy once more. Suddenly she shut herself up alone.

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There was a brighter gleam in the air when, after a time, she came forth. The small windows, high up, seemed more radiant, and outside, in the peristyle, there was even hazy sunlight. The storm had broken. The place seemed to stifle her. Catching up a cloak she sought the garden. The heavy gale had dropped into a steady, brisk breeze, fresh, bracing, and salt. The low, hurrying pall of gray vapours had melted away, and, far overhead, the clouds were luminous. They were shredding and breaking fast into feathery masses. Here and there already peeped the deep blue of the heavens. The sea still tumbled its foamy billows far below, but, from the great elevation of the villa garden, the agitation was scarcely noticeable. It seemed like a huge plain thickly flecked with snow, across the surface of which moved gleaming halos of radiance shooting down from the sunny rifts overhead.

Plautia, on reaching the door previously described as fixed in the high wall, turned to the palace attendants and bade them bring the means to open it. They were visibly struck with embarrassment, but a tall handsome girl, who seemed to have authority over the rest, was constrained to find an answer, as the brow of the lady began speedily to blacken over. She said she would be obliged to go to the steward, having no authority herself in the matter. Plautia bade her do so, and she hurried away accordingly. Presently she returned with the reply that the steward was absent in attendance on the Emperor, and that nothing could be done until his return. Plautia turned sharp on her heel, without a word, and continued her walk.

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In half an hour she was again within her room, attempting a perusal of her book. But, though her eyes rested on the letters, she never read twenty lines. Very soon she was again wandering here and there, aimlessly and wearily, under the influence of her disturbed thoughts. Presently she found herself standing before the mirror of her dressing-room, gazing at her reflected face with an unconscious and preoccupied stare. Becoming attentive, or waking up, as it were, she noticed that either the fresh breeze out-of-doors, or else the ferment of her mind, or both combined, had more than restored the rich warmth of colour which was the crown of her vivid type of beauty. Its brilliance was, perhaps, even a trifle more than customary; yet it was magnificent, and no one understood that better than herself. She drew herself up, folded her arms across her ample bosom, and smiled sidelong at herself with proud satisfaction. A new idea had possessed her, and she nodded approvingly to herself. Her black orbs sparkled with a careless, reckless light. One passion had ruled her, but that was all over. She had drunk to the dregs of the anguish which stimulates despair, and she would meet Caesar on his own ground. Wearied and harassed beyond her patience by the disappointment which poisoned her thoughts, and which was yet increased by the unaccustomed restriction and monotony of her position, she rushed from the idea of remaining passively watching. With the recklessness of a gamester who has lost all, she would go boldly forth. To act on the aggressive, with such potent weapons as her wit and beauty, would be more likely to achieve her liberty, than standing defiantly at bay in the corner of a cage. It might, moreover, bring her more than mere liberty. She knew not what fate might have in store for her; and, in truth, she cared little. At least she might calculate upon the relief of some amount of novelty and excitement. It is better to die in a dash for liberty, than to lie and rot away in a dungeon.

It was then resolved. She would recover from her indisposition, and appear at Caesar's supper-table, wreathed with smiles and graciousness. It might be called a feminine masked reconnaissance in force.

She, therefore, caused her intention to become known to the domestics when the hour for supper approached; and through them it was conveyed to the Imperial ears. To arm herself was the next and most important business. Her own wardrobe, under the circumstances of her visit, was most humble and scanty; but, in the plentiful supply already alluded to, she had neither difficulty nor scruple in selecting an attire to her satisfaction. The protracted and minute process of the toilet

completed, she stood forth brilliant, peerless, and resistless. The admiration of the women broke forth in murmurs as she swept on in the wake of Zeno and his people, who had come to marshal her to table.

* * * * *

From supper, at a late hour, she went back to her room triumphant. Exultation shone in her eyes, and, for a time at least, lulled the sticking pain in her heart.

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Copious floods of wine flashed in Caesar's cup, whilst his gaze was riveted on the matchless beauty of his guest. The cool-headed, temperate Prefect, whom the Emperor had purposely brought into unexpected contact with his guest, looked on and laughed in his sleeve. On Plautia, at times, he bestowed an ironical smile, the spirit of which she defined, and resented inwardly. Atticus, Flaccus, and Marinus, three devoted personal friends of the Emperor, drank their wine, gazed their fill at the superb woman, listened to her lively wit, and gave back what they could of their own, in an excited ecstasy and jauntiness of foolish middle-age. The night waxed, and the faces of the waiting slaves grew weary. But the wine still splashed into the gold goblet of Caesar, and his eyes scarce moved from the girl before him. These only betrayed him to the watchful; for his slow, cautious tongue, scarcely looser with wine, said little. The time flew on. Draught followed draught still faster, until Plautia rose to go. The pallid face of Tiberius had become gradually suffused with a faint tint of the warm floods which were pouring through his veins. His kindling eyes had begun to sparkle and blaze like a basilisk's. The swift-witted damsel seized the moment, and, with the briefest delay, left the table and the room.

The rich jewel which had set the ring was gone. The flame in the Emperor's eyes lacked its fuel, and quickly sank like the chilling embers of fire. His gaze became a vacant stare, and then swiftly relapsed into the glassy stupidity of intoxication: but all in complete silence. The remaining six men, after a parting cup, took their leave of their Imperial host, who made no sign in response.

One of the guests walked away from the palace, under the bright stars, with a hot brow, and tumult in his breast. The Prefect, his companion, suddenly startled the quiet night air with a loud laugh.

'Is she not clever, my Titus? Is she not superb? Did she not play a pretty game? Ha! ha! ha! Is it not a droll world this of ours? An emperor besotted on what a poor centurion has spurned! Wouldst thou have turned a goddess adrift who had knelt to thee? O, mighty Centurion! O, poor Caesar! Was she ever so glorious as to-night? But hark you—it was false fire. I caught the spurious tone—did you not, Afer? But she was incomparable—do you not hear, my friend?'

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Afer ground his teeth, and muttered something unintelligibly between his lips.

'She was, do you say? You are insufferably dull, my friend. You have drunk too much, or not enough. It is lucky our companionship is only to be short. Here is my way! *Vale!* sleep off your sombre fit!' Afer went on, but not to his bed. He burned with a fever which could not endure the cramping walls of his lodging.

The first faint, luminous gleam of dawn in the eastern sky found him watching, motionless, under the walls of the villa Jovis, and then, and not until then, he went away homeward.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

Some days subsequently, Plautia stood with her arms resting on the parapet of the garden wall which edged the cliffs.

Her mood was one of profound abstraction, and the fixed gaze of her eyes seemed to be unconscious of the endless beauties of the scene which lay within the scan of that giddy height. The rays of the autumn sunlight, mingling with the opal-coloured light, the deepening shades of the whispering sea, the changing tints of the mountains, and the white gleam of the cities fringing the sweep of the distant shores, were far from her mind. No sound arose to the secluded spot on high, save the mysterious murmur of nature, so favourable to an utter absorption of mind, until the grate of a human foot behind aroused her with a start. Turning round she beheld Afer standing within a few yards, gazing at her intently.

Since the banquet the manner of Plautia had become that of one quite reconciled to her situation. Nay, it rather betokened satisfaction and pleasure judging by outward manifestation. She had seemingly earned complete freedom also, since she came and went wherever and whenever she pleased, without being subjected to any galling symptom of restraint. Her apartments were free

of access to whosoever chose to visit her, though these were necessarily few in number. To Tiberius himself she jestingly contrasted her later freedom with her first day's experience. He lightly returned, that he prided himself upon the better judgment he had shown, in perceiving the unreality of her momentary dissatisfaction; and that now, since time had proved him to be right, she might call herself the Queen of Capreae, and do aught her mind might fancy, save attempt to quit the island. This he added smilingly, with the customary shake of his forefinger; but, whether it was an earnest injunction veiled in jest, Plautia had not as yet thought proper to prove.

In accordance with this disposition of affairs Afer had first presented himself at her apartments, and, by direction of her attendants, had followed her to the garden.

His cheeks seemed hollower and more drawn, and his glance was haggard and restless. For the rest, his attire and bearing were unchanged in their faultless taste and neatness. Plautia did not quit her position, but simply turned her back against the wall, with her elbows thrust behind her on the top of the stones. The grace of her splendid form was thus admirably displayed, but the posture was strongly suggestive of careless indifference. The languid gaze, and the lifeless drawl of her salutation, were even more devoid of the sense of politeness; but he, nevertheless, drew nearer to her.

'They told me you were here, so I made bold to follow you,' he said. 'No wonder the evening has tempted you forth with its loveliness.'

She gave a faint yawn, and turned her glance languidly another way, in a manner distinctly rude and heedless.

His gloomy eyes flashed, and his hand clenched for a moment in anger.

'I have interfered with your solitary enjoyment of the scene.'

'I was thinking nothing of it,' she replied carelessly.

'Intent, perhaps, upon the thoughts of Rome, far away across the waters there—your eyes seemed fixed in that direction.'

'You are mistaken.'

'Pardon, Plautia, for having intruded myself so unpleasantly and untimely. It is all the more to be regretted, inasmuch as I sought you with the hope of your favour, having just received letters from Rome.'

'And how could the letters of Titus Afer possibly concern me?'

'Being discursive they might probably contain something to interest you, in the current affairs of the city we love so well.'

'Humph!' she said drily, with her gaze still fixed down the garden. 'You are speaking for yourself. You are growing thin and pale, Afer, and absence from the city you love so well is trying you. You are fretting after the airy height of the Esquiline, and the view of the housetops from your own portico.'

'You, who have left it so recently, can so far afford to mock me,' he retorted sarcastically. 'I will plead guilty to the charge in order not to spoil the jest.'

'It is not worth another word.'

'My correspondent tells me that Rome is wondering what is passing in the island here.'

'It is not surprising in the city, when one considers the power and importance of the absentees—including yourself!' said she.

'Of course,' responded Afer, growing paler; 'nor, at the same time, must such a powerful factor in the Imperial destinies as the beauty of Plautia be omitted.'

Plautia smiled and showed her pearly teeth, and the face of the knight grew whiter than ever.

'It seems that, surprised as the poor exiles on this island were at your appearance, the citizens are even more mystified at your disappearance there. It is totally inexplicable. Rumour says you have been stolen, murdered, and so on' (Plautia's smile deepened as she caught the fiercely suppressed tremor of anger in his voice); 'or translated to the companionship of the immortals, after the fashion of old,' he continued; 'that is even believed in. One individual, at least, is inconsolable, frantic, desperate—mad, if you like. Searching day and night—wandering sleepless like a spectre.'

'Only one, Afer—do they tell you of only one?' she said ironically.

'Only one in such sad straits,' he responded. 'You can guess probably who it is.'

Plautia shrugged her shoulders carelessly.

'So may one love you and perish—O wretched example!' he said bitterly. 'If the miserable man could only have seen that careless shrug of your pitiless shoulders.'

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'The idiot—he has seen many such, doubtless. Am I to be answerable for the presumption of such fools?' said she, turning her head swiftly toward him with a withering blast of scorn and contempt.

The knight's face became like pallid marble, but, apparently impenetrable, he replied—

'Surely not, if it be of their own cultivation. There can be no blame to you.'

'Thanks!'

'Nevertheless one should feel pity and not scorn; for who knows how soon the same fate may overtake oneself? Ill-starred Martialis is not the first nor the last who has suffered from misplaced infatuation.'

Her face was in profile, and his eyes scanned it keenly.

'Of course Plautia knows I am speaking of Caius Martialis, the bosom friend of Apicius,' he went on, with slow distinctness. 'There is also another Martialis, his brother Lucius, a Centurion of the Pretorian guard, at present in attendance here on our worthy friend the Prefect. Do you know this one?'

'It matters not whether I do or not; it is not worth the trouble to try and remember. I am ever grateful for your visit, your company, your entertaining conversation, which has beguiled my loneliness. And now I must bid good-night—it grows chilly.'

She roused herself from her leaning posture, and gathered up her drapery preparatory to moving off. Afer's eyes were still riveted on her countenance. Her mocking words were easily borne after the insulting demeanour already experienced. Something like a cold smile rested on his lips as he watched her. He did not feel disposed to leave her yet. Her behaviour had stung him deeply, and the bitterness which gnawed him so grievously was too keen to be borne without the solace of retaliation. He waited a few moments until she was on the point of retiring, without any further notice of him, and then said, in a low voice—

'It would be better worth your while than you think, Plautia, to strive to remember if the soldier-brother be amongst your acquaintance or not.'

'Another time when I am more disposed,' she sternly answered, beginning to descend the grassy mound on which they stood.

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'At your own gracious pleasure,' he repined, as he leisurely followed. 'I mentioned it, because I thought it might interest you to know, that whether the acquaintance really exist or not, there are rumours in the island of a somewhat close relationship between you.'

She stopped short, and turned round upon him—so swiftly and sharply, that the skirts and folds of her garments whirled out on the air.

'Rumours—what rumours? What close relationship? What do you mean?' she said, with the haughtiness of a queen to a slave.

'Nothing, but what my words plainly convey. Let me repeat—it is said in the island that a warm friendship exists between yourself and the Centurion Martialis.'

'And what of that? Is it not permitted to me to have warm friends as well as others?'

He gently shrugged his shoulders, and the action brought the sudden fire to her eyes and the colour to her cheeks. Noting the signs he looked down and smiled covertly, to her intense irritation.

'Do you wish to trifle with me, Afer?' she said, in a dangerous tone.

'I would rather brave Tiberius himself,' he replied, with a bow, which was lower than humility itself; 'far from trifling, I merely alluded to that which passes current in the island; but, if it be distasteful to you, I regret I was the unlucky means of making it known.'

'My friends are always of my choosing; I ever abide by my choice and suffer no other interference. It is true I remember to have met the younger Martialis on chance occasions in the city. It is hardly possible that it should be otherwise, since the brother haunts me like a pestilent shadow. That should all the more predispose me to increase the intimacy with the name as little as possible. The tale of the elder brother's folly has followed even here, Afer, and the good idle Capreans have saddled it on the wrong man—the mistake is obvious.'

'That would have been the most probable explanation doubtless, if I were sure that the idle babbling had arisen amongst the islanders themselves.'

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'Psa!' ejaculated she, sweeping round again, as if contemptuously dropping all further thought of

the subject.

She walked on a few yards with the knight following. Then she turned sharply round on her heel and confronted him again. The movement was unexpected, and she caught a smile on his lip. She stamped her foot.

'Tell me, what this is—what it all means! Quick, man!'

'The thorn has stuck,' he murmured imperceptibly, as he hesitated and looked down.

'Speak!' continued the angry imperious tones.

'I knew she could not rest with that prickle rankling in her mind,' he continued inwardly; 'now her haughtiness shall dance to my piping and pay for her insolence.'

A vehement snatch of her hand at his arm roused him.

'Do you hear, Afer? Speak when I ask you!'

Raising his head he looked at her with provoking gravity, and his studied deliberate manner easily attained the effect he designed for it.

At no time did she appear so superb, as when her impetuous blood was stirred, and the excitement of anger glowed in her cheeks and flashed in her eyes. He gazed upon her with a double gratification, for, while his glance drank in the spectacle of her kindled beauty, his heart warmed with a savage joy of power.

Her contemptuous bearing had filled him with a devouring tumult of passions, none the less fierce, because of the powerful restraint which stifled them.

All the arts of sympathetic love and compassion may be lavished on a mind which lies numb in the chill death of its hope of hopes; but let the venom of contempt be flung upon it, from a certain eye or lip, and it straightway surges from its icy torpor with the fire and fury of deadly hate.

Above the wild passion which sickened in the heart of Afer, struggled resentment and profound indignation. He calmly looked back the flashing gaze of his companion, and a faintly mocking smile curved his lips.

'Yes, I hear,' he said at length; 'of what do you wish me to speak?'

[pg 306] 'Of what? You are bent on provoking me. Are we not talking—did you not speak of some rumour or tavern gossip of the island at my expense?'

'Since your appearance in Caesar's villa, as a guest, the island is mightily interested in you, and, naturally, the tongue follows the bent of the mind. Many rumours and conjectures are doubtless rife concerning you. To which would you have me refer?'

'You are playing with me, I repeat—you dare to do so,' she replied; and he plainly saw the effort it cost her to speak, as she did, in a quiet tone. 'You either know something, or nothing—to the point then, quickly.'

'Your displeasure is so swift and heavy that it behoves me to be most prudent and cautious. Give me to understand of what I am to speak—'

'People call you wise and subtle, but, to me, your prudence and caution savours very much of the profound wisdom of the bird of Minerva.'

'It is a sapient fowl which flies about in the night-time only, and, doubtless, sees many strange things in moonlight and shade,' said he.

'Once again—do you refuse to answer me?'

'Surely not, in reply to a direct question,' he answered, as if taking a malicious pleasure in forcing her to mention names.

'I will give you a cue then,' said she; 'you mentioned rumours concerning me—tell me all you know.'

'There is only one worth repeating.'

'And that refers to Martialis.'

She was pale, with the exception of a bright, red spot on either cheek, and, perceiving by her look and tone, that it would be imprudent to try her further, he nodded affirmatively.

'And could you not say so before?' she asked, with an indescribable sneer which stung him to the quick.

'Not until you yourself had uttered the name, should I have dared to mention what might prove

disagreeable,' he replied derisively.

'Proceed, then, and without fear.'

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'It will require but few words. You arrived in a mysterious manner; and, it is said, you came hither of your own accord, because you could no longer endure the absence of the handsome Centurion Martialis from Rome!'

'Psa! You are too ridiculous.'

She laughed outright, but the knight, though he could not but admire her self-possession, could hardly fail to detect the false ring on her tones.

'And this is the portentous secret you drag forth so mysteriously,' she cried; 'this is what you have heard in the wine-shops and on the Marina! Worthy, idle Capreans! And you, Titus Afer—subtle Titus Afer—to what an empty, pitiful condition of mind, has the sleepy stagnation of this pile of rocks amid the sea brought you, that such an idle fable should so occupy your thoughts as to relate it seriously and solemnly to me.'

'I admit that one's faculties are apt to rust amid the sluggish tranquillity of this place,' replied Afer, with a sigh of charming softness. 'The whole thing is absurd, but for the extraordinary fact, that the wonderful story is not the production of the gossips themselves. Instead of being born in the village below, it has flowed from the villa above—from headquarters itself.'

As a matter of fact, the details of Plautia's romantic adventure had spread no further than the reader is already aware of, but the unscrupulous knight knew the power of such a statement, false as it was, and, therefore, made it without hesitation. To have given the rumour on the authority of the simple islanders themselves, was to have rendered it of no weight with her; but to boldly state that it proceeded from the villa, was at once to load her with the maddening suspicion that she had been betrayed. Thus to include the man he hated, by one master-stroke, was a worthy revenge, and he perpetrated the falsehood with an utter recklessness of discovery. He was prepared to exult over an explosion of wrath, or, better still, to gloat over an exhibition of shame and abasement, which would have left him master of the field, in a triumph to last as long as life. But to have reckoned on any mood of weakness, he perceived, at once, was vain. His quiet words fell on her ears with an unexpectedness that struck her dumb for a few moments.

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Martialis must have betrayed her—had probably told all to his comrades, as an excellent joke and boast; and for all she knew, she had, perhaps, been the sport and object of secret laughter to every one around. Her pride boiled—her head whirled. Her eyes dilated and her robust frame trembled as if seized with ague.

'Infamous!' she cried, at length, in a choking voice. 'But say you are trifling with me, Afer, and this is the crown of your jest.'

'I am not so mad,' he replied, dwelling with complete satisfaction on the effect of his communication.

'From whom, then, in the villa, has such a slander sprung?'

'That I cannot say.'

'I must know.'

'Drowning were too good for him.'

'Him!'

'Him,' repeated the knight, with a nod. 'There are no women in the villa who could possibly be the author of such a story. It is certain to be a man. Have you no suspicion?'

He could hear the grate of her teeth as she breathed heavily and rapidly through her nostrils.

'Suspicion!' she cried, after some inarticulate sounds. 'How am I to know? A lie—it is for any one—what is easier? A scullion—Caesar—any one can make a lie! It is another matter to discover it—the coward!'

'Who?' demanded Afer, starting at the fierce intensity of the epithet.

'The coward—the liar, whoever he may be.'

'Humph, that is true; if we could only find him out.'

He looked at her with a sidelong glance. Her face had taken a cadaverous hue, and her forehead seemed to shine as if bedewed with moisture. Her eyes, under their knitted eyebrows, were directed for the moment in fierce abstraction among the thickets of the gardens, so that he had ample opportunity for observing her.

'Such a fabrication, mischievous as it is, is too idle to cause you concern, Plautia,' he said,

breaking silence. 'I see it has troubled you as I dreaded; but, in my humble opinion, you consider it too much.'

[pg 309] 'Can I help, and I a woman?' she retorted fiercely; 'but I will be even with the coward.'

'He must first be found; and I think the best plan would be to commence with the individual with whom your name has been linked in such a shameless fashion.'

'Do you think it is he?'

'Nay, I cannot say. But as a beginning must be made somewhere in the inquiry, that is the point I should select. I don't see but what it is as likely as any. He is tall, well-favoured, conceited, like all Pretorians, and more so, probably, since the Prefect makes much of him. He has probably told his comrades some such story, as a boast of his own superior attractions. It is a weakness of the military nature, and of the gorgeous Pretorian nature in particular, to be vain of a supposed fascination over females.'

Plautia smiled disdainfully.

'I had the opportunity of coming in contact with one of his conquests the other day,' continued Afer, 'a young girl with whom he is infatuated, they say. One of the lower people only. The daughter of a potter in Surrentum, who has some sort of reputation for his work. Wishing for some specimens of his handicraft, as a memento of Surrentum, I went thither to purchase, and the girl herself attended on me in the shop. A tall, lithe, handsome girl, undoubtedly, and with a manner altogether superior to that of her class, however she came by it.'

'And do you think it likely, with such a paragon as this under his sway, he would ever trouble himself to invent a lie concerning another?' said Plautia.

'Oh, in the most natural manner possible,' laughed Afer. 'You know not these men. Victory does not appease them. They are insatiable after fresh conquests, like Alexander.'

'Indeed—is it possible?'

She proceeded calmly to gather together the skirts of her garments; and beyond the pallor of her face, the result of her great mental excitement, there was nothing unusual in her manner.

'If I can help you in the matter, command me, Plautia,' said Afer.

'I ask nothing save your profound silence—I will take the affair into my own hands.'

[pg 310] 'It will be well dealt with.'

She bowed her head.

'I suppose the Centurion is to be found somewhere in the vicinity of the villa?'

'He left yesterday for Rome on an errand for the Prefect.'

'You appear to be very intimate with him and his movements,' remarked Plautia drily.

'The place is so small, and its events so few, that every one seems to know everything that passes. As for his departure, I happened to be idling on the Marina at the moment he took boat, so that there is no mystery in my knowledge.'

'No matter; he will return, I presume.'

'Ah yes, for his sweetheart's sake as well as his commander's. It is a matter of jest how he invariably posts to Rome, when often he might save himself and the Imperial horses the labour. For instance, what a fine breeze has been blowing these three days past—a fair wind which would have taken a swift-sailing galley straight from the Marina to Ostia or Puteoli without the touch of an oar.'

'Winds are apt to fail and change when least desired. He probably prefers the surer method of travelling.'

'Yes, but why?' said Afer, with a cunning smile, 'because his sweetheart's home is but a few paces from the road to Rome, and thereby he gains the opportunity of seeing her for a few moments, going and coming—that is the real reason.'

'And an excellent one too, Afer. He shows his devotion as well as his sense. The woman ought to be proud of him,' she replied, with a perceptible sneer which filled the listener's heart with transport. 'Lest it be of use to me, you may as well tell me this girl's name.'

'I do not know, I grieve to say, but it may be obtained. Her father is well known, and lives on the further side of the town, close by the main road; he is a potter, as I have said.'

'Surrentum, I understand, contains many of them. Have you not his name?'

Afer considered for a few moments.

'Ah, I know—it had almost slipped my memory. His name is Masthlion.'

'Masthlion—good!' said Plautia; 'it may help or it may not. It is as well to know it.'

[pg 311] She turned and walked quickly toward the villa, and Afer attended her in silence up to the door of her apartments.

'I have been the unwitting cause of bringing you great unpleasantness,' he said as he took leave; 'but you will admit that I was unwilling to relate what I did.'

'I admit it. It was necessary for me to hear eventually—the sooner the better. I now perceive I gave way to my anger more than the occasion warranted, but on a woman slander falls heavier than on a man. *Vale!*'

She entered the room swiftly and shut the door, and the knight burst into a laugh and strode off.

'If I have not opened a Pandora's box in my own small way, I am mistaken. I am not to be treated as she treats that spiritless dog of a Martialis in Rome—no, by Hercules!'

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CHAPTER XIX.

Afer had gauged with tolerable accuracy the depth to which he had stirred the heart of Plautia, in spite of her efforts to counterfeit indifference. Indeed, with the actual knowledge he possessed of her feelings towards the Centurion Martialis, he could scarcely be misled.

'She will go straightway and lock herself up alone, to give it all vent,' he thought to himself, with a grin, 'and quite right that she should know the flavour of what she deals so liberally to others.'

What the knight thus shrewdly conjectured was actually the course which Plautia followed. No sooner had she quitted him, than, impatiently refusing all the attentions of her women, she closed the door upon them, and gave a full rein to the feelings which choked her.

Furious resentment against the betrayer of her confidence was uppermost; and reflection on the consequences of publicity was maddening to one whose intense pride had never been thwarted in any particular. She would now be haunted by the covert smile, the half-hidden sneer and giggle, though masked by the obsequious court and service which hung upon her nod. She shook her clenched fists in dull fury.

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It was the nervous dread of this which formed the obstacle to her burning desire of making personal inquiries into the extent of the evil. To watch the smile on a menial's face in answer to her questions, would be truly insupportable; but, more than all, would her pride disdain to betray the least token that the matter gave her concern, even to the extent of a simple question. The thoughts, therefore, which remained to comfort her in some degree, may easily be perceived. Her fevered mind was filled with the form of the imagined author of her trouble. 'Coward, coward!' she muttered from time to time, in the accents of the deepest rage and contempt, though once or twice it fell whispered from her lips, like an echo of reproach and despair, rounded by a half-hysterical sob.

But all such passing weaknesses were swallowed up in the overpowering resentment which thirsted for revenge. What mischief had already been done it was impossible to remedy. Nothing was left to her but a counter scheme, which might eventually enable her to cry quits. With this intention in full possession of her mind she paced the room, yet was without a sufficiently plausible idea to work upon, when the customary invitation to the supper-table of Caesar arrived. Her first impulse was to remain in seclusion, but, on second thoughts, she reproached herself with want of courage, and determined to boldly accept her position at once. The hour for the meal being near at hand, she summoned her attendants for the business of her toilet.

There was seldom much change in the party at the Imperial supper-table. Plautia, therefore, met the familiar faces, amongst whom were Afer and the Prefect. The task of appearing utterly indifferent and unobservant when, at the same time, the breast is unusually susceptible and sick with nervous dread, is so difficult as to be seldom or never acted with success. The result with Plautia was, that her bearing became haughty and stiff to an unusual degree. Her distempered mind appropriated every smile and jest as in some way connected with herself. Her disordered fancy even reached to the slaves behind her back, furnishing them with imagined nods and winks, and *sotto-voce* jokes. The exclusive demands on her vigilance by this morbid sensitiveness naturally engendered an abstraction from the conversation of the company, which was particularly noticeable, in contrast to her customary mood. As she was moreover, somewhat pale,

Tiberius expressed a fear that she was unwell. Assuring him to the contrary, she made a spasmodic attempt to recover her sprightliness, but, unable to sustain it, she gradually relapsed into her former mood. No further notice, however, was taken.

[pg 314] When the business of eating was over, and the conversation began to lag somewhat, Zeno, whose watchfulness had a care for everything, leaned over the Imperial couch and whispered in his master's ear. Tiberius nodded.

'Tis an artisan from Surrentum, friends, who desires to show me something—some extraordinary discovery. It may amuse us to see what it is,' said the Emperor.

In a few moments the Greek returned, followed by Masthlon, who seemed to be dazzled for a moment by the lights and glitter of the luxuriously-appointed apartment. The Surrentine's eyes had never been suffered to fall upon such magnificence crowded within the limits of four walls. When to this was added the scrutiny of the richly-attired guests at table, whom he concluded to be people of the highest rank, including Caesar himself, his temporary embarrassment was only natural. As he stepped inside the room, he made a deep obeisance towards a confused gleam, mingled with forms and faces. But speedily recovering himself, his keen eye roved swiftly round, and noted every particular and face, even of the slaves who stood clustered aside. Thence his gaze returned and rested on the pale, blotched face and brilliant eyes, which, by repute, he knew belonged to his ruler.

'Approach!' said Tiberius.

The potter stepped forward into the middle of the floor opposite to the table, and on his flanks, at the same time, moved the Pretorian of the guard, who had attended him into the room. He was dressed in his best dark woollen tunic, and carried in his hand a wallet. His striking face, with its pale massive brow and deep-set bright eyes, caught the attention of all and he stood calmly sustaining the scrutiny of every eye.

'We are ready to see what you have to show, artisan, and to hear what you have to say,' said Caesar. 'Who and what are you?'

'I am a potter of Surrentum, and well known to the townsfolk. My name is Masthlon, so please you, Caesar.'

Plautia started in surprise as the name fell on her ears, and she roused with eager attention to what should follow. She found the glance of Afer also resting on her, and he slightly raised his eyebrows and smiled.

'Proceed, then, Masthlon the potter,' said Tiberius.

[pg 315] 'May it please you, Caesar,' responded Masthlon, 'although a potter by trade, I have devoted much time to the art of making glass,—as much in the way of inclination as of making profit. Twenty-five years ago, whilst working under my old master, I chanced to fall upon a piece of glass of very strange quality, amongst a pile of fragments and rubbish of the workshop. It had been fused and formed by some strange accident, and ever since that time I have never ceased in trying to discover the secret of its formation. Within the last two or three days I have, by the favour of the gods, succeeded in my endeavours, and to you, Caesar, first after my own family, I considered it my foremost duty to show it.'

Tiberius nodded.

'Twenty-five years! At any rate such wonderful perseverance should command respect,' remarked Sejanus drily.

'It was the belief that my labour, if successful, would prove a benefit to the world, that has upheld me under much disappointment and poverty.'

'Very disinterested and laudable,' said Afer, in a tone which brought a laugh to the lips of the Prefect.

'You would seem to doubt my sincerity, noble sir,' said the potter, bestowing a keen glance on the knight, and at the same time opening his wallet, 'and without being selfish, I think that my long labour and sacrifices should meet with a just return, if the fruit of it prove of real service to others.'

'Doubtless,' quoth Afer.

'Doubtless,' murmured Caesar, and the knight became silent.

'This is the specimen I have made to test my words,' proceeded Masthlon, as he drew out a plain bowl of dull-coloured glass. He handed it to Zeno, who stood by, and the Greek took it to his master who briefly examined it. With a shrug of his shoulders it was handed back to the steward. A smile rested on the lips of the potter.

'It is true that its appearance has nothing to commend it,' said the latter, 'but I will explain that, by saying, that it was made in haste during the past night, that I might hasten hither to-day. It is

not the appearance of the glass I wish your highness to judge of—that can be made to suit every taste, with better appliances than my humble workshop possesses. The same principle which constructs this poor bowl can be applied to produce such costly and priceless articles as those I see there,—he pointed to some magnificent vases on the table. ‘It is the nature of the material which forms my secret. You know of what worth those vases would be if flung on the floor; they would be shivered to a million atoms. Will Caesar bid the strongest slave take this poor bowl of mine and dash it on the floor with all his might, that he may see the result?’

Tiberius turned his head slightly toward his gigantic Nubian servant who stood behind him. The black went round and took the cup from Zeno. Raising it to the full height of his arm, he dashed it down on the marble floor with terrific force. The derisive smile on his thick lips changed to complete surprise, for, instead of the expected crash was a dull thud. He stooped quickly and lifted on high the bowl with one side completely flattened in.

Exclamations and murmurs of wonder arose, and the bowl was given over once more to the inspection of Caesar, from whom it was passed to the others.

‘Good,’ said Tiberius. ‘What next?’

‘I will proceed to restore it to its original shape, if Caesar will permit.’

Receiving the customary nod, the potter took from his wallet a small block, slightly concave on one surface, together with a mallet and a piece of wood, which had one end fashioned like a wedge, and the other broad and round like a pestle. Placing the bowl on the hollow side of the block, he proceeded to distend the crushed glass with the thin end of the wedge, and, when sufficient space had been made, he inserted the blunt end, and so hammered the malleable glass to its original shape.

Springing up Masthion once more passed the bowl for examination.

‘This virtue is my discovery, Caesar,’ said he with pride. ‘That frail glass is made well-nigh indestructible. That is my feat accomplished at last. To others who follow it will be easier to further develop the principle.’

The potter and his novel exhibition had now aroused very considerable curiosity in the spectators. Plautia’s interest was in the man rather than in his work, not only by reason of the relation he bore to the affair which absorbed her mind, but also by the natural inclination of her sex. The Prefect was genuinely interested, whilst Afer assumed an amused indifference. Tiberius himself betrayed evident attention to Masthion’s work, and asked many questions in reference to its qualifications and fitness for further development, not omitting to draw from the inventor brief details concerning himself.

At length the potter received the signal to retire, and Zeno was instructed to retain him in the villa until further notice. One old man at table had kept his peace, watching all and hearing all, with knitted brows and pursed mouth. He was one of the philosophers whose company was so much affected by the Emperor, and his profession was the abstruse science of astrology, a pursuit whose attributes of mystery and superstition especially recommended it to his master’s favour.

‘Look how rapt in meditation is our worthy Thrasullus,’ remarked Sejanus, with ill-concealed raillery; ‘his mind is amid the stars. Say, learned sage of Chaldean mysteries, if this new birth of plastic glass pots has been recorded in the heavens?’

‘In the eternal stars are written all things, but few only of their inscrutable secrets fall within the narrow scope of the human understanding,’ responded the philosopher, in a low tone. ‘My own poor powers have been engaged in tracing weightier destinies than that of a wretched potter.’

‘Oh, for a lesson therein from your learned lips, Chaldean!’

‘Nothing is sacred to the ears of a scoffer,’ said the old man. ‘Thou wilt know well enough some day all that I could tell thee now, Prefect.’

‘And much more too—it requires no planets to tell us that,’ said Sejanus derisively.

Thrasullus smiled scornfully and, without deigning to reply, turned to the Emperor and said, ‘What does Caesar think of this new species of glassware, which would seem to be practically indestructible?’

‘Indestructible material must ever have the preference over the perishable.’

‘Yes, when there is tolerable equality in other respects. For the kitchen and tables of the poor, the ware that is proof against time and usage is priceless. But how, if, as this potter says, the principle can be applied to works of the highest beauty and art, such as deck the boards and mansions of the noble and wealthy, the chosen of mankind?’

‘It does not alter the circumstances. I should prefer to have this precious vase before me safe from all possible fracture.’

'And so would the rest of mankind owning such a treasure. Thus then, this union of beauty and economy becoming universal, to what esteem and value will the precious metals sink? Look to it, Caesar, and great ones of the earth, possessors of the priceless wealth of gold and silver! This poor potter with his bowl is a leveller and cheapener of ye all.'

'Thank heaven 'tis a danger I am quit of,' quoth Afer, in a tone which raised a laugh; and, after Plautia retired a few minutes later, the discussion upon the very plausible theory put forward by Thrasullus was continued with animation some time longer.

The appearance of Masthion in the character of an inventor struck Plautia as a very extraordinary coincidence, and added fresh fuel to her excited thoughts. She lay sleepless for hours, turning restlessly from side to side with the sharply graven image of the potter rooted in her brain. The mystery of the man's daughter tormented her. A mental portrait of her she had formed long ago, but now a fierce desire to see with her own eyes took possession of her. She must visit Surrentum—she would request it of Caesar—nay, she would demand it. The old man was infatuated and would grant her any wish—any whim. A thought struck her, and she started up with the blood tingling through her veins. Would not this man's lovely daughter be a more acceptable and interesting object in the villa than his glassware! Fool she was not to think of it before!

To find the cherished flower—the paragon of loveliness within the fatal walls of the villa when he returned! Ha, then would Martialis have his due. She sank back with a sinister laugh.

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When the morning came she despatched a messenger to Priscus, a knight and personal friend and follower of Tiberius. He had been of the party at the supper-table the previous evening. In half an hour he entered the apartment, newly-shaven, curled, fresh and wreathed in smiles. She had chosen her man well, for in all matters domestic he was Caesar's confidant. With political matters he meddled not, repelled alike by inclination and prudence. But in the daily minutiae of the personal and private occupations of his Imperial friend and ruler he was indispensable, inestimable as thinker, provider, arranger—a true lion's jackal.

He was barely middle-aged, with regular, comely features, which a puffy face and pasty complexion marred considerably. His figure exhibited the same overload of fat, and, altogether, he presented the idea of a man, whose habits of life might more wisely have lain in the way of increased bodily exercise and Spartan fare. He used his hands very freely to accentuate his speech, but, more probably, because they were very small, plump, white, and soft.

'Plautia's message reached me in the midst of important business, but at the very moment of relief I came,' he said, with a charming smile and wave of his white hand.

'It is more than I deserved, so trifling are my requirements,' replied Plautia. 'I left the table last night somewhat early, and I am anxious to know whether I missed anything in the affair of that wonderful potter and his glass. See how interested I am, when I presume so far as to bring you hither at the sacrifice of your own affairs to enlighten me.'

'Ah,' replied Priscus, with a smirk, a bow, and a flash of his snowy fingers, 'would to heaven your summons came oftener to bid me attend your presence. In the matter of the potter and his glass, which was, as you say, so highly remarkable, there followed a long discussion, of which, to my deep sorrow, I am utterly unable to give you a detailed account. I believe the fellow is still detained during Caesar's pleasure, and the decided opinion last night was, that his new fashioned glass, if brought into general use, would sadly interfere with the more highly esteemed metals. So that, in case this opinion be retained, I should say the unlucky man will have small cause to rejoice in his invention.'

'A very hard fate, no doubt, after his toil.'

'Doubtless,' said Priscus, shrugging his shoulders; 'but it cannot be helped. If his invention be disadvantageous, Caesar must interdict it in the interest of all.'

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'Naturally! And so, noble Priscus, let me thank you for your courtesy. I am sorry to think the poor man will be no gainer—he seemed so intelligent, I was quite interested.'

'Undoubtedly above the standard of his class.'

'He seems, moreover, to be tolerably well known,' uttered Plautia, with a careless yawn. 'Somebody about me—I know not who—told me he possessed a daughter at home, a girl of surpassing loveliness.'

'Ah, indeed!' said the knight, with the slightest wrinkle of his brows. 'Now, to my humble taste, that would be infinitely more interesting than the child of his genius—a glass bowl. But yet to speak of surpassing loveliness when the beauteous Plautia is not excepted is absurd.'

Priscus bowed and smirked again with effusive gallantry which Plautia, as affectedly, returned.

'And now I will detain you no longer, my friend,' said Plautia; 'forgive my idle message!'

'Ah, say no more of that—would I could remain! But there is an excursion half resolved upon to-

day to inspect the works at the new villa of Mars. You will doubtless hear of it in due course, if finally resolved on. Till then farewell, noble Plautia.'

As the day wore on, Priscus came again with the anticipated invitation for Plautia to accompany the afternoon's expedition.

The effect of yesterday's experience had far from passed away from her mind, and, although she had recovered much of her nerve, there yet remained a dread of appearing among the people. The hesitation did not last long. Her courage was equal to the occasion, and she had now, moreover, a definite plan of action. The man before her, she thought, as that individual chattered away, must know, if any one knew, of every rumour and piece of gossip current in the villa and island. She longed to question him, but her pride recoiled from the attempt.

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As the knight was going out of the room, he suddenly turned back and whispered, with portentous secrecy, 'Concerning that potter, I had nearly forgotten to tell you. I am afraid the verdict goes dead against him—Caesar has been closeted with his philosophers all morning—lengthy discussion and opinion entirely unfavourable to said potter's invention—Silenus tells me this, *sub rosa*—I tell it to you, divine Plautia, but you will respect the secret and save me the fate of a talebearer, I know—in half an hour your litter will await you at your garden entrance.'

At the time appointed Plautia was borne away by the stout slaves, and joined Tiberius and his small retinue which awaited her without the villa gates. After a minute inspection of the villa, which was rapidly rising on a height beyond the village, the party returned, and Plautia was escorted to her rooms by her host himself. Refreshments were served. Tiberius, drinking wine, reclined on a couch.

'You eat nothing, Caesar,' said Plautia, whose healthy appetite, sharpened by the open air, was not so easily appeased.

'Age wants for less than youth,' replied Tiberius, with his admiring gaze fixed upon her. 'This island wine will suffice me till supper.'

She refilled his cup and acted as his cupbearer, with such charming, smiling grace, that his pale face was suffused with a faint hue of pleasure.

'You sent for Priscus this morning,' murmured he, between the sips of the wine which she had tasted for him with her ripe lips.

She started and he smiled.

'Priscus told me,' he said, laying his thin hand quietly on her arm. 'Why do you start? Do you think you have committed some grave offence? Can you not send for whom you please—myself included?'

'You are too good,' murmured Plautia, with a pretty assumption of bashful pleasure.

'Yes,' continued the Emperor, feasting his eyes on the lovely colour which deepened in her face. 'You feel interested in the artisan and the work he showed us last night, and you sent for Priscus. I am displeased—you ought to have sent your pleasure to me, who can better serve you than Priscus.'

'It was nothing—yet I confess the man's appearance and his work interested me—I wished to know what you had determined with regard to him!'

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'I am counselled to think that his invention would not be the benefit which, at first glance, it would seem to be. It is necessary to consider it in conjunction with other things. However, if the fellow is likely to suffer by his unlucky idea, we may be able to make it up in some other particular—let us have him here and hear what he has to say.'

One of the attendants was despatched, and in a short time returned with Masthion.

The potter came before them with his customary respectful, but self-possessed bearing; but his expression was a trifle more anxious and careworn, as if delay and want of encouragement had dispirited him. His hopes had been very sanguine.

His eyes eagerly tried to glean from the Emperor's impassive face some trace of the bent of his thoughts, but without result.

'This noble lady,' said Tiberius, 'who saw you last night, has deigned to take so much interest in you, as to wish to hear from your own lips the story of your life. With regard to the specimen you brought us, that is yet under consideration.'

'The noble lady honours me with her regard,' replied Masthion, gazing at her with undisguised admiration; 'I will tell her willingly; but there is little worthy of notice. The life of a poor workman is seldom anything but the dreary history of toil for daily bread. One day resembles another, save when food is scarcer and labour harder.'

'Go on!' said Plautia.

Masthlon did as he was requested, and gave a brief sketch of his life, down to the discovery already described. Plautia listened attentively, whilst Caesar beguiled the time in sipping his wine and gazing at her face.

'Good!' said Tiberius, as the speaker concluded; 'and now it would be idle to mislead you with sanguine hopes. After so long a labour it must needs be disappointing to know, that the verdict upon your invention seems to be unfavourable. Build not, therefore, extravagant visions of success.'

[pg 323] Masthlon listened in silence. It sounded like the knell of his hopes. His eyes first sought one and then the other, as if to assure himself that no joke was being passed upon him; then he folded his arms across his breast with quiet dignity, but infinite sadness.

'Take heart, potter!' said Plautia, who seemed really touched, as far as it was possible for an aristocrat to be with one of Masthlon's degree.

'A lifelong task must needs be rooted in one's breast—it is idle to deny it,' said Masthlon, sick at heart. 'Will Caesar deign to say in what respect my work has met with disapproval?'

'Its bad effect upon a more important industry.'

'One industry can scarce injure another, when both are useful. To my own poor thoughts they would rather tend to mutual good.'

'Older and wiser heads than yours think differently. Your views are prejudiced and circumscribed by the narrow limits of your own particular work—it will be necessary for your secret to remain undivulged.'

'And yet there is no one living who would not seek the benefit of my glass—is it possible, then, for such a thing to be hurtful?' muttered Masthlon in the keen bitterness of his soul.

'Tis strange, to say the least of it,' said Plautia; 'but courage—it will be approved—some day you will become famous.'

Tiberius smiled coldly. Seeing Masthlon about to speak again, he shot him a warning glance and raised his finger.

'It is enough,' he said; 'I admit the disappointment, but it is unavoidable. At the same time your honest perseverance merits praise, whatever its fate. We may be able to recompense you in some way. You are a poor man, and I am told you have a comely daughter—let her come to Capreae and attend on this noble lady, whose interest you have won. In addition to the great honour and advancement it will confer on the girl, she will be bestowed upon the protection and kindness of the best of mistresses. It is a chance such as seldom offers.'

The words fell on Masthlon like a blight. Terror froze his heart with an icy grip, and animation seemed congealed, for a few moments, so sudden and dread was the blow.

[pg 324] The warnings and censure of his kinsman came back upon him. Their echo no longer sounded foolish. He was in the toils—in the midst of the vast palace, with guards and sleepless eyes environing down the water's edge. In the very clutch of the ruthless being, the savour of whose public reputation was as the scent of blood: whose simple request was tantamount to a command.

How came he to know of her existence? Those two visitors to his shop, whom Cestus had warned him of! But then Neæra was as well known in the town as himself.

His mind flew back to his lowly home, and pictured his darling so vividly, that the fire of desperation rose upon the chill horror which filled him. She, who was all purity and womanliness, to inhabit there! They might rend him in pieces ere he would consent.

He moistened his parched lips with his tongue, and could scarcely trust his voice to frame an answer. He looked up again. Caesar and the beautiful woman were watching him. The immovable eyes of the former seemed to pierce him to the marrow, and he shuddered.

'What troubles you, fellow?' said Tiberius, in harsh tones; 'have you not a daughter to send hither?'

'So please you, Caesar, and this noble lady, I have a daughter, and I am grateful for the gracious favour you propose for her; but for her to leave me would be to take from my life the only joy and consolation it has left, since the hopes of my work have been destroyed.'

'Tush! This is the way that the maudlin childishness of old age speaks, and not the common-sense words of hale and hearty manhood. The lady has need of her—it will be to the benefit of the girl, and she will be nigh at hand for your occasional visits.'

'The noble lady will not deal so hardly with us,' said Masthlon; 'she will not insist on removing from our poor home the only light it possesses?'

'My service will be easy and pleasant, and the girl will be happy—you distress yourself without

reason,' said Plautia, with singular satisfaction at the unexpected turn things had taken.

'Enough,' said Tiberius, 'it is settled. It is the bare idea which frightens you—you will grow wiser on reflection. Now go—you will receive your instructions to-morrow.'

[pg 325] Masthlion seized upon a last thought which struck his mind, and, instead of obeying the command, fell on his knees.

'Pardon, Caesar, but it cannot be—this daughter, as I have called her, is not my own begotten child. Those, to whom she belongs, still live, and it is beyond my power to dispose of her, whether I would or no.'

'It matters nothing,' said Tiberius ironically; 'refer them to me—who are they?'

'I know them not, save that they are noble and wealthy and dwell in Rome,' said Masthlion wildly.

'The children of nobles are not put into the hovels of potters,' returned the Emperor contemptuously.

'She was stolen and brought to me when an infant.'

'Then your head is in danger.'

'I knew it not until within the last few weeks—she was delivered to me as an orphan child of poor parents—I was childless and I took her in.'

'Dare you tell fables to me—go!'

'It is truth, before the gods—she is a noble's daughter and cannot come!' cried the potter in reckless desperation.

'Away—you destroy all lenience,' said Tiberius, starting up with a terrible frown; 'cannot come—insolent! Ho! Zeno! Who waits there?'

Both the steward and the soldier on guard appeared in the room, almost as soon as the words had left the Emperor's lips. By the wrathful tone and the angry glow in their master's eyes, they expected a summary order. The Pretorian's heavy grasp had already fallen on the potter's shoulder, but Tiberius merely waved his hand impatiently toward the door, and fell back on his cushions.

'Quick, you fool!' whispered Zeno in Masthlion's ear, and, aided by the Pretorian on the other side, the wretched potter was hurried staggering from the room.

'Haste!' said the steward again, when outside, 'before he changes his mind.' He dragged his charge along through the mazes of the palace, without stop, until he deposited him, more like a man in a dream, in the narrow little closet which contained his sleeping pallet.

Masthlion sank thereon and buried his face in his hands with a groan.

[pg 326] 'Hark'ee, comrade,' said Zeno, after regarding him for a while, 'take my word for it, you are well out of that. I have seen better men come worse off. It is only for madmen and fools to make experiments on the temper of Caesar—do you take my advice and be careful and less ambitious in your business—take your wares to a safer market.'

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CHAPTER XX.

When the sun flashed upon the white walls of the palace next morning, Masthlion was still upon his pallet bed, much in the same posture as when Zeno had left him. Indeed, the cramped space of the cell gave not much opportunity for movement.

He was free to enter the servants' hall, to eat at their table, and otherwise to amuse himself within the limits of the villa; but he had remained in his narrow retreat heedless of all.

As the morning wore on, the door opened, and the handsome steward entered. He gazed upon Masthlion with surprise. The potter was gaunt, haggard, and wasted—a single night had scored his face with the careworn furrows of twenty years.

'Well!' said the latter, starting up with an unsettled look, which had supplanted his usual calm gaze. 'Well!'

'Well!' echoed the Greek, regarding him with undisguised curiosity.

'What message from the hoary tyrant—what are his commands?'

'None, as yet, Surrentine—and speak respectfully of your betters, for walls have ears.'

Masthlon sank back on his pallet, and dropped his head on his hand with an action of utter weariness, mental and physical.

'Hark'ee, brother; no one has seen or heard anything of you since yesterday, when I took thee to the presence chamber—have you never stirred from here since I quitted you?'

'No.'

'Then you have neither eaten nor drunken?'

[pg 328] The potter shook his head.

'Nor slept either, I daresay.'

'I think not.'

'In truth, you look like a man who has been sealed up in a vault for a month. What is the trouble? Is it because your business has gone amiss with Caesar, or that he scared your life half away—or both? At any rate this is not the way to mend it. I recommend meat and drink and fresh air, taking care not to breathe the latter beyond the outer gate.'

'Thanks!' replied Masthlon, rising; 'you are kind. I will do as you say, and wait and hope for the freedom of these cursed walls.'

'Hum—if you lived in them long enough you would be more guarded in your language. Your visit has not been pleasant—it is hard to have one's expectations unduly knocked on the head—you take it to heart, and you have had an ill night of it.'

'It has passed now.'

'Every man to his own way. If you had tried to drown your sorrow, instead of nursing it, you would have been a better man this morning.'

'Every man to his own way,' said Masthlon, with a wan smile.

'The gods be praised—mine now lies elsewhere,' returned Zeno. 'Mark! don't attempt to pass the outer gate!'

So saying, he vanished, and Masthlon, after a few more minutes' reflection, followed, to act on the recommendation of the steward, and break his long fast.

His misery of mind led him to shun, as far as possible, all intercourse with others; so, hastily swallowing a few mouthfuls of food and a hearty draught of rough wine, apart in a quiet corner, he stole out-of-doors.

[pg 329] The wine and the fresh morning air restored him vastly, but his condition was yet pitiable. He sought a warm sunny corner of a wall and sat down, but could not rest. Cramped by his narrow room, he had remained motionless the past night, till the acute suffering of his apprehension had produced a merciful species of drowsiness. But now, under the open heavens, and with ample space on every side, the functions of his mind resumed such activity, as to develop a painful nervous disorder which impelled him ceaselessly hither and thither. A wider field for reflection might have brought him relief, but that was denied him. He knew only, that one whom he loved better than his own life was in worse danger than that of death.

On this dread fact he brooded in passive agony. Like an orb of torment it pierced him with its searing flame amid encasing blackness, through which his mind struggled in vain to escape for relief. It scorched into his brain; and round and round, hither and thither, without rest, his feet wandered within the girdle of the infernal walls which imprisoned him. His was the soul of the true artist—keenly sensitive, deeply emotional—all the worse for him.

The hours passed on. Would Caesar's commands never come to end his terrible suspense?

The vast palace, gleaming in the sun, seemed to mock him as he watched its silent entrances with feverish glances. He knew not but what his home had already been invaded. Knew! No, he knew nothing, save that he was helpless.

More than once, despair urged him to force his way into the presence of the tyrant himself and demand his freedom, or to boldly pass the outer gate and gain the fishermen's boats. But the madness of such an act was evident even to his own wild thoughts. At every outlet a guard was lolling lazily on his spear, his gilded panoply shining in the sun. One shadowy hope there was, that Cestus might have persuaded Neæra to proceed to Rome. But that was hoping against hope: the unhappy potter knew in his heart she would never consent. No—there she would remain until

he returned, and there she would be the prey of the spoiler.

The big drops stood on his pale forehead as the agony of his mind tore him. His overloaded brain seemed to rock with a vague, hideous burden. Suddenly the sunlight brightened, as it were, into a fierce white glare. The vast fabric of the palace, with each neighbouring object, seemed to heave up round him with a motion which filled him with a deadly sickness, and caused him to spread out his arms, as if the surging masses were about to be launched upon him.

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Out of the sky gigantic shapes whirled and swooped upon him; but when, as it seemed, they were on the point of crushing him, they dwindled and fled as suddenly away. His very brain seemed to contract and distend as rapidly in the same awful proportions. It was terrific—he strove to shout aloud in his terror, but his voice died within him, and his limbs were immovable.

The colossal masses and spheres which darted down upon him shot away again into tiny twinkling specks—so far away, into such immensity of space, that his soul shuddered with a frightful sensation at the awful gulf yawning before him. Back they came—swelling as they rushed, in the brief second of their career, like Titanic globes upon his paralysed vision. One of them took the semblance of a face, distorted and ghastly. Down it swooped in stupendous bulk, so close that his brain seemed to burst with its appalling proximity. His delirious senses saw in it a livid, grinning caricature of Caesar's ghastly visage—he thrust out his arms at it and shrieked in terror—tottered and fell senseless to the ground.

* * * * *

When he recovered consciousness he found himself lying on the ground where he had fallen. A circle of faces surrounded him, and Zeno was kneeling beside him with a cup in his hand.

'Ah, now he is coming to,' said the Greek, as the potter gave a deep sigh and slightly opened his eyes. 'Back, back—further back!'

The idle, gazing menials gave way, and Zeno held the cup to Masthlon's lips. A few mouthfuls restored the potter, and he looked around. His faculties cleared, and he shuddered as his memory brought back those dread visions of his overstrained brain.

'This comes of fasting and watching, Surrentine,' quoth Zeno, offering him the cup again; 'Nature is spiteful when robbed of her due.'

'I must have fainted,' muttered Masthlon feebly.

'Ay, with a yell which was enough to curdle the heart of a dead man!'

'I shall soon be all right, but I must confess to a certain weakness and dizziness.'

'Come, these fellows shall help you to your bed.'

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But Masthlon, refusing the offer, walked away unassisted, though somewhat falteringly, inside the palace to his pallet, whereon he stretched himself gladly, for he was not a little shaken and confused.

Zeno flung a cloak over him, and set some drink near him. Masthlon thanked him for his kindness.

'I was bidden to take care of thee, and I dare not disobey—that is all,' answered the other, with a grin. 'But listen, potter, I may tell thee this much, and it is as much as I know so far, that thou art to go away before nightfall—how and in what way I know not.'

'The gods bless you for the words,' cried Masthlon, whose face lighted with unspeakable joy.

Zeno shrugged his shoulders, and hastened away.

The joyful intelligence appeared to pour a calm, soothing influence on the suffering man's spirit, and, in weariness and weakness of mind and body, he fell into a profound slumber.

He seemed to have slept only a few minutes when he was aroused by a hand touching him on the shoulder. He looked up and saw Zeno once more beside him. The daylight had failed, and the little room was nearly dark.

'How do you feel?' asked the steward.

'Better—I have slept.'

'Three good hours—you are now to depart—make ready.' Masthlon, with trembling hands, lifted his wallet from the floor.

'I am ready,' said he.

They went out, and the steward never spoke until they reached the outer gate.

Conversing with the soldier on guard was an individual well wrapped up in a cloak.

'Here is your charge,' said Zeno, addressing him.

The other nodded and ejaculated, 'Good,' as he bestowed a sharp glance on the potter.

'Farewell,' pursued the Greek to the latter; 'I come no further, and here our acquaintance ends, I suppose. Plautus goes to the opposite shore; he will take charge of you, and has instructions to see you safely bestowed—farewell, Surrentine!'

The man called Plautus laughed. Masthion, in his eager excitement to be gone, uttered his farewell and thanks rather hastily.

[pg 332] 'Come, then, Surrentine,' quoth Plautus, striding through the gate, 'the boat waits, and I have far to go and much to do.'

The potter needed no encouragement to quit the abhorred precincts of the villa, and when once clear of its shadow, he breathed a prayer of thankfulness and relief. With a light step and eager heart he followed the rapid pace of his conductor, his mind being too full of hopes and fears to attempt a conversation.

The absence of any command from the Emperor with regard to Neæra, he regarded with satisfaction, as a plausible argument that no further insistence in the matter was intended. Yet he was anxious—more anxious than he cared to own. He burned for the moment to arrive when he should enter his own door again—and yet he dreaded it too.

Once he was curious enough to ask of his companion, if he was to be landed on the opposite point, in which case he would have a long journey on foot to accomplish. He received only an unintelligible growl in response; so, fearing to irritate what seemed to be a cross-grained temper, he held his peace.

Descending the steep declivity they issued on the narrow Marina, where a galley ready drawn up awaited them. Its crew of about eight men were lolling about amongst the idlers, but when the gruff voice of Plautus fell on their ears, they sprang to their places in readiness to ply their heavy oars.

'In with you,' said Plautus to Masthion; and the boat, by a vigorous shove, was swept out on the bay.

'Give way—bend your backs, and the sooner we shall be home again,' called Plautus, as he seized the steering oar.

'Sit you just there, and move not, Surrentine.'

He pointed to a place just astern of the stroke-oarsman. The potter sat down and became again absorbed in his reflections.

[pg 333] The slaves were all picked men of large frame and muscle, and they urged the boat through the water at a swift pace. The dusk was beginning to fall, and the distant shore was barely visible, though the dark masses of mountain above were sharply outlined against the clear sky. They skirted the stupendous cliffs, upon the brink of which, far above, rested the walls of the villa Jovis. The sea broke with a sullen, dismal splash against the perpendicular wall of ragged rock, and the boat was still moving in the shadow of the overhanging cliffs, when Plautus, in his deep tones, bade the men cease rowing.

They lay on their oars, and the boat, with its freight of motionless forms, glided silently along like a phantom. Masthion looked up to account for the sudden command. The frowning, towering rocks, the portentous gloom, and the cold inky water sent a shudder through his frame.

'Surrentine,' said the voice of Plautus, 'you are the potter who came to show to Caesar a curious kind of glassware?'

Masthion answered in the affirmative. The question took him by surprise, so completely had all thoughts of his unlucky invention been displaced by those of Neæra.

'Are you alone possessed of the secret of making that same glass?'

'I alone—why, friend?' replied Masthion.

'Why,' said the cloaked Plautus in his grating tones, 'because it has been decreed that you shall take your secret with you elsewhere.'

'Elsewhere!' cried Masthion, with a sharp foreboding; 'what mean you—where am I to take it?'

'Where it can never be found again—to the bottom of the sea!'

As Plautus uttered the words he threw up his arm. Simultaneously the potter's throat was grasped from behind by a hand of iron. As he fell helplessly back, a poniard was plunged deep

into his heart—all in a brief second of time, ere he could make a sound or motion.

The assassin raised his weapon for another stroke, but it was unneeded—he had already done his terrible work too well. His victim had died on the instant, without a murmur; his gentle heart was still for ever.

The voice of Plautus broke on the terrible silence. 'Habet!' he said, 'a good stroke—Caesar's justice must be done. Now for the daughter, whom he is bound to father in this one's place. We must get on—quick, in with him!'

A heavily-weighted cord was produced—there was a sullen plunge, and the boat again went foaming through the water to complete its mission of violence.

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CHAPTER XXI.

When the craft was brought up at the landing-place on the mainland, Plautus, followed by five of his crew, sprang ashore and with all haste made toward the posting-house.

The superintendent was in a long stable, overlooking the business of feeding and making snug for the night the animals under his charge.

'Horses!' demanded Plautus laconically, as he strode inside, followed by his gang.

'Humph—on whose business?' said the superintendent suspiciously.

'Caesar's!'

'Humph! I must have more than your word for that.'

Plautus, without speaking, thrust his fist close up under the official's nose, and displayed a signet ring gleaming on one of his bony fingers.

The man of horses bobbed back his head with an angry gesture, which made the new-comers laugh, and turning to the grooms, said snappishly, 'Give him Livilla.'

Plautus again thrust his ring under his visage. 'I said horses,' he growled roughly; 'here are six of us. Nor will the nag Livilla do for me—pick out your own, lads, and no more palaver.'

This was soon done, amid much noisy mirth and rude jesting, and in a few minutes they were all speeding along the road to Surrentum, making the most of the last minutes of departing daylight.

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Arriving at the town, they proceeded at a walk, in straggling order, to attract less attention. The streets were now dark, however, and the passers-by few in number; nevertheless Plautus, in the van, thought fit also to defeat any idle curiosity by taking a devious route.

Within a hundred yards of the dwelling of the ill-fated Masthion, the band dismounted; the sweating horses were fastened in a gloomy corner, and a man left in charge of them. Plautus, with the remainder, proceeded to the house.

The outer door was closed and all was dark and silent. Plautus, ordering his companions to remain without until he called them, knocked loudly. A light step came running within.

'Father, is it you?' called the glad tones of Neæra's voice.

A bolt was drawn, the door opened, and the girl herself stood in the entrance, holding a light above her head, whilst she peered beneath, with eager expectation written on her face.

'No, my pretty wench, it is not your father, that's very sure,' quoth Plautus, as he came forward out of the darkness into the feeble light thrown by the lamp.

Neæra, with a cry of alarm, started back at the sight of the shrouded figure and the harsh features of the speaker.

'Stop,' he said, making good his entrance inside the shop; 'don't be afraid nor run away. If I'm not your father, I've come from your father—that is, if you are the daughter of Masthion the potter.'

'I am,' said the disappointed girl, whose anxiety to learn of the absent one struggled against feminine suspicion and timidity of the ill-favoured visitor. 'What have you to tell me of him? Why does he not come home? When is he coming?'

'For a particular reason he has not come home; nor is he coming yet. That is why he has sent me to bring you to him. To speak truth, he is taken very ill, and you are bidden to go back with me, straightway, to tend him.'

'That shall be my business,' said a voice behind; 'ill, did you say—my husband ill?'

'Eh!' ejaculated Plautus, scanning the wrinkled anxious face of Tibia as she came forward; 'are you his wife?'

'Yes,' cried Neæra for her, in great agitation; 'tell us, good sir, if he is very ill—speak quickly and tell us all.'

[pg 336] 'How many more are there of you?'

'None—save a kinsman who dwells with us for a space—oh, tell us of my father.'

'And where is the kinsman—is he in the house?'

'No—no! Somewhere in the town. You are cruel in tormenting us—speak then, and say what we are to do?'

'I have already told you. He has sent for you—he is ill, dying—so haste and come along, if you would see him alive.'

A smothered cry broke from Tibia's lips, and Neæra turned pale.

'Dying?' murmured the girl, tottering back against the wall.

'It was me he should have sent for—his wife,' said Tibia, confronting the wily ruffian; 'you have made a mistake surely. At any rate she shall not go.'

'She must, and quickly.'

'It would be impossible for a girl, as she is, to go with you now; it is my place and duty to go to my husband—she must remain.'

'Ah, mother, can we not both go? Where is he, and how are we to travel?' said Neæra, pale but self-possessed.

Plautus scowled and gnawed his lip for a moment. Then he said, 'Well, well! I admit the wife has a claim before the daughter. Go you, therefore, and get your cloak—let the girl remain by the house. All blame must be on your head.'

Tibia instantly departed into the upper rooms with the assurance that she would not be long.

'You have not yet told us where my father is,' said Neæra, when they were alone; 'you are unkind, as a messenger, to those who hold him dearest. Did he send no words beyond bidding me to go—no token? Speak, for the love of the gods!'

'I don't recollect, but I'll bring in my comrade and see if he has a better memory,' replied Plautus.

[pg 337] He whistled and his accomplices filed in. Neæra, in great alarm, turned to dart away down the passage into the house, but Plautus dexterously placed himself in the way. At the same moment a cloak was twisted round her head, which stifled the cry on her lips. To pinion her limbs was the work of an instant, for the worthy slaves were prepared for every emergency, and made light of her struggles. Thus gagged and helpless she was borne outside. The remaining four men instantly closed the door and passed into the house, carrying the light with them.

The unhappy Tibia was surprised in her room, where she was hastily collecting a few articles for her supposed journey.

'What do you want?' she cried, as the ruthless slaves crowded into the narrow room.

They advanced toward her, and she screamed in affright at their menacing aspect. One of them rolled his eyes to his leader and half drew a knife from his belt. But no orders had been given for any further use of the weapon, and Plautus, from experience, kept to the letter of his instructions.

'Silence, hag!' he roared, 'and keep your traps—you can stay and keep house since your girl has now gone. As for your husband, he doesn't want you, for he is at the bottom of the sea, and his glass pot with him—we put him there as we came along to-night.'

As if his pitiless brutality were a matter of humour, the wretch accompanied it with a grin. The poor woman gave an agonised cry, and sank down beneath his terrible words, as though pierced with the kinder thrust of a sword.

'You have killed her,' said one of his comrades.

'Not I,' returned Plautus; 'she'll make a sturdy widow yet—it was well behaved to go off in that fashion and save us trouble.'

The insensible dame's mouth was gagged, her poor, frail limbs tied, and then the room ransacked. There was nothing, however, which seemed worthy of any particular notice, and they proceeded to devote a similar attention to the remainder of the house.

Every glass article was smashed, to prove it did not possess the interdicted malleable quality, and, in the search for whatever might have some bearing on the same luckless invention, the whole of the poor appointments of the dwelling were tossed hither and thither. This process was very rapid and thorough, and occupied only a few minutes.

[pg 338] The workshop outside was then entered, and a work of devastation entered upon. The furnace was pulled down bodily. Every article which could be destroyed was utterly wrecked. Every nook and cavity was zealously raked out and explored, and finally, when the rigorous examination was completed, the potter's tools, which had been gathered together, were thrust in a sack and carried away.

In another minute the marauders had regained their horses. The whole campaign had been executed with a rapidity, silence, and completeness which left nothing to be desired, and reflected the highest credit on the discipline of the Imperial household.

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CHAPTER XXII.

No tidings of Masthlion having been received for three days, his brother-in-law, Cestus, had given himself up to the gloomiest forebodings. At the end of the second day he had used all the arts of his persuasion to induce Neæra and his sister to set off for Rome. At their distinct, unreasoning refusal he had lost his temper, with the effect of causing his tongue, in desperation, to speak more violently than he would otherwise have thought prudent. The discourse had been suddenly brought to a close, by the abrupt retirement of Neæra from the room, at which the worthy Suburan, in a rage, slunk out of the house, to go and drown his anxiety and harassments at his favourite wine-shop.

A scene of much the same character had occurred on the following evening, and, in a still more violent fit, he had again quitted the now detested dwelling of his sister, to seek the solace of copious draughts of liquor.

Whilst he was thus engaged in a temporary return to his old indulgent habits, we have seen what occurred at home.

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An hour subsequent to the events already recorded, he went back, not without a suspicion of unsteadiness in his gait. Although a faint, luminous haze had succeeded to the short period of darkness, the moon had not yet topped the crests of the hills which girdled the town and valley. His vision being also a little blurred with the fumes of the wine, he did not perceive that the door, which was always closed at this hour, was wide open. He raised his fist to deal it a blow as usual, but, meeting no resistance, he overbalanced himself and fell forward on his hands and knees. With an oath of astonishment he got up and went forward. At every step his feet crunched the fragments of glass and pottery. More astonished than ever, and not without a suspicion of something wrong, he roared out for a light, whilst he groped his way to the passage leading within. No answer or sound relieving the silence, he was constrained to go forward in the dark until he reached the common dwelling-room. The door of this was found to be also open, and the gloom impenetrable. He remained on the threshold, for a moment, dumbfounded; but not a sign of life met his ear.

'What in the name of all that's damnable has come to the house?' he muttered; 'is it a joke—thieves, or what? Where are they—Tibia—Neæra—hillo!'

His voice was no mean one and his roar shook the little house; but he got no return for his pains. With increasing alarm and soberness he groped his way into the room, and, at once, caught his shin against a substantial article of furniture, which was in a most unexpected position. He fell with a cry of pain and rage, and some moments were absorbed in chafing his leg. This done he proceeded more cautiously, and, after a long search, succeeded in laying his hand on flint and steel. He produced a light and surveyed the room. Every article had been dragged about and ransacked. He looked on the scene, with mouth agape, in blank amazement. Then he rushed forward into the shop. The shelves were bared of their contents, and the floor littered with their fragments. Turning back he ascended to the upper floor, and there, on her back, tied and gagged, he perceived the form of Tibia, with her eyes resting upon him in the strange agony of speechless helplessness.

'What is it, Tibia—what is it? The girl—where is she?' he cried, springing forward.

Drawing his knife he cut her bonds, and raised her into a sitting posture.

Tibia burst into a paroxysm of grief. 'Oh brother, brother—dead, dead!'

'Who—the girl—Neæra? Don't say that, woman!' he cried furiously.

'No, no! Masthliion—my husband!'

'Did I not say he would never return? But the girl—where is she, in the name of the furies?'

'Gone—they have taken her away.'

[pg 341] With a cry like the howl of a wild beast, Cestus threw up his arms. Everything was plain.

His face grew purple; the veins swelled like cords, and his eyes glared with an insane fire. His tongue found vent in a torrent of mad ravings and horrid imprecations, accompanied with the wildest gestures, till the heart-stricken woman herself forgot her own anguish for the moment, and shuddered in horror.

When the fit had partially exhausted itself he turned to his sister, and hoarsely demanded a recital of what had passed. A few words sufficed, and she threw her apron over her head, and rocked herself to and fro.

The bluster of the tempest was over, and silence succeeded. For a moment Cestus remained in meditation, with his eyes fixed on the floor. Then bidding her not to quit the house, he rushed out headlong into the street, and rapidly ran toward the Marina. Here, with much difficulty, for few people were astir, he satisfied himself that no party had landed or embarked, at all answering to those whose track he sought to discover. Thence he hurried to the posting-house in the town, where he was just as unsuccessful. Sustained and spurred on by terrible excitement, he ran out to the very outskirts of the town, till he reached a tavern, standing on the side of the road which led from the southern coast. Here he was well known, the establishment being a favourite port of call in his rambles. He called the landlord aside, who looked with surprise on his customer's disordered aspect. In answer to the Suburan's inquiries a youth was summoned, who was employed in all kinds of outdoor jobs about the premises, which included a small farm as well as the business of a tavern. The lad, to the intense delight of his questioner, proved to have been loitering at the entrance of the house about nightfall, and had taken particular note of the six horsemen who had composed the party led by Plautus. Giving the lad a coin, Cestus briefly informed the master of the outrage and went back home.

[pg 342] 'It is as I said it would be!' he burst out as he entered the room where Tibia remained. 'A gang of Caesar's rascals from the island, and back they have gone, taking her with them. It is all over with her, and I am ruined. You would not listen to me, would you not?—they would have been cheated of their prey if you had. Now you know who was the wisest! Fools! fools! fools!'

Pale with excitement he threw himself on the floor, and, save for his heavy breathing, deep silence fell on all—the terrible silence of desolation and woe.

It was a dismal, weird scene, lighted by the dull, smoky flame of a rude lamp. The contents of two chests littered the floor with homely linen and wearing apparel, together with numberless odds and ends stored by a thrifty housewife. The simple articles of furniture were awry and overturned. The broad, burly form of the man lying face downwards, half upon the pile of bedding and half upon the floor; the woman crouching beside the naked pallet bed, with her head bowed down upon her knees. Two or three locks of her thin gray hair had escaped from their fastening, and hung loosely down over her tightly clasped hands. She was most to be pitied. She had lost her husband and child, and sat, an aging woman, amidst the wreck of her home, which had hitherto bounded her life and thoughts.

The ghostly, unutterable stillness long continued, and the only thing which seemed to have life was the smoky yellow flame of the lamp, as it waved and flared in the currents of air which came through the open door. Presently Cestus turned over with a sigh and sat up. He directed his gaze toward the motionless form of his sister, and his eyes filled with an unaccustomed compassion.

Long years ago, when, as a youth, he left his father's cottage, in consequence of some misdeed, to go and seek his fortune in the great city, this sister had been the last one to give him tearful farewell words of hope and encouragement. That scene was still bright in his memory. The pretty maiden standing in the middle of the sunlit road, where she had kissed him, waving her hand as he turned the bend which hid her from view. There she was now—old, faded, wrinkled, toil-worn, and broken-hearted. And he, since that day when her pure kiss and warm tears fell on his beardless face—

[pg 343] He turned away his head, and resting his chin on his hand and his elbow on his knee, he remained staring at vacancy. He might have been a stony embodiment of abstraction, with widely-distended, lustreless eyes which stared as if frozen in grim despair. Such an expression Dante might have figured among the sombre troops of the infernal regions.

Nearly half an hour passed; then Tibia raised her wan face. The sound of a footstep in the passage below struck on her ears. It moved irresolutely, and finally, from the foot of the stairs,

came a subdued, yet anxious voice calling upon the name of Neæra. Starting at the tones Tibia gave a low cry, and turned her eyes anxiously on her brother. But he was buried in a lethargy, and seemingly oblivious of everything. She, therefore, bowed her face again, and rocked herself with the same weary motion. The call was repeated a little louder, but no reply being vouchsafed, a step came bounding up the stairs and entered the room. The glitter of a polished cuirass crossed the tranced eyes of Cestus and broke the spell which bound him. He looked up and beheld Martialis standing before him, regarding the scene with knitted brows and utter astonishment.

With a yell of delight, impossible to describe, the Suburan leaped to his feet, and seized the Centurion's hand in a convulsive grip.

'Welcome! welcome!' he cried wildly. 'Welcome as water in the desert. Here is a pretty business within the last few hours—it is only yourself can right it!'

Martialis looked on the crouching form of Tibia.

'Where is Neæra—what has happened?' he said hurriedly.

'A gang of cut-throats has been here, and has upset the house, and carried away the girl——'

'And you sitting here like a stock!' thundered the young man in a frenzy. 'Were there no neighbours to rouse to help, if you could not? Thieves that steal maidens from a house in a peaceful town—whence come such villains here? Where is her father—following on her track, while you sit here idle and useless!'

'Stop, Centurion,' said Cestus, seizing him by the arm as he was turning to dash out of the house, 'you are all wrong together. There is only one spot in the neighbourhood which can harbour kidnappers and the like. I was absent at the time, and if I had been here I could not have followed—that is for you to do.'

'Name, then!' cried Martialis, with contempt.

'Capreae—Caesar!'

[pg 344] The young man stared as if petrified. His outstretched arm fell heavily to his side, and he dropped his head on his breast with a groan.

'Did I not foresee it—did I not warn and beseech them to go by my advice?' cried Cestus, wringing his hands and giving way once more to a burst of passion. 'Did I not see and watch two fellows here in the shop some days ago? They were from the accursed island, and they came to mark down their game. I knew—I knew! But no one would listen. I begged and beseeched, almost on my knees, for them to quit the place—to go back with me to Rome, where they might be safe. But no—none would listen. Not they! And then the potter must needs take off to the island himself—must needs run his head into the tiger's very jaws; all for the sake of showing some newfangled kind of glass he had found out. As if no patron was to be found other than a bloody, strangling, ravishing tyrant! The fool would not listen to what I said, though I went nearly crazy, but went on his mad way with a light heart, if one could judge by his smiling face. And here's the end of it. He will never see his home again—he is murdered—the girl is missing, and I am robbed, ruined, cheated! Haste, Centurion, for all depends on thee. Bring her back, by hook or crook, for hark you, man, she is more than you think—she is of the Patrician order, and no more my sister's child than you are——'

'Are you going mad?' said Martialis hoarsely.

'Mad—no!' shouted Cestus; 'had they taken a madman's advice all would have been well now, and the wench on her way to her people in Rome. She is no potter's child, for I hold the proofs. There was money paid, I tell you, to put the child out of the way; but instead of murder she was brought here quietly and no one the wiser, save the woman there, who has passed for her mother—no, not even the villain who was at the bottom of it all.'

Martialis strode over to Tibia and laid his hand on her shoulder.

'Mother,' he said, 'have you heard this?'

'Yes,' said the poor woman, looking up with her woe-stricken face, 'I never had a child of my own.'

His eyes softened, and suddenly bending down, he pressed his lips against her withered forehead. She burst into an agony of tears.

[pg 345] 'Bring her back—bring her back,' she moaned.

'It is too strange; but gentle or simple she is still Neæra to me. Oh, the accursed tyrant—I shall bury my dagger in his foul heart if she be harmed—even if they rend me in pieces after! But I may yet save her, though I strike her dead to do it—yes, I may yet be in time!'

He laughed a short dry laugh, and his eyes shone with a terrible light as he flung his long heavy

cloak aside, the less to impede his motions.

'Tell Caesar she belongs to the best blood in Rome,' said Cestus. 'He will not dare to harm her—I will hasten to the city.'

'He reckes of nothing, idiot—her family, quick!'

'Fabricius of the Janiculum is her grandsire—she has only him.'

'Fabricius! He lost a child—is this true?'

'As you stand there!'

'And how came you to know all this?'

'Simply because it was I who stole her as a child and brought her here—she knows.'

Cestus nodded to Tibia.

'Dog, if this be true!' cried Martialis, springing on him and grasping his throat with a hand of iron.

'That you shall see,' choked and sputtered Cestus. 'It is likewise only I who can restore her. You are losing time—save her first and the rest will follow.'

'Villain, what demon possessed you to do such a heartless deed?'

'Money!—and now I would bring her back to the living for revenge—glorious revenge!'

'On whom?'

'That is my concern, and mine only. Come, haste, Centurion!'

Without further parley Martialis sprang to the door.

'Hark'ee,' said Cestus, again catching his arm, 'there is one man who must never know what I have told you until the proper time arrives, or else it might go hard with the girl. Beware, therefore!'

He whispered in his ear and the Pretorian started with surprise. Then he dashed down the stairs and out of the house.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

Martialis, who, as the reader may have perceived, was returning from Rome, made his last change of horses in the town, an operation which his feverish haste contracted to the limits of a very few minutes. Leaping on the back of the fresh steed he clattered through the narrow streets, and, on gaining the open, moonlit road, flew along at a frightful speed.

With all his energies concentrated on his headlong race, there was left no opportunity for the consideration of any special plan or method, by which to attain his object. One supreme hope panted in his breast, that they, who had carried off his beloved, might have loitered on the way, and that thus he might have time to close with them ere they reached their journey's end. Oh, that he might have that satisfaction!

He chuckled savagely at the thought—his brain was on fire! The fatigue of a long day's incessant galloping, league after league, was unfelt and forgotten. Excitement strung his nerves to an intense pitch, and he scarcely knew the pitiless use he made of whip and spur on his flying horse's sides.

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He raced along, with his eyes fixed and strained ahead to catch the welcome sight of the group he burned to see, but he was fated to bitter disappointment. The building which terminated his ride rose before him, and nothing more to gladden his eyes. An involuntary groan broke from his lips. Confidence and hope died away, and blind desperation and doggedness took root. Half a score—half a hundred menials of Caesar, beyond the immediate beck of the tyrant's finger, he heeded not; but in the vast palace yonder, with its thronging guards and slaves, what then? There was still a faint hope left. There yet remained a league of sea to cover before gaining those accursed rocks, which lay far out in dim outline.

He leaped to the ground, and the grooms glanced in astonishment at the foam-covered animal he

quitted to their care, with its drooping head and trembling limbs, its flanks dropping blood.

'The Centurion must have serious business to have ridden so fast. Yes; some of Caesar's slaves had taken boat for the island, but they must have landed ere this.'

A meaning laugh accompanied the information. With distraction in his brain Martialis hastened forward to the landing-place, where a boat for courier service was ever kept at hand for immediate use.

It happened, however, that the crew, probably tempted by the brilliant night, were not all on the spot, as they ought to have been, but had rambled off here and there in the moonlight. A very few minutes would, doubtless, have sufficed to bring them all together, but to the Pretorian's fevered mind the delay was unbearable. Sweeping his glance around, he perceived a light skiff drawn up on the shore at a little distance. There were oars in it; and without a second thought he sprang to it, and putting forth his strength pushed it down into the water. The next moment he was pulling the frail vessel over the calm sea at a rate it had surely never travelled before.

The tough oars bent with the mighty strokes. Each time they gripped the water the light bark seemed to leap forward, and the perspiration rolled in heavy drops from the stern brow of the rower. The exertion was terrible; but yet the powerful arms never relaxed an ounce of their strength, nor the stroke a second of its time, nor an inch of its sweep, till the bow of the boat flew round into the narrow little bay of the Marina of Capreae, and ran hard upon the pebbly beach.

Dropping the oars, Martialis leaped ashore and ran up the steep path which climbed the terrace-like ascent to the village above, leaving the astonished guardians of the landing-place to wonder and speculate at the unusual method and haste of his arrival.

To the labour of his arms now succeeded the trial of his legs, and he possessed the swiftest foot in the legion.

[pg 348] On his left arose the conical hill, topped by the villa, in which the Prefect was established. Here he should have stopped; but neither his commander, nor the despatches he carried for him, now claimed the least thought. He doubled the base of the hill, and threaded the narrow lanes leading to the villa Jovis above, with a stride which brought him in a very few minutes close to the outer gate. Here he thought best to moderate his pace to a rapid walk, and in this gait reached the Pretorian on guard. From this man he learned that half a dozen slaves, with a female, had entered about half an hour previously. He passed on and entered the palace.

Where within its fatal recesses was she hidden away? He came to a stand within the gloom of a passage, whilst fiery thoughts flashed through his mind. Beyond he could hear the sound of hurrying menials. It was Caesar's hour for supping—what should he do?

The Prefect was his friend, and his influence was great. Oh, that he had met with the wretches ere this, so that his own arm had been all to trust to! Where was the Prefect, and would he stir in his cause? It might be too late. After the supper most like would come the sacrifice. The drops burst forth on his brow in his agony of mind.

If he could only discover where she was placed, it would go hard, but that cunning, or force, or both combined, would bring him to her. But which way to turn? The superstructure of the palace was itself intricate; underneath, he knew, was another subterranean labyrinth of which few had much knowledge. To follow to the bowels of the rocks was of no more consequence than to find the object of his search where he stood, since escape from either spot was hopeless without the tyrant's will. To gain her side was now his utmost hope. Could he but clasp her in his arm, he had the means to save her unsullied and to put himself beyond the reach of vengeance.

These few moments of reflection passed, during which the image of Neæra rose on his mind, in painful distinctness, with the sweet breath of her calm beauty and purity.

He felt that his short sword and poniard were loose in their scabbards, then entered the peristyle before him.

[pg 349] Silver lamps shed a brilliant light on the polished marble of pillar and floor, on the gilded fretwork of ceiling and cornice, the panelled pictures, the dancing, diamond-flashing waters of the fountain in the midst. Among the doorways which opened on the court was one heavily curtained. Domestic passed in and out ever and anon, and the presence of the soldier stationed before it was evidence that Caesar was within.

Martialis perceived with satisfaction that this man was one of his own troop, and went up to him immediately. The Pretorian drew himself up and saluted, but not without a curious glance at the unusual aspect his officer presented.

'Welcome back, Centurion!—the Prefect is not within,' said he, concluding that the object of the aide-de-camp was the commander himself.

'Where then?'

'At his house for anything that I can tell, Centurion.'

'Maybe he awaits me there, for this night I was due.'

'I can see with my own eyes you have travelled hard, Centurion.'

'Who is within?'

'Caesar supping with his friends.'

'Know you which friends?'

'Flaccus, Marinus, Priscus, the philosophers, and the Roman lady,' replied the legionary.

The three first named were companions of Tiberius, the third of whom we have already known. The Roman lady Martialis knew to be Plautia. He passed his hand across his forehead. The question was as useless as the answer. The slaves, who idled here and there in twos and threes about the court, were the natural repositories of household secrets and tattle. He eyed them and gnawed his nether lip.

'Have you been in the palace long?' he asked again.

'I have wellnigh worn out my spell of duty, I should say, Centurion—at least I brought Caesar hither from his dressing-room.'

'Tell me, Asca,' said Martialis, dropping his voice, 'since you have been here within-doors, have you seen or heard anything of the arrival of some of Caesar's slaves bearing with them a woman—a young girl?'

[pg 350] 'Only a few minutes ago, Zeno, the worshipful steward, marshalled a couple such into Caesar's presence—they had a woman with them, and they are there now.'

'Ah, and she?' demanded the young man, with an energy which caused the soldier to recoil a step. 'What was she like—her appearance? Quick, Asca, speak!'

'Truly, Centurion, I scarce gave her any heed, except that she was taller than common—her face was well shrouded moreover,' quoth the surprised Asca.

'Was that all? Was there nothing said? Did you not hear whence they came? Can you tell me nothing of her looks, her voice, dress, or anything to guide me?'

'Well, she seemed very unwilling; and when they first came and demanded entrance, Plautus—that is one of the slaves who came along with her, sent in Caesar's signet ring, along with the word Surrentum, upon which Zeno came out and—Stop, Centurion, stop—!'

But Martialis had disappeared through the curtains of the doorway. The word Surrentum was electrical, and, with a bound, he was gone, ere his amazed subordinate could move a muscle.

Double curtains closed the entrance to the supper-room, the few feet of intervening space forming a kind of ante-chamber. Martialis dashed aside the innermost drapery and halted for a brief second, whilst he cast a flashing glance around the brilliant chamber. Yes, there was Neæra standing in the midst, on exactly the same spot where her ill-fated fosterfather had stood before, a target for each rude, pitiless gaze of master and slave alike. She was drawn to the full height of her tall, supple figure, and her noble face, as pale as death, was bent undauntedly on the opposing visage of Tiberius. The expression of the latter was seemingly cold and impassive. Plautia, reclining at his right hand, gazed with an exultant glance and flushed cheeks; the others were critical and amused. On either hand of the captive girl was Plautus and a comrade, with their fierce eyes riveted on Tiberius, oblivious of all save his slightest motion. Behind the Imperial couch stood the handsome steward, intently watchful of everything. The supper-table, in the midst, was loaded with its gorgeous service of gold and silver plate, whilst the attendants around the apartment had stayed their stealthy steps, fearful of interrupting the scene with the slightest sound.

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'They said my father had need of me—was dying,' Neæra was saying in a clear, firm voice, when her glance, in common with the rest, was drawn by a stir at the doorway. The gleam of a corslet filled her eyes, breaking violently through the cluster of slaves round the entrance, as the prow of a ship dashes aside the billows of the sea. With a tremulous cry she held forth her arms.

'Lucius!'

'Neæra—I am here!'

He reached her side at a stride, and, thrusting Plautus rudely back, cast his left arm around her and lifted her away to a clearer space.

Close on his heels rushed the terror-stricken Pretorian on guard, and Plautus, on his part, made a savage gesture of retaliation. Both, however, had the discretion to hesitate before the fiery glance of the Centurion and a still more significant motion of his right hand to his belt.

'Courage, my Neæra,' murmured her lover; 'I know all, and have followed to save thee from these

pitiless wretches, whose foul touch is worse than death. Only one escape from dishonour is left to thee now, dear love.'

He drew his poniard from his belt and placed it in her hand.

She took it, and held up her face to his with an ineffable smile.

'They shall not part us now.'

He kissed her lips, and looked calmly on the excitement which followed his extraordinary interruption into the inviolable presence of the Emperor. Confused exclamations and cries broke forth. A convulsive movement ran through the throng like the tossing of forest boughs in a sudden gust of wind. Each one stared with astonishment on the Pretorian garb, the splendid form, the dark, stern, handsome face, flushed and damp with extreme exertion and emotion. The name of Martialis flew from lip to lip.

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Under the wing and eye of their Imperial patron himself, the indignant expressions of his shocked creatures were many and loud, but, beyond these safe demonstrations of just resentment of the unparalleled audacity of the intruder, there seemed to be no disposition to proceed to a more forcible proof of their zeal. An armed, desperate man, who had more than held his own with the first gladiators and athletes of the capital, was not to be rashly interfered with.

Thus the clatter of tongues and perturbation of gesture eddied and tossed within its own agitated circle for a few moments, without overflowing toward the tall person of the offender, who stood confronting them, motionless, yet watchful and resolute, with his left arm thrown round the waist of the young girl.

'Yes, they are in no hurry to begin—they know it will cost them dear,' muttered Martialis grimly, with vigilant eyes on those nearest him, and a meaning hitch of his belt which brought his sword hilt nigher to his hand.

From him to Caesar all glances roved. Tiberius had recovered his attitude and composure from his first start of astonishment and alarm. On his countenance rested a dark, lowering look, which no one, who knew him, saw without vague uneasiness.

Asca, whose instructions were without privilege to any one, was the most to be pitied. He shook with dread, and his visage, full of consternation, hovered between his Centurion and his Emperor. On the former he bent reproachful glances, whilst the aspect of the latter filled him with terror.

'So please you, Caesar, it was no fault of mine,' he broke out, after the first few moments of confusion were dying away. 'The Centurion will bear me witness, that he broke past my guard ere it was possible to prevent him.'

'The man is right,' said Martialis calmly; 'he is in no way to blame. This maiden is my betrothed bride—I come to claim her. She has been dragged from her home by ruffians. I pray you, Caesar, of your clemency, to let me give her safe conduct back again.'

Zeno leant over his master and whispered in his ear. The frown did not quit the face of Tiberius, but he appeared to reflect. Martialis perceived the hesitation and took heart.

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'You have a strange method of making your request,' said the Emperor, with sardonic slowness, in the deep silence which immediately reigned at the sound of his voice. 'Until this moment I thought the privacy of my room my own. When Pretorian officers set the example of breaking orders and over-riding regulations, it is time I saw to their discipline myself. I will begin with you. Deliver up your arms, and place yourself in the custody of the guard, awaiting my pleasure.'

The Emperor signed to the soldier Asca to enforce these commands, but, ere he moved, Martialis retired farther back with Neæra, until he reached the corner of the room. By this strategic movement into the empty angle he brought all his expected assailants more in front, and, thereby, vastly strengthened his position.

'I crave your pardon, Caesar, for what must appear an unseemly intrusion into the privacy of your apartment, and nothing but the bitter circumstances of my case would ever have driven me to be guilty of such disregard of your presence,' said the Centurion, with respectful but resolute mien. 'I pray you, consider my position. I bear to the Prefect despatches from the camp at Rome, and have galloped since early dawn with barely a stop. Flinging myself from my horse at Surrentum, for a few brief minutes, at the house of my betrothed, I found it had been the spoil of ruffians. I have hastened hither without stop—what are every-day rules and customs to a man whose brain is distraught with grief? Nothing could have touched me nearer, Caesar, and I entreat your indulgence—your pardon. Let her go, I beseech you—I doubt not the slaves have made some grave error. She cannot have given offence—it would not be possible for her sweet nature. It is not much thy Centurion asks, and he has served thee well.'

'Did you not stay, then, to deliver your despatches to the Prefect?' said Tiberius.

'They are here in my belt.'

'Another duty disregarded—the first care of a courier is the errand he is upon.'

'The Prefect will bear willing witness of my diligence in his service—I have ever the favour of his choice for the same errand,' said Martialis.

'Deliver up your weapons,' said Tiberius harshly. 'Guard, take him and lead him away.'

[pg 354] 'He comes to certain death,' said Martialis with energy. 'You may overpower me, but it will cost you dear—you shall never take us alive.'

Excitement and commotion again shook the room like a turbulent sea, yet still it never gathered sufficient cohesion and weight to propel itself into the corner against the resolute form there. All eyes were bent on the luckless Pretorian Asca, whose glance, in turn, hung on Caesar's with a piteous expression. With the selfish satisfaction which human beings view the misfortune of another, the soldier was assailed with cries of encouragement and censure, which came all the more freely from the lips of those for whom he acted as a kind of sacrifice.

'Centurion, you hear!' he said to Martialis in beseeching tones, 'give up your sword as Caesar wills.'

'I will not, Asca, and do you forgive me if I hurt you in self-defence.'

The legionary looked again to Caesar. 'He refuses!'

'Then compel him,' thundered the Emperor; 'strike, man, strike!'

Thrilled by the terrible voice, and somewhat excited by the cries of the others, the Pretorian set his teeth in blind desperation, and levelled his heavy spear. With consummate ease Martialis evaded the thrust, and grasped the weapon with his hands. Continuing the same movement, he thrust the lance back athwart the body of the soldier, and threw him sprawling on his back. It was done in a second of time, and with astonishing power and celerity, but it gave what the attentive slave Plautus thought an excellent opportunity for interference. He had been lingering nighest of all, with the eye of a lynx on the movements of the Centurion. As the latter closed with Asca, he therefore sprang forward. He was a large and powerfully-built man, and, had he been able to carry out his intention of grappling with the young officer off his guard, the latter would probably have been entangled and finally smothered by numbers. But quick as the slave's movement was, it was late by a brief second, for he had been closely watched and suspected. As the soldier Asca went sprawling back, Martialis swerved, as swift as light, and met his new assailant with an unexpected blow of his clenched fist. No friendly affection for a comrade-in-arms tempered the stroke, as in the case of Asca, but, on the contrary, his long sinewy arm shot out like a battering-ram, and struck the on-coming slave off his feet.

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The dash and prowess of the young officer seemed to arouse something like a revolution of feeling in his favour, to judge by the tone of the exclamations which broke forth at his feat. Even a half-stifled excited '*Euge!*' of approval might have been heard. His reputation was general, but Asca, alone of all present, had seen him discomfit a boxer of the amphitheatres by a similar blow, dealt for the honour of the Legion in the camp at Rome, amid the delighted yells of packed thousands of his comrades.

The senseless Plautus was lifted and carried out with a face crushed and disfigured for life. Martialis, with his weapon still undrawn, fell back to his former position. The slender fingers of Neæra glided into his, and he clasped them tight.

'Hark!' he said to her, as the raised tones of Tiberius bade them haste for a file of Pretorians, 'twill be no more child's play—would it had been with others than my own comrades. But courage, my Neæra! Shelter yourself behind me, and when I fall, you know how to use your weapon; better the tomb for such as you than the pollution of these walls.'

'Alas, my father and mother!' she murmured, as she nestled closer to his side.

He glanced quickly into her face, and saw that it was composed, though pale. No trace of fear trembled on the tender curving lips, or dwelt in the calm clear eyes which rested devotedly upon him. New-born qualities of heroism transfigured her, and clothed her with a new beauty. The routine of her humble life had never lighted her fair face with such an unexpected spirit of dauntlessness. That brief glance filled his heart with pride and rapture such as he never felt before, and nerved him with the strength of a Titan. Her unruffled mien flooded his mind with the parting words of Cestus, and he thrilled with joy. Surely, none but noble blood could so nobly withstand such a terrible test. It was a melancholy joy, however, despairing and fierce as it was fleet.

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He reared his head, and bent his eyes upon the throng before him with infinite pride and contempt. The dark deep orbs of the Emperor shone upon him from beneath the shadow of their knitted brows, but he returned their gaze disdainfully. He felt himself beyond their vengeance.

From the ghastly visage of Caesar his gaze rested on the warm loveliness of Plautia, whose flushed countenance and sparkling eyes betrayed the excited conflict of her mind. Her yet unconquered love of the young soldier's manly beauty, blown into fresh flame by the exhibition of

his power—the sting of remorse at the unlooked-for effect of her plot, mingled with savage envy at the sight of her rival, and the bitter spectacle of their mutual devotion, were rioting in her breast. His glance was cold and contemptuous, as it was passing and brief, and stung her soul to madness.

The messenger despatched for the Pretorians had sped away only a few moments, when the anxious brows of Zeno contracted suddenly. An eager light came into his eyes, and he stooped to whisper in the Emperor's ear. Tiberius nodded, and muttered a few words in reply. The Greek touched the elbow of the huge Nubian servant, and they both hurried swiftly out of the apartment.

Martialis saw them, but gave them no heed. He had no further hopes, fears, nor suspicions. His sole object, in what he considered to be the few remaining minutes of his career, was to sell his life as dearly as possible. In expectation of the coming struggle, the slaves had imperceptibly edged away from his vicinity, and were waiting with uneasy suspense. The guests at table, with askant glances at the disturber of their peace, fidgeted as though he might, at any time, burst upon them with a furious onslaught, whilst the stern glitter of the Emperor's eyes, on the other hand, discouraged any attempt at interference. Asca, the guard, remained at the doorway. He held his lance at the advance, and his face was dejected and chopfallen in the extreme.

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Rapid thoughts sped through the mind of Martialis as he surveyed the scene. What if he were to assume the offensive before the arrival of his comrades? Would he thereby better his position? Had he been alone, his fleet foot by a quick dash would have easily carried him free from the palace to the boats. But such an act was impossible with Neæra. It was true he might fall upon the craven, naked flock before him, and turn the room into a shambles. But such a butchery would avail him nothing; and to leave the side of Neæra for an instant would be to endanger her. No, he would meet his fate honestly, and not like a reckless murderous desperado.

Once more he appealed to Tiberius.

'Will you not send for the Prefect?' he said; 'his presence might intercede with you, and gain your gracious clemency for his unfortunate Centurion and this blameless maiden. Force will avail nothing, but the sacrifice of some brave men—as for us, we shall never be parted alive, be assured.'

But Caesar answered nothing; neither did any motion or expression betoken that he paid the least attention to the words. His glance was fixed intently, as it seemed, on the wall, or rather the long curtains which draped the wall behind the Centurion for some distance on either hand.

Martialis forebore to say more, and ere long the critical moment arrived. The rapid tread of many feet was heard through the half-drawn curtains of the door, and some ten or fifteen Pretorians, fully armed, and flashing with their polished harness, filed into the room, headed by the bulky Centurion Macro.

The legionaries came to a halt, with blank wonder on their faces, and their officer, with no less astonishment, turned his eyes on Caesar for his orders.

Martialis silently stooped and kissed Neæra on the lips. Then he slowly drew his sword from his sheath, and gravely saluted his comrades.

'He refuses to surrender himself,' said Tiberius to Macro, without removing his eyes from Martialis; 'I have sent for you to secure him—alive, if possible; if not, dead.'

The task was repugnant from every point of view, and the legionaries showed it by the want of alacrity and spirit in the preparations they made to carry out the mandate. But to hear was to obey, and Macro, who, perhaps, felt less scruple than the rank and file, in consequence of a jealousy of Martialis, desired the latter to deliver up his weapon.

'Come and take it,' said Martialis; 'these are my only terms. Our fellowship is fated to end in a way we never dreamt of; blame me not, but those who have dragged my betrothed hither from her home—I will not give her up.'

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The faces of the men darkened, and dissatisfied mutterings broke from their lips. The order to draw up in line and prepare for their work was obeyed sullenly and slowly. Martialis was popular, and his words and position inspired them with additional sympathy.

'Do as ye are bid,' cried Martialis, as he noted the signs of dissatisfaction; 'nought else will avail.'

But, as their fingers tightened on their weapons, an unlooked-for occurrence changed the position of affairs.

Caesar's eyes were still riveted on the curtain which hung at the back of the Centurion's beleaguered corner. As the last words were spoken, a tremulous motion stirred the heavy folds. Then they were suddenly and silently parted immediately behind the lovers, and through the opening the gigantic form of the Nubian body-servant was launched upon the Centurion in rear. The steward followed him like a shadow, and simultaneously gripped Neæra from behind. The surprised and helpless girl was speedily dragged apart and disarmed, but to force her lover to

succumb was a more difficult task. His weapon, poised readily but lightly in his hand, was whirled away by a sudden blow, and the horror-stricken Centurion, at the same instant, felt himself strained in an embrace which well-nigh stopped his respiration. By a marvellous contraction and eel-like movement of his body, however, he succeeded in releasing his arms and twisting himself into a position more face to face with his assailant. He was thus enabled to grapple on fairer terms, and a terrible struggle began.

The Nubian, as we have already said, was a giant in stature. He topped his tall antagonist by a head, and enfolded him with an overwhelming bulk. His huge, thick limbs and muscles, his vast breadth of chest, denoted enormous power; but it was a slow, ponderous, elephantine strength, overloaded with the superfluous flesh of ease and good feeding. On the other hand, his opponent was lithe, supple, and active as a tiger—a consummate athlete, with thews and sinews of steel. In addition, he was inspired with a fury it is impossible to describe,—rage at the manner in which he had been tricked—agony of desperation as he heard the faint cry of Neæra.

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With every muscle strained to its utmost tension they swayed round and round. Macro, seeing the favourable opportunity, called on his men to join in the struggle and secure the entrapped Centurion; but the voice of Tiberius broke in with the brief word 'Hold.' They glanced at him in surprise, and saw his uplifted hand and his eyes bent on the wrestlers with eager interest. Nothing loth, therefore, they stood still to watch the issue of the struggle.

The knotted veins, the corded muscles, the mighty strength of the combatants, as they rocked to and fro and panted with terrible efforts, impressed the onlookers with awe, and thrilled them with excitement. The immense Nubian was a mountain of bone and flesh. To move him was like moving a column of the palace. He followed no plan but that of trying to bore down his lighter antagonist by sheer weight and brute force. Martialis felt that these tactics, rude as they were, must finally prevail, if the contest were suffered to go on much longer. Mad with passion, he gathered every atom of his strength and art into a last frenzied effort. Finding it impossible to lift the ponderous, inanimate mass in his arms by main force, he swerved, as quick and sudden as light, and thrust forward his left hip, using it as a fulcrum, over which the astonished slave felt himself whirled from his feet with irresistible force. With his legs flying round in the air, like the spokes of a wheel, he was dashed on the floor with a tremendous concussion, which stunned him and shook the room.

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A yell of delirious excitement and triumph rang from the lips of Martialis, and he glanced round, like a tiger at bay, as if for the next victim. But nature has its limits, and the last supreme effort, added to the extraordinary exertion and excitement of the day, had begun to tell even on his frame of iron. As he drew himself back and clenched his hands for a desperate dash, his eyes seem to fill with blood—lights, faces, forms mingled in one confused gleam before him. The exultant shouts of the soldiers, unrepressed by the presence of Caesar, filled his ears like a muffled roar. He swayed dizzily for a brief second or two, and, as he passed his hand across his brow as if to clear his faculties from the mist which confused them, he was buried amid the forms of the soldiers. Their grasp restored him, and he struggled with renewed vigour. Once or twice, as he hurled the men right and left, he seemed on the point of breaking through the heaving mass, but numbers and exhaustion rendered the issue no longer doubtful. The Pretorians, whose feelings rather prompted them to shoulder their officer in triumph, clung tenaciously to him with firm hands. Only too pleased at the bloodless conclusion of the matter, they received their rough handling with good-humoured jokes and entreaties, and used their united strength with a merciful purpose.

At the first chance a belt was passed around their prisoner, and his arms securely buckled to his sides. Then the unfortunate Centurion perceived, at last, that all hope was gone.

'Caesar! tyrant!' he foamed, as he struggled frantically with his bonds, 'why did I not bury my blade in your foul heart and relieve the world? Do your worst with me—I care nothing! But dare not to harm her; she is nobly born and of gentle blood; beware, therefore!'

The Emperor waved his hand. There was only time for one agonising look between the lovers, and the Pretorians hurried their prisoner from the room.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

It would have greatly relieved the distracted mind of Martialis, had he known that he occupied the Emperor's thoughts to a far greater degree than his beloved Neæra. The brilliant beauty and wit of Plautia was too far in the ascendant, at present, in the Imperial heart to admit of a rival, especially one of such a different type.

To Neæra, when she had been dismissed to safe keeping, Tiberius gave, for the time, no further

heed. Weightier matters engaged him, and very shortly after the conclusion of the scene described in the last chapter, he rose from the supper-table and returned to his own apartment, from which he dismissed every one.

Suspicion and dissimulation equipoised the Imperial mind. The former fed the latter, and both were unutterably profound. Only the day before he had yielded to the importunities of the Prefect, and had consented to give him his daughter-in-law in marriage. Sejanus retired in joy, with everything arranged for his early reception into the Imperial family. His plans, long and carefully followed up, were now well-nigh matured, and he laughed in his sleeve at the earnest, trustful affection which the Emperor had displayed very liberally toward him. He was not aware of the fact that he daily and hourly filled the buried thoughts of the old man—thoughts which trusted nobody; that his own eager ambition was blinding him, and actually supplying a fatal web for a subtler mind than his own to weave around him.

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The close attention which the Emperor devoted to the Prefect, by a natural sequence, could not fail to follow the person of the Prefect's favourite officer. If not so familiar with Martialis personally, he was well-informed by report in all concerning him. Up to the moment when the Centurion hurriedly accounted for his movements, the mind of Tiberius was smouldering with passion, on the point of breaking into a fierce flame of summary vengeance for the unparalleled temerity of a reckless invasion of his privacy. At that particular moment his craft seized like lightning upon an idea; his wrath sank subordinate, and became a mere simulation. We shall presently see how his subtle conjectures were realised. For the time, however, Martialis was spared, providing his own stubbornness presented no further obstacle to lenience. His personal attributes, his fearless, soldierly defiance, reached a vein of sympathy which yet lived dormant, far down in the depths of the tyrant's heart. In his youth Tiberius himself had been comely, tall of stature, strong of limb, and skilled in hardy exercises; therefore the handsome face and athletic form, the extraordinary strength, skill, and address of the young officer, had not failed to arouse his secret admiration. The downfall of his gigantic Nubian struck him with wonder, and relit a ray of the joys of the palæstra of his own youthful days. But more grateful than this to his suspicious nature, was the conclusion he drew from the frank, fearless countenance and the simple faith of the Pretorian. Such a man might be invaluable, and he determined that he should not be uselessly butchered, if it could be profitably avoided. When Zeno stooped, and whisperingly reminded him of the fact of the existence of a door, but seldom used, and hidden by the curtain, immediately behind the position of Martialis, he assented eagerly to the suggestion, which, we have seen, was carried out successfully.

So far all had gone fortunately. The Emperor withdrew; and, from the dark expression of his face, it was readily inferred that the culprit would have short shrift.

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When alone, however, in his apartment, and safe from every eye, his mien altered. Fits of abstraction and restless pacings of the room passed the silent time, and as the hour of midnight approached, his impatience and nervousness grew more marked. Several times his hand rested on a small silver bell as if to ring, and, as often, after a few moments of indecision, with his ears strained to catch the least sound in the deep stillness, he turned away. Occasionally he went to one corner of the room, and, drawing back a curtain, placed his ear close against the wall for a few moments. Thence he would return to his seat and his book, for a space, to leave them by and by for another excursion. Many varied positions he occupied, now sitting, now reclining, now ambling hither and thither, impelled by the pains of impatience and anxiety. Trifling with this object, touching that, lifting and examining another, half unconsciously, his state of nervous unrest, finding full vent within the deaf and sightless walls of his retreat, was a wonderful relaxation from the inscrutable impassiveness of his public demeanour.

Midnight had barely passed, when two or three taps proceeded from that corner of the room where he had often paid a visit, and bent a listening ear. His face cleared instantly, and he stepped at once toward the sound. Stooping down he pressed a particular spot in the angle of the wall, and a narrow, secret panel, wholly indistinguishable before, shot silently and swiftly upward. Through the opening stepped Zeno.

'Well?' said Tiberius sharply; 'at last! I have waited almost beyond my patience.'

'I have not lingered one second longer than I could possibly help,' replied the Greek; 'to have come sooner would have been rash.'

'Is all safe now?'

'Quite—he is off as sound as can be.'

'And you are sure that no soul has passed from the palace outwards since supper?'

'Espécial orders were given to all the guards.'

'Come, then!'

They stepped through the secret opening and drew down the shutter after them. It closed with a subdued, but clear 'click,' which denoted the hidden instrumentality of a highly-perfected spring. Zeno went on first with the lamp. They descended two narrow winding flights of steps cut in the rock; and at their foot, another door, as cunningly contrived and hidden away, gave way to their

potent touch in the same mysterious manner. They were now in a wider gallery, all rock-hewn and faced with brick. On either side were ranged doors; and, at a little distance away, a lamp hung from the ceiling, like a yellow beacon light struggling with the subterranean gloom. Immediately beneath this lamp Zeno halted before a door.

'Are there none but ourselves below?' muttered Tiberius.

'No one,' returned Zeno; 'I despatched every one on one pretence and another, and having seen all clear, locked up the main outlet myself.'

The steward pushed with his finger one of the many iron studs or bolt-heads which strengthened the door. It slid back a couple of inches and disclosed a small peep-hole, through which he peered. Satisfied with his scrutiny he unlocked the door and they went in. The chamber was about twelve feet square, and furnished with a small tripod stand, a stool, and a pallet bed. From the ceiling hung a lamp which threw down a dismal light on the cheerless place.

On the bed was stretched the form of Martialis in careless grace, with one sinewy arm hanging down at length over the pallet-side, toward the floor. His appearance was corpse-like. His closed eyes, his bold, handsome features, his dark hair curling crisply over his brow, seemed all fixed in the tranquil marble beauty of the early moments of death. Not a breath seemed to part his moulded lips, and the steel cuirass which encased his body hid effectually all sign of movement beneath. Tiberius started and turned a frowning, inquiring glance on his companion. Zeno pointed to some victuals and an empty pitcher which stood on the small stand.

'He has eaten nothing and drunk every drop—he will give no trouble.'

'How—have you killed him?' demanded the Emperor sternly.

'Ah no, Caesar—the drug was harmless for that, but potent enough to make him no better than a clod for some hours; and a mercy for him, as you would say, had you seen his state of mind. We may do what we please with him.'

The steward spoke the truth, for, in the handling to which the inanimate Pretorian was subjected, he exhibited no symptom of consciousness. Underneath his cuirass they found a stout leather belt buckled round his waist. Attached to the belt was a pouch securely fastened, and from this the Emperor drew several scrolls of papyri—the paper of the ancients, made from the Egyptian plant of that name. Taking these to the lamp on the tripod, Tiberius turned his back on his trusty steward, and proceeded to unroll them with eager trembling fingers. He glanced through the written contents of each with a rapid practised eye, but found nothing therein, save dry official reports from the deputy in command of the Pretorian camp at Rome. His countenance fell gradually as he proceeded, and when he arrived at the end, he gave vent to a muttered ejaculation of disappointment. One other scroll remained, which was not of an official nature, but evidently a late production of a bookseller's shop.

It may be as well to explain that the book of the Romans in no point resembled that of modern days, inasmuch as binding and pages formed no component parts. The work of a Roman author was written on one continuous strip of papyrus or parchment, of more or less length. This was rolled round a stick of appropriate size in the same manner as a modern map or chart, the exterior being neatly finished and lettered with the title of the book. It is probable enough that the latter was also exhibited on a ticket attached to the end of the roll, as affording a readier means of ascertaining any particular book, when laid together on the shelves of the library, or dropped endwise into the circular boxes used for their transport.

The remaining roll or book, which the Emperor now took up, was sheathed in a purple parchment covering. Sliding off the latter, he found the volume to be of a nature he had already guessed with the accuracy of experience. It was a satire, a *vers-de-société*, by one of the poetasters of the day, and very showily got up. As the outer sheath was removed a small slip of paper fell out. It was an epistle, which ran as follows:—

'Knowing you must at times feel dull with an out-of-the-world feeling, I have sent the accompanying volume in the hope it may prove acceptable; it is only small, and will not add much to the bulk and weight of your despatches. It is the last new thing by Varius, and quite the rage. I have a very poor opinion of the composition myself; but, as an elegant and artistic specimen of the publisher's workmanship, I think it is as admirable as any I have yet seen—even to the mute wood itself, whose ornamentation you will find well worthy of examination. It is mournful to think that the bookmaker's art should be so needed nowadays to eke out an author's want of wit.'

Now it happened that Tiberius, who was very devoted to literature, had already perused the satire he now held. Every new publication of the city was punctually forwarded to him, as might be expected. He, therefore, unrolled the paper, which was about a yard and a half in length, and six or eight inches wide, and glanced his eye down the beautifully characterized effusion. There was also a portrait of the author included on the scroll; but as it was all identical with what he had already seen, he passed it over and bestowed more attention upon the wooden roller, to observe if there was anything about it worthy of more particular notice than he had before given

to the one in his own possession. The little roller was plain and coloured black, but each end was ornamented with a boss, rather of conical shape, carved and picked out with brilliant colours. Tiberius gazed at it and strove to compare it mentally with his own specimen. He read the accompanying letter again, and tried hard to discover the peculiar beauties of the wooden cylinder, so particularly recommended. He failed to perceive anything extraordinary, but there seemed to be something in the bulk thereof which struck him as unusual. Turning to Zeno, he despatched him to his library to bring him his own copy. The Greek soon returned, and Tiberius compared the two volumes. They were exactly similar, being copies of the same edition; but, when he placed the wooden cylinders together, he saw at once there was a difference in their circumferences. That which belonged to the Prefect was very perceptibly thicker; but, as the bosses affixed to the ends remained the same size, it followed, that the margin of the projection was less in the Prefect's than his own. The Emperor knitted his brows, and riveted his gaze on the two cylinders in profound meditation. Then he once more studied the nameless epistle to refresh his memory; after which he bestowed another examination on the books. Something in the relative weights of the cylinders seemed to strike him, so, arranging the rolls of paper to which they were attached as to interfere as little as possible, he balanced the rollers on the tips of his fingers of both hands. Then, as if dubious, he called in the aid of Zeno, briefly pointing out the facts of the case. The Greek took the cylinders into his own hands, and after minutely examining them, he weighed them as his master had done. For a further test he tapped the thicker roller with a little metal key, and listened attentively to the sound. Then he balanced them again, and finally gave it as his opinion, that the thicker roller was lighter than the smaller one, and, moreover, sounded as though it were hollow. The eyes of Emperor and steward exchanged a significant flash.

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'Such a condition is neither usual nor necessary,' said Tiberius. 'Let us try and discover the reason.'

The Greek took the suspected cylinder into his long supple fingers, and made a very minute scrutiny of the junction of the bosses at either end. Then, by patient and delicate, but firm manipulation, he proceeded to try if they were detachable. After a considerable amount of persuasive force of handling, one of the bosses yielded a hair's-breadth. He renewed his efforts, and the Emperor's eyes glistened. The boss became looser and looser, and in a minute's time came off altogether. They were now enabled to perceive that the original bosses had been fitted to a new cylinder. That one which had been removed, instead of being affixed in the usual way to a flat surface, had been hollowed a little to receive the end of the roller, and then tightened with a thin application of glue. The roller, as Zeno had suspected, was hollow. He turned it upside down and a little scroll of very thin paper dropped out. The fingers of the Emperor closed on it like lightning. His eyes flamed with a ferocious delight as he carefully unrolled a few inches of the fragile document and read therein.

'Haste—bring tablets, paper, anything—like the wind!' he whispered excitedly. Zeno hastened away, and Tiberius, huddling against the lamp, devoured the contents of the secret missive with eyes starting from his head, and mouth agape in astonishment. Rage, hate, and delirious joy thrilled him as he read. His hands, his body, and his limbs trembled with the force of his excitement. Swiftly reading to the close, he dropped the little quivering paper, and laughed with triumph. Startled by his own voice he looked fearfully round at Martialis; but the Centurion lay deathlike in the profound stupor of his drugged slumbers. With uneasy, hasty steps the Emperor paced the narrow dungeon, muttering inaudibly until Zeno entered with writing materials. Then he sat down to make a copy of the secret, and evidently fateful, missive intended for the eyes of the Prefect alone.

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The task occupied longer than it would otherwise have done, owing to the agitated mind and trembling fingers of the writer; but at length it came to an end. The original letter was restored to its hiding-place in the roller, and the boss skilfully replaced by Zeno, who carefully heated the incrustated glue over the flame of the lamp to cause it to hold firmly.

The documents were then replaced in the pouch of the Centurion, and his dress arranged without a sign to show that he had been tampered with.

'Send to the Prefect with the first light of day, and acquaint him with the position of his courier and the causes thereof,' said Tiberius. 'He will, without doubt, attend personally—let him see his messenger if he wishes, and obtain his despatches with his own hands. When that is done and he is gone, I will see this youth myself. We have made a good night's work—you will find it to your benefit as to mine—now to bed!'

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CHAPTER XXV.

Martialis awoke, or rather came gradually to consciousness, next morning, with a dull torpor

weighing on him like lead, and a brain confused and racking with pain. Zeno's sleeping potion, whatever it was, had been mixed with a liberal hand. Memory came slowly back through the stupor which clogged his senses, and he instinctively felt for the despatches of which he had charge. They were there all right, and he turned his heavy aching head toward the little table. A jug stood thereon along with the victuals he had left untouched the night before. To his joy he found it had been replenished with water. His mouth was parched and his lips dry and cracked, and he drank with avidity. The grateful draught restored him vastly, and he also partook of some bread and fruit. Then lying back again on the bed he gave himself up to his poignant reflections, and awaited what should follow.

[pg 370] He had ever the most strict injunctions to deliver papers and despatches to no one but the Prefect himself, whenever he was employed as their bearer, therefore there arose the idea in his mind, and a hope also, that his commander would be one of the first to visit him, if allowed. At any rate, captive as he was, he determined not to give up his charge to any one but the Prefect himself, or to some one authorised by the Prefect, in writing, to receive the same. Thus he might be able, perhaps, to cause his commander to visit him in person, an act he was earnestly desirous of, since he hoped to gain his influence in his behalf, and more especially in that of Neæra. Of her his mind was filled with fears and imaginings which tortured him with sufferings of suspense too deep to be described. He knew nothing of the time, whether it was night or day, since he was beneath ground; but he had been lying long awake when he heard a key put into the door. To his joy his conjectures were realised by the entrance of Sejanus. The Prefect was genuinely troubled at the situation of his favourite officer, and drew from him a detailed relation of what had occurred.

'You were ill-advised in being so bold and desperate,' said Sejanus, shaking his head. 'A calmer method would have been more politic.'

'I think not, though I never stayed at the time to deliberate,' returned Martialis sternly. 'Being too late to deliver her ere she reached this accursed place, I knew that no escape but death remained for her—therefore I gave her the means. But for a cunning trick all had been successful, and you, Prefect, would now have been lacking a Centurion and a few Pretorians.'

'Humph, it is better as it is, Martialis—we must have you free of this place again.'

'Preserve her, Prefect; I care little for myself if I am assured of her safety. Do this for me, I adjure you; for I have spared nothing in your service. Pray and entreat him, and if he be still pitiless, do as I did, and find the means of providing her with a secret weapon of freedom. She will bless you as I will—promise me, Prefect, in mercy to her—to us both! The gods only know what agony of mind is mine. The torture of thinking of the pure, sweet girl in the power of those wretches above us—to imagine her shrinking in their foul, pitiless hands—oh!' The young man shook his clenched fists and then buried his face in his hands.

His distress, and the poignant groan which closed his speech moved his commander's heart, albeit not over sensitive in such matters.

'My best efforts shall not be wanting,' he replied. 'Think better of it. It is early yet, but as soon as Caesar is stirring, I will put this matter right, depend upon it—why, I cannot do without thee.'

Martialis uttered his thanks, and, after some more questions in connection with his mission to Rome, the Prefect buckled the courier's belt underneath his cloak and departed from the cell.

[pg 371] The weary time lagged on until the prisoner once more rose from his recumbent position to greet his commander, who returned with a grave look on his dark handsome face. Martialis beheld it with a failing heart.

'I have done what I could, and have gone as far as I could, with safety; but you have provoked him in no light fashion,' said Sejanus, shaking his head.

'And she?' cried the young man.

'Well, as to her, you may rest easy. She is no longer in the palace, but has been sent away to the household of Livia for safe keeping.'

'Thank heaven! And to you, thanks are all I am able to give for your good offices,' cried Martialis.

His voice choked—his lip trembled. The revulsion of feeling was too much for his overstrung nature to bear, and tears stopped his voice.

'There is nothing due to me,' said the Prefect; 'the transfer was already accomplished; but, being where she is, she shall not fail of careful watching. The noble Livia, as you may have heard, becomes my bride ere long.'

'I knew it not, but wish you every joy,' said Martialis, yet without warmth; for he could not help recalling to his thoughts the Prefect's divorced wife Apicata, who had been frivolously put aside, no doubt to make way for his present betrothal. 'It may be I have only a few hours to live, but the sting of death is gone since I know my Neæra is safe. Tell her, Prefect, that my last thoughts were of her and for her.'

'Humph, Caesar is ruffled without doubt, but he does not make away with my Pretorians so easily,' said Sejanus, with a proud curl of his lip; 'you may leave your last will and bequest over for a space yet.'

'It is all in your hands, Prefect,' returned the other.

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Sejanus retired, and Martialis was left once more alone with his thoughts. They were tranquil and even buoyant to what they had been, and he began to conjecture and weigh arguments in the discussion of his own case. He had no craven fear of death, but, at the same time, he was young and an ardent lover, and life had gone pleasantly with him. It cost him a deep pang to think on what might have been, and Neæra being out of peril, his hold on the hope of liberty was strengthened in spite of himself. He knew the stern relentless nature of Tiberius, but he relied on the influence of the commander, who he was certain would hazard much in his defence.

So he ruminated and turned these things over and over in his mind, wondering when he should again see the light of day. Zeno, with a guard, paid him a visit to attend to his wants, and bring him a fresh supply of provisions, but the worthy Greek was singularly uncommunicative.

When they were gone the prisoner ate and drank more heartily than he had hitherto done, and, lying down again, fell asleep.

He was awakened by a touch on his shoulder. Opening his eyes he saw, to his extreme surprise, the Emperor himself standing by his side. He started up and perceived they were alone together. His heart beat quickly, and wild thoughts began to rise. There was the tyrant defenceless before him—the cause, as he believed, of the present situation of himself and Neæra,—an old man, whom he could crush like a nutshell, delivered to his hand. Whilst his mind flamed with this idea, his eye instinctively sought the door, to ascertain whether it was closed upon them. Tiberius, meanwhile, stood motionless before him. He read the young man's passing thoughts quite readily—not a motion or glance escaped him.

'We are alone, and it occurs to you that I am now in your power,' said he, with the utmost calmness; 'I admit it.'

A flush arose to the cheek of Martialis. It needed no words of Caesar to show him that he had little to gain from such a desperate act, save a momentary satisfaction of savage revenge.

'I have been sorely tried,' he replied, drawing a deep breath; 'if such an idea flashed into my mind it died on the instant—you need have no fear.'

'I knew it,' said Tiberius; 'I love my Pretorians, and an officer and youth of such prowess as you have proved yourself to possess, is well worthy of the mature consideration of a ruler. The circumstances of your case are so unusual that my interest has led me to visit you personally.'

Martialis bowed his head.

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'One thing seems to demand forbearance, and that is your youth, with its hot unreasoning blood. Without thought, scruple, or calculation of a moment, you plunge headlong into my chamber, amid my guests and servants, utterly regardless of everything, in pursuit of your sweetheart, just as you would, doubtless, have rushed into the midst of a band of Satyrs.'

'You are right—I was excited to desperation—I would have followed her anywhere—nor do I now repent,' said the young man frankly; 'the welfare of my betrothed is more to me than life itself.'

Tiberius nodded gently, with a countenance as impassive as the Sphinx.

'I entreated your pardon, Caesar, for my rude intrusion into the privacy of the Imperial chamber, and I humbly submit my fault once more for your forbearance and forgiveness,' added Martialis quickly.

'It was a fault which set at defiance all discipline, authority, and respect. What then is the punishment? You, as a soldier, ought to know.'

'I am well aware that my offence brings me within the extreme punishment of all. Caesar is master of life and death.'

'Is there any reason why the penalty should not be enforced?'

'I am ready,' said Martialis, calmly returning the gaze of the Emperor. 'But, as a soldier, who has ever done his duty, two requests might be mercifully granted.'

'Name them.'

'That I suffer no dishonourable death, and that the maiden may be returned to her people in safety and honour. Or, if these be too much, grant, at least, the latter, and deal with me as you will as regards the former.'

'I have said that your headstrong youth claims an amount of indulgence, and I grant both requests.'

'Thanks from my heart.'

'Your betrothed shall not be harmed—she is now in safe keeping. There is the first condition settled.'

'Then I am at peace.'

'And for the other, you shall name yourself the manner of your death.'

[pg 374] 'A single sword-thrust here,' said the Centurion, laying his hand over his heart. 'I bear an old and honourable name.'

Tiberius bent a long and searching gaze upon him, and then rising to his feet, paced up and down the cell for some moments.

'I love my Pretorians, and cannot bear to see them come to harm,' he muttered. The words reached the ears of Martialis, whose heart throbbed with renewed hope which would not be denied. Then Caesar returned to his seat and said, 'The Prefect has spoken to me concerning you—has he seen you here?'

'He came for the despatches I bore,' answered the Centurion; 'I know he would speak favourably of me.'

'He did so—you often act as his courier?'

'Very frequently.'

'I remember to have seen you before in that capacity.'

'I have often had the honour of carrying important letters between the Prefect and yourself.'

'Yes, you are favoured with his confidence. Do your missions ever include any diplomatic or political business?'

'No—I know nothing of either, and have no desire to learn. My profession suffices to fill my entire attention.'

'Good,' said the Emperor approvingly; 'you are a soldier, pure and simple, as you ought to be. It is all the more pity you have committed this fault.'

He rose from his seat and walked the cell again. Martialis watched him anxiously.

'It is strange that you, a man of noble blood, should stoop to a girl of a base artisan,' said Tiberius. 'Do you say you are betrothed, and meant to marry her?'

'I did,' replied the other, with a little sternness; 'you have already passed your word for her safety, and that is sufficient assurance: but I have reason to believe, Caesar, that she is not the potter's child.'

'I have already heard that—it requires proof, however—give it me,' said Tiberius, with an incredulous smile curling his lip.

'I cannot prove it,' returned Martialis; 'but at least I can tell you all I know.'

And he accordingly related the slender facts committed to him the previous night.

[pg 375] 'And this man, Cestus, whom she supposes to be her uncle—is he still in Surrentum?'

'I cannot tell. But his last words were, that he would hasten away to Rome at once—I presume to reveal all to her relatives.'

'Did he not say who these were?'

'I should have said relative,' replied Martialis; 'according to his tale there is only one remaining—her grandfather, Fabricius, who lives on the Janiculum.'

'Fabricius of the Janiculum,' repeated Tiberius, tapping his forehead; 'Fabricius belongs to other days, but if I am not mistaken, his heir is fully with the times. Is he not the worthy Domitius Afer, the bosom friend of the Prefect?'

Martialis was confused and silent, for he saw he had unwittingly betrayed what Cestus had particularly enjoined him to keep secret.

'If this is so, then the tale certainly grows in interest,' continued Tiberius, with a dark twinkle of his eyes; 'it lends it more substance and probability.'

'I made a breach of trust in causing the name of Afer to be revealed,' said Martialis anxiously; 'were he to know, it might prove a risk to her.'

'Be at peace, Centurion—I have such sympathy with the knight, that I could ill bear the matter to be interrupted for his sake.'

Caesar smiled grimly, and then his brows knitted in deep thought. He remained thus for some minutes without speaking. The young man's heart throbbed fast, and it needed a great effort to retain an outward appearance of composure.

'Centurion,' said Tiberius, at length raising his head from his breast, 'I love my Pretorians, and to deal hardly with them pains my heart. I have pondered on your case, and find much in excuse of your conduct—the inconsiderate rashness and haste of your youth, and the overwrought state of your feelings, which was only to be expected. I will not say I pardon you, but I will give you a chance of redeeming your liberty.'

The Centurion faltered out his thanks from a heart overflowing with joy.

[pg 376] 'Anything that may be honestly undertaken I will strain body and mind to accomplish, and prove my sense of your clemency,' he said.

'You will find it to your taste, Centurion,' said Tiberius, speaking with a polished affability which proved irresistible to his astonished prisoner. 'I propose that you busy yourself in establishing the identity of your betrothed with the granddaughter of Fabricius of the Janiculum. The fate of your endeavours will determine your own.'

Dumfounded with excess of wonder and joy, Martialis was speechless for a few moments. It seemed too good to be true, and he gazed in Caesar's face with a lurking suspicion that, perhaps, he was, after all, the object of a bitter joke.

'Do you accept?' asked Tiberius, smiling.

'Ah, if I were sure you do not jest.'

'Should you fail in proving your point you will eventually find it no jest.'

'It shall not be for the want of a trial—but how am I to commence, and when?'

'Proceed on your task in the manner you think best; you shall be set at liberty to-night. Since you are so swift and faithful a courier, I will also entrust something of my own to your care. It will, therefore, be necessary for you to proceed to Rome direct. I do not choose it to be known that I have broken the law, which demands that you should be punished—it would be impolitic. It is, therefore, necessary that you depart in absolute secrecy. That will be arranged for you. At nightfall you will be removed to the villa Neptune, whither I am about to start within an hour. I will, again, see you there, and, till then, breathe not a word, or your hope will be cut off at once—nay, you must even continue to appear the downcast prisoner whose hours are numbered.'

'I will attend to the very letter of your instructions—Caesar will never be better served,' replied the Pretorian; 'I only wish you gave me a better opportunity to prove my gratitude.'

'You are hasty—you have nothing but the tale of an idle vagabond to rely on. If I were in your place, I should have preferred the chance of facing a cohort single-handed. You know the terms—consider them in the interval.'

So saying Tiberius left the cell, and Martialis flung himself on the bed to think on what had passed.

[pg 377] Was this the cruel Tiberius? It was hardly to be realised! It was so extraordinary that his heart failed, as the sickening thought crept into his mind that he was the victim of refined cruelty. His senses were on the alert, with an expectation which was positive pain. If Caesar were as good as his word, he would be breathing the pure air of heaven in a few hours. The thought filled him with the glowing warmth and comfort of wine. On Cestus everything depended. Had he left for Rome? Should he meet him at the house of Fabricius? Had he the proofs, as he asserted, and would they be conclusive and satisfactory to the old man? Was she really anything but the simple girl he had always known her? The potter's wife said she never had a child of her own. Her beauty seemed never to spring from such lowly parents. She bore no resemblance to them, and her lofty courage was such as comes with the proud blood of ancient ancestry.

Thus, with a multitude of thoughts vivid and wild, presumptive, yet inconclusive, he waited and burned for the hour of his deliverance. It came, at last, in the person of Zeno and half a dozen Pretorians.

The Centurion played his part well, and asked various questions as to his destination and fate; but, when they produced bonds to fasten him, he drew back.

'No—not those,' said he proudly; 'I will go with you, comrades, without giving you the trouble of a knot or a buckle.'

They assented, and presently all left the cell and marched down to the Marina. Here they took boat, and were rowed to the north-west side of the island, where the villa Neptune stood. Ascending the cliffs by a narrow flight of steps cut in the rock, they reached the level ground

above and entered the villa. Martialis was conducted to a cell beneath ground, and very similar to the one he had left, save that it was somewhat larger. Wine and food was brought him, and he proceeded at once to make a hearty meal. The fresh air had invigorated him, and dispelled, in a great measure, the vapours with which his drugged drink had filled him. Moreover, it was dusk by the time they had entered the villa, and he expected and hoped to encounter a night's toil. He had just finished eating when the key rattled in the lock, and Caesar entered.

[pg 378] 'Have you eaten well, for you have a long journey before you?' asked Tiberius.

'I am ready,' replied Martialis.

'Then listen! On your own concern, proceed as you think best, but first of all you must carry and deliver a letter for me.'

'I will ride without a single stop.'

'Wait until you hear, for this business must be carried out in a different manner, else I had not brought you here. It is necessary, for the reasons already given, that your absence be not known to any one. Whilst you are leagues away, the guard will still be stationed at the upper end of the corridor, under the belief that you are a prisoner. Provisions will still be supplied, and all details will go on, in order that no suspicion may be aroused. I, myself, and the Prefect are journeying down the coast, southward, for a few days, so that no one will interfere—you comprehend fully?'

'Quite.'

'This letter you must deliver at the earliest,' said the Emperor, drawing a small packet from his bosom. 'Never rest until you have placed it with your own hands in those of the lady to whom it is addressed. Guard it and care for it as your own life. I never wrote a more important and weighty despatch. You see, I place implicit faith in you.'

'You will have no occasion to repent your faith,' replied Martialis, who now began to perceive that something more than personal interest in himself was answerable for his ruler's clemency and strange proceeding.

'That I fully expect,' said Tiberius, 'and, as your absence from confinement is not to be revealed here, it follows, naturally, that your presence must not be known in the city. Were it known there it would speedily be known here. For that end, therefore, you must not stir abroad in the city in daylight. That is all. It is simple. You will deliver the packet promptly at the first nightfall possible. The second night after that you will go and receive an answer and return straightway. The mean time you may use for your own concern; but I forbid you to run any risk of betraying your presence.'

[pg 379] The Emperor clapped his hands and Zeno entered. He bore an armful of clothing, and proceeded to disguise the outward appearance of the Centurion. The cuirass, high boots, and all vestiges of the military profession, were exchanged for the loose garments of a trader, in the breast of which the nimble-fingered Greek adroitly concealed and secured the secret missive of his master. To complete all, a wig was drawn over the close, curling locks of the Centurion, which more than all effected a transformation in the young man's appearance.

'Twill not blind every one, unless the Centurion can manage to alter his speech and bearing to suit,' said Zeno.

'It will serve his purpose sufficiently well. Let him never speak until compelled,' said Tiberius. 'Now you may start, Centurion. Here in writing is the name and place required for the delivery of the letter. Keep it in your pouch, and do not preserve it longer than necessary. Here is money, also, without which you cannot move. Do not spare it. Go now and be secret. Zeno will conduct you.'

Tiberius nodded, and, Martialis turning round, saw, to his astonishment a narrow opening in the cell wall opposite to the door, and beside it Zeno standing smiling, with a lantern in his hand, ready to conduct him.

'It leads to the grotto beneath, and so avoids busy eyes above,' said the Emperor. '*Vale.*'

The steward went through the secret opening, and Martialis followed down a narrow subterranean way for a considerable distance. The descent was continuous, and in some places by means of broad shallow steps. A door closed the exit, and when Zeno opened it he gave the key to his companion.

'You must return to Capreae by no other way than this. On the upper door you will find a small knob on the left hand side; press it and you will be able to enter your cell again.'

[pg 380] Then desiring him to stand still lest he should fall into the water, the steward lit a torch, with which he had provided himself, and Martialis perceived they were in the largest of those wonderful caverns or grottoes which exist in various places in the island, along the foot of the sea-washed cliffs. As one of the wonders of the island he had been in it before, though, of course, entering from the sea; and had seen with delight and wonder the dazzling effects of the blue

refraction of the light in daytime, and the lovely silvery colour which the deep water lent to every object immersed therein. The torch of Zeno gave sufficient light by which to unmoor a light skiff which floated beside the little landing-place on which they stood. The red glare fell on the still, dark, deep water, but failed to pierce to the lofty roof, or yet to the full circuit of the cavern, which nature had curiously domed out of the rock. The Centurion got into the boat and Zeno gave him the torch, advising him, at the same time, to be careful to provide himself with another on his return as well as the means of lighting it. He pushed off the shallop, and the impetus was sufficient to bring it to the outlet of the cavern. This was an orifice of small dimensions, and so low that it did not admit of even a sitting posture in the boat. Guiding his skiff therein, Martialis threw his torch into the water and uttered a farewell which rolled in hollow echoes through the cavern. Then he lay down at full length in the boat, and giving a vigorous shove, swept out into the open moonlit sea without.

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PART III.

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CHAPTER I.

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Though Quintus Fabricius had long since withdrawn from public life, and spent his days mainly in the library of his mansion, he was not altogether so secluded in his habits, as to entirely forego the society of two or three ancient friends and colleagues of the busy days of politics gone by. From supper at the house of one of these, he returned one evening at an early old-fashioned hour, and upon entering his own hall, was met by Natta, his ancient steward, who informed him, that a man who had travelled for days to see him, was now awaiting him on some pressing business. Fabricius, thinking, perhaps, it was some affair connected with some distant estate, desired the visitor to be brought, and, entering his favourite library, sat down before the fire, being still deep in the thoughts of a literary discussion which had raged over the supper-table. In a few moments Natta ushered in Cestus. He looked pale and worn; his brows wore an anxious wrinkle, and his glance was uneasy and restless. It was now the fourth evening following that on which Martialis had quitted him in the despoiled dwelling of Masthlon. The wind blowing fair, and promising a speedy voyage, he had embarked on a trader bound for Ostia, but contrary to expectation the passage proved long and tedious, owing to the wind falling light and baffling. On reaching port, with a mind overwrought with impatience, he posted along without stop, until he reached the mansion on the Janiculum. It was not without an amount of distrust he appeared before the old ex-senator. It was no pricking of conscience for the wrong he had done him, but purely fear, lest he might be recognised in connection with the part he had played in that self-same room, at no great distance of time back, when he had acted the part of a murderous decoy. He trusted, however, to his changed appearance, which he had ever maintained, and, at the worst, was confident that he had the power to make almost his own terms.

He met the scrutiny of Fabricius, therefore, with his accustomed boldness, and when, after a lengthened survey, the old man motioned him forward and asked his business, he felt relieved with the assurance that he was not recognised.

‘I have come a long way from the south—I have been travelling for days to see you,’ said he; ‘that means important business, noble Fabricius, and I must ask you to hear it alone with me.’

But Natta was deaf to the hint and moved not from his post behind; nor did his master give him any sign to do so.

‘My steward has my confidence in everything—go on!’ said Fabricius.

‘You will pardon me, but before a third person I cannot speak; nor would you suffer another to be present if you knew what I had to say.’

‘Then leave it unsaid!’ replied the old man testily.

Cestus drew near him and said in a low tone,

‘Did you not receive a letter, not long ago, containing a piece of ribbon?’

Fabricius started and fixed an intent look on the Suburan. His breast heaved with a sudden emotion.

'Well, what of it?' he said.

'You did receive it, then?' said Cestus.

Fabricius nodded hastily.

'Then I am the bearer of a further message from him who wrote that letter and sent that ribbon—and see, here is my warrant!'

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Cestus drew from his breast the remaining portion of the faded ribbon from which he had cut the former piece enclosed to Fabricius. When the eyes of the latter fell on it, his frame trembled with an agitation he could not hide. He motioned Natta to depart, and when the door was closed, he unlocked a cabinet, and took therefrom the tablets he had received, with the ribbon in question. His eye had told him, at a glance, that the two portions were of the self-same fabric; but, partly to hide his feelings, and because he felt he could scarcely trust his voice, he nervously went on fitting the severed ends together.

'You see that all is right—that one piece has been cut from the other,' said Cestus at length.

'Who are you, and what do you know of this?' asked Fabricius, in a voice which palpably trembled. 'Something in your face or tone seems familiar to me.'

'I cannot say whether I resemble any one you know, noble sir,' replied the Suburan, with *sang froid*; 'but, touching the ribbon, it was sent because it is of an uncommon pattern; for which reason it was also thought you might remember and recognise it, as having been worn by the child, your granddaughter, long ago.'

'I could not remember it; but when it came, like a message from the dead, I searched among the little garments and clothing in the child's room, which remains undisturbed as when she left it, and there I found some more of the same pattern. How came you by it? Tell me quickly what you know; and yet most likely it is nothing but another befooling—another deception of a foolish, fond, old man!'

'I know well enough you have been fooled many times, but I know just as well, that you never had a proof like this—something to see and touch—something that fits into its proper place, in this affair, without any denial. This is different to the tales and tricks which have been specially made to draw money from your coffers. The girl is alive and well, and I have other proofs, better than this, to show and tell you.'

'Man—man! if money be your object, you are labouring in vain,' said Fabricius, feebly endeavouring to appear firm and resolute; 'I have spent my last coin in the folly, and now when extreme age is beginning to lay its hold on me, I have at last learnt my lesson from experience. In no great time now I shall be with my fathers—there will be an end of my sorrows—for that I can now wait. If you are bent on extortion and falsehood your opportunity is gone. Nay more, I will put an end to such deception, and claim the help of justice—so take care!'

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'It is a pity you never did so before,' said Cestus. 'Had you done so, you might possibly have learnt something which would have saved you no end of bother, disappointment, and money. However, all that you shall learn presently. I have something to ask of you, it is true; but I ask it on condition that you fulfil your promise, only, when you are fully satisfied and claim your grandchild. You see how certain I must be when I can offer such terms.'

'What is it you ask?'

'That you give me your solemn promise, to allow me to go unharmed by you or any one else, and that, in consideration of my services, you will reward me with what you consider a fair return—the amount I leave to your own liberality.'

'Why do you wish me to guarantee to keep you safe and unharmed? What necessity for this, when your action would be kind and merciful in the highest degree?'

'Because, when you hear the history of the whole affair, it is possible my part in it may not please you,' said the Suburan coolly.

'If you have wronged her or me you shall be punished, and everything shall be wrung from you, as you deserve, without guarantee or reward.'

'Then, in that case, I will go no further; and you shall never see or hear of your missing grandchild again, simply for the reason, that I, alone, know who and where she is, and I, alone, hold the proofs of the same. I desire to serve myself as well as you; but, at the same time, I will not thrust myself into danger on that account. Without your promise in writing I will say nothing, except this, that she was safe and well until four days ago, when something occurred which has put her in some danger—you must understand she has grown up tall and comely. I have, therefore, come at much cost and fatigue, in mercy to you and her. Her situation at present is not

to be envied, and the sooner we come to terms and see to her welfare the better.'

'I must know more than this—this is only a tale like others I have heard, save, that it is, perhaps, more ingenious and plausible,' said Fabricius, in a great tremor. 'Give me more proofs—show me that I may place faith in you, and you will find that I shall not be behindhand with you in anything that is fair and reasonable.'

[pg 387] Cestus knit his brows and mused a little.

'I thought it would have been enough for any man to see I was no impostor,' he said at length, pointing at the ribbons; 'the child wore those when she was taken away from here—is it not enough?'

'No!' answered Fabricius.

'To give me such a paper will not in any way commit you, Fabricius; for, in it, you will not undertake to fulfil your promise, till you are satisfied that I have done my part in the business.'

'I will do nothing without further assurance that I am not trifled with—let that end it!'

'Very well, then, in consideration for the young girl, for whom I have a regard, I will give way a point from what I had determined, in order that she may not be sacrificed—otherwise your stubbornness would ruin all. If I were to bring you the clothes she wore when you lost her, even to an amulet, would you then give me the writing?'

'Yes, if they satisfied me as being hers.'

'Would you know them?'

'I would know the amulet.'

'Good—then I will bring them!'

'Have you not them with you?'

'No; but they are not far away,' said Cestus, with a cunning grin. 'I am not in the habit of surrendering myself so completely; but now, with the assurance of your promise, I will do what I had no intention of doing. You may send your slaves along with me if you wish.'

'Go alone. If you do not return I shall know that one more attempt on my credulity has failed.'

'A few minutes will set your doubts at rest,' replied Cestus, and he left the room.

[pg 388] As soon as he was gone, the patrician poured out some wine, with a trembling hand, and drank it to brace his aged frame against the nervous tremor which possessed it. His agitation would not allow him to rest, so he wandered up and down the apartment. Once or twice he listened at the door which stood ajar, and, whilst doing so, heard the sound of returning steps. It was his visitor returning with Natta at his side. Both entered as before, but the suspicious steward again received the sign to withdraw. Cestus advanced to the table, beside which Fabricius has reseated himself, and laid thereon a bundle, carefully wrapped up and tied.

'These are the traps,' he said, and proceeded to open the parcel. Taking out the tiny garments of a child he displayed them on the table.

The old man, with a strange inarticulate cry, seized them in his hands, and examined them with a devouring eagerness.

'See!' said Cestus, laying his broad finger-tip against an embroidered mark on one of the little linen underclothes, 'here is a mark of ownership, I take it.'

'Yes, yes! But the amulet!' cried Fabricius feverishly.

'Here 'tis,' replied the Suburan, drawing from his bosom a little soft leather bag, having a fine steel chain attached.

His companion pounced on it, and plucked out a small agate, carved into the shape of an open hand, bearing a curious symbol cut into the palm.

He gazed on it for a few moments, with his wrinkled face twitching. Then he pressed it convulsively to his lips, and, sinking his head, buried his face in the child's garments on the table, huddling them up against his silvery hairs with both arms.

Cestus, anxious and impatient as he was, forbore to break the silence.

At length Fabricius raised his head and spoke in a broken voice, 'I am an old man and you must excuse my weakness, friend—the sight of these trifles tries me hard.'

'Drink!' said Cestus, filling a cup; 'there is nothing like good wine to cheer one. Forget what has passed and think on the good time that is coming to wipe it out.'

'Thanks!' answered Fabricius, taking the cup with an unsteady hand. 'Fill yourself also a draught,' which invitation Cestus obeyed, nothing loth.

'Here's to the speedy restoration of your little maid,' he said, and bottomed the cup. 'Now, as you are satisfied that these trifles are really genuine, and that I am not deceiving you, I must ask you to write me that little document; after which, you shall know the whole story, which will contain certain items which will astonish you without doubt.'

[pg 389] Fabricius reached his writing materials and wrote, slowly and painfully, a brief undertaking, by which the personal safety of Cestus would be assured, and his efforts suitably rewarded, upon the satisfactory restoration of his grandchild.

Cestus perused the document, and, finding it satisfactory, put it away carefully in his breast.

'Thanks! thanks! I value, and rely upon your word equally; but then I may fall into other hands, in which case this paper might be useful. I will commence and tell you from the beginning, and you may brace yourself up to hear something which will startle you.'

He poured out and drank some more wine, and then began his declaration.

'Your little maid was stolen from your own porch, here on the Janiculum, fifteen years ago, all but three months and three days—if you have the day marked, consult it, and you will find I am right.'

Giving a start of surprise, Fabricius began to count with the fingers of one hand on the table, to assist a mental calculation.

'You are right, without doubt,' he said finally; 'how come you to know this?'

'None so well as I,' returned the other, 'you shall learn.'

He then related the manner in which the child had been enticed and snapped away from the porch of the house, the various places she had been hidden away, until her final removal to Surrentum. The extreme minuteness of the narrative was too extraordinary not to impress his listener's mind with an inward conviction of its truth, but, as our reader is already acquainted with its tenor, it need not be recapitulated here.

'Yes, noble Fabricius, Surrentum is full of potters,' said Cestus, concluding, 'and with one of them, called Masthlon, and his wife Tibia, was finally lodged your little maid; and, with them, a childless pair, she has grown up well cared for and tended, as I know well. She thinks herself their child to this hour, and it is time you took her to your own nest. Her poor feathers cannot hide her breed. She is known by the name of Neæra.'

[pg 390] Fabricius sat looking at the Suburan with the torture of his mind imprinted on his pale face. 'Why do the gods permit such cruel deeds?' said he; 'for what reason was this wickedness perpetrated?'

'Money,' said Cestus.

'Money!' echoed Fabricius, leaping to his feet in horror; 'was she sold, then, for a slave?'

'Not at all,' replied the Suburan quietly; 'cannot you understand? Money has been at the bottom of it all. You have an enormous amount of it, and the child was in some one's way. Once out of it, and then who comes next? Why your loving nephew, Afer—now do you see?'

'Fellow, what do you mean? Do you dare to cast even so much as a doubt upon the honesty of a knight—a relative of mine?—take care!'

'More than that, your honour, I say it was no other, and through no other, than your nephew, T. Domitius Afer, that your child was kidnapped.'

'Fellow!'

'It is true enough. He wanted her out of the way so that he might be your heir. For that end he hired a certain individual, now alive, for a comfortable sum to put her aside, so that she might never more be heard of.'

'I'll not believe it,' cried the old patrician hoarsely; 'it must be proved—where is that wretch whom you say he hired?'

'What would you do with him supposing I brought him?'

'Were I forty years younger I would tear him limb from limb with my own hands—but now nothing remains to me but the justice of the law.'

'Neither the one nor the other, although he is within your reach at this moment, for I am the man who was employed by your sweet nephew—I am the man who took away your child!'

Fabricius stood dumfounded for a moment, and his jaw fell.

Then the blood rushed to his face; his eyes flamed with terrible wrath, and, with a stride, he confronted Cestus.

'Dog!' he shouted hoarsely, as he clutched the Suburan with a grasp which was inspired with the vigour of youth.

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But Cestus, in no way disconcerted, calmly pulled out the written guarantee from his bosom and held it up. The old man eyed it, hesitatingly, for a brief moment; then dropped his hands and tottered back to his chair, wherein he sank with a groan.

'You have just cause for anger, and I admit it,' said Cestus, in a lower and more respectful tone; 'but you cannot now move without me, and I will do all I can to make amends. After all I am not so much to blame as your nephew. At that time I was an idle vagabond—you see I don't attempt to hide myself—dwelling in the Subura, and your loving nephew, Titus Afer, tempted me with a handsome sum to do this thing. Only, mark you—I was to put the child clean out of the way—that is to say, I was to strangle her, drown her, kill her in the best and quietest way possible.'—Fabricius hid his face in his hands.—'That was what I was paid to do, and, if I had done that, the job would have served his turn most effectually, as he intended, and you would never have been the wiser, perhaps. But bad as I was, there was left yet a soft spot in my heart, and to that is owing the life of the little maid. I couldn't bring myself to hurt her; and, moreover, what did I know but what she might be useful to me in the future. It turns out now that I was wise. A dead child is of no use to any one, but a living one is—vastly so at the present time. You will, therefore, see that I had to deceive your worshipful nephew. He thinks she is dead, as I told him she was, and all his pretended help in searching for her was nothing but a blind. Your money went, most of it, into his own pocket—and a comfortable income it was.'

Fabricius was overwhelmed. He rose unsteadily to his feet, and his face was ashen pale. Such terrible deception was scarcely credible to his trustful nature, and yet the evidence seemed too weighty to be easily explained away. Its great perfectness of detail, the unhesitating business-like manner of its delivery—above all, the clothes and amulet—were beyond doubt. Yet he eyed the man before him with unconcealed distrust, contempt, and indignation, to which, however, the Suburan was utterly indifferent.

'Tell me what reasons have impelled you to come to me now and confess all this villainy,' said Fabricius, in hollow tones.

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'Because I am sorry for what I did, and wish to make some amends,' replied Cestus.

'And for this penitence you require to be paid,' rejoined the other, with withering scorn; 'by your own showing you have made terms for committing a desperate sin, and have probably extorted every sesterce possible in that direction; now you betray your accomplice, and come to extort more from me, under a mask of righteousness.'

'I have told you nothing but the truth, and you may twist it as you like,' replied Cestus, unmoved; 'bear in mind, but for me, there would have been no child at all to welcome back.'

'I have only your word for that, so far.'

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'The terms made are not to be carried out, on your side, until you are satisfied with your bargain. That is enough to show, of itself, that I am in earnest. I must live, and to your own generosity I leave the payment. But it is not altogether that for which I am here. Your nephew, the worshipful knight, has dealt very scurvily with me, after his nature. He is a hundred times more rascal than myself—a mean, cowardly dog, knight as he is. I have two surprises in store for him—one, when he is confronted with the girl he paid me to kill, and the other, when his eyes fall on me, whom he struck down one night, not long since, in the streets, and left for dead. He thought, when he did that, his secret was for ever safe. But I was picked up with a hole in my side, and so well tended in a house I can take you to, that, after a hard fight of it, I came round. I bethought me of the girl I had left in Surrentum, and I stole away to see how she fared, and to pick up strength. I have been living for weeks, waiting and watching in my sister's house; for it was my sister, and her husband, the potter, who took her from me. They have loved her like their own child, and she treats them as her parents, for she knows nothing to the contrary. Watch well your nephew, therefore, when he first sets eyes on me—if his conscience don't visibly trouble him it will be strange. But there is more yet to be told you, and we are wasting time. When I came away, matters in my sister's house were in a bad state. Masthion had gone to Capreae, to show Caesar some new kind of glass he had discovered. He was a fool and it cost him his life; for he found the bloody tyrant in the humour to reward him with a bed at the bottom of the sea. And more than that, a gang of slaves, from the palace, I suppose, arrived after dark, and sacked the house, and took off the girl back with them. You must understand she has uncommon good looks, and is good prey for this island, which is no place for her. Now you know what reason there is for haste to protect her. I could do nothing; but you are a patrician and powerful, and to you Caesar will listen.'

'Alas, you told me she was alive and well, and now you say Tiberius has carried her off to his island—is this your good news?' cried Fabricius, wringing his hands. 'Better indeed dead, I should say, than left to the mercy of that debauched old man! Four days since you left, and as long for me to go thither, what hope is there? Why did you not bring her away at once? Here, in

this house, the house from which you say you took her, you might have proved your words, or damned yourself for ever. You bid me hope, and then dash hope away. Alive—ay, but if alive, most likely in a living death—Oh!’

‘Stay a moment,’ said Cestus soothingly, ‘the danger is great; but yet I have hope. I have not told you that the maid has caught the eye of a youth, and they are betrothed. I had a suspicion that something ill was brewing to the girl, and they will bear witness that I did my utmost to persuade them to come to Rome at once, where she might be in safety; but they flatly refused to move until the potter came back from the island. He never did come back, but in his place came the slaves, who tore the girl away. But soon after they had gone, arrived the youth who has fallen in love with her. He is a centurion, and was posting from Rome to the island with despatches, and him I told who she was, and bade him warn Caesar not to harm her—I said I would go straight and bring you, and now the matter rests with yourself.’

‘And the name of the youth you say is betrothed to her?’

‘He is a centurion of the Pretorian Guard, and his name is Martialis.’

‘What?’ shouted Fabricius, ‘am I living in a dream the gods have woven round me? Martialis, did you say—Lucius Martialis, a Pretorian—tall above the common?’

[pg 394] ‘The same—he seemed to know you when I spoke your name, and said you had lost a child.’

‘Oh, wonder of heaven—the man of all I would have chosen—the son of my old playmate! Alas, alas, the more you say, the more unhappy and hopeless the case! Do you not know that the young man has been flung into a dungeon, awaiting perhaps his death?’

‘By Pluto, no—how could I?’ cried Cestus, aghast.

‘It is here, in a letter received this morning from my nephew,’ replied Fabricius, taking an epistle from a drawer and glancing down its contents. ‘Listen!’

—‘By the way, the Centurion Martialis, for whom you took such a sudden fancy, has fallen into disgrace and one of the palace dungeons, for bearding Caesar in his own hall, in pursuit of a wench, a sweetheart of his, who had been brought off to the island, I believe, by force. Of course it means death in some shape or other.’

The face of Cestus grew dark and sullen as a thundercloud, and he folded his arms across his chest without a word.

‘What is to be done?’ said Fabricius, the extremity of distress breaking down the repugnance and indignation with which he regarded his companion.

‘The luck seems against us,’ answered the Suburan bitterly; ‘he must have played the rash fool. At any rate, your letter shows that I am to be believed when I make you a statement. All we can do is to get there as fast as we can and make the best of a bad job. In whatever plight the girl may be, I can prove who she is, and you can have your fling at your dutiful nephew.’

‘A poor consolation,’ muttered Fabricius; ‘but I cannot rest until I fathom this strange story; were it for nothing but the sake of this unfortunate Martialis I would seek admittance to Caesar, who is not unknown to me personally. We will start before dawn—you will remain here in the house until then.’

‘I have no wish to go elsewhere, if I may have some supper and a bed, for I am tired out.’

[pg 395] Fabricius called Natta and handed over the Suburan to his care, but not before the articles on the table were once more made up and locked away. Later on the steward appeared to make his report, and was instructed to be careful not to allow the visitor to slip away from the house. When, however, he was further ordered to have everything in readiness for a long and rapid journey southward, Natta, with the license of an old servant, began to expostulate. Not daring to give him any reasons, his master cut him short very peremptorily and dismissed him. The offended official had scarcely been gone a minute before he returned, and handed a letter to his master, with an air of injured dignity. Fabricius broke the sealed thread which bound it, and read inside the following:—

‘From L. Martialis.—I have just arrived. Come to me at once, if possible, for your sake and mine and another’s. The bearer will conduct you. Erase this at once.’

‘My litter immediately—I go with the bearer of this,’ cried Fabricius with sudden energy.

The steward prepared to open his mouth once more, but an angry stamp of his master’s foot, and a flash of his eye stopped him—he hurried away.

Fabricius flung the tablets into the fire and sank trembling on to his knees.

CHAPTER II.

Fabricius got into his curtained litter, and the youth, who was the bearer of the summons, led the way across the Tiber to a tavern under Mount Aventine, in the heart of the wharves and warehouses, of the teeming haunts of sailors, and the thousands whose livelihood depended on the ships and commerce which crowded the quays of the busy river.

Here, in an upper room, the old man was brought into the presence of one whom he did not recognise; but when the stranger removed a peruke, and reared himself upright, as Martialis, he hastened to embrace him with a glad cry.

It will be needless to recount what passed between them during the two hours they remained together; or to portray the emotion of Fabricius, already much tried. He perceived that the narrative of the Centurion was substantially the same as that he had heard from Cestus, so far as regarded Neæra; and when he had exhausted his fond ingenuity of inquiry, he put his hand into his bosom and solemnly drew out an article, which he placed in the hand of his companion. It was an intaglio on cornelian, the likeness of a woman's face, graved with an exquisite art unapproached in modern times. When Martialis saw it he started in surprise.

'Is there a resemblance?—you start!' cried Fabricius breathlessly.

'So great, that I seem to trace Neæra herself in the face,' replied the young man; 'and yet it cannot be herself—who, then?'

Fabricius was so overcome with extreme joy that he could not reply for some moments. At last, in tremulous tones, he said, 'It is her mother's picture—done before her marriage—not long before. If she be like this, then I shall know the child, and so get my own again. O boy, what a strange working of the gods is here! That I should lose my little maid, and, after long years, you, the son of my old friend, should love her all unknowingly.'

'Nay, Fabricius, there is nothing strange in my loving her,' returned Martialis; 'it was only wonderful that I should have met her, of all women—having seen her and spoken to her, the rest followed infallibly.'

The old man smiled, and rose to go.

'It grows late—to-morrow I will start for Surrentum. I cannot travel as rapidly as yourself, my Lucius, and, by the time you reach Capreae, I shall have done no more than to have arrived at my journey's end, though with two days' start.'

'Farewell! Let not Cestus nor any one know of my presence,' said the Centurion.

Fabricius went away home, and on the morrow, though later than he had given orders for, he set out on the southern road, with Cestus, Natta, and a retinue of slaves.

Martialis, at the end of the second tedious day, went to receive the answer to Caesar's epistle, and, after securing it carefully, set out also on his return.

On the second morning following this, about dawn, Zeno entered his cell in the villa Neptune, and found him lying fast asleep on his bed. He went away at once and reported the same to the Emperor, who himself proceeded with little delay to visit the returned prisoner.

When he entered, the latter was still asleep, and received a shake on the shoulder from the Imperial hand.

'So, you have returned,' said Tiberius, as Martialis leapt to his feet and saluted; 'the letter.'

Martialis ripped the cloth of his inner garment and took out the despatch. Caesar stepped aside and broke the seal, and ran his eye briefly over the contents.

'Good!' he said, with a brightened eye, as he rolled up the paper; 'have you succeeded in keeping yourself unrecognised?'

'Perfectly well, Caesar, for anything I know to the contrary,' replied Martialis. 'I entered and came away from the city at nightfall, and lodged near the Porta Navalis, where there was small chance of recognition—especially in my disguise.'

'A savoury part to be lodged in, and, as you say, not often liable to the visits of your comrades from the opposite side of the city. You have carried out my commission perfectly well—what of your own business?'

'So please you, Caesar, there is little doubt as to the identity of my betrothed. It can be

satisfactorily proved that she is the grandchild of Fabricius, stolen from him when she was but a child.'

'So much the better for you in every way—how do you propose to prove it?'

'As soon as you wish. Fabricius has left Rome, and should be in Surrentum ere now, with those who can give testimony.'

'And does that testimony still incriminate the worthy nephew?'

'It does.'

'Ah!' said Tiberius, with grim irony, 'I am more and more interested. I will send for the aged Fabricius and his friends, and administer this matter myself. Where in the town is the old man to be found?'

'He is to be found, or to be heard of, at the villa of his friend Asinius, whom he proposed to visit.'

'I foresee an interesting scene—no time must be lost,' said Tiberius, turning to the door.

'And my betrothed, Caesar—is she well?' said the lover.

'For aught I know—they had my orders to tend her well. They would scarcely disobey.'

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CHAPTER III.

The following day had been fixed by Tiberius for the formal betrothal of his daughter-in-law Livia to the Prefect; and with the intention of dining and passing the night at the villa Neptune, so as to be in readiness for the ceremony, the Imperial lady set out thitherwards, from her own palace, attended by a numerous retinue. A special command had been received to include the unhappy Neæra among the latter.

The past few days had wrought a change in her appearance. Her form had wasted, and her face was thin and wan with excess of mental affliction. Much as Martialis had suffered, she was even more overwhelmed at the agonising sight of her lover and protector torn away by the soldiers, to what, she concluded, would be an ignominious punishment, or perhaps death. After a sleepless night of horror, she was transferred to the dwelling of Livia, where she was well cared for. This important lady was verging toward middle age; was of somewhat masculine appearance, and as haughty and full of ambition as her intended husband. But, being duly acquainted with Neæra's story, even her proud nature could not help unbending with pity. The girl's beauty also impressed her, and she placed her in attendance on herself, and caused her to lay aside her poor homely garments for more suitable apparel.

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The Prefect, when he came, was curious to see her and bent admiring eyes on her. 'It is no wonder Martialis should dare so much,' he said gallantly, not to say grandiloquently, after his fashion before women. 'He is the best of my Centurions—but have courage; I will put this matter straight. He is something to me as well as to you. They have penned him up, but I will have him at liberty ere long. He knows you are safe, so take heart.'

With a mind dazed and only half-conscious through suffering, Neæra was thankful for the encouraging words of this personage, whom she surmised to be some one of high position. When she fell back to where the group of attendants were standing, one of them whispered to her that it was the Prefect who had spoken to her. A great load fell from her thankful heart at the words. She gazed back with something like awe at the most feared and powerful man at that moment in the empire. From Martialis she had learned much, from time to time, concerning him; and the assurance, coming from the mighty personage's own lips, changed at once her agony into hope.

Another sorrow haunted her with an intensity of suspense. Her father—where was he? Was he sick or dying as she had been told? A mysterious dread of ill weighed upon her. The details of her own rough and forcible abduction could not fail but impress her mind with a sense of some evil-doing, so, at the first opportunity, she began her efforts to obtain information respecting the potter. Those whom she asked either denied all knowledge of him or gave evasive answers. In one or two cases, her strong suspicions were aroused that actual knowledge was not wanting, by the hesitating manner in which a negative answer was made. More than ever alarmed by the confused and embarrassed manner of those who seemed to falter before her earnest gaze, her acute anxiety at length emboldened her to speak to Livia herself. The lady received the application condescendingly, and promised that inquiries should be made at the palace. Later on the same day she summoned Neæra and made known to her the fact of the potter's death. He had been taken ill with a sudden and strange sickness, and had only lived a few hours afterward.

Such were the fatal words which fell on the stricken girl's ears, and, after the first gust of wild grief had passed away, a brooding melancholy possessed her. Her lover was a close prisoner, whose fate hung on the whim of Caesar. The gentle, simple-minded, sweet-natured potter, whom she had filially loved and revered with all the strength of her nature, being also reft from her, no wonder the burden of her sorrow sapped the beauty swiftly from her face, leaving hollow eyes and thin cheeks. She knew that Martialis had been removed to the villa Neptune, and, by the last report, was still there, so, when she received intimation to accompany Livia thither, her heart bounded and her eyes brightened. The journey itself, and the melancholy satisfaction that at each step she was nigher to her lover, did something to restore more colour to her cheek and vivacity to her manner. But what was her unutterable delight, when no other than Zeno, the steward, appeared before her, not long after her arrival, and led her away into a room where she saw Tibia waiting alone to receive her. With an indescribable cry of thankfulness and relief she sprang forward, and the two women were locked in each other's fast embrace. Neæra was shocked to see the ravages which affliction had wrought in her mother's appearance, and the heartbroken widow, on her part, scanned the pale face of her fosterchild with tenderness and pity. When Neæra had related her experiences, since she had been taken away from her home, she led Tibia on gently, in her turn, to speak of herself, and of him they had so looked up to, and revered. But as the dame came at length to mention her husband, her voice broke down at the word, and she got no further. They said no more—all that was in their hearts was merged in silent weeping. The wonder of Neæra was no less than her joy at the presence of the dame in the island, but the latter seemed loth to give any explanation thereof, and tried to turn from the subject as often as it was put.

Neæra, at last, pressed the matter in an unavoidable manner. 'Mother,' she said, 'you have not yet told me how you contrived to get here. Did they bring you away as they brought me? Or did you come of your own accord to seek me? It was strange if you were able to enter here alone.'

'No—I came with others,' said Tibia. 'You shall know everything.' She stopped and turned her eyes to the floor, and her breast began to heave with emotion.

A dull, chill horror sank into Neæra's heart. Her mind was prone to fear, being overcharged and susceptible through long and dark brooding.

'Speak!' she whispered. 'What new trouble is this? Tell me—I can bear it.'

The old woman glanced up into the girl's face, and, divining the signs of terror which dwelt there, took her hand caressingly.

'It is no new trouble, thank the gods,' she faltered. 'We have had plenty of that. Nay, I must call it rather happiness——'

'Ah, I thought you were about to tell me something terrible of Lucius,' murmured Neæra, drawing a deep breath, as a great load, like the shadow of death, slid from her mind.

'No! It is of yourself. It is time you must know all,' said Tibia. 'Child, you must never call me mother any more.'

It hardly needs to tell the start of surprise which Neæra gave at these words. Through her amazement, the strange wistfulness of the dame's glance and her broken, pathetic tones struck to her heart. She threw her arms around her aged neck.

'What is it you are saying?' she cried. 'Why do you look like that? What is it I am to know? Am I to lose mother as well? Mother you are, and always must be.'

For some moments Tibia remained in silence within the arms of the young girl, as if unable to force herself from the warmth of what might be the last heartfelt, daughterlike caress. Then at length she slowly uplifted the shapely arms, and, as she did so, pressed one hand of the girl to her lips, whilst the tears trickled down from her eyes.

'Neæra,' she said, 'I have lost my husband, and now the gods will that you shall be taken from me. I have tended you, watched you, and loved you like a mother; but—but, Neæra, we never thought the time would come, nor yet the need to tell you that—that you are not our child. For I have been a barren stock—I never bore a child into the world.'

They sat looking at each other. Tibia, with a pleading, timid expression in her meek eyes, which the tender-hearted girl could not withstand, despite her speechless incredulity and wonder. She thought for the moment that the dame's sufferings had, perhaps, deranged her faculties, and then, as with a sudden and swift ray of light, her mind recalled one or two circumstances which had puzzled her strangely hitherto. She remembered on that day just as Cestus first appeared in the workshop at home, when addressing the potter as father, he replied in the negative with all the evidences of powerful emotion. Nothing had been ever added in explanation, and the hasty disavowal of relationship had presently sunk out of active speculation beneath other matters, and had been thought of no more. Again, the frantic words of Martialis, as he was hurried away from the presence of Caesar, had been wild and inexplicable to her ears at the moment of their utterance, but, in the agony of her thoughts, they had also fallen unheeded. What did it all mean?

'I—not your child, mother,' she said slowly. 'Do you know what you are saying? You are forgetting

—alas, this cruel trouble—it has been too much for you to bear!’

‘I know what you mean, child, but it is not so,’ returned Tibia, in a low voice; ‘it is true, indeed, I never was a mother. You were brought to us a little thing—a very little thing—by Cestus, my brother, for safe-keeping. We never saw or heard of him again till this present visit. We thought he must be dead, and that you, therefore, would never be claimed; so we looked upon you as our own, and never allowed you to know otherwise. What else could we have done? He told us you were an orphan—a poor man’s child—without kith or kin. Now he has come to claim you. Your grandfather is here now in this great house. He is neither poor nor mean. He is a great and wealthy nobleman, and you a great lady. Alas, we did not know—Cestus has done a wicked thing; but idle and evil he ever was from a boy in our father’s cottage.’

Neæra sat silent and motionless, listening as in a dream. The blood surged like a fiery flood through her veins, and then fled back as suddenly, leaving her cold and pale as death. Her mind was in a whirl, and her ideas were helplessly tossing in a hurly-burly of confusion. It was pardonable, in the first moments of strange wonder, that her wild but vivid thoughts flew to the future. Reared amid humble associations, what a new world of hopes, ideas, and curiosity flooded her dizzying brain with sensations here indescribable. Masthlon not her father—nor Tibia her mother! Her grandfather a stranger, awaiting her even now—a noble! She was afraid already. What did it all mean? and why had she been thus treated? Now she thought she saw the reason of the unhappy restraint and mysterious trouble which had clouded their home during the sojourn of Cestus. She had been right in ascribing it in some way to his influence. She turned her eyes on Tibia, who was watching her in deep suspense. There, at least, was her mother in heart and deed, and she opened her arms to her.

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‘Mother, I am bewildered! How came I to be with you my life long, if I am, as you say, the child of another—the child of great and wealthy people? Ah, but that you have told me this strange thing I could scarce believe it.’

Tibia received her with a grateful heart, and held her close while she told her the whole story.

‘It was a wicked deed that Cestus did, but he was tempted by one worse than himself,’ said she, concluding; ‘evil he was without doubt, but, to my mind, your kinsman was more to blame, for it was he who planned it. You were nothing to my poor brother till he was tempted with gold. Ah, child, do not be too hard upon him. If he did you and yours bitter wrong, remember that he preserved you when he was paid to take your life.’

‘And this kinsman—who is he, and is he alive?’ asked Neæra, in a hushed voice.

‘I do not know—he may, or may not be. We are here for your grandsire to claim you, and you will soon know everything. When you go to Rome to live among the great people there, will you remember the poor cottage that was your home so long?’

‘Go where I may you must still be with me,’ replied Neæra; ‘how could I forget? I was happy—oh, my poor father, if he had only lived!’

The tears of both began to flow again, and, for a long time, they remained silent and occupied with their own thoughts.

They were roused by the entrance of Zeno, who summoned them to follow him. Neæra drew a sharp breath, and trembled with nervous expectation as she stood up to obey.

‘Keep near me, mother,’ she whispered, as she clutched the dame’s hand tightly; ‘and yet, for the sake of Lucius, ought I not to be glad?’

The apartment into which they were brought was tolerably well filled with company. Tiberius sat on a slightly raised seat, and, in a lower chair, at one side, was seated his daughter-in-law Livia. Sejanus was at her side, whilst conversing in knots, at a respectful distance, were others of the court. Flaccus, Priscus, Marinus, Atticus, the devoted friends of the Emperor, were there, as well as Afer and two or three other followers of the Prefect. Caesar himself was speaking in a low tone with Thrasullus, the astrologer, who stood at his elbow; next to whom was Seleucus, another philosopher, buried in deep reflection. Behind the Imperial chair was, as usual, the gigantic Nubian, and still further in rear, other slaves in waiting, including the females in attendance on Livia. Neæra and the dame, marshalled by Zeno, entered the presence with hesitating steps, and halted near the door—Tibia, with the abashed feelings of her humble timid nature, and the maiden, with an agitation which the circumstances of her position rendered positively painful. She clung tenaciously to the hand of the dame as she ran her eyes hastily over the company. She was even comforted to observe Livia present, and her heart throbbled violently as she cast fugitive glances upon each gray head, in vain wonder as to the identity of her aged relative.

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At Caesar’s sign the steward brought them forward in front of his chair. In the hollow of his left hand, Tiberius held the same intaglio which Fabricius had shown to Martialis, in the tavern under the Aventine. He studied it, in conjunction with the face of the maiden before him, with close attention, and then, without a word, handed it to Thrasullus. The philosopher, after a rapid comparison, returned it to the Imperial hand, giving a significant nod. Tiberius raised his voice and called to Afer, who immediately broke off his conversation and approached.

'Hither—I want your opinion,' said the Emperor, holding out the intaglio; 'cast your eyes on this graven stone, and thence on the face of this maiden before us, and tell me if you perceive any resemblance.'

The rest of the company edged nearer with curiosity.

Afer took the likeness, and, as he did so, bent his gaze on Neæra's beautiful face, with the same supercilious smile, which had proved so offensive to her in Masthlon's shop. She recognised him readily, and coloured with displeasure, as she haughtily reared her head, and averted her eyes.

[pg 406] 'Have you met before?' asked Tiberius, closely watching them.

'Yes, Caesar, to the best of my memory,' returned the knight, removing his eyes from her face and turning them to the miniature for the first time. He gave an almost imperceptible movement of surprise, and his brows knitted closely over his hooked nose, as he gazed at the portrait in his hand.

'Where then was the meeting?' asked Caesar.

'In Surrentum—if I mistake not, in a potter's shop. But she is better known, I believe, to the Centurion Martialis,' replied Afer, with the unflinching curl of his lip, half smile and half sneer.

There was a gentle titter; the face of the young girl became crimson, and she dropped her head. Tibia, despite her timidity, cast an indignant glance at the speaker and those smiling around, as she drew the maiden nearer to her.

'It may be so, but I wait your opinion with regard to the resemblance which seemed to strike me,' said Tiberius; 'you also appear to be very strongly impressed with the likeness, Afer.'

'In truth, I confess I am,' returned the knight, as his eyes returned again to the cornelian with a puzzled air; 'I admit there is a strong likeness, especially in the eyes and mouth, though this is taken from a woman somewhat older. I seem to know the face, and yet—'

'Doubtless you do, for it belongs to a relative of your own,' said Tiberius. 'He has honoured us with a visit, and here he is.'

All eyes followed the glance of Caesar, and saw Fabricius, followed by Natta and an elderly fellow-servant, appear through the curtains which covered the entrance of an inner room.

The old senator came forward with an erect body and firm step. His face was very pale and stern, and, as he advanced with a measured step, he kept his eyes persistently fixed upon the persons of Tiberius and his granddaughter, to the determined exclusion of every one else.

Afer was transfixed with amazement, and barely saved himself from uttering an exclamation. Had his house on the Esquiline suddenly planted itself before him, his face could scarcely have shown more unrestrained surprise.

[pg 407] 'Welcome, noble Fabricius,' said Tiberius, as the old man made a deep obeisance before him and Livia; 'welcome to Capreae—we are busy in this affair of yours. Your worthy nephew looks dumfounded at seeing you.'

'Uncle!' cried the wondering voice of Afer, now released by the words of Caesar; 'you here! This is strange!'

The knight took a step or two forward, and then hesitated. The old man gave him not the least sign of acknowledgment, but, raising his glance for the first time, met the lustrous eyes of Neæra fixed upon him, with a world of anxiety in their depths. The occasional deep heaves of her bosom showed that she was holding her breath in her agitation, and the burning gaze of Fabricius seemed to pierce her with its intensity. He placed one hand over his heart, and a flush covered his wan face. Another moment he looked, and then stretched forth his arms toward her with a strange cry—

'Aurelia—my Aurelia! My child!'

The poignant accents and the unaccustomed name thrilled through her with indescribable sensations. With no less power, but in a different way, the old man's words startled his nephew as with an electrical shock. Reaching his uncle's side at a stride, he grasped his arm, and said sternly, and almost fiercely, 'What is this, uncle? Is this folly still so strong within you? How came you here in the name of the gods? and in what does this wench concern you? Do you thus accost every girl you see? She is nothing but a potter's girl of Surrentum.'

'Stay, Fabricius, you are hasty,' spoke Tiberius; 'let us hear what these people have to say.'

Recalled to himself, Fabricius, with his eyes yet fixed on Neæra, stepped back to a place beside Thrasullus, without deigning his nephew a look or a word. Afer's brows met with an angry scowl, and he abruptly folded his arms across his breast, whilst muttering some hasty wrathful words. Every one looked curiously on, and, in the momentary silence which suddenly ensued, the voice of Natta was heard, in an eager undertone, speaking to his fellow-servant. Urged by their keen

interest the pair had pressed forward beyond their proper station, and were peering through the circle of their superiors at Neæra. The old steward's demeanour was excited, but at the impatient sign of his master he and his companion fell back to their proper station.

'Noble Fabricius here, a Senator of Augustus, well known to us of old days,' said Tiberius, 'lost a grandchild years ago. Unable to trace her, in spite of every effort, he yet preserves hope. The likeness which you have seen is that of the mother of the lost child. Fabricius has at last, he thinks, fair grounds for supposing he has recovered the missing girl. Be it our business to inquire into the proofs.'

'To what purpose, uncle?' said Afer, with angry impatience. 'Is it not absurd to ground a belief upon a mere resemblance to a graven gem? It can only end in fruitless disgust, as hitherto. Cease to harass yourself any longer by pursuing an *ignis fatuus*; be guided by me, I pray you. Leave these impostors to me, as you were wont, and I will unmask them.'

'I pray you, Caesar, proceed,' said Fabricius briefly, without taking any notice of his nephew.

With an expression of unutterable disgust and anger, the knight fell back a pace or two. 'With your permission, Caesar, I will retire,' he said; 'I cannot listen to this folly.'

'It is my will that you remain; try, therefore, and endure what shall follow,' replied Tiberius.

'I must obey your wish,' said Afer, biting his lip.

'Woman!' said Tiberius, addressing himself to Tibia, 'tell us your name and where you dwell. Speak without fear.'

'My name is Tibia, and I dwell in Surrentum,' answered the dame. She began in low nervous tones, and then gathering courage from the conviction of her deep injuries, she proceeded more hurriedly in a louder tone, 'My home has, however, been ruined, and my husband Masthion—'

'Enough!' interrupted the Emperor, in a harsh, sudden voice; 'answer only the questions you are asked. Anything beyond them concerns us nothing. You are now a widow—let that suffice. How long have you dwelt in Surrentum?'

'About twenty years.'

'And is this girl the child of you and your husband?'

'No; we never had a child.'

'How then did you come by her?'

'My brother brought her to us to foster, when she was a little child, about fifteen years ago.'

'Was she his child?'

'No. He said she was an orphan—the child of a fellow-workman in Rome.'

Afer shrugged his shoulders, and glanced toward Fabricius, who was gazing intently and unmoved upon the females.

'Has she remained with you ever since?'

'Yes.'

'Have you always led her to believe she was really your own child? Did she never discover that she did not belong to you?'

'She was never told till a few minutes past in this house.'

'Did you never know of this before, maiden?'

'No.'

'Did your brother never visit her, woman?'

'We never saw him again until a few weeks back. We thought he must be dead, never having even heard of him.'

'You then thought of the child as your own?'

'We never thought she would be taken from us again, and we looked upon her as our own.'

'What brought your brother back again after so long a silence?'

'He had had a bad illness in Rome, and he came to Surrentum for change and fresh air to help him to get better.'

'Why did he not come to see the child, or at least send to learn of her welfare during all those years?'

'I cannot tell. He said he knew she was in good keeping.'

'And did not you or your husband ever think proper to communicate with this brother of yours respecting the child he had left in your charge, since he himself was so careless of her?'

'Not until a few weeks ago, when my husband went to Rome to seek him, but never found a trace of him.'

'Why did he go, then, at last?'

'It was when she was asked in marriage,' said Tibia, with hesitation. 'My husband thought it was his duty to tell my brother, but he could not find a trace of him.'

'Then after this your brother arrived at Surrentum of his own accord?'

'Yes; he was weak and thin.'

[pg 410] 'Did he give you no account of himself for the time he had been silent?'

'No.'

'Did he tell you anything further concerning the girl?'

The dame's head sank gradually.

'Speak, good woman,' said Fabricius; 'no harm shall come of it.'

'He said,' Tibia continued, in a low voice, 'that he told a lie when he came first with the child. She was not the child of a fellow-workman, but was nobly born, and had been stolen.'

'Of course,' said Afer ironically.

'From whom, then, did he say she had been taken?'

'From one called Balbus, a wealthy man; but he said this to deceive us—I know now there is no such person.'

'You say you have dwelt in Surrentum twenty years, being about five years before the child was brought to you. Can you produce any people of the town who can testify that you have been childless, and that she came as you relate?'

Tibia did not answer, but looked at Fabricius.

'I have seen several such townspeople very privately, Caesar,' said Fabricius, 'and, from the evidence I gathered, I am perfectly satisfied that this worthy woman speaks absolute truth.'

'Enough, then, for that,' said Tiberius; and he turned to exchange some whispered words with Thrasullus.

'We will now hear your brother's story,' he resumed. 'Zeno, bring him in before us.'

Fabricius slowly removed his eyes from the fair face of Neæra and turned them on his nephew, who stood with an impatient, scornful expression of face, gazing fixedly on the dame.

The ring of bystanders parted, and Cestus walked into their midst with a bold, not to say triumphant air. His face had recovered its normal habit. When matters arrived at a crisis with the sudden departure of Neæra, there was left no occasion for secrecy. But rather the reverse since his interview with Fabricius, so that the dye had been suffered to fade from his skin, and the razor had removed his bristly beard and moustache.

[pg 411] He made an awkward obeisance to Caesar, and then turned to his former patron. The moment for revenge, so long waited and thirsted for, had at last arrived, and his broad, coarse face gleamed with diabolical exultation and malignance.

His significant gaze directed the eyes of the rest toward the unhappy knight, whose demeanour had suffered a change which was as extraordinary as it was sudden. He seemed as if an icy, deathlike hand had seized upon his heart and turned him to stone. His fixed eyes were glassy, and his face drawn and ghastly white.

'Good morrow, patron,' said Cestus, with a fiendish grin; 'you thought you had paid me off in full the last time we were together, but here I am again, and, like a good client, still devoted to your affairs.'

His voice seemed to break a horrible fascination. Afer recovered himself, and drew a long silent breath as he glanced around. Fabricius had seen enough in his heart-stricken nephew's face, and was now again sternly avoiding his gaze. A dull, sickly dread numbed the heart of the knight and

whispered fatefully in his ear. But extremity of peril nerved him with the courage and coolness of despair, and, collecting his faculties, he stood at bay, in readiness for the ominous storm which threatened him.

Withdrawing his attention from Afer, the Emperor devoted a few moments' scrutiny to the Suburan.

'Is this the brother you speak of, woman?' he asked of Tibia.

'Yes.'

'Do you claim the kinship, fellow? Are you her brother?'

'Yes, so please you, I am her brother.'

'Your name?'

'Cestus.'

'And dwelling?'

'In Rome—in the Subura.'

'From the Subura—you have that appearance. From one of the darkest holes therein.'

'There are some powerful and wealthy people in the Subura, Caesar, and we cannot all choose the best spots therein.'

[pg 412] 'Bandy no words. Do you know the maiden there by you?'

'Yes—no one better. She is the granddaughter of the noble Fabricius there.'

'How, then, came she to be living as the child of the woman your sister?'

'I took her secretly away from the mansion of her grandsire fifteen years ago, all but three months less a day. I have kept the reckoning carefully—ask the noble Fabricius if I am not right.'

'He has already told me this—he speaks truly, to the very day,' said Fabricius.

'Are you not afraid to confess this villainy?' said Tiberius sternly.

'It is because I wish to make the noble Fabricius some amends for the wrong, and for another reason, which all will soon understand.'

'Why did you tell the woman, your sister, that you took her from one Balbus, a wealthy man?'

'Because I did not choose to let out my secret and mention names—the time was not ripe then to bring the matter forward, and I was afraid it might be meddled with, and harm done instead of good. There was no such person as Balbus.'

'What do you mean by the time being not ripe? Had you seen or heard of her since you first left her in Surrentum?'

'Not once.'

'It may be concluded from that you cared nothing whether she were alive or dead during all that time—is that so?'

'Not so much as to take me to Surrentum to find out, I confess.'

'Then why, after all that long silence, did you resolve to go to Surrentum! Say, what was your reason in stealing the child and hiding it away for fifteen years in order to restore it again?'

[pg 413] 'So please you, Caesar, the child was no more to me than any other, but she was of great importance to my patron, and he bargained and paid me seventy sestertia to secretly kill it. I was too soft-hearted to make away with it altogether, so I took it to Surrentum quietly and unknown to him, and there she has remained till now, as you see.'

'And who is this patron?'

'He stands there before you—Titus Afer.'

'It's a lie—a damnable lie!' shouted the knight. 'Dog! vagabond! whoever thou art, how darest thou say such a thing?'

His black eyes blazed amid the deathly pallor of his face, and a thrill of astonishment passed through the bystanders. Even Livia leaned forward in her seat with rapt attention.

'Have a care,' quoth Cestus, shrinking back, 'or he will knife me again, as he did before.'

'Command yourself, Afer,' said Tiberius drily; 'you shall have plenty of opportunity to reply.'

'Am I to be traduced by such a villain, whom I never saw before? And in the face of these present? Do you, Fabricius, my uncle, whom I have served and loved as a son so long—do you countenance it in silence thus? Oh, monstrous! To be so gulled by a cunning knave after all that has been practised on you in the same fashion, and thus calmly to listen to such an outrage on your own flesh and blood—shame!'

'Caesar has said you will have an opportunity, at a proper time, of disproving what this man says. Let us proceed and seek for the truth, and woe upon the evildoer,' said Fabricius in hollow tones.

'Ay, indeed, woe upon him,' said Afer loudly.

'Have you, then, cast me off, patron? Do you disown me after all my services?' observed Cestus, with a grin.

'No more of that, Suburan,' cried Tiberius. 'It is a grave charge to make against one of the rank and family of Titus Afer. Beware, if it be an idle piece of mischief.'

'It's nothing but sober truth, Caesar.'

'Lying, cunning knave!' hissed the knight.

'It is easily explained,' continued Cestus, with a rough laugh; 'the noble Fabricius is vastly rich and his nephew wanted it all to himself—the girl was in the way.'

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'Execrable wretch!' cried Afer, beside himself with terror and fury. He made a spring towards the Suburan, but those near him clung to his garments and arrested the movement. The Suburan, on his part, bounced back precipitately, and then seeing the knight's advance stayed, broke out into a jeering, but, at the same time, nervous laugh.

'Peace, I say again, Afer,' said Tiberius more sternly; 'the justness of your cause can surely well await until the end. Go on, Suburan, and relate the whole of your story of this affair. Add nothing, omit nothing, and be as brief as possible.'

Cestus did as he was required, and revealed the full extent of his relations with the knight, on whose pallid brow the perspiration gathered in drops with the violence of his emotions.

Step by step the pitiless tale went on, laying bare, with extreme minuteness, the whole history of the connection between noble and vagabond from its commencement. Nothing was omitted down to the last violent meeting by the Circus Maximus. Thence, in conclusion, the Suburan ran over the occurrences which we have already described.

'And that is everything, Caesar,' he said, when he had finished. 'Every word I have said is truth—I swear it, by all the gods. If it were a lie, should I have been fool enough to have made myself out to be the thief? No, it is when thieves fall out that honest men get their own. I don't seek to hide myself—not I; but for the man's sake, who tempted me and hired me, I have made a clean breast of it and exposed myself. He paid me at last with a dagger thrust, like a false-hearted coward as he is, and now I'm even with him. See, here is the place—look at it for yourselves, and believe your own eyes!'

He hastily withdrew his tunic sufficiently to disclose the recently-healed scar in his left side, where Afer had struck his desperate blow.

'Lying knave, this is some slash received in a drunken night-brawl in a Suburan sty, if it be there you dwell! The whole story is a fable, a cursed lie,' broke in Afer again, whose aspect was ghastly to behold. 'I know him not! Is this a return for my love, uncle? Shame that you should suffer it!'

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'Patience!' said Tiberius, 'let us finish. Fabricius, you have heard him confess that he decoyed you from your house, on a certain night, with a false tale about a comrade who was sick, and wished to see you, concerning your lost granddaughter—is it true, and do you recognise him?'

'It is true enough,' replied Fabricius, whose horror-stricken feelings were displayed distressingly in his voice and demeanour; 'I seemed to remember his face again, and a thousand times, from Rome hither, have I tried to bring him more exactly to my mind. But now, as he related the occurrence, I recognised him—yes, it is the same wretch who came to me that night. His description of what occurred is perfect—it is too well graven on my mind. But for the timely appearance of the troop of Pretorians with Martialis the Centurion, the wretch would have succeeded only too well in his evil intent. This new infamy comes unexpectedly on me, Caesar, and it tries me hard—'

'Wine, and a seat for Fabricius,' said Tiberius; and the attendants flew to obey.

'Am I to bear this? Am I to listen to this'—broke in Afer.

'Peace, I say,' said Tiberius; 'drink and rest, Fabricius.'

The old senator drank the wine the attendants brought for him, and sank with trembling limbs

into the chair they placed for him.

'If what you have told us is true, Suburan,—and it is scarcely credible you would invent a tale to incriminate yourself to such a degree,—then your actions bring you within the reach of the rods of the lictors, and of the cord,' resumed Tiberius, 'but due attention shall be given to this at a proper time. What concerns us now is the identity of the child. Give us, therefore, the proofs that she is what you assert her to be.'

'I have, already, given them to the noble Fabricius, so please you,' said Cestus.

'My slave bears them—bring them hither, Natta!' said Fabricius.

The steward came forward before Caesar with the package of child's garments, and displayed them to Tiberius on bended knee, whilst Fabricius attested them—particularly the amulet.

'Come hither, woman,' said Tiberius to Tibia; 'do you know these things?'

[pg 416] 'They are what the child wore when she came to us—we took them off and kept them.'

'They are not the dress of a poor man's child. Did such a thought not strike you when you saw them at first.'

'Yes; I asked him how she came by them, and he said her father had been very poor, so poor that a rich family had befriended him out of charity, and had dressed her in some cast-off clothes.'

'That's true! I told her so,' said Cestus.

'The memory of a liar should always be good,' cried Afer; 'this vagabond's memory is only equalled by his lies—they are all of a prodigious nature. Yet I doubt if they are as monstrous as the credulity which sucks them in.'

'What more remains to ask these people, Fabricius? Question them if you will,' said Tiberius.

'I have nothing to add to what your highness has ably said,' replied Fabricius, rising from his seat. 'I have already satisfied myself, by inquiries in Surrentum, that this woman is worthy, honest, and estimable in the opinion of the townspeople, and that her husband was likewise esteemed for the same qualities. Her word, therefore, is to be trusted, and it bears out the assertions of her misguided brother. I will tell you that some weeks ago I received a letter, saying that my grandchild was alive, and enclosing a piece of ribbon, which lies there before you. It is of unusual pattern. I went to the child's room, and there found some more of the self-same fabric. I had been imposed upon many times, but this was the first news I had heard, which seemed to strike to my heart with the weight of conviction. It was like a message from the grave. I was deeply moved. A few nights ago this man appeared before me in my house, and related what you have heard, with the exception of the vile trick by which my own life was attempted. He brought these things as proofs of his words. I can find no flaws in his evidence, and I accept it. So please you, Caesar, here are two slaves of my household who served the mother and grandmother of this child. The memory of the mother should be strong within them. Let them say. Look upon this maiden, Natta and Verrus, and answer truly, as your hearts tell you, if she recall the image of the dead Fabricia, my daughter, your mistress.'

[pg 417] 'We have already looked upon her, master,' replied Natta for both. 'She is too near alike not to be the child of the dead Fabricia.'

'We are all agreed as to the marked resemblance to the gem,' observed Caesar.

'I am satisfied; my heart—everything tells me she is my Aurelia,' said Fabricius fervently.

'Then it becomes Afer's turn, for which he burns, to refute the charge which has been brought against him,' Tiberius continued.

All eyes turned now upon the white, haggard visage of the knight, as he stood with tightly-folded arms and compressed lips.

'I will be brief. I deny it all—it is an infamous lie, invented to impose upon a credulous old man,' said he. 'You have taken an unfair advantage; it would have been, at least, manly to have warned me. You have your witnesses gathered, and paid to brazen it out. Once concoct a tale, and the rest is easily arranged. Now, however, I hear of this for the first time. I have nothing to defend me but my bare word. Who am I to find in this island to support me, when even my uncle will not turn an ear to me? Long and bitter experience cannot cure his credulity. He swallows a plausible tale now as eagerly as formerly, when the child was first missing—only, with the difference, that in his present delusion he has no scruple in allowing suspicions to be raised of his own flesh and blood.'

'I have not spoken one word to you, much less made a charge against you, though, like yourself, I have listened to one. Your conclusions are hasty, therefore,' said Fabricius sternly; 'you are under no restraint; you will be at liberty to gather what witnesses you may, and do anything you can to disprove what has been said. No one will be more pleased than myself to know of your success. I do not condemn on the word of one man; at the same time, it is incumbent on you to

refute him. It is a grave charge.'

'And too true to be upset, is it not, patron?' remarked Cestus coarsely. 'Your lips are glib enough as ever, but your false, cowardly heart is shrivelled within you, at this moment, for fear, I know right well.'

[pg 418] 'Silence, vagabond!' cried Tiberius; 'Afer, you have been taken unawares it is true; but, as you declare yourself innocent, you need feel no concern on the score of this charge.'

'I do not know,' replied Afer scornfully; 'too often the innocent suffer—especially, when it is in the interest and inclination of some one that they should be the scapegoat. My worthy uncle lost his grandchild, and now resolves to replace her at all hazards. By a perfectly natural hallucination, he persuades himself that he sees her in the person of the potter's girl; whatever consequences follow matters nothing to him.'

'There shall be no suffering of the innocent, or of any one, in this sad matter, except by the pangs of self-accusing conscience,' said Fabricius; 'it remains with yourself to disprove the charge or not. If you do not, you know as well as I what judgment will be meted out to you, though you still walk at liberty. I am satisfied, for my part, with the recovery of my child; deal with the rest, which concerns you, as you will.'

'You are too liberal and slack of dealing, noble Fabricius,' said Tiberius: 'it would be better for all concerned to unravel the matter completely.'

'It touches my nephew's honour—I leave it in his hands,' replied Fabricius.

'Be it so. But yet a word or two more, Afer,' observed Tiberius; 'turn to this ruffian of the Subura once more. He has given a very minute description of an alleged acquaintance with you lasting over many years. Is it possible that you do not know him?'

'No—save for a lying scoundrel,' returned Afer; 'but of what avail is my word?'

'He must then be a scoundrel of exceptional ingenuity and imagination. What say you to this, Suburan?'

'Why, it is easy enough for him to say that in this place,' replied Cestus, with a laugh; 'but in the city he would not dare. He is but plunging himself deeper into the mud when he denies me. It is not a simple thing to throw off altogether a friendship of eighteen years!'

'Friendship!—execrable villain,' hissed the knight.

'As you please, patron; you were always fertile in pretty names,' retorted the other, shrugging his shoulders.

[pg 419] 'It must be just as easy for you to prove the existence of eighteen years' connection,' said Tiberius.

'Ay, in the city, where plenty of people could be found to help me; but here—stop! will you send for his slave, a Greek lad named Erotion?'

Afer started. These unlooked-for words shot a thrill of terror to his heart and roused him to desperation.

'He shall not come,' he cried fiercely. 'You will terrify him into bearing false witness against me. You are banded against me. I claim a suitable delay, until I can reach Rome, to gather evidence against this conspiracy.'

'You are unreasonably moved, Afer; we may as well listen to what your slave has now to say as to wait longer. It cannot make any possible difference to you, whether he speak the truth now or then,' remarked Caesar grimly. 'Bring the slave hither, if he be in the palace.'

Zeno knew that he was close at hand and went to fetch him. In the few moments' interval the strained attention of the company relaxed into a low murmur of conversation. Caesar sat with his cheek on his hand and his eyes fixed on no one in particular. The Prefect stole round to the side of his friend Afer and whispered, 'What is all this, Afer?'

'You have heard, like me, for the first time, Prefect,' replied the other, 'the conspiracy of a rogue.'

'A clever rogue, by Hercules,' observed the other, and at that moment Zeno re-entered with the young Greek Erotion.

'Come hither into the midst,' said Caesar.

Erotion, with a look of mingled astonishment and alarm, cast an uneasy glance around, whilst bethinking himself of any misdeed which was about to be visited upon him. He came forward into the middle and betrayed unmistakable surprise at seeing Cestus. His master's eyes were, moreover, fixed on him with a peculiar, meaning expression which he failed to interpret, and which tended to further embarrass him.

'Are you the slave of Domitius Afer, called Erotion?' demanded Caesar.

'I am.'

'Stand forward a step, Suburan. Now, slave, look at that man and say whether you know him.'

[pg 420] The young slave's eyes instinctively turned a fleeting sidelong glance at Afer ere he complied, whereupon Tiberius peremptorily bade him turn his back on his master.

'Look upon no one but him I have pointed out to you; speak truly and fear not. If you speak false, Caesar has the means of discovering it, and then woe upon you. Do you know him?'

'Yes,' was the trembling reply.

'His name?'

'Cestus.'

'Where and when have you seen him?'

'In Rome, in various places.'

'Where did you see him first?'

'In the Subura, I think.'

'What took you there?'

'I bore a message from my master.'

'To this man?'

'Yes.'

'Do you remember that message?'

'It was a command for him to meet my master.'

'Where?'

'I forget.'

'How long ago was this?'

'About three years, I think—I cannot be certain.'

'How long have you been the slave of Afer?'

'Nearly four years.'

'Have you ever seen this man since then?'

'Yes.'

'What business had you with him?'

'Only to tell him where my master was to see him.'

'Have you ever seen him in the house of your master?'

'Yes—once, not long ago.'

'Have you ever had any other business with him?'

'No.'

'Have you ever seen this man in company with your master?—answer!'

'I have.'

'Enough then for the present—you may go.'

When the slave had left the room there fell a momentary deep silence upon all present, ominous and painful.

[pg 421] 'Titus Afer, do you now deny all knowledge of this man Cestus?' said Tiberius in sardonic tones.

With his arms folded, and his eyes fixed before him, Afer remained as if turned to granite, unheeding of everything whilst his slave unconsciously dashed all hope of escape away.

'Do you deny all knowledge of this man Cestus?' repeated Tiberius.

'I have already done so,' replied Afer stolidly; 'I refuse to say more. I am prejudged—it is useless to say more.'

Another silence fell on the room and the Prefect frowned and fidgeted. But the Emperor seemed in no hurry to relieve the embarrassing stillness.

'There has been no judgment delivered so far,' he said at length. 'Do you impugn the words of your slave?'

'He is a Greek, and a born liar,' said Afer bitterly.

Thrasullus and Seleucus the philosophers, both of them Greeks, pricked up their ears at the insinuation, and reared their heads in indignation.

'Greek or no Greek, do you say that he has now lied?' said Tiberius.

'I say no more—it is useless,' replied Afer abruptly.

'Good! Then the matter shall be transferred to Rome and probed to the bottom forthwith,' said Tiberius sternly, as he sat up; 'I command it, and it is no less due to society. Prefect, I give Domitius Afer and this man Cestus into thy care. Let them be conveyed to the city and handed over to the charge of the Pretors there, who shall examine fully into the truth, with the help of whatever witnesses are forthcoming.'

'Noble Fabricius, remember your pledge to me,' said Cestus, as alarm began to get the upper hand of the exultation which had hitherto lighted his coarse visage.

'Upon his full confession I promised this man that he should come to no hurt,' said Fabricius, immediately rising from his seat. 'I pray you will not see fit to cause me to break faith.'

'Granted, Fabricius,' returned the Emperor graciously; 'nevertheless I insist on a full inquiry. You must attend the court with the woman and the maiden if required.'

'One other request, Caesar.'

[pg 422] 'Go on.'

'The headstrong boy—the Centurion Martialis, who offended in his love for this girl—I beseech you show clemency to him, and pardon his youth and hot blood. He is loyal and brave, and his desperation carried him away.'

'How say you, Prefect,' said Tiberius, turning to Sejanus; 'is your Centurion to go scot free of his behaviour?'

'I am of the same opinion as Fabricius, and think he has been sufficiently punished. Caesar may well overlook a boyish rashness,' replied Sejanus.

'Good! Then I yield to you. He shall be released, but I will not altogether pass over his offence. I will relieve him of his centurionship for a while, as a salutary discipline to remind him of his fault. As a citizen of the plain coat he will be able to devote more time to his wife. Fabricius, you dine with me to-night.'

So saying the Emperor rose smiling, and, leaning on his gigantic Nubian, passed into the inner apartment. When he had disappeared the others departed by degrees, full of interest and speculation on what had passed.

Sullen and impenetrable, Afer refused to enter into any intercourse, despite the Prefect's efforts for that purpose; and Sejanus, therefore, shrugging his shoulders, left him in the apartment which was appointed to him, until the time came to proceed to Rome.

[pg 423]

CHAPTER IV.

Escaping from the throng into privacy with his recovered child, Fabricius poured out upon her all the endearments of a nature transported with joy and thankfulness. His fervent warmth, and almost childish delight, touched Neæra very deeply, but yet it was impossible for her to respond as freely. She was still the humble cottage girl, and the stranger patrician awed her somewhat. In addition to this, the rapid bewildering occurrences and disclosures of the afternoon had left her in a state of confusion. She seemed to exist in the midst of a strange dream, and her labouring thoughts were dogged by unbelief.

All perplexities vanished for the time at the sudden appearance of her lover within the room. He came, not with the haggard look and the attendant guard of a desponding prisoner, but free, alone, and smiling. With a low cry she sprang toward him and was clasped in his arms. Here, at least, was no place for doubt; and, on his breast, she peacefully wept away all the darkness and misery which had loaded her mind so grievously during the last terrible days.

'You are sadly pale and thin,' he murmured, as he touched her cheek caressingly, after the first moments of her emotion had passed away. 'Have they not treated you well?'

'Quite well.'

'The gods be praised—it is more than I once looked for,' he said fervently.

'But all is well now, and you are free,' she said, looking up into his face, and smiling through her glittering tears. 'Shall we not go soon from this place?'

'You, doubtless, my sweet; your duty lies with your grandsire. Does she go back to Rome with you, Fabricius?'

[pg 424] 'Ay truly,' answered the old man, who was watching them with infinite satisfaction, 'and you also.'

'Ah, if I knew it were so!'

'Then rest assured—it is the will of Tiberius.'

'Then if this sweet girl's will be in unison with Caesar's I will not strive against my fate—I await her decree.'

'What Caesar commands I cannot forbid, and must fain put up with,' said she demurely.

'Then I will go; but circumstances are altered since I last saw thee. You have been transformed from the poor potter's girl. Once you had scruples in matching with one out of your own station. Do you still keep them? Will you now stoop to a poor Pretorian?'

'You took great labour to remove the scruples I had then—would you now bring them back again?' she said.

'Yes, if I might plant them in myself for you to charm away—it would be a task I could never weary of.'

'But I should—so let us not begin,' she replied, with a divine smile.

'What is all this muttering between you?' cried Fabricius, growing impatient.

'I am asking her if she thinks as kindly of me now that she is changed from the potter's child into the granddaughter of Fabricius,' replied Martialis.

'Well, and what says she to that? Come, child, let us hear your sweet notes,' said Fabricius; 'he that bearded Caesar in his own hall for your sake is worthy of some reward.'

'I have already given him all I have to give,' she said, smiling and blushing upon her lover.

'What in the world can better it, my sweet Neæra?' responded Lucius with a fervent kiss.

'Neæra no longer, but Aurelia,' cried Fabricius.

'Neæra she must ever be to me,' said Lucius.

* * * * *

[pg 425] Here we will leave Martialis in his prime, with the crown of his life in the person of a beloved wife and noble offspring. One of his sons, named after himself, was a man of learning and taste, and is immortalised in the letters of his friend and namesake, the great Roman epigrammist. We cannot refrain from concluding with that epistle of the latter which relates to the mansion of old Fabricius, and we present it in a well-known translation:—

'On the long ridge of the Janiculan Hill lie the few acres belonging to Julius Martialis; land more blessed than the gardens of the Hesperides. Secluded retreats are spread over the hills, and the smooth summit, with gentle undulations, enjoys a cloudless sky; and while a mist covers the hollow valleys, shines conspicuous in a light all its own. The graceful turrets of a lofty villa rise gently toward the stars. Hence you may see the seven hills, rulers of the world, and contemplate the whole extent of Rome, as well as the heights of Alba and Tusculum, and every cool retreat that lies in the suburbs, with old Fidenæ and little Rubra, and the fruit-bearing grove of Anna Perenna, which delights in virgins' blood. Thence may be seen the traveller on the Flaminian and Salarian roads, while his carriage is unheard, so that its wheels

are no interruption to gentle sleep; neither is it broken by the cry of the boatswain or the noise of hawsers, although the Mulvian bridge is near, and ships are seen gliding swiftly along the sacred Tiber. This country box, or rather mansion, is rendered additionally agreeable by the welcome of its owner. You will imagine it to be your own; so ungrudgingly, so liberally is it thrown open to you, and with such refined hospitality.... You now who think all these attractions insignificant, cultivate, with a hundred spades, cool Tibur or Praeneste, and give the slopes of Setia to one single husbandman, whilst I, for my part, prefer to all your possessions the few acres of Julius Martialis.'

THE END.

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The table of contents, which was not present in the original book, has been added to the electronic version.

Variations in spelling and hyphenation have not been changed.

Following changes have been made to the text:

- [page 45](#), quote mark added before "I act", period changed to comma after ["answer"](#)
- [page 62](#), period changed to comma after "patron"
- [page 73](#), quote mark added after "Pretorians?"
- [page 107](#), comma added after "freedman", quote mark added before ["See"](#)
- [page 110](#), quote mark added after "goddess."
- [page 233](#), quote mark added after "but—"
- [page 246](#), period added after "look"
- [page 259](#), quote mark added after "aristocrat."
- [page 289](#), quote mark added after "not!"
- [page 319](#), quote mark added after "requirements,"
- [page 364](#), "scrunity" changed to "scrutiny"
- [page 376](#), "to" added before "proceed"
- [page 394](#), quote mark added after "nephew."
- [page 415](#), quote mark added after "Fabricius,"
- [page 418](#), "things" changed to "thing"

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