

pouring from his body, his face was as grey as the sand of the arena, the fear of death had raised the death-sweat on his brow.

His breath came and went hot and panting through his nostrils, his eyes, dilated with terror, were vainly searching for the cowering enemy.

Once more he turned to run. The panther seemed to be playing with him. A dozen times it could have reached him, a dozen times it bounded to one side, giving his prey another chance to run, another short respite for the agony of despair.

Men, women and children screamed with excitement. No longer did they cheer the handsome young patrician, no longer did they throw roses at his feet. They shouted to him to run because they knew that running was no use. They urged the panther to leap because they fanned its rage with their screams.

"Habet! Habet!" they shouted with every bound of the ferocious creature.

"Habet! Habet!" now that Hortensius at last paused in his run.

He stood quite still for a veil had descended over his eyes. The whole arena began to spin and to dance before him, the marble columns were twisted awry, thousands upon thousands of distorted faces grinned hideously upon him. Over the trees and the grass and the stream there was a film of red, the colour of blood, and through this film--which grew thicker and thicker as he gazed--he saw nothing but just opposite to him, across the width of the arena, towering high above everything around, the tall figure of Dea Flavia with her white dress falling straight from the shoulders, her fair hair crowned with diamonds, her face white as her gown and her lips parted as if uttering a cry of horror.

The next moment that cry--it was a woman's cry--did rend the air from, end to end of the gigantic enclosure, and the cry was echoed and re-echoed by thousands and thousands of throats, as the panther, taking steady aim, leaped straight for the man.

The noise became deafening: men, women, children, everyone screamed, and right through this whirling orgy of sound a voice was shouting, strong and mighty as that of Jupiter when he sends his decrees thundering forth into the air.

"By his throat, Hortensius! By his throat, and I'll at him whilst he pants!"

Hortensius put out his hands with a last instinctive sense of self-preservation. The mighty voice rang in his ear, it reverberated through the hot noonday air, and clanged against the copper gates as if a powerful arm had smitten them with the axe of Jove.

The man saw the beast's leap, felt the hot breath in his face, felt the two yellow eyes gleaming on him like burning suns, and his ears buzzed with the din of thousands of shrieks; then he suddenly felt himself uplifted, whilst an agonised roar from the throat of a wounded beast overfilled the seething cauldron of sound.

The praefect of Rome was standing in the arena now, and in his strong arms lifted high above his head he held the swooning man, whilst some few paces away the panther was lying prone, with blood streaming from its quivering jaws.

It had all happened so suddenly that no one afterwards could say how it occurred. But there were those who retained a vision of the whole thing and afterwards shared their impressions with others.

Everyone recollected when my lord Hortensius first entered the arena and the iron gates closed in behind him, that a general feeling of horror fell upon the entire public when it realised that all means of safety, all chance of escape had been removed with those silken ladders, and that the young patrician had in truth been left at the mercy of a powerful brute, goaded to madness through baffled desire for blood.

At that same moment the praefect of Rome disappeared from the imperial tribune, and the terrible scene between the hunting beast and the hunted man had begun.

Time for the man to run round the arena! Time for the brute to stalk and play with its prey! Time, it seems, for the praefect of Rome to make his way from the imperial tribune to the east end of the arena, where was stationed the city guard of which he had full control!

A few precious seconds in making the soldiers understand what he wanted, a few more seconds to command them to obey for they stood as a phalanx against the gate, thinking the praefect mad in desiring to enter the arena--a few more seconds and Taurus Antinor was at last in the arena, shouting to the hunted man to have at the brute with his hands.

But Hortensius was weak from exhaustion brought on by a life of luxury and idleness and by the excitement of the last two days. He put out two feeble hands, and the panther was already on the leap.

And by that time Taurus Antinor was between him and the brute. With a blow of his hard fists--fashioned in far off Northern lands--and with the strength that is given to the barbarians of that sea-washed shore, he had drawn blood from the creature's jaw and sent it rolling back on its haunches, momentarily dazed.

Only momentarily, however, whilst two hundred thousand throats yelled in unison:

"Habet! Habet! Habet!"

A precious moment that! With a maddened beast, a swooning man and no arms save a pair of fists, hard as iron, made with a hand slender and supple like the finest tempered steel.

And while the panther fell back roaring, and before it could prepare for a new spring, Taurus Antinor had seized the swooning man. It was his turn to run now, for he had but a few seconds in which to save the life of his bitterest foe.

Straight to the walls of the arena did he run, and his voice was heard

speaking loudly and commandingly:

"The arcade, man! Rouse thyself! The arcade! The rings in the columns! Quick!"

It needed the strength of a bullock to accomplish the deed: that, or the strength which comes from unbendable human will. The man, only half-conscious, returned to his senses by the force of that same will. The instinct of life was strongest in the end, and when Taurus Antinor leapt upon the ledge and hoisted Hortensius' body high up above his head, the young man, with the final effort borne of hope and built upon despair, reached up and caught one of the massive rings imbedded in the bases of the fluted columns.

For a few seconds he remained suspended, his body swinging against the marble wall, whilst the public cheered with an enthusiasm that knew no bounds. From below the praefect helped to push the feeble body up, then another jerk, a pull upwards, a push, and Hortensius Martius had found safety in one of the niches of the arcade.

"Hail to the praefect of Rome! Hail!" came in a continuous, thunderous roar from every corner of the arena, even as with a sudden bound the black panther had sprung upon Taurus Antinor, and, catching him unawares, had felled him to the ground.

CHAPTER XXIII

"Well done, thou good and faithful servant."--ST. MATTHEW XXV. 21.

A tumult amongst the people?

Aye! it was here now fully aroused. The praefect of Rome was popular with the plebs. His action in the arena had called forth unbounded enthusiasm. When he fell rolling into the sand, with the black panther snarling above him, his steel-like grip warding for the moment the brute's jaws from off his throat, the people broke out into regular frenzy.

"The praefect! the praefect!" they shouted.

Men climbed down along the gradients leaping over other men, determined to jump down twelve feet into the arena in order to rescue the praefect from the jaws of the ferocious beast.

But above in the imperial tribune the Cæsar sat snarling like the panther and rubbing his hands with glee. His trap had been over-successful, one by one the arch-traitors fell headlong into it. First Hortensius Martius, that young fool! What mattered if he had escaped from a ravenous panther? The claws of a vengeful Cæsar were sharper far than those of any beast of the desert.

And now Taurus Antinor! the praefect of Rome! the man of silence and of integrity! the idol of the people, the scorner of Cæsar's godhead. Vague

rumour had reached Caligula of the praefect's strange sayings, his refusal to enter the temples and to sacrifice to the gods. People said that the Anglicanus worshipped one who claimed to be greater than Cæsar and all the deities of Rome.

Well, so be it! There he lay now in the dust, a huddled mass of man and beast, the sand of the arena reddened with his blood. Caligula screamed like the rest of his people, but his cry was:

"Habet! Habet! Habet!" And in a frenzy of rage and hate his thumb pointed downwards, downwards, as if it were a dagger which he could plunge into the Anglicanus' throat.

But the city guard were the first to break their bounds. Even whilst the imperial madman exulted and shrieked forth his murderous "Habet!" they had rushed to the rescue of their praefect.

The powerful grasp on the panther's throat was on the point of relaxing; the brute was digging its claws in the shoulders of the fallen man, and he, feeling faint with loss of blood, looked upon death as it stared down at him from the beast's golden eyes, and all that he was conscious of was the feeling that death was good.

When the city guard rushed to his rescue, and by dint of numbers and strength of steel tore the ferocious creature from the body of its prey, Taurus Antinor lay a while half conscious. He heard the cry of the people round him, he felt a shower of sweet-scented petals fall upon him from above, he heard the last dying roar of the panther and a scream of rage from the imperial tribune.

Then the din became deafening: the trampling of feet, the rushing hither and thither, the cries, the imprecations, and from beneath the tribunes in their distant prisons, the roar of caged beasts like the far-off rumbling of thunder.

Taurus Antinor raised himself on his knees. Both his shoulders had been lacerated by the panther; he was bleeding from several wounds about the legs and arms, and his whole body felt bruised and stiff.

But he struggled to his feet, and now, leaning against a large tree trunk which had formed part of the setting of the scene, he tried to take in every detail of what was going on around him. There was, of course, a great deal of shouting and a general stampede in the tribunes of the plebs. In the midst of this shouting, which buzzed incessantly like the war of a great cataract, two cries resounded very distinctly above all the others.

Thousands of people were shouting:

"Hail to the praefect! Hail to the god of valour and of strength! Hail! Taurus Antinor, hail!"

Whilst others cried more dully, yet equally distinctly:

"Death to the tyrant! Death to the madman! Death to Cæsar! Death!"

That he himself was for the moment the object of enthusiasm of this irresponsible crowd, he could not doubt for an instant. That this same irresponsible enthusiasm was leading the crowd to treachery and rebellion was equally certain.

The city guard egged on by the people had forced open the heavy iron gates through which Hortensius Martius had passed a while ago, and which led up the marble steps straight to the imperial tribune.

Taurus Antinor looking up now saw the Cæsar standing pale and trembling, surrounded by his standard bearers, whose attitude seemed strangely irresolute. The Augustas were clinging together in obvious terror, their heads were pressed close to one another, and the jewels in their hair formed a curious shimmering mass of diamonds and rubies which caught the rays of the sun and threw back blinding sparks of prismatic colours. Dea Flavia was not near them. She was standing alone up against the dividing wall of the tribune, and leaning back against it, with eyes closed, and hand pressed against her heart.

All this did Taurus Antinor see, and also that Hortensius Martius, still deathly pale and trembling in every limb, had succeeded in making his way from the arcade where he had found safety, back to the patricians' tribune amongst his friends.

He was standing now in the midst of a compact group composed of those men who had been present two days ago at the banquet in Caius Nepos' house. They stood close to one another whispering eagerly amongst themselves. Hortensius Martius was obviously their chief centre of interest, and young Escanes held his hand concealed within the folds of his tunic.

And Taurus Antinor no longer paused to think. He had forgotten his lacerated shoulder and his bleeding limbs; even the horrors of the past quarter of an hour had faded from his mind. All that he saw was that murder and treachery were walking hand in hand, and that the murder of the insane Cæsar now would mean the death of thousands of innocent victims later on, that it would mean civil strife, and uncountable misery. And all that he heard was the voice of Him Who had bidden him to render unto Cæsar that which was Cæsar's, namely his allegiance, his fealty, his life.

The city guard loved him and knew his voice. He had no trouble in inducing the men to let him pass through their ranks and to mount the steps before them which led to the imperial tribune. They let him pass perhaps because they thought that their praefect would wish to take his revenge with his own hands. The gods themselves would have placed a poisoned dagger in the hand of him who had been so ruthlessly exposed to a most horrible death.

And as Taurus Antinor's massive figure was seen to mount the steps, the audience broke into cheers.

"Hail Taurus Antinor! the god of valour and of strength!"

Whilst more ominous than before came that other cry: "Death to the tyrant! Death to the Cæsar! Death!"

And whilst the city guard followed closely on the footsteps of their praefect, and men among the crowd prepared for the inevitable fight which they foresaw, the women and those who were feeble and pacific waved fans and cloaks about and threw dead roses across the arena, till the whole place seemed like a great pageant of many-coloured flags, over which the midday sun had thrown its veil of gold.

When Taurus Antinor reached the topmost step Caligula caught sight of him, and the intensity of his rage was such that his cheeks turned livid and blotchy and hoarse inarticulate sounds escaped his panting throat.

Even at this same moment the group composed of Escanes and the others seemed to sway in a mass toward the tribune of the Cæsar. They appeared to be consulting Hortensius Martius who had nodded encouragingly. Young Escanes was in the very centre of the group now, his hand was still hidden in the folds of his tunic and the look in his face told Taurus Antinor all that there was to fear.

At his feet as he stepped into the tribune lay his own cloak which he had discarded when first his instinct had prompted him to run to Hortensius' aid. Now he picked it up. It was of dark-coloured stuff, unadorned with the usual insignia of dignity and rank. With it in his hand he ran quickly toward the Cæsar.

Caligula saw him coming towards him, his yellow teeth were chattering in his mouth, he stood there palsied with fear, a prey to a deadly feeling of hate and to one of abject terror.

Even as Taurus Antinor, with a quick gesture, threw his own cloak round the shoulders of the Cæsar and whispered hurriedly:

"Let your praetorian guard escort you quickly to your palace, gracious lord--your life is in danger from the people, and...."

"In danger at thy hands, thou infamous traitor," broke in Caligula with a maniacal yell of rage; "take this then, in remembrance of the Cæsar whom thou hast betrayed!"

And quick as lightning the madman drew a short poniard from beneath his robe, and, uttering a final snarl of satisfied hate and revenge, he plunged the dagger in Taurus Antinor's breast.

Then he snatched the cloak from him, and, wrapping it quickly over his head and shoulders, he called wildly to his guard and fled incontinently from the spot.

CHAPTER XXIV

"The sorrows of death compassed me."--PSALM XVIII. 4.

Dea Flavia lay upon her bed, with wide-open eyes fixed into vacancy above her.

Afternoon and evening had gone by since that awful moment when the whole fell purpose of the Cæsar's plan was revealed to her, and she saw Hortensius Martius standing unarmed and doomed in the arena, face to face with a raging, wild beast. Afternoon and evening had vanished into the past since she saw Taurus Antinor, with Hortensius' body held high over his head, saving one life whilst offering up his own, since she heard that deafening cry of horror uttered by two hundred thousand throats when the panther sprung upon him unawares and felled him to the ground, whilst his blood reddened the sand of the arena.

Afternoon and evening had swooned in the arms of eternity since she saw the terror-stricken Cæsar treacherously stab the man who had rushed forward to save him.

After that last agonising moment she remembered nothing more until she found herself in her own house, lying on her bed, with Licinia's anxious, wrinkled face bending over her.

"What hath happened, Licinia?" she had asked feebly as soon as consciousness had returned.

"We brought thee home safely, my precious treasure," replied the old woman fervently, "all praise be unto the gods who watched over their beloved."

"But how did it happen?" queried Dea with some impatience. "Tell me all that happened, Licinia," she reiterated with earnest insistence, as she raised herself on her elbow and fixed her large blue eyes, in which burned a feverish light, upon the face of her slave.

"Yes! yes! I'll tell thee all I know," rejoined the woman soothingly. "Thy slaves were close at hand in the vestibule of the imperial tribune, and thy litter was down below with the bearers, in case thou shouldst require it. But I had stood on the threshold of the tribune for some time watching thee, for thy sweet face had been pale as death all the morning, and I feared that the heat would be too much for thee. Thus I saw much of what went on. I saw the traitor advance toward the Cæsar, trying to smother him with a cloak. I saw the Cæsar--whom may the gods protect--stab the traitor in the breast, and then leave the Amphitheatre hurriedly, followed by a few among his faithful guard. But my thoughts then were only of thee. I could see thy lovely face white as the maple leaf, and thou wast leaning against the wall as if ready to swoon. The traitor whom the Cæsar had justly punished lay bleeding from many wounds close to thy foot. The next moment I had thee in my arms, having caught thee when thy dear body swayed forward and would have fallen even upon the breast of the dead traitor."

"The traitor?" murmured Dea Flavia then.

"Aye! the praefect of Rome," said Licinia, with a vicious oath. "He had incited the rabble against the Cæsar, and--may his dead body be defiled for the sacrilege!--he was causing the populace to acclaim him as their Emperor, even whilst he raised his murderous hand against him who is the equal of the gods!"

"He was striving to save Cæsar, Licinia, and not to murder him," said Dea Flavia earnestly.

"To save the Cæsar? Nay! nay! my precious, the praefect of Rome tried to murder Cæsar by smothering him with a cloak."

"It is false I tell thee!"

"False? Nay, dear heart, I saw it all, and thou wast beside thyself and knew not rightly what happened. Even a minute later thou laidst in my arms like a dead white swan, and I pushed my way through the soldiers, and past the other Augustas who cowered in the tribune, screaming and wringing their hands. Two of thy slaves were luckily close at hand. Together we carried thee down to thy litter and bore thee safely home for which to-morrow I will offer special sacrifice to Minerva who protected thee."

"And what happened after we were gone?"

"Alas! I know not. They say that the populace became more and more unruly: there were shouts for the praefect of Rome, who fortunately lay dead on the floor of the tribune, and there were even some sacrilegious miscreants who called for death upon the Cæsar."

"Do they say," queried Dea Flavia, speaking slowly and low, "that the praefect of Rome is dead?"

"If he be not dead now," retorted Licinia viciously, for her loyalty to the Cæsar was bound up with her love for Dea Flavia, and treachery to Cæsar meant treachery to her beloved, "If he be not dead now, he shall still suffer for his treason: and if he be dead his body shall be defiled."

"Oh!"

"Aye! a traitor must suffer even in death. His body shall be given to the dogs, his blood to the carrion...."

"Silence, Licinia!" broke in Dea Flavia sternly, "fill not mine ears with thy hideous talk. Every word thou dost utter is impiety and sacrilege, and I would smite thee for them had I but the strength."

"But I am so tired," she added after a slight pause, with a weary little sigh, even whilst Licinia, subdued and frightened, stood silently by: "I would like to sleep."

"Then sleep, my goddess," said the old woman, "I'll watch over thee."

"No! no! I could not sleep if I were watched," rejoined Dea Flavia with the fretfulness of a tired child. "I would rather be alone."

"But thou'lt have bad dreams."

"Order Blanca to lie across the threshold. I can then send her to fetch thee, if I have need of thee."

"I would rather lie across thy threshold myself," muttered the old woman.

"Good Licinia, do as I tell thee," said Dea, now with marked impatience. "And--stay--" she added as Licinia still grumbling prepared reluctantly to obey--"I pray thee find out for me all that is going on in the city. Mayhap Tertius will know what has happened--or Piso.... Go seek them, Licinia, and find out all that there is to know, so that thou canst tell me everything anon, when I wake."

She lay back on her bed with closed eyes whilst Licinia kissed her hands and feet, re-arranged the embroidered coverlet and the downy cushions, and after a while shuffled out of the room.

There was nothing that the old woman loved better than a gossip with Tertius, who was the comptroller of the Augusta's household, or with Piso, who was the overseer of her slaves: and even her fond desire to watch beside her mistress yielded to the delight of holding long and interesting parley with these worthies.

So it was with considerable alacrity that--having deputed the young girl, Blanca, to watch over her mistress--she made her way through the atrium, and thence across the vast peristyle to the quarters of the slaves.

Tertius--the comptroller--had, it appears, sallied forth into the streets, despite the lateness of the hour, in the hope of gleaning some information as to what was going on in the city. Even in this secluded portion of the Palatine, where stood the house of Dea Flavia under the shelter of the surrounding palaces, weird sounds of human cries and of the clashing of steel was penetrating with ominous persistency.

Piso--the overseer--who had remained at home, as he did not feel sufficiently valiant to face once again the disturbance outside, told Licinia all that he had witnessed before he finally found safe haven at home.

It seemed that the tumult in the Amphitheatre had not ceased with the flight of the Emperor, rather that it had grown in intensity when the populace saw the praefect of Rome fall backwards, stabbed by the Cæsar, and the latter disappear hurriedly, followed by a few from among the praetorian guard.

There was no doubt that the temper of the populace had been over-excited by the cruel scenes of a while ago; lust of blood and of tyranny had been fanned to fever-pitch through those very spectacles which the Cæsar himself had provided for the people, with a view to satisfying his own ferocious desires of hate and of revenge.

Now that same fever-heated temper was turning against him, who had fanned it for his own ends.

Caligula had made good his escape, satisfied that his dagger had done its work upon the arch-traitor. He had fled through the private entrance of his tribune, and his guard had rallied round him. But a company of legionaries--some five or six hundred strong--was still in the place, as well as his knights and all his friends, and against these did the wrath of the rabble turn.

The lawless and the rough soon had it all their own way, and the

peaceable citizen who would have liked to get wife and children safely out of the crowd found it well-nigh impossible to make his way through the throng.

After a few moments the disturbance became general; there was a great deal of shouting and presently missiles began to fly about. The rabble attacked the legionaries and a sanguinary conflict ensued. The former was in overwhelming number and succeeded in breaking the rank of the soldiers, and in putting them momentarily to rout.

After this there was a general stampede down and along the gradients of the Amphitheatre, during which hundreds of persons--including women and children--were crushed to death. The scene of confusion seems to have baffled description. Piso, who had succeeded in making his way home in the midst of it all, had even now to wipe his brow, which was streaming with perspiration at the recollection of the horrors which he had witnessed.

Whilst he proceeded with his narrative, Tertius had returned with further news. And these, of a truth, were very alarming. The lower slopes of the Palatine, as well as the Forum and the surrounding streets, were now in the hands of the mob. The few legions who were in the city had been cut off from the Palatine, and though they were making vigorous efforts to break through the close ranks of the crowd, they had, up to this hour, been wholly unsuccessful, owing no doubt to the paucity of their numbers, since the bulk of the army was not yet home from that insensate and mock expedition into Germany.

The whole of the troops in and around the city, including the town and praetorian guard, was on this day computed at less than one thousand, and the mob--so Tertius averred--was over one hundred thousand strong.

The law-abiding citizens had locked themselves up in the fastnesses of their homes, and the Cæsar--so it was believed--was inside his palace with a small detachment of his guard around him, one hundred strong, who already had had to repel numerous attacks delivered by the more forward amongst the rabble.

Tertius had not been able to get far beyond the precincts of the house, for fear had driven him back. The shouts which came from the streets below and from the Forum were ominous and threatening.

"Death to the Cæsar! Death to the tyrant!" could be distinctly heard above the din of stampeding feet, and a low and constant murmur that sounded like distant thunder.

There was no doubt that the Cæsar's life was in grave danger, seeing that only a handful of men stood between him and the fury of an excited populace; and these men were without a leader, for the praetorian praefect had been cut off from them, even as he tried to push his way through the crowd earlier in the day.

Thus, therefore, did this harbinger of evil news resume the situation. Caligula was in his palace, surrounded by the slaves of his household and guarded by a few soldiers against a raging mob--an hundred thousand or more strong--who had formed a ring around the Palatine, and was clamouring for the Cæsar's death. The legionaries, under the command of

faithful Centurions, were cut off from the Palatine and from their Cæsar by the mob whose solid ranks they had hitherto been unable to break. The Augustas and their slaves were also safe within their palaces.

But what Tertius did not know, and was therefore unable to impart to his eager listeners was that the party of conspirators, with Hortensius Martius as their acknowledged leader, were taking advantage of the disturbance to place themselves at the head of the mob, hoping that the cry of "Death to Caligula!" would soon be followed by one of "Hail to the Cæsar! the new Cæsar, Hortensius Martius! Hail!"

CHAPTER XXV

"Watchman, what of the night?"--ISAIAH XXI. 11.

And far away beyond the noise and tumult which ranged around the foot of the Palatine, the honey-coloured moon illumined with her weird and ghostly light the vast arena of the gigantic Amphitheatre, where a company of the town guard, under the command of an aedile, were busy collecting the dead.

A narrow streak of those same ghostly rays found its way through the folds of the curtains which spanned the window of Dea Flavia's room. It peeped in boldly, stirring up myriads of impalpable atoms and whipping them into a living line of silver. It wandered further, and finding a golden head that tossed restlessly upon a silk-covered pillow, it alighted on it, making the white face appear ghostlier still, and the wide eyes to shine like stars.

A timid step shuffled across the floor.

"Blanca, is it thou?" whispered Dea Flavia, as quickly she raised herself up, squatting now upon the bed, with one hand pressed against the pillow and the other to her breast.

"Aye, mistress, it is I!" came in whispered response.

"Well? Have they returned?"

"Aye! gracious lady. Half an hour ago."

"Did they find him?"

"Yes."

"Is he...?"

There was a pause, whilst from afar came that strange low sound of thousands of men murmuring, which is so akin to the booming of the waves upon a rocky shore.

"The praefect of Rome was in a swoon when they found him in the imperial tribune," said the young slave-girl, still speaking under her breath.

"Nolus and Dion carried him to the litter, and once or twice he groaned whilst they carried him."

A gentle breeze wafted the curtains into the room; the rays of the waning moon fell full upon the huddled figure on the bed, with the stream of gold falling each side of the set, pale face, and the large blue eyes now strangely veiled with tears.

"Where is ... where is the praefect now?" asked Dea Flavia.

"In the room out of thy studio, gracious mistress, as thou didst direct. Dion did prepare a couch for him there, and hath laid him down."

"And the physician?"

"The physician hath seen him. He saith that the praefect is weak with loss of blood. His shoulders, arms and legs have been torn by the panther's claws, but these wounds are not deep."

"And ... and the dagger thrust?"

"The physician saith that the dagger must have glanced off the bone. I did not quite understand what he said, and Dion explained it badly."

"He did not say that there was poison in the dagger?"

"I think not, gracious lady; for the physician said that the praefect would soon be well if he were carefully tended. He is very weak with loss of blood."

"Did Nolus and Dion find it difficult to approach the praefect's body?"

"They had to parley with the aedile who was in command, and to give him all the money which my gracious mistress did entrust to them for that purpose."

"After which the aedile made no demur ... and asked no questions?"

"The aedile took the money, gracious lady, and Dion said that he asked no further questions, but allowed the praefect to be borne away."

"That is well," said Dea Flavia, after a brief moment of silence, whilst the girl stood awaiting her further pleasure. "Thou, Blanca, hath served me faithfully, so have Nolus and Dion, my slaves. Ye have earned your reward, and though I am grieved to part from good servants like you, yet will I fulfil my promise, even as I have given it to you. From this hour, thou, Blanca, art a freewoman, and Nolus thy brother, and Dion, thy future husband, are freemen, and the sum of six hundred aurei shall be given unto you to-morrow--two hundred unto each--and may you live long and prosper and be happy, for you have served me well."

Blanca fell upon her knees and kissed the coverlet on which reposed her mistress; but Dea Flavia did not seem to see her. She was squatting on her heels, with body and head erect, and slowly now, like the rosy kiss of dawn upon the snow-clad hills of Etruria, a faint crimson glow spread over her pale cheeks.

Blanca waited irresolute, not liking to leave her mistress before she could be assured that sleep had descended at last on those weary lids. The hour was very late, close upon midnight, and yet the city was not asleep. That constant murmur--like unto the breaking of angry waves--still sent its sinister echo through the still night air, and even in the house of Dea Flavia it seemed that hundreds of eyes were still open, fear having chased sleep away. There was a sound--like the buzzing of bees--that came from the slaves' quarters beyond the peristyle, and from the studio, which lay the other side of the atrium, came the sound of muffled footsteps gliding over the mosaic of the floor.

"Go to bed now, child," said Dea Flavia at last, "thou hast earned thy rest ... and ... stay! Tell Dion and Nulus to remain in the studio, and there to spend the night. They must be ready to go to the praefect if he calls.... Go!"

Then as the girl made ready to obey, the Augusta put out her hand to detain her.

"Wait! Hast seen Licinia?"

"No, gracious lady."

"She is not hovering somewhere near my room?... or in the atrium?"

"No, gracious lady."

"And the night-watchers?"

"They are in the vestibule, gracious lady."

"And all my women?"

"They are all in bed and asleep."

"That is well. Thou canst go."

Blanca's naked little feet made no sound as she crossed the room, and went out by the door which led to the sleeping-chamber of the Augusta's women.

Dea Flavia waited for a while, straining her ears to catch every sound which came from this portion of her palace.

Her sleeping-chamber, together with all those on this floor gave directly on the atrium, which formed a large irregular square in the centre of this portion of the house. The north side of it was taken up with the Augusta's apartments and those of her women, the south side with the reception rooms and with the studio and its attendant vestibules, whilst the main vestibule of the house and the first peristyle gave on either end.

From the main vestibule came the subdued hum of voices, and throughout the house there was that feeling of wakefulness so different to the usual placid hush of night.

Dea Flavia held her breath whilst she listened attentively. In the vestibule it was the night watchmen who were talking, discussing, no doubt, the many events of the day: and that sound--like the buzzing of bees--showed that the women were awake and gossiping, and that up in the slaves' quarters tongues were still wagging, despite Blanca's assurance and the overseer's sharp discipline. But on the other side of the atrium, where were the reception halls and the studio, everything was still.

The young girl threw herself back upon her bed. Sleep refused to visit her this night; the thin streak of silvery moon, which persistently peeped in through the curtain, flicked the tiny atoms in the air until they assumed quaint, minute shapes of their own, like unto crawling panthers and grotesque creatures crowned with a golden halo, and brandishing a mock thunderbolt in one hand and a dagger in the other. Then suddenly all these shapes would vanish, smothered beneath a cloak, and Dea Flavia, still wide awake, would feel drops of moisture at the roots of her hair, and her whole body, as if sinking into a black abyss, where monsters yelled and wild beasts roared and huge, black, snake-like creatures tore the flesh off human bones.

The hours of the night sped on, borne on the weighted feet of anguish and of horror. Gradually, one by one, the sounds in and about the house died away; the slaves in their quarters must have turned over on their rough pallets and gone to sleep, the women close by had done gossiping, only from the vestibule came the slow measured tread of the watchmen guarding the Augusta's house, and from far away that ceaseless, rumbling noise which meant that discontent was awake and astir.

Once more Dea Flavia sat up, unable to lie still. Her golden hair was matted against her temples and in her breast her heart was beating furiously. The waning moon had long since now sunk behind the western clouds, a gentle breeze stirred the curtains with a soft, sighing noise as of some human creature in pain. In the far corner of the room, in a tiny lamp of gold, a tiny wick threw a feeble light around.

Dea Flavia put her feet to the ground. The heat in the room was oppressive; no doubt it was that which had caused her restlessness, and the dampness of her brow. She shuddered now when her bare feet touched the smooth coldness of the mosaic floor, but she stood up resolutely, and anon crossed over to the door which gave on the atrium.

For a few seconds she listened. Everything was still. Then very gently she pushed open the door.

On the marble table, in the centre of the atrium, another light glimmered in a jewelled lamp; but the atrium was vast and the diminutive light did not reach its far corners. The gentle trickle of water along the gutters in the floor made queer, ghost-like sounds, and in the great pots of lilies all round currents of air sent weird moanings in the night.

Dea Flavia, like an ethereal figure clad all in white, and with waves of golden hair shimmering over the whiteness of her gown, glided softly across the atrium.

A tiny vestibule led into the studio, she crossed it, guided by her

"Dost hear their shouts? the villains! the villains! Dost hear Jove's thunder, my beloved? His vengeance is nigh! May his curse descend on the villains and on their children."

"Silence, woman!" commanded the Augusta peremptorily. "Get me a robe--quickly--no, no! not that one," she added, as Licinia, with trembling hands had snatched up the gorgeous jewel-studded gown which Dea Flavia had worn the day before, "a dark robe--haste, I tell thee! go thou fetch it and send Blanca quickly to me."

Moaning and trembling, the woman endeavoured to obey and to make as much speed as her limbs, paralysed with terror, would allow her. She called to Blanca, who together with the Augusta's tire-women had her quarters close at hand, and the young girl hastened to her mistress's room whilst Licinia went in search of a dark-coloured robe.

"The praefect?" whispered Dea Flavia quickly, as soon as she felt assured that she was quite alone with her slave. "Hast seen Dion or Nolus?"

"My brother spoke to me in the atrium just now, gracious mistress," replied Blanca, who seemed scarce less excited than her mistress, "he and Dion heard a thud in the night, which roused them from a brief sleep which they had snatched, for they were very tired ... their long hunt in the Amphitheatre...."

"Yes! yes! go on! I know that they slept ... and they heard a thud ... what was it?"

"They ran to the resting-chamber, gracious lady, and found the praefect of Rome lying senseless on the floor."

"Great Mother!... and what did they do?"

"They lifted him as best they could; for the praefect is over tall and mightily powerful. But they succeeded in laying him back on to the couch, and Dion ran to rouse the physician."

"And now?"

"The physician hath given the praefect a drug to make him sleep, for it seems that fever was upon him with the pain of his wounds and he talked incoherently like one bereft of reason."

"Hush!..." interrupted Dea Flavia hurriedly, "not before Licinia."

Even as she spoke the old woman returned, carrying a robe of dove grey cloth, the darkest one that she could find. She had collected the tire-women round her, and they flocked in her wake like frightened sheep that have been driven into a pen. Licinia herself was evidently the prey of abject terror, for her teeth were chattering, and all the while that she helped her mistress to make a hasty toilet, she uttered low moans as if she were in pain.

"The traitors! the miscreants!" she murmured at intervals.

But Dea Flavia paid no heed to her. Her women had brought her fresh

water, perfumes and fine cloths, and she was hastily bathing her face and hands. Then, she slipped on the dull-coloured robe and Licinia's trembling fingers fastened a girdle round her waist.

And all the while, from far away, came the dull sound of Jove's thunders hurled by his wrath, and above it as a constant din, like the roaring of a tempestuous sea, the hoarse cries which--borne upon the wings of the oncoming storm--seemed to gain distinctness as their echo reached this distant house.

"Dost hear the cries, Blanca?" asked Dea Flavia, as the young slave, leaning out of the narrow window tried to peer out into the street.

"I hear them, gracious lady," replied the girl in an awed whisper.

"And canst distinguish any words?"

"Aye, one word, gracious lady ... Hark!"

And that word sent its dismal echo even to Dea Flavia's ear.

"Death!"

Then Blanca uttered a terrified scream and quickly drew away from the window; from beyond the Palace of Tiberius, there where the new Palace of Caligula reared its gigantic marble pillars above the temples below, a huge column of flames had shot upwards to the sky. And a cry, louder than before and more distinct, came clearly from afar.

"Death to the Cæsar! Death!"

"Ye gods protect him," murmured Dea Flavia fervently.

"They'll murder him! they'll murder him!" shouted Licinia at the top of her trembling voice.

She had fallen on her knees and the other women squatted round her like a huddled-up mass of terror-stricken humanity, with hair undone and pale, quivering lips and staring eyes dilated with fear.

But Dea Flavia, now that she was dressed, took no further notice of them; she left them there on the floor, moaning and whimpering, and hurried out into the atrium. Here too the sense of terror filled the air. Beyond the colonnaded arcade in the corridors and the peristyle could be seen groups of slaves--men and women--squatting together with head meeting head in eager gossip, or clinging to one another in a state of abject cowardice.

Here too, through the open vestibule, the sounds from the streets came louder and more clear. That awful cry of "Death" echoed with appalling distinctness, and to Dea Flavia's strained senses it seemed as if they were mingled with others, more awesome mayhap, but equally ominous of "The praefect of Rome! Where is the praefect of Rome! Hail! Taurus Antinor! Hail."

The noise grew louder and louder, and from where she stood now--it seemed to her that she could trace in her mind the progress of the

rebels, as they spread themselves from the foot of the Palatine and from the Forum, upwards to the heights until they had the palace of the Cæsar completely surrounded.

It was from there that weird cries of terror came incessantly, and in imagination Dea saw an army of cowardly, panic-stricken slaves, huddled together as her own women had been, with palsied limbs and chattering teeth, whilst a handful of faithful men of the praetorian guard were alone left to protect the sacred person of the Cæsar.

Above her, through the apertures in the tiled roof, she could see the sky aglow with lurid crimson, and the smell of burning wood and of charred stuffs filled her nostrils with their pungent odour.

"Death to the Cæsar! Death!" The cry seemed almost at her door. Only the Palace of Tiberius, with its great empty halls and basilicas stood between her and the rallying-point of the rebels.

She called loudly for Tertius--her comptroller--and he came running along from the slaves' quarters with an army of howling men and women at his heels.

"What news, Tertius?" she demanded. "Hast heard?"

"They have surrounded the Cæsar's palace," said Tertius excitedly, "and demand his presence."

"Oh! the sacrilege!..." she exclaimed, "and what doth the Cæsar?"

"He will not appear, and his guards charge the mob as they advance upwards from the Forum. They have invaded the temple of Castor, and already some are swarming in the vestibules of the palace. The guard are behind the colonnades and were holding the crowd at bay with fair success until...."

"Until?" she asked.

"Until some of the rebels skirting the palace, set fire to the slaves' quarters in the rear. The flames are spreading. The Cæsar will be forced to face the people, an he doth not mean to be buried beneath the crumbling walls of his palace!"

"The miscreants have set fire to the palace of the Cæsars?" she exclaimed.

"Alas!" replied the man, "they will force the Cæsar to show himself to them. And they loudly demand the praefect of Rome."

"The praefect of Rome?"

"Aye, gracious lady. The people had thought that the Cæsar killed him; some strove, it seems, to recover his body in the imperial tribune, where he was seen to fall. But the body had disappeared, and the rumour hath gained ground that the Cæsar had it thrown to his dogs."

"It's not true," she cried out involuntarily.

"No, gracious lady. Men of sense do know that it is not true. But an infuriated mob hath no sense. It is like an overgrown child, with thousands of irresponsible limbs. It is tossed hither and thither, swayed by the wind of a chance word. But it were as well, mayhap, if it were true."

"Silence, Tertius, how canst say such a thing."

"I think of the Cæsar, gracious lady," rejoined the man simply, "and of thee. If the mob found the praefect of Rome now alive or dead, then surely would they murder the Cæsar and make of the praefect their Emperor if he lived, their god if he were dead."

And as if to confirm the man's words, the morning breeze wafted through the air the prolonged and insistent cry:

"Taurus Antinor! Hail!"

With a curt word, Dea dismissed her comptroller, and he went, followed by his train of shrieking men and women.

She remained a while silent and alone in the atrium, while the moanings of the slaves and Tertius' rough admonitions to them died away in the distance.

"If the mob found the praefect of Rome now alive or dead," she murmured, "then surely would they murder the Cæsar and make of the praefect their Emperor if he lived, their god if he were dead!"

Dea Flavia cast a quick glance all round her. The atrium itself was deserted, even though from every side beyond its colonnaded arcade came the sound of many voices and those persistent, cowardly groanings which set the young girl's nerves tingling and caused her heart to sink within her, with the presage of impending doom.

Only in the vestibule the watchmen sat alert and prepared to guard the Augusta's house; they were gossiping among themselves and seemed the only men in the place who were not wholly panic-stricken.

The hum of their voices sounded quite reassuring in the midst of the senseless groans of terror which came from the women's quarters near the Augusta's rooms, as well as from the men in the more remote parts of the house.

After that brief moment of hesitation Dea went resolutely toward the studio. She crossed its small vestibule and pushed open the door.

Dion was sitting there on guard as the Augusta had commanded. He rose when she entered.

"The praefect?" she asked hurriedly.

"He sleeps," replied the man.

"Art sure?"

"I peeped in but a few moments ago. His eyes are closed. I think that he

sleeps."

"I would wish to make sure," she said curtly.

Too well-trained, or mayhap too indifferent to show surprise at so strange a desire on the part of the great and gracious Augusta, Dion stood aside respectfully to allow her to pass, then he followed her to the door of the inner room and held aside the heavy curtain, whilst she put her hand upon the latch.

"Dion," she said, turning back to him, "yesterday I gave thee thy freedom, since thou didst serve me well."

"Aye, gracious lady," replied the man as he bent the knee in submissive respect, "and I would kiss thy feet for this, thy graciousness."

"When the city is once more at peace, we'll before the quaestor, and thou and Nolus and Blanca shall all be declared free. But to-day thou art still my slave and must obey me in all things."

"As thou dost command, gracious lady."

"Then, 'tis silence that I do enjoin on thee, Dion," she said earnestly, "silence as to the praefect's presence in my house, until I bid thee speak: on pain of death, Dion, for thou art still my slave."

"I understand, gracious lady."

"Then wait for me now and on peril of thy life allow no one to enter."

But scarce had these words crossed her lips than there rose from the atrium behind her a series of weird sounds, cries, and imprecations, calls for the Augusta and curses on her slaves, as from one who is bereft of reason and screams in his madness.

"The Cæsar!" she murmured, as white to the lips now, she stood rigid by the door whilst her hand fell from the latch.

"Augusta! Augusta!" came the hoarse cries from the atrium, and the hideous, familiar sound of leather thongs whistling through the air reached her straining senses.

She put a finger to her lips, with a quick peremptory gesture to Dion, then she recrossed the studio with a firm step and the curtains of the inner door fell back behind her with a swish.

The next moment she was standing in the atrium facing Caligula, the Cæsar.

CHAPTER XXVII

"How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!"--ISAIAH XIV. 12.

He had a score or so of his guard with him and they remained at some little distance, in a compact group, with their short, bronze-hilted swords naked in their hands.

Caligula was livid. He had donned a dark woollen robe and his head was uncovered. His knees, arms and hands were shaking and his mouth opened and closed as if he were gasping for breath. His eyes were bloodshot and staring out of his head like those of a man who is being strangled.

"Gracious Cæsar!" exclaimed Dea Flavia as soon as she was before him, and with the instinct born of long usage, she bent the knee before him.

"They have trapped me," he murmured inarticulately whilst weird choking sounds escaped his throat. "They have trapped me, hast heard?"

"Alas!"

"The miscreants! the sacrilegious miscreants! the hideous monsters! the villainous reptiles! Aye! punishment will overtake them; they shall rue this day! All Rome shall rue this day: her streets shall flow with blood and I'll invent such tortures for every man as will turn the firmament red with horror ... I'll...."

His mouth was twitching convulsively and his hands clutched spasmodically at his throat. Dea Flavia had risen to her feet, she stood before this raging madman erect and calm, with eyes downcast, for the sight of him filled her with loathing.

Suddenly he ceased in his ravings; a loud crash as of crumbling walls had rent the air, followed by shrieks and loud hissing sounds and that perpetual cry, awesome in its weird monotony:

"Death to the Cæsar! Death!"

Caligula's face was contorted with terror, his cheeks were grey like those of the dead. He made a quick movement forward and suddenly clutched Dea's wrist.

"Dost hear them?" he said in a hoarse whisper.

And she nodded in response.

"They want to kill me ... they have set fire to my house ... I escaped through the crypta.... But they were hard on my heels...."

And as if to confirm his words, the cries of "Death!" again rose in the air; the tramping of feet, the angry murmurs became more loud and appeared to be filling the street close by and tending toward the very door of Dea Flavia's house.

"Ah, monsters! miserable monsters!" shouted the Cæsar, crazy with fear, "to-morrow will come the awful reprisals ... to-morrow ..."

"To-day," broke in Dea Flavia coldly, "the Cæsar is in danger of his life."

"They'll kill me," he cried, whilst once more trembling--akin to palsy--seized his limbs. "They'll kill me, Augusta ... hide me, hide me ere they come."

And he fell on his knees, grovelling on the floor like a fawning beast, with quivering hands clutching the young girl's robe, his forehead beating the ground at her feet.

"Hide me, Augusta," he murmured through his groans, "hide me!... Do not let them kill me."

She drew back in horror and disgust, closing her eyes lest she should see this degradation of the Cæsarship, this breaking down of her highest ideals.

But two days ago this same abject creature had stood beside her, demanding from her obedience and loyalty which she was fully prepared to accord to him. He had called on her fealty in the very name of that Cæsarship which she worshipped and which he was now degrading and lowering to the dust.

Then as now Jove's thunders from afar had proclaimed the wrath of the gods. Then as now Jove thundered his warnings to that man not to defile the majesty of the Cæsars. But two days ago she had still believed in and acknowledged that majesty, she had bent her will, curbed her inclinations, smothered her every girlish inspiration, her every womanly instinct to the dictates of that power which came straight from the hands of the gods; now she felt actual physical nausea at the sight of this pitiable coward, who--wallowing in his own cruelty--had not even the unreasoning pluck of a brute defending its life.

Involuntarily her thoughts flew back to the man who was lying helpless in her house. She saw him in her mind as she had seen him yesterday, bounding into the arena to save another's life: strong and determined--measuring and accepting every risk, looking neither to right nor left whilst he carried his self-imposed burden to safety, and then falling without a groan, felled to the ground by the claws of the panther.

And outside the cries had become quite distinct.

"Death to the Cæsar! Hail Taurus Antinor! Hail!"

The people, in their fury and their exultation, had condemned one man and exalted another. Truly the gods themselves had guided them in their choice. And now it seemed as if the final choice rested with her: as if in some distant shrine, mysterious oracles had spoken and told her that the future of Rome lay in her hands.

And involuntarily she looked down on her hands and saw that they were tiny and weak, and yet one of them would within the next few seconds point the way to Destiny, show her whither she should go, carrying on her giant shoulders the whole empire of the world.

At her feet a cowardly and inhuman creature grovelled, abjectly praying for a life which by its continuance could only bring more sorrow, more horrors and more misery to thousands upon thousands of human beings

dependent on this half-crazy monster.

Behind her, beyond two walls there lay a man amongst men, for whom the people clamoured, whose very presence betokened strength and whose every glance diffused peace. A man born to rule a people and to guide the destinies of an empire, and whose life of simple integrity had yesterday been crowned by an act of sublime sacrifice.

And the choice rested with her.

Her ears were buzzing with the hoarse cries from without: the cry of "Death!" mingling with that of "Hail!"--the name of Cæsar blended with that of the praefect of Rome; and through it all, drowning them by their hideous sound, the groans and shrieks of a bloodthirsty tyrant, brought down to the dust by his own cruelties, and even now thirsting for more.

The choice did rest with her.

She had but to run a few steps to the vestibule and there to call loudly to the populace that even now was invading the slope of the hill toward her house. She had but to rush to her door and to shout boldly:

"The Cæsar is here, and the praefect of Rome is nigh!"

And the twenty men who were waiting with naked swords would be as naught before the onslaught of the people.

She looked round her helpless and dazed whilst the fawning creature on the ground embraced her ankles and kissed her feet, and repeated with frantic persistence:

"Save me, Augusta ... save me ... do not let them kill me.... I have been good to thee.... I am thy guardian--thy Cæsar ... save me...."

"Save thee?" she repeated mechanically, "how can I?"

"Hide me somewhere--where they cannot find me"--he murmured, half raising himself from the ground. "Thou wouldst not give up thy Cæsar to the fury of the populace ... thou wouldst not soil thy hands with the blood of thy kinsman..."

Now he was embracing her knees and his hideous, distorted face was looking up appealingly at her.

"Thou wouldst not soil thy hands with the blood of thy kinsman...."

Even as these words escaped his flaccid lips a roll of thunder louder than any previous one came echoing from behind the Aventine Hill. Dea Flavia shuddered. Was it Jove's warning, or already Jove's curse, the curse of the gods on her for the treachery of her thoughts?

"Thou wouldst not soil thy hands with the blood of thy kinsman...." he repeated pitiably.

"No! no!" she said hurriedly. "Not that.... I'll help thee!... What can I do?"

"Let me hide in thy house...."

"Where?"

He pointed to the studio.

"There!" he said.

"No! no!" she exclaimed, and instinctively her arms were held out, as if she would protect a sacred shrine.

"Thy workroom is private," he urged in tones of abject entreaty; "no one would venture there ... only thy women slaves ever cross its threshold.... I should be quite safe in the inner room ... thy women would not betray me ... thou hast some that are mute ... they could attend on me there, and no one would know of my presence until this outrage hath subsided.... In a few hours mayhap the praetorian guard will succeed in forcing a passage through the raging mob ... my legions too are on their way from Germany ... they will be here soon ... they were only four days' march behind me and my convoy ... they are but a couple of days' march now from the city gates ... I could stay in there ... in thy private room ... with a few men to protect me ... and thy women to attend on me ... no one else would know...."

He talked volubly, at times incoherently, with hoarse voice and quaking lips. She tried with all her might to free herself from his convulsive clutch--but he clung to her like a dying man would cling to the last breath of life--like a drowning man would cling to the raft on which he might find safety.

"In there----" he entreated.

"No--no----"

"I should be safe and nobody would know."

And now he raised himself to his feet, and swaying like a drunken man he turned toward the studio, calling to his guard to follow him. But she was still between him and that door, between this raving, bloodthirsty maniac and a helpless man who was lying wounded and in a drugged sleep on a bed of sickness.

The oracle had not yet finished speaking. The last word still hung in the air. Her choice had not yet been made: but at this moment when Caligula and his guard turned toward the studio door, she knew that it would not be long in the making. Never should that demented tyrant cross the threshold of her studio and wreak his hatred and revenge upon the fallen hero. Rather than that should happen she would call to the people, and hand over the Cæsar--her kinsman--to an infuriated mob. Better that than to deliver a wounded man into the claws of a raging brute.

Then mayhap the blood of her kinsman would stain her hands for ever; then, too, no doubt would come horror, remorse and the malediction of the gods. Then so be it. That would she take upon herself. What must be suffered, that she would suffer: the torments of remorse would be infinitesimal compared with the awful sacrilege which the Cæsar's hand

would perpetrate, were he allowed access to the praefect of Rome.

And even as the resolve became firmly implanted in her heart, she found herself murmuring softly words which she had heard in the Forum a very few days ago.

"I have but one soul and that is in the hand of God!"

Something of the serenity which had then shone from the man's face now entered into her heart. Horror and excitement fell away from her like a useless mantle. She felt herself absolutely calm and unswerving in her determination.

Therefore she did not make a rush for the studio door, she did not with dramatic gesture interpose her body between it and the Cæsar: she merely put her hand out and let it rest upon his arm.

"I should be safe in there--and nobody would know...." he murmured.

"My slaves would know," she said coldly, "and would betray thee."

"I only fear the men and they need not know," he said eagerly, even though at her words he had paused and turned back towards her.

"Many of them have seen and heard thee."

"Tell them I have escaped to the Palace of Augustus, through the crypta."

"They would not believe it--they would know it was not true."

"Canst thou not trust thy slaves?" he snarled.

"Couldst thou trust thine?" she retorted.

"I can change robes with one of my guard," he urged, "and he could then pretend to be the Cæsar escaping through the crypta to the House of Augustus."

"'Twere safest not to make pretence," she rejoined coolly; "rather let the Cæsar do what he suggests."

"What is that?"

"The Palace of Augustus would be the safest stronghold for the Cæsar until the arrival of the legions. It would be safer than the house of his servant, for prying eyes may have seen him enter it, and ears--sharpened by hate--may have heard his cries."

"Then am I lost!" he exclaimed.

"Not if my gracious lord will take counsel of his servant. The underground way is clear and safe. The Palace of Augustus would afford ample shelter. Twenty men well armed will watch over the Cæsar and the house of Dea Flavia will furnish the necessary food."

Caligula hesitated a moment, his shifty eyes wandered restlessly over

the face of the young girl.

"Thou'lt not betray me?" he murmured.

"I could betray thee now an I would," she said simply. "The mob is at my gate. One call from me and the Cæsar is in the hands of those who desire his death."

"Hush! hush!" he said, once more clutching her wrist and gazing fearfully around him, "speak not of this, Dea! The very words might call down the decree of the gods.... I'll trust thee," he added, bringing his livid face close to her own and speaking with a fever of maddened fury, "but if thou shouldst fail me...."

"No need of threats, great Cæsar," she said, calmly disengaging her wrist from his grasp and stepping back from him, "if I failed thee to-day neither I nor thou would be alive on the morrow."

The truth of what she said must have struck his dulled mind, for the look of savage ferocity quickly died from his face, leaving it once more pale with abject fear. He must have realised that his own unreasoning cowardice had placed him entirely in this girl's hands, and that having feared to meet his people a few hours ago, he had cut off from beneath his own feet the bulwark of dignity and of unapproachable sanctity on which he should have stood.

"I'll to the House of Augustus," he said more quietly, "while the rabble vent their rage upon my palace and search for their Cæsar that they might murder him, I'll remain there in peace. Do thou send thy most trusted slave into the streets, and let him endeavour to reach the praetorian guard who are holding their ground behind the crowd of rebels. They might effect a flank movement, which, if unexpected, might put the miscreants to rout sooner than we anticipate. Hast a slave whom thou canst trust thus far?"

"I have two freedmen," she replied, "free since yesternight, who would give their life for me."

"Let them do it then," he retorted cynically. "And do thou lead the way to the triclinium. I am anhungered, and a halt at thy table will throw dust in the eyes of thy slaves. I can reach the crypta from there without being seen again."

"As the Cæsar commands," she said calmly, "but there is little time to be lost."

CHAPTER XXVIII

"Nothing is secret, which shall not be made manifest."--ST. LUKE VIII. 17.

Caligula himself led the way to the triclinium and Dea Flavia followed him.

He threw himself upon a couch and she, with her own hands, served him with wine and fruit. He refused to eat but drank freely of the wine, whilst she stood beside him calmly waiting until he should be ready to go.

Seeing Blanca cross the atrium, she had called to her and ordered her to serve the soldiers. The men were grateful for they were exhausted. They had not tasted food since the day before, and had been on the watch round the Cæsar's person all night.

The underground passage which runs beneath the declivity between the two points of the Palatine, and by tortuous ways under the temple of Jupiter Victor on its highest summit, did connect the house which Dea Flavia now occupied with the Palace of Augusta. The latter, since the death of the great emperor, had been used entirely as a hall of justice: a few scribes alone inhabited the rearmost portion of the huge edifice.

The passage itself abutted in Dea Flavia's house on one of the small rooms that lay round the triclinium. There were several such passages connecting the various palaces on the Palatine, but their existence was not revealed to the army of slaves, only a few responsible ones knew that they were there. In this instance the Cæsar could, from the triclinium, reach this road to safety without again crossing the atrium and encountering the prying eyes of hundreds of cowardly slaves.

He had no thought of thanking Dea Flavia for what she did for him, but having drunk his fill, he rose from the couch and made ready to go.

She escorted him to the door of the passage and gave brief instructions to the men how to proceed. She had lighted a small lamp which would guide the Cæsar and his escort on their way. From the door, a flight of precipitous steps led down into the darkness. Caligula was the first to descend and his soldiers followed him; the one who held the lamp keeping close to the Cæsar's person.

Dea Flavia stood at the door until the footsteps of the men ceased to send their echo back to her along the vaulted passage. Then, with a sigh of relief, she closed the door on them and hastily fled from the room.

Her one desire now was to shut out, as completely as possible from her mental vision the picture of her shattered ideal, the degradation of that majesty which she had honoured all her life. So imbued was she with that sense of honour and of reverence for the Cæsarship, that she would not dwell in thought on that awful sight of the Cæsar grovelling in abject terror at her feet. She wished to forget it--to forget him--the man who, in her eyes, was already no longer the Cæsar, for the Cæsar was a god, and like unto a god in glory and in dignity--whilst Caligula, her kinsman, had sunk lower than the beasts.

Almost involuntarily she had turned back toward the studio. A while ago she had wished to look on the præfect of Rome as he lay in a drugged sleep, desiring to assure herself that all was well with him; then the advent of the Cæsar had interrupted her. Over an hour had gone by since then and the whole aspect of the world had changed.

The Cæsar was a fugitive and a coward, and the people who had the upper

hand were prepared to acclaim the hero of their choice.

The atrium now was gloomy and deserted. The slaves--gathered together in their remote quarters--shunned the vastness and the enforced silence of the reception halls; they preferred to huddle together in close groups in corners, distant from the noise of the street.

Dea Flavia stood quietly listening. Still from afar came the insistent cries of "Death!" and of "Vengeance!" Still overhead that lurid light and smoke-laden atmosphere. But now those same cries seemed almost drowned by a sound more persistent if less ominous: the sound of heavy pattering rain on leaden roofs and into the marble basin of the impluvium, whilst the roll of Jove's thunders appeared to be more nigh.

It was obvious that the storm which had been threatening all the morning from over the Campania, had burst over the great city at last. It was Jove's turn now to make a noise with his thunder, to utter cries and howls of vengeance and of death through the medium of his storm, and to drown the fury of men in the whirl of his own.

Now a vivid flash of lightning rent the leaden sky overhead and searched the dark corners of the atrium. Dea Flavia uttered an involuntary little cry of terror, and hid her face in her hands.

A high wind howled among the trees outside the house; Dea could hear the tiny branches cracking under the whip-lash of the blast, breaking away from the parent stem and sending an eddy of dry dead leaves whirling wildly along the narrow streets and into the open portals of the vestibule. She could hear the fall of the torrential rain, and the flames, which sacrilegious hands had kindled, dying away with long-drawn-out hissing moans of pain. She could hear the wind in its rage lashing those flames back into life again, and could see through the opening overhead the huge volumes of black smoke chased across the sky.

Smoke and flames were fighting an uneven battle against the persistent, heavy rain. The wind was their ally, but he was gusty and fitful: now and then helping them with all his might, fanning their activity and renewing their strength, but after a violent outburst he would lie down and rest, gathering strength mayhap, but giving the falling rain its opportunity.

The rain had no need of rest; it fell, and fell, and fell, steadily and torrentially, searching the weaker flames, killing them out one by one.

To Dea Flavia's straining senses it seemed clear that in this storm the number of rebels had greatly diminished; none, no doubt, but the most enthusiastic remained to face the discomforts of drenched skin and bone chilled to the marrow. No doubt too the gale blowing the flames and smoke hither and thither on the exposed slopes of the Palatine, had rendered a stand in the open unobtainable.

All this of course was mere conjecture, but the young girl, worn out mentally and physically with the nerve strain of the past four-and-twenty hours was grateful for the momentary sense of peace. The steady fall of the rain acted soothingly upon her senses; her wearied thoughts flew aimlessly hither and thither on the wings of her

imagination.

Only the storm frightened her because she was not sure if it were an expression of Jove's wrath, or whether his mighty hand had only scattered the infuriated populace so that she--Dea Flavia--could weigh the destinies of Rome in peace.

She thought of going quietly back to her room, to think a while in the solitude; the danger being less imminent gave her leisure to ponder and to weigh in the balance her allegiance to Cæsar, and that other nameless sense within her which she did not yet understand, but which invariably drew her wandering thoughts back, and then back again to the man who lay in a drugged sleep under her roof.

He slept, and throughout the great city the people called on him: "Hail Taurus Antinor! Hail!"

She sighed and involuntary tears gathered in her eyes: but the sigh was not one of sadness, rather was it one of longing for something intangible and exquisite, and this longing was so sweet and withal so mysterious, that instinctively she turned away from the magnificent reception hall toward her own room, with a wild desire to be alone and nurse that longing into an all-compelling desire.

It was at this moment that five or six men--all wrapped in dark woollen cloaks--entered the atrium from the vestibule, and catching sight of the Augusta, called to her loudly with greetings of respectful homage.

She paused, angered at the intrusion; peace and solitude seemed indeed denied to her to-day; but recognising the praetorian praefect as the foremost of her visitors, she could not--owing to his high rank--dismiss him from her presence.

Caius Nepos had already bent the knee before her. He looked flushed and agitated as did most of the others, only my lord Hortensius Martius who was in the background, looked pale and wan from the terrible exposure of yesterday.

She did not think to wonder how these men had entered her house, how they had found their way to her presence, past her janitors, and without the usual formalities and ceremonies of introduction which her high rank demanded. She knew that her slaves were demoralised, that men who had been friends of the Cæsar were now fugitives, and vaguely thought that the praetorian praefect and his friends had found their way into her house as into a likely haven of refuge, and would, the next moment, be kneeling at her feet begging for protection and shelter, just as their lord and Cæsar had done on this selfsame spot half an hour ago.

"Your pleasure, my lords?" she asked.

"To speak with thee privately, O Augusta!" said Caius Nepos, sinking his voice to a whisper. "My friends and I have tried all the morning to forge our way through the mob and to reach thine ear. But the praetorian guard, faithful to me, was unable to make headway. Then did we think of covering ourselves with dark cloaks and of following the crowd, as if we were one with it, until it led us to the precincts of thy house. The storm as it broke overhead was our faithful ally; the crowd has sought

refuge against it under the arcades of the Forum, and the slopes of the Palatine are comparatively free."

"Yet, do ye want shelter and protection from me?" asked Dea Flavia.

She had no liking for these men, all of whom she knew. Caius Nepos, selfish and callous; Ancyrus, the elder, avaricious and self-seeking; young Escanes whom she knew to be unscrupulous; Philippus Decius whose ostentation and lavishness she despised. She vaguely wondered why my lord Hortensius Martius was among them.

"Nay, gracious lady!" said Caius Nepos suavely, "'tis not thy protection which we crave, save for a few moments whilst we lay at thy feet our desires for the welfare of Rome."

"The welfare of Rome?" she queried vaguely. "I do not understand ye! What hath your coming hither to do with the welfare of Rome?"

"Allow us to make the meaning clear to thee, O Augusta. But not here, where prying eyes might be on the watch or unwelcome ears be prepared to listen. Grant us but a brief audience in strict privacy ... the destinies of Rome are in thy hands."

She made no immediate reply, but, as was habitual with her, she tried to read with searching eyes all that went on behind the obsequious masks wherewith these men sought to hide their innermost thoughts from her.

And as she peered into their smooth, humble faces, all at once she knew why they had come. She knew it even before they put their proposals into words; she knew why the praetorian praefect was so servile, and why my lord Hortensius Martius, despite his obvious weakness, wore an air of triumph.

They had come to betray the Cæsar and to place the destinies of Rome in her hands. It was strange indeed that this mealy-mouthed sycophant should be using those very words which had stood before her eyes like letters of fire, searing her brain ever since she had stood here--half an hour ago--with the grovelling Cæsar at her feet.

The whirl of thoughts which rushed to her brain now made her giddy. Instinctively now, as she had done then, she looked down on her hands--those hands which were to guide the destinies of Rome--and her heart had a curious twinge of pain, almost of fear, for she realised more fully than before how small and delicate they were.

"Time walks closely on the heels of destiny, O Augusta!" urged Marcus Ancyrus, the elder, in his gently insinuating voice; "for the nonce Jove has damped the wrath of the people of Rome, but that wrath is only dormant, it will break out afresh. The storm in the heavens will pass by, but the tempest caused by a raging mob will reawaken with double fury. In thy hands, Augusta, in thy hands!..."

She knew that all these men wanted was to use her as a tool--a puppet to dance to their piping. She knew that anon they would be as ready to betray her as they were betraying their Cæsar now. Yesternight had they come to her with their proposals she would have rejected them with unqualified scorn; but since yesternight she had seen the Cæsar abject,

cowardly, degraded, dragging his bespattered majesty across the floor of this house; she had measured him--not by what he represented, but by what he was, and she had taken his measure ... and that of another ... and the Cæsar was lower than the brutes--and that other was greater than men.

A silent voice, a whisper which mayhap was an inspiration, caused her to look toward the studio.

"In there, my lords," she said, pointing to the door, "we shall be safe from watchful eyes and ears, and I will listen to what you have to say."

She chose not to see the look of triumph which flashed from six pairs of eyes, but calmly led the way toward the studio.

Caius Nepos and the others followed her without a word. Dion and Nolus rose as she entered, and she dismissed them, whilst ordering them to wait her pleasure outside the door. The two men--brought up in the school of slavery, were too well drilled to marvel at the gracious lady's many moods; they did not even cast one look in the direction of the inner room where they knew that the praefect of Rome still lay in a drugged sleep.

As soon as they were gone Dea Flavia turned again to Caius Nepos and to his friends.

"I pray you sit," she said simply.

She herself sat on a high chair with circular back carved of citrus wood, but Caius Nepos and the others preferred to stand.

CHAPTER XXIX

"For the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light."--ST. LUKE XVI. 8.

Caius Nepos was the spokesman of the party. His high rank and great influence with the guard under his command gave him certain privileges which his friends were always willing to give him. They did not know of his treachery to them; nothing, indeed, had occurred to make them guess that the man who, in a sense, had been the leader and organiser of their party, had betrayed them all to the Cæsar in the hopes of greater gains, once he knew that his adherents had no thought of offering him the imperium.

The events of yesterday had changed the whole trend of Caius Nepos' ambitions. The people in its present temper was not like to accept him as the Cæsar, even if he could persuade the praetorian guard to acclaim him as such.

His one desire being his own advancement and his own interests, he had already realised that these were best served by adherence to Dea Flavia's fortunes, since the Cæsar himself, whilst still in the fulness

of his power had named her and her descendants as his successors for all times. Caius Nepos, quick to seize his chance, and seeing the party of patrician malcontents aimless without a leader, had grasped his opportunity and constituted himself once more their organiser.

Now whilst the others grouped themselves at a respectful distance round the Augusta, he stood quite close to her, with back bent and his face in shadow.

"Augusta," he began, "meseems that in thy heart thou hast already guessed the purpose of our coming. The hour is rife and we do but wait thy command. We are at one in this: the praetorian guard will follow my dictates, the patriciate of Rome will bow the knee to thee. Augusta, the hour is rife! a raging madman, a cruel mountebank and abject coward has this day forfeited all rights to sit on the throne of Augustus, thine immortal kinsman. Augusta, art prepared to deliver Rome finally from under the heel of a tyrant, and thyself to place the sceptre of Augustus in the hands of one who were worthy of the prize?"

"I, my lord?" she asked coldly, for Caius Nepos had paused in his oratory, "I? How can I--a woman--decide on this great point? 'Tis for the legions to proclaim their Cæsar...."

"The legions," he broke in quietly, "will follow in the wake of the praetorian guard, and the praetorian guard will listen to my voice. They believe that the Cæsar is dead; they will soon believe that the will of Rome lies in this, that the final choice of his successor shall rest with thee."

Then as she made no reply but sat quite still and thoughtful, her small hand shielding her face so that it was in shadow, her elbow resting on the delicately carved wood of the chair, Caius Nepos drew a step or two nearer: he bent his long back nearly double and sank his voice to an insinuating whisper.

"It was the Cæsar himself, O Augusta," he whispered, "who yesterday, before all the people, made an oath and declared that thy future lord and master should succeed to the imperium, so that the descendants of immortal Augustus should in time become the rulers of Rome."

"But the Cæsar is not dead," she said simply.

"He is dead to the people, dead to his guard, dead to Rome!" asserted the praefect solemnly. "Yesterday the dagger of Escanes was ready to do the supreme act of retributory justice, and to rid the world of a maniacal tyrant and Rome of a cruel oppressor; to-day the act was virtually done by the madman himself when he fled in abject terror from before the face of his people."

And--as if in direct confirmation of Caius Nepos' solemn words, there came from far away, rising momentarily above the roar of the tempest, that ever-persistent monotonous cry:

"Death to the Cæsar! Death!" even whilst Jove's thunder overhead gave forth its majestic echo.

Dea Flavia no longer hid her face in her hand. She sat serene and

dignified, upright and pure as a lily, allowing her thoughts to be expressed in her blue eyes, letting these ambitious self-seekers see that she was not deceived by their pretence at loyalty and patriotism. They gathered closer round her, and she looked now truly a queen, dignified and serene, her head crowned by the glory of her golden hair--towering above their stooping forms.

There was a look of contempt in her eyes which they did not choose to see. They were having their will with her; they had fired her ambition and roused her enthusiasm, and that was all that these intriguers asked of this girl, of whom they but desired to make a tool for the carving of their own selfish ends.

Vaguely the older men wondered on whom the Augusta's choice had fallen, whilst my lord Hortensius Martius felt the hot blood rush to his cheeks at the hopes that had once more risen in his heart.

But now Ancyus, the elder, began to speak and his voice was mellow and gentle.

"The people have spoken plainly, O Augusta," he said; "wilt set thy will against the might of the people of Rome? Hath not Jove spoken clearly too? Think on the events of the past two days! The Cæsar's pronouncement in the Circus, the tumult amongst the people when my lord Hortensius Martius courted certain death in order to win thy favours, the rage of the populace against the Cæsar!... think on it all! Did not Jove direct all this?"

"Aye! but meseems that he did!" she murmured, as her eyes fastened themselves on the heavy door that led to the inner room, "but since then hath he not directed the people to acclaim the Cæsar of their choice?"

Caius Nepos shrugged his shoulders and Hortensius Martius broke in hotly.

"The rabble clamours for the praefect of Rome! but the praefect is dead...."

"Aye! I remember, my lord," she said quietly, "there is a rumour that he died soon after he had saved thy life."

Then as Hortensius Martius, feeling the sting of the rebuke, bit his under lip to check an angry retort, Ancyus, the elder, rejoined suavely, trying to pour the oil of his honeyed words on the troubled water of the younger man's wrath.

"The praefect is dead, O Augusta, and the people will soon forget him. Rome deifies thee because of thy great kinsman. Having forgotten the hero of their choice they will readily turn to thee whom they love. They will accept from thy hands the Cæsar whom thou wilt choose."

My lord Hortensius after that first feeling of anger had soon recovered his serenity. He tried to put an expression of sad reproach into the glance which he fixed on the Augusta. Perhaps she had not meant to rebuke him and was already sorry that she had wounded him. He would have liked to put into his glance all that he felt in his heart for her; deep down within him, below the overlaying crust of his ambition, there was

real love for the beautiful girl who had it in her power to bestow on him all the gifts for which he craved.

He firmly believed that the Augusta reciprocated his love. She had always received his admiration more patiently than that of others, she had more than once listened quietly to the protestations of his love. Yesterday he had risked his life to win her hand: she, a proud Roman lady, was not like to forget his valour. When from the arena he had caught sight of her face, it was terror-stricken and deathly pale; she had feared for him then, of that he was quite sure.

The horrible death which he had faced had given him the first claim to her favours in the sight of his friends. They had rallied willingly round him and had tacitly recognised him as their leader. Now it seemed as if Jove himself, with the help of his thunders, had ranged himself on his side.

He saw the glow of enthusiasm rise to Dea Flavia's face, suffusing her eyes, her lips, her throat. He believed that that glow had been partly kindled by his glance, and was too much blinded by his own ambition and his own desires to note that the young girl's averted gaze was persistently fixed upon the door of the inner room.

Dea Flavia, of a truth, had little thought of my lord Hortensius Martius, of his ambition or of his love; she could not tear her eyes away from the spot beyond the stuccoed walls where lay a man--helpless now--but a man whose every deed proclaimed him the born ruler of men.

Then, as those around her were silent, hanging expectant upon her lips, she forced her thoughts back to them and to all that they had said.

"What would ye have me do, my lords?" she murmured.

"Make thy choice, O Augusta!" urged Caius Nepos eagerly. "Choose thy lord and master from among those who are ready to acclaim thy choice as final. The praetorian guard is prepared I tell thee. The mad Cæsar yesterday paved the way for our success. Choose thy husband, Augusta, and the praetorian guard will forthwith proclaim him as the greatest and best of Cæsars, princeps, imperator, the father of his armies. The people will go wild with joy and will deify thee and thy lord."

"But the Cæsar ... my kinsman...?"

"He will end his days in contentment and in peace," said Ancyus, the elder, dryly, "in a villa on the island of Capræa. No harm shall come to him. We here present do pledge thee our oath."

"But I must have time to think," she said earnestly; "'tis no small matter ye ask of me, my lords. I am but a woman and still young in years, and ye ask me to weigh the destinies of this mighty Empire in the balance of mine own desires."

"We would not ask it of thee, O Augusta! were thou an ordinary mortal," said Hortensius Martius, speaking with passionate warmth, "but thou art a goddess; the blood of great Augustus doth deify thee."

"A goddess? I?" she retorted coldly; "nay! I am but a lonely woman who

hath need of counsel to guide her in this supreme moment of her life."

"Are we not here to guide thee?" came in dulcet tones from Ancyrus, the elder; "we, thy faithful servants, thy obedient slaves? Have we not spoken and counselled thee?"

"Aye! you have spoken, my lords, and I have read the thoughts that lie behind your words. 'Tis not loyalty to dead Augustus that alone led your footsteps to my door."

"Our love for thee," interposed Hortensius Martius softly.

"And your own aims that you would follow, your own ambitions that you would feed."

Then as hot words of protest rose to the lips of most, she put up her hand and added with quiet dignity:

"Nay, my lords, 'tis but human to be ambitious, and Rome herself is great because she is ambitious. But I, for myself alone, have no ambition. The proud title which ye would offer me holds no allurement to my tastes. But if the gods will so guide my choice that a just and brave man shall bear the sceptre of imperial Augustus, then will I thank them on my knees that I was made a medium for their will."

Hortensius Martius, convinced that her eyes had rested on him while she spoke, made an effort to disguise the look of triumph that shone from out his glance. But young Escanes, in whom all hope had not yet died, was under the same impression, as also was my lord Philippus Decius; for, in truth, Dea Flavia had looked round on them all marvelling how any of them could compare with the man who already, in her heart, was the chosen lord of Rome.

"And now, my lords," she said, paying no further heed to the sighs of restless desires that rose up round her as she spoke, "I pray you ask no more of me. I must think and I must pray. I entreat you not to urge a decision on me until I have thought and prayed."

"Time is precious, Augusta," urged Caius Nepos feebly, "and the people will not wait."

"The people have fled from before the storm," she rejoined, "and their will, remember, my lords, may not be in accordance with yours."

"They call for the praefect of Rome and the praefect is dead. We must be ready to acclaim a Cæsar who will be equally to their choice."

"Then," she said, "when to-morrow the third hour of the day is called, I pray you, my lords, come back to me for mine answer. But I must have until to-morrow to ponder and to pray. An you must press me now," she added decisively, seeing that protestations were again hanging on their lips, "then must my answer be 'No!' to all your demands."

Though in her heart she had already weighed all that she meant to do, yet she would not give her decision without speaking first to the man who already was the elect of her choice. He was sick now, lying in the arms of sleep. In a few hours probably he would be refreshed, and it

would indeed be a mighty Cæsar whom she would proclaim on the morrow before the people of Rome.

"The people will not wait till to-morrow, Augusta," urged Ancyrus, the elder, "canst tell a raging tempest to pause or a thunderstorm to bide thy time? They are quiet for the nonce but in an hour they will again invade the imperial hill. Thy house will not be safe."

"Then must ye put a check upon the people as best ye can, my lords; I cannot make my choice at this hour," she said determinedly, "if ye cannot wait and if ye fear the people, then must you make your plans without my help."

They consulted with one another in whispers. The Augusta was obdurate and without her they did not care to act. Her personality was alone powerful enough at this crisis to satisfy the people, and she alone could stand for the success of their intrigues against the people's loud demands for the praefect of Rome.

Betwixt two dangers the plotters chose the lesser one. If the populace got once more out of hand they would, whilst invading the palaces, find the Cæsar and no doubt murder him. That act of vengeance once accomplished they would probably calm down for a while. They would expend their strength in clamouring for the praefect of Rome, but the praefect of Rome was certainly dead, else he would have appeared ere this. The darkness of the night would perforce put a stop to all street-rioting; under its cover the praetorian praefect could easily rejoin the guard, and by the third hour of to-morrow, everything would be prepared for the proclamation of the newly chosen Cæsar.

Not one of these conspirators had any doubt as to who that Cæsar would be. Chosen from among their ranks, he would be compelled to reward richly those who had placed him on the throne.

Dea Flavia waited quietly while these hurried consultations were going on. Now that she saw that her wishes had prevailed, she once more became gracious and kind.

With a sign of the head and a smile that contained a promise she intimated to them that they were dismissed.

"I beg of you, my lords," she said, "to look upon my house as your own until the morrow. My slaves will offer you food and drink, and prepare you baths to refresh you, and sleeping-chambers for the night. To-morrow you will have mine answer. May the gods protect ye until then, my lords."

She touched a small gong summoning Dion and Nulus back into her presence. To them she entrusted the task of seeing to the needs of these great lords and of watching over their comforts.

It would have been churlish and inexpedient after this to insist on further conversation. Moreover the presence of the slaves put a check on privacy. It was better on the whole to obey. These sybarites too were not averse to the thought of a rich table and of merry-making in the Augusta's house until the morrow. Her cooks were noted for their skill and hers were the richest cellars in Rome.

Caius Nepos, Ancyrus, the elder, and the others all walked out of Dea Flavia's presence backwards and with spine bent at an obsequious angle.

Hortensius Martius was the last to leave. He knelt on the floor, and taking the edge of her tunic between his fingers he touched it reverently with his lips. She looked down on him, not unkindly. Had he but known that his greatest claim on her graciousness was that his life had been saved by another, he would not have worn that look of triumph as he finally followed the others out of the room.

"She hath made her choice, my lord," said Caius Nepos amiably, taking the younger man by the arm, "a woman was not like to reject such brilliant proposals."

"I will ask for the praefecture of Rome," murmured Ancyrus, the elder, complacently.

My lord Hortensius Martius said nothing, but he disengaged his arm from his too familiar friend and walked ahead of all the others, squaring his shoulders and holding his head erect, as one already marked out to rule over the rest of mankind.

CHAPTER XXX

"Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way...."--ST. MATTHEW VII. 14.

In the studio, upon the throne-like chair of carved citrus wood and heavy crimson silk, Dea Flavia sat silent and alone.

The footsteps of the men quickly died away on the marble floors of the atrium, their harsh voices and loud laughter only reached this secluded spot as a faint, intangible echo.

The patter of the rain from above into the impluvium was soothing in its insistent monotony, only from time to time Jove, still angered, sent his thunders rolling through the heavy clouds and his lightnings rending the lurid sky.

The people of Rome, wrathful against the Cæsar, vaguely demanding vengeance for wrongs unstated, had not gone to rest. Like the gale a while ago they had merely drawn back in their fury, quiescent for a while, but losing neither strength nor temerity. Dull cries still resounded from afar. "Death to the Cæsar!" was still the rallying cry, though it came now subdued by distance, and the majestic screens of stately temples interposed between it and the towering heights of imperial Palatine.

Dea Flavia at first--her musings one wild tangle of hopes, fears and joys--did only vaguely listen for each recurrent cry as it came; and thus, listening and watching, her ears became doubly sensitive and acute, and caught the words more distinctly as they rolled on the currents of the wind that blew them upwards from the arcades of the

Forum.

"Death to the Cæsar!" That cry was always clear, and with it came, like a complement or a corollary, the name of the præfect of Rome.

"Hail Taurus Antinor Cæsar! Hail!"

The cry filled Dea Flavia's veins as with living fire. She longed to run out into the streets now, at this moment, with the rain beating about her and the storm raging overhead, and to call to the people to come into her house, in their thousands and tens of thousands, and here to fall down and worship the mighty hero who would rule over them all.

The people clamoured for him, and because of these clamours an almighty love for the people of Rome filled the heart of the Augusta. She saw now just what the imperium should be, just how supreme power should sit upon a man. And she loved the people because the people saw it too. They clamoured for the one man who would fulfil every ideal of Cæsarship and of might.

Valour yesterday, the sublimity of self-sacrifice, had appealed to them with irresistible force, even though they did not understand the force that had set these great virtues in motion. The hero of yesterday should be the chosen of to-day, the god of to-morrow; let the brutish Cæsar be swept from before his path.

The people clamoured, and did they see the præfect of Rome standing virile and powerful before them, they would fall on their knees and acclaim him princeps, imperator, greater than great Augustus himself.

And in this very house, but a few steps from where Dea sat musing, were the men, the patricians who were ready to accept the decision of the people, who were all-powerful to make the legions acknowledge the new Cæsar, and ready to set the seal of official acceptance to the wild desires of the plebs.

The patriciate of Rome had combined with the people to place its destinies in Dea Flavia's hands. The Cæsar's insane pronouncement in the Circus yesterday had confirmed the wishes of the conspirators. All envies and jealousies would best be set at rest if the kinswoman of great Augustus chose the future Cæsar, and secured the inheritance of the great Emperor for his descendants later on.

And now there was but her choice to be made, and the imperium would descend on the noblest head that had ever worn a crown. Dea Flavia felt the hot blood rush to her cheeks at thought that the choice did rest with her, that the man who was so proud, so self-absorbed, so self-willed but a few days ago in the Forum, would receive supreme gifts through her; that he would be the recipient and she, like the goddess holding riches, power, honour in her hands; that she would shower them on him while he knelt--a suppliant first, then a grateful worshipper--at her feet.

Ambitious? He must be ambitious! Ambition was the supreme virtue of the Roman patrician! And she had it in her power to satisfy the wildest cravings of ambition in the one man above all men whom she felt was worthy of the gifts.

Those were the first thoughts that merged themselves into a coherent whole in Dea Flavia's head after Caius Nepos and the others had bowed themselves from out her presence, and there was her sense of the power of giving, that sense so dear to a woman's heart. As to the thought of love--of the marriage which this same choice of hers would entail--of that greatest gift of all--herself--which by her choice she would promise him--that thought did not even begin to enter her head. She was so much a girl still--hardly yet a woman--she had thought so little hitherto, felt so little, lived so little; a semi-deified Augusta, surrounded by obsequious slaves and sycophantic hangers-on, she had existed in her proud way, aloof from the bent backs that surrounded her--loyal to the Cæsar, loyal to herself and to her House--but she had not lived.

There had never been a desire within her that had not been gratified or that had grown delicious and intense through being thwarted; she had never suffered, never hoped, never feared. The world was there as a plaything; she had seen masks but never faces, she had never looked into a human heart or witnessed human sorrow or joy.

Looking back upon her life, Dea Flavia saw how senseless, how soulless it had been. Her soul awakened that day in the Forum when first a real, living man was revealed to her; not a puppet, not a mealy-mouthed sycophant, not a tortuous self-seeker, just a man with a heart, a will, a temperament and strange memories of things seen of which he had told her, though he saw that he angered her.

Since then she had begun to live, to realise that men lived, thought and felt, that they had other desires but those of pleasing the Cæsar or winning his good graces. She had seen a man offering his life to save another's, she had seen him clinging to a strange symbol which seemed to bring peace to his heart.

That man she honoured and on him would rest her choice, and he would be exalted above everyone on earth because she believed him to be loyal and just, and knew him to be brave. Her own heart--still in its infancy--had not realised that her choice would rest on that man, not because of his virtues, not because of his courage and his power, but for the simple, sublime, womanly reason that he was the man whom she loved.

And as she sat there, musing and still, with her eyes almost involuntarily drawn toward the oaken door of the inner room, she saw it slowly swinging out upon its hinges, she heard the swishing of the heavy curtain behind it, and the next moment she saw the praefect of Rome standing on the threshold.

He looked sick and wan, but strangely tall and splendid in the barbaric pomp of the gorgeous robe which he had worn yesterday. Dion had cleaned it of blood and dust, and it still looked crumpled and stained, but as he came forward the purple and gold gleamed against the stuccoed walls of the studio, and his tawny hair and sun-tanned face looked dark in the subdued light.

She could see plainly through the robe the line of bandages which bound his lacerated shoulders, and her heart was filled with pity for all that he had suffered, and with pride at thought of all the joys that would

come to him through her.

As he came nearer to her, he bent the knee.

"I crave leave to kiss thy feet," he said, "for thy graciousness to me."

"Thou art well, O Taurus Antinor?" she asked timidly; "thy wounds...."

"Are healed, O gracious lady," he broke in gently, whilst a smile lit up his dark face, "since thy lips did deign to ask after them."

"It was presumptuous of me to bring thee here," she said after a while. "I feared that thou wast dead, and the Cæsar...."

"Would have defiled my body. Then would I kiss the ground where the hem of thy gown did touch it, for thy graciousness hath made it sacred."

"I pray thee rise," she said, "thou art weak."

"May I not kneel?"

"Not to me."

"Not to thee, but before thee, Augusta; before thy beauty and thy purity, the exquisite creations of God."

"Of thy God, O Taurus Antinor," she said with a little sigh. "He hath naught to do with me."

"He made thee for man's delight, to gladden the heart of those on whom thy glance doth rest."

She had ordered him to sit on a pile of cushions which lay not far from her chair. Thus was he almost at her feet, and she could look down upon his massive shoulders and on his head bent slightly forward as he spoke.

She thought then how like unto a ruler of men he was, how much strength and power did his whole person express. She wondered, with a happy little feeling of anticipation, how he would take the news which she would impart to him, what he would say, how he would look when he knew that she was prepared to crown him with the diadem of Augustus, and to bestow on him the full gifts of her love.

Time was precious, and the next few moments would satisfy her wonderment. She longed to see the fire of ambition light up his earnest face: the glow of love smouldering in his eyes would render their glance exquisitely sweet.

But for the moment she would have liked to put the more serious issues off for a while, she would have liked to sit here for many hours to come, with him close by at her feet, her ears pleasantly tickled by his gentle words of bold admiration yet profound respect. Had he not said that she was made to gladden the heart of those on whom her glance did rest? And a sense of sadness had crept into her heart as he thus spoke, for memory had conjured up before her mind the miseries which had followed in her wake these few days past.

"I have brought naught but misery," she said with a sigh, "to those whom I would bless."

"Joy to me, Augusta," he rejoined earnestly, "since the day I first beheld thee."

"Menecreta is dead," she whispered; "dost remember?"

"I remember."

She paused a while, then said abruptly:

"And the Cæsar is a fugitive."

"Heavens above!" he exclaimed, and the whole expression of his face changed suddenly; "a fugitive?... when?... where...?"

"The people are wrathful against him," she said; "they surrounded his palace, and even...."

The words died on her lips. The shout of "Death to the Cæsar! Death!" had come distinctly from afar. He jumped to his feet, and she saw that his face now looked careworn and anxious.

"Where is the Cæsar?" he asked hurriedly.

"He is a fugitive, I tell thee. The rabble fired his palace to force him to come out of it and face them. But he ran away through the secret passage which leads through the house of Germanicus to mine."

"He is here then?"

"No! He grovelled at my feet and begged me to hide him ... here ... in my private chamber where he thought he would be safe ... but I would not let him come for I thought thee helpless in thy bed, and feared that he would kill thee."

"Great God!"

"Nay! why shouldst thou call to thy god on behalf of a tyrant and a coward," she said excitedly; "thou shouldst have seen that man cowering at my feet like a beaten dog. I could have spurned him with my foot, as I would a cur."

"The Cæsar, Augusta, the Cæsar!"

"Aye!" she rejoined firmly, "the Cæsar, my kinsman! Were he not that, I would have rushed to my door and called to the people, and would have handed over unto them that miserable bundle of rags which stood for the majesty of Cæsar!"

"And I lay a helpless log," he rejoined bitterly, "while the destinies of Rome lay in thy hands."

"Aye! The destinies of Rome," she said proudly, whilst a glow of intense excitement filled her whole personality, "but not in my hands, O praefect, but in thine!"

"In mine?"

She rose and went up to him and placed her white fingers upon his arm.

"Listen!" she said.

She held up her other hand and thus stood beside him with slender neck stretched slightly forward, her lips parted, a look of intentness expressed in the whole of her exquisite face.

"Dost hear?" she whispered.

Obedient to her will he listened too. The cry of "Death to the Cæsar!" monotonous and weird, seemed to strike him with horror, for his wan cheeks assumed a yet paler hue and his lips murmured words which, however, she could not understand. Then suddenly the cry was followed by another--indistinct at first, yet gaining in clearness as it rose on the waves of the storm from the Forum below.

"The praefect of Rome! Where is the praefect of Rome? Hail Taurus Antinor Cæsar! Hail!"

"Hark!" she said triumphantly, "dost hear? The people call to thee! They are ready to deify thee. They call for thee, dost hear them, O praefect?"

But though she turned her eager, questioning gaze on him, though excitement and enthusiasm seemed to emanate from her from every pore, the look of horror only deepened on his face and the whispered prayer did not cease to tremble on his lips.

"Dost hear them?" she reiterated once more.

He was looking on her now, and gradually horror faded from his eyes and pallor from his cheeks. A wave of tenderness seemed to pass right over his face, making the harsh lines seem marvellously soft.

"I hear thy voice," he murmured, "soft as the breath of spring among the leaves of roses."

"The people call for thee."

"And thy hand is on my arm and I feel the magic of thy touch."

She stood there quite close to him, tall and slender like those lilies which--ever since he first beheld her--had so sweetly reminded him of her. Her simple grey tunic fell in straight folds from her shoulders, not a single jewel adorned her hands or neck, only her hair, in heavy plaits, made a crown of gold above her brow.

Never had she seemed to him so beautiful as now, for never had she seemed so womanly and yet so young. Her soul--rising triumphant from its trammels of high rank and artificial living--emerged god-like, opening out to the advent of love, welcoming it as it came, enfolding it in its own ardour and in its purity. With this man's presence near her, with her hand upon his arm, she had suddenly understood. Ambition, power,

dominion of the world had vanished from her thoughts.

She had found love, knew love, felt its empire and its yoke, and the vista which that knowledge opened up before her was more wonderful than she could ever have dreamed of before.

Her cheeks were glowing with enthusiasm, her lips were parted and her eyes were of a vivid, translucent blue, with the pupils like brilliant sardonyx, full of dark and mysterious lights. She was ready to meet love with a surfeit of the rich gifts which she had at her command.

"The people call to thee, Taurus Antinor," she reiterated eagerly; "they want a man to lead them. They are tired of tyranny, of bloodshed and of idleness. They want to live! Therefore they call to thee. Two hundred thousand hearts were opened to thee yesterday in the Amphitheatre! Two hundred thousand tongues acclaimed thee even as in thine arms thou didst hold my lord Hortensius Martius and didst bear him into safety. The people have need of thee, and are ready to follow thee whithersoever thou wouldst lead them. They are miserable and oppressed, they want justice! They are starving and want bread. Their fate is in thy keeping for thou wouldst give them justice, and thou wouldst feed the poor and clothe the needy. All this morning did I hear the moans of the down-trodden, the wretched and the weak, and felt that Rome could only find happiness now through thee."

"And the Cæsar?" he said. "Where is the Cæsar?"

"He hath fled like a coward. Let him be forgotten even whilst the people proclaim thee the Cæsar and a new era of happiness doth rise over Rome."

Then as he made no reply she continued more hurriedly, more insistently:

"There are those here in my house now who would be the first to acclaim thee as the Cæsar. The praetorian guard, fired by thy valour yesterday, sickened by the cowardice of Caligula, is ready to follow in their wake, whilst mine will be the joy of calling unto the whole city of Rome: 'Citizens, behold your Cæsar! He is here!'"

She would not tell him that the imperium should come to him only through her hands; a strange reticence seemed to choke these words in her throat. Anon he would know. Caius Nepos and the others would tell him, but it was so sweet to give so much and--as the giver--to remain unknown.

She made a quick movement now, half withdrawing her hand from his arm, but his firm grasp closed swiftly over it.

"No, no," he said, "take not thy touch from off my soul lest I sink into an abyss of degradation."

He kept her slender fingers rivetted against his arm, and she looked up at him a little frightened, for his words sounded strange and there was a wild look in his eyes. She remembered suddenly that he was sick and that a brief while ago fever had fired his brain. All her womanly tenderness surged up at sight of his drawn face.

"Thou art ill!" she said gently.

He fell on his knees, and still holding her hand he rested his forehead against the cool white fingers.

"I am dying," he said softly, "for love of thee."

There was silence in the room now whilst she stood quite still, like a grey bird in its nest. She was looking down on him and his head was bowed upon her hands.

A weird, ruddy light penetrated into the studio from above and the sound of the pattering rain awoke a soft, murmuring echo on the white walls. The noise of strife and rebellion, though distant, still filled the air around, but here, in this room, there was infinite quietude and peace.

Dea Flavia felt supremely happy. Love had come to her in its most exquisite plenitude; the man whom she honoured, loved her and she loved him. It seemed as if she had slept for thousands and thousands of years and had just woke up to see how beautiful was the world.

"Love is not death," she murmured gently. "It is life."

"Death to me," he whispered, "for I have seen thy beauty and felt thee near unto my soul. And when I no longer may look upon thee mine eyes will become blind with the infinity of their longing, and when I no longer can feel thy touch, my heart will become as a stone."

A quick blush rose to her cheeks.

"That time shall never come, Taurus Antinor," she said so softly that her words hardly reached his ears. "Have I not told thee that there are those in my house who are ready to acclaim thee as the Cæsar?... acting upon my kinsman's own pronouncement yesterday ... they have come to me ... to beg me to make the choice which will place the imperium in the hands of the man most worthy to wield it.... My choice is made, O praelect!... Look into mine eyes, my dear lord, and read what they express."

He looked up just as she bade him, and as he did so there fell on him from her blue eyes such a look of love, that with a wild cry of passionate joy he stretched out his arms and closed them around her.

"Love is not death, dear lord," she murmured, even as the tears gathered in her eyes and made them shine like stars.

The moment was too supreme for words. Even the whisper, "I love thee!" died upon their lips. He held her close to him, her dear head resting on his shoulder, his hand upon her cheek, the perfume of her loveliness mounting to his nostrils and making his senses reel with its exquisite fragrance.

This one great moment was love's, and it was love's alone. Each had forgotten strife, rebellion, ambition, the fugitive Cæsar and the murmuring people. Each only remembered the other and the perfect flavour of that first lingering kiss.

Whatever life held for them hereafter, glory or shame, joy or regret,

this moment remained unspoiled, perfect in its ecstasy, the world but a dream, love the only reality.

Overhead the thunder rolled at intervals, dull and distant now, with occasional flashes of vivid lightning which lit up Dea's golden hair and the round, bare shoulder which emerged above the tunic. Her face was in shadow; she lay against his heart like a young bird that has found its nest.

Then he awoke from this ecstasy.

"The Cæsar?" he said wildly, "where is the Cæsar?"

"Near me now, dear Lord," she murmured looking up at him with a smile; "my head is on his shoulder and I can hear the beating of his heart."

"The Cæsar, Augusta," he said more insistently, and now he held her away from him, her two hands still in his and held against his breast, but she at an arm's length from him.

"Augusta," he reiterated, "I implore thee! Where is the Cæsar?"

"Hid in the Palace of Augustus, whining like a coward for his vanished power.... Forget him, my dear lord ... he is not worthy of thy thoughts.... Whither art going?" she added suddenly, for with gentle force he had disengaged his hands from hers and had turned toward the door.

"To the Cæsar, dear heart," he said simply; "an he is a fugitive he hath need of friends: an he is afraid, he hath need of courage."

"Thou'lt not go to him, dear lord," she exclaimed indignantly, and her hands, strong and firm, fastened themselves on his arm. "A coward, I tell thee ... a madman ... a tyrant ..."

"The Cæsar, Augusta," he retorted; "deign to let me go to him."

"Thou'rt mad, Taurus Antinor! Fever is in thy veins and doth cloud the clearness of thy brain.... Hast not heard the people? They vow vengeance on him.... 'Tis on thee they call ... thou art their chosen, their anointed; the people call to thee. It is thou whom they acclaim."

"To-morrow," he said more gently, "they will have forgotten their disloyalty. To-morrow they will have forgotten me ... they will think me dead ... dead will I be to them to-morrow."

"Nay! but to-day," she urged, "to-day is thine and mine.... The praetorian praefect is here and the others ... the choice rests with me and my choice is made.... Rome even now rings from end to end with thy name: 'Hail Taurus Antinor Cæsar! Hail!' ... Hast no ambition?" she cried, for at her words he had remained cold and still.

"None," he replied gently, "but so to help the Cæsar, that he may gain the love of his people by acts of grace and mercy, and to see the wings of peace once more spread over the seven hills of Rome."

With a firm yet exquisitely tender touch he took her clinging hands in

his, forcing her to release her grip on his arm. On her trembling fingers then he pressed a burning, lingering kiss.

"Thou art not going!" she cried.

"To the Cæsar, O my soul! He hath need of me! He has mine oath; my loyalty is his."

"A madman and a tyrant. If thou goest to him he will kill thee!... his guard is with him ... he will kill thee!"

"That is as God wills...!"

"Thy god!" she retorted vehemently, "thy god! Doth he wish to part us? Is my love naught that he should wish thee to spurn it...?"

"The value of thy love is infinite," he said earnestly and tenderly as, in perfect humility, he bent the knee for one moment before her and stooping to the very ground he kissed the tip of her sandal. "'Tis only on bended knees that such as I can render sufficient thanks to God and to thee for that holy, precious gift."

She bent down to him and said with earnest solemnity:

"Then I entreat thee, good my lord, in the name of that love go not to the Cæsar now.... An he doth not kill thee ... an thou dost help to bring him back to power, he will use that power to part thee from me.... Do not go from me now, dear lord--for if thou goest I know that it will be for ever.... The Cæsar hates thee now as much as he loved thee before ... his hatred is as insensate as his love.... He will kill thee or take thee from me.... In either case 'tis death, my good lord...."

"'Twere death to betray the Cæsar, O my soul!" he replied, still on his knees, his forehead bent low to the ground, "Death, a thousand times worse than a dagger's thrust ... a thousand times worse than parting."

His voice was low and vibrant, and as his solemn words died away, they struck the murmuring echo that slumbered on the studio walls. And Dea Flavia was silent now: silent as he rose to his feet and stood before her with head slightly bent, silent, because borne on the subtle wing of that same dying echo there came to her the awful sense of unavoidable fate. She shuddered as if with cold, that sense of fatality seemed ready to spread over her soul like a pall.

It was only the Roman blood in her, the blood of victorious Augustus which would not allow her to yield to the spectre ... not just yet ... not until the last battle had been fought--the last unconquerable weapon drawn.

She waited in silence for a while, nor did she detain him by the slightest gesture although he once more made a movement as if to go, only her eyes rooted him to the spot even as she said very softly, her voice sounding full and mellow like the cooing of a dove.

"My lord, I entreat thee but to grant me one moment longer, for of a truth there is much that my mind cannot grasp. Of thy god we will not speak. Whoever he be, as thou dost worship him, I will be content to

worship by thy side. But that will come in the fullness of time. Dost love me, my dear lord?"

"With every aspiration of my soul, with every beating of my heart, with every fibre of my body do I love thee," he said, and there was such intensity of passion in his voice, such a glowing ardour in the glance which seemed to envelop and embrace her whole person, that even she--the proud Augusta, the woman--exacting through the very magnitude of her love--was satisfied.

"Then, dear lord, I entreat thee," she said, "for one brief moment only think of naught but of our love. Let me rest in thine arms but that one moment longer, and remember the while that with my love, the world conquered will lie at thy feet."

She drew closer to him and once more lay against his breast. She was tender and clinging now, no longer the Augusta, the unapproachable princess but just a woman, loving and submissive, proud to give and proud to abdicate.

To him this was the torturing moment. He knew what she desired and what weapons she could wield wherewith to subdue his will. The battle he fought with himself just then was but a precursor of the fiercer one which anon he would have to fight against her. The rending of his soul was expressed in every line of his face, which once more now looked haggard and harsh; Dea Flavia saw it all. She saw how he suffered, whilst with every passing second the inward struggle became more difficult and fierce; his breath came and went with feverish rapidity, the frown across his brow deepened visibly, and for a while his arms were rigid and his fists clenched, even though she clung to him, her frail body against his, her head upon his breast.

"Wouldst lose the world and lose me?" she murmured. "The world is at thy feet, and I love thee."

A moan escaped him as that of a wounded creature in pain; the rigidity of his arms relaxed and wildly now he was pressing her closer to him.

"I love thee," he murmured, "I love thee. The world is well lost to me now that I have held thee in mine arms."

"The world, dear lord," she whispered, "is not lost, rather is it won. My hand in thine, we'll make that world a happier and brighter one. Power is thine ... thou art the Cæsar...."

"Hush--sh--sh, idol of my soul! Do not speak of that ... not now ... when my arms are round thee and the whole world has vanished from my ken. Let me live in my dream just a brief moment longer; let me forget all save my love for thee. It hath burned my soul for an eternity meseems, for I have only lived since that hour when first I heard thy voice ... in the Forum ... dost remember?... when I knelt at thy feet and tied the strings of thy shoe."

"I remember!"

"And I loved thee from that hour. I loved thee for thy purity and because thou art exquisitely beautiful and I am a man thirsting for

happiness. But God, who hath need of my soul, hath willed to break my heart so that I might remain pure and true to His service. It was so filled with thine image that even the glorious vision of His Passion became faint and dim. But with infinite pity He hath given thee to me just for this one brief, glorious hour that it might feed on the memory of thee, even whilst my feet trod the way that leads to the foot of His Cross."

"There is but one way, dear lord," she exclaimed, "for thy footsteps to tread! Tis the way that leads to mine arms first and thence upwards to the temple of Jupiter Victor where stands the throne and rests the sceptre of Augustus."

"The way of which I speak, dear heart," he rejoined earnestly, "also leads upwards, upwards to Calvary, on the uttermost summit of which stands a lonely, broken Cross. The wind and rains and snows of the past seven years have worked their will with it.... They tell me that one of its branches lies broken on the ground, that its stem is split from end to end. But it is there--there still, abandoned now and alone, but to eyes that can see, still bearing the imprint of the heavenly body that hung thereon for three hours in unspeakable agony so that men might know how to live--and might learn how to die."

She said nothing for the moment. Her excitement had not left her, but her lips were mute because that which was in her heart was too great, too strange for words. She did not understand what he meant; she still thought that fever had clouded his brain; anon, she felt sure, sane reason would return and with it ambition, which became every man. But she did not understand that his love for her transcended all human love she ever wot of; it was great and noble and sublime as all that emanated from him, and, womanlike, she was content to let other matters shape themselves in accordance with the will of the gods.

She looked into the face which in this brief period of time she had learnt to love, and tried to read that which to her was still hidden behind the earnest brow and the deep-set eyes. In them, indeed, did she read exultation, an ardour at least equal to her own, but an ardour for an object which she--the proud, exquisite pagan, the daughter of Augustus--wholly failed to comprehend. She had shown him the way to the imperium, to the diadem of Augustus, the sceptre of the Cæsars, yet in his eyes, which were unfathomable and blue as the ocean that girt his own ancestral home of far away, there glowed neither the fire of ambition, nor the desire for supreme power. Only the fire of love for her and the serenity of infinite peace.

"Dear lord," she said, "when the sceptre of Augustus is in thine hands thou canst wield it at thy pleasure. I know not the way of which thou speakest; the mountain of Calvary is unknown to me and thou speakest of things that are strange to mine ear.... But the gods have placed it within my power to make thee great above all men, the ruler of the mightiest Empire in the world, and on my knees do I thank them that they have shown me the way whereby I can guide thy footsteps even to the throne of Augustus."

"And on my knees do I thank God, O my soul, that thou didst show me the way to the foot of His Cross. God himself, dear heart!--oh! thou'lt understand some day for thy soul is beautiful and prepared to receive

just that one breath from Heaven which will show it the way to eternal life--God Himself, dear heart, who lived amongst us all a lowly, humble life of patience and of toil! God--think on it!--who might have come down to us in the fullness of His Majesty, Who might, had He so chosen, have wielded the sceptre of the world and worn every crown of every empire throughout the ages, but Whom I saw--aye, I, dear heart--saw with mine own eyes as He toiled, weary, footsore, anhungered, and athirst, that He might comfort the poor and bring radiance into the dwellings of the humble. And I who saw Him thus, I who heard His voice of gentleness and of peace, I to desire a crown and sceptre, to betray the Cæsar and to mount a throne!!! Dear heart! dear heart! dost not understand that the sceptre would weigh like lead in my hands and the crown bow my head down with shame?"

"Then would my whispered words lift the weight from thy brow and my kiss dissipate the blush of shame from thy cheeks. Day and night would go by in infinite happiness, thy head upon my breast, mine arms encircling thy neck. I am ignorant still, yet would I teach thee what love means and the sweet lesson learnt from me thou wouldst teach me in return."

"And in mine ear the still, small voice would murmur: 'Thou hast seen the living face of thy God, didst break thine oath to Cæsar! thou didst betray him in his need, even as the Iscariot betrayed his Lord with a kiss.'"

"The voice of thy god," she retorted, "is no louder than that of the people of Rome, and the people proclaim thee the Cæsar and have released thee of thine oath."

"The voice of God," he said slowly, "spoke to me across the sandy wastes of Galilee and said unto me: 'Render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and unto God the things that are God's.'"

His softly murmured words died away in the vastness around him. Dea Flavia made no response; a terrible ache was in her heart as if a cold, dead hand gripped its every string, whilst mocking laughter sounded in her ear.

That cruel monster Finality grinned at her from across the room. Love was lying bleeding and fettered at the feet of some intangible, superhuman spectre which Dea Flavia dreaded because it was the Unknown.

Taurus Antinor's eyes were fixed into vacancy, and she trembled because she could not see that which he saw. Was he looking on that very vision which he had conjured up, a cross, broken and tempest-tossed, a symbol of that power which to him was mightier than the Empire of Rome, mightier than the kingdom of her love?

She remembered how, a few days ago, in this self-same room she had in thought accosted and defied that Galilean rebel who had died the ignominious death; she had defied him, even she, Dea Flavia Augusta of the imperial House of Cæsar. She had offered him battle for this very man whose soul she now would fill with her own.

She had defied the Galilean, vowed that she would conquer this heart and filch it from the allegiance it had sworn, vowed that she would make it Cæsar's first and then her own, that she would break it and crush it

first and then wrest it from its unknown God.

And now it seemed as if that obscure Galilean rebel had conquered in the end. She had brought forth the whole armoury of her love, her beauty, her nearness, the ardour of youth and passion which emanated from her entire being, and the intangible Unknown had remained the victor, and she was left with that awful ache in her heart which was more bitter than death.

"Have I thy leave to go, Augusta?" he asked gently at last, "the moments are precious. The Cæsar hath need of me...."

She woke as from a hideous dream. With a wild gesture of the arms she seemed to sweep away from before her those awful spectres that assailed her. Then she clung to him with the strength of oncoming despair.

"No--no," she cried, "do not go ... he will kill thee, I say ... do not go...."

"I must," he said firmly. "Dear heart, I entreat thee let me go."

"No--no... think but a moment ... think!... My love?... is it naught to thee?... Has my kiss left thee cold?... Do not leave me, dear lord ... do not leave me yet ... not just yet ... now that I know what happiness can mean. I have been so lonely all my life.... Love hath come to me at last ... love and happiness.... I am young--I want both.... Dear lord, if thou lovest me canst leave me desolate?..."

"_If_ I love thee!"

There was so much longing in the one brief phrase, such passion and such tenderness, that all her hopes revived. One more effort and she felt sure that she would conquer. Fever was in her veins now, the walls of the studio swam before her eyes; she fell on her knees for she could no longer stand, but her arms encircled him, clinging to him with all her might. Her face, lifted up to his, was swimming in tears, her golden hair escaping from its trammels fell in a glowing mass down her shoulders.

"I love thee," she murmured, "canst leave me now, dear lord.... If thou goest now 'tis for ever ... think, oh think! just for one moment ... the Cæsar restored to power will part me from thee ... even if anon in his madness he doth not kill thee. If thou goest 'tis for ever.... Think on it ... think on it ere thou goest.... My love ... my love, go not from me, and leave me desolate.... Dear lord, but think on it--of the kisses thou wilt taste from my lips--the ecstasies thou wilt find in my arms!... Thine am I--thine my heart that loves thee--my body that worships thee--my every thought is thine.... Go not from me ... not just now till thou hast felt once more the full savour of my love."

Her arms round his knees, and she was exquisitely beautiful, exquisite in her whole-hearted love, her whole-hearted abnegation--she, a proud Roman lady kneeling at his feet, her full red lips asking for a kiss.

He stood with his face buried in his hands.

"Oh God! my God!" he murmured, "do not forsake me now!"

The thunder crashed overhead while a human soul fought its desperate fight for truth and eternal life. A vivid flash of lightning lit up the white-washed walls of the studio, and to the poor fighting soul, tortured with temptation, with longing and with passion, there came in that swift bright flash a vision of long ago.

The sky lurid and dark, the soil trembling beneath the feet of thousands of men and women, and there, far away, outlined against that sky, a figure stretched out upon a Cross. The head was bent in agony, the eyes half-closed, the lips livid and parted, the body broken with torments had the rigidity of death. But the arms were stretched out, straight and wide, as if with one last gesture of appeal and of longing, and in this storm-laden air there floated tender words, intangible and soft as a memory.

"Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you."

It was but a vision, swift as the lightning flash that conjured it and the words had already died on the stillness of the air.

But the tortured soul had found its anchorage. Taurus Antinor's hands fell from before his face.

"In Thy service, O Jesus of Galilee!" he said, and the mighty effort of subjection brought the perspiration to his brow and caused his limbs to tremble. "I saw Thine agony, Thy sacrifice; it should be so easy to do this for Thy sake. Give me the strength to render unto Cæsar that which is Cæsar's, and do Thou take from me all that is Thine."

She heard his words, she saw the look and knew that she had failed.

Back on the cruel wings of remembrance came the words of Menecreta the slave.

"May thine every deed of mercy be turned to sorrow and to humiliation, thine every act of pity prove a curse to him who receives it, until thou on thy knees art left to sue for pity to a heart that knoweth it not, and findest a deaf ear turned unto thy cry!"

And the curse of the broken-hearted mother seemed like the tangible response to the defiance which she, in her arrogance and her pride, had hurled against him who was called Jesus of Nazareth. She would have blessed Menecreta and Menecreta was dead; she would have given her life for the Cæsar and the Cæsar was a cowardly fugitive, and now on her knees she had sued for pity, and the heart which she had fought for to possess had turned from her as if it knew neither mercy nor love, and whilst her very soul had cried with longing she had found a deaf ear turned to her cry.

That unknown Galilean who died upon the cross had been stronger than her love. It was he who was filching it from its allegiance, he who was brushing and crushing this heart ere he wrested it finally from her--Dea Flavia Augusta of the imperial House of Cæsar!

The Galilean had accepted her challenge and he had conquered, and she

was naught in the heart of the one man she would have given her whole life to call her own.

She gave a cry like a wounded bird, she jumped to her feet, and for one moment stood up, splendid, wrathful, pagan to the heart.

"Curse thy god," she cried wildly, "curse him, I say, for a jealous, cruel god.... Go thy ways, O follower of the Galilean! go thy ways! and when lonely and wretched thy footsteps lead thee along that way which thou hast deified, then call on him, I say--thou'lt find him silent to thy prayer and deaf unto thy woe!"

Her body swayed, an ashen pallor spread over her cheeks, she would have fallen backwards like a log had he not caught her in his arms.

Reverently he carried her to the couch and there he laid her down, wrapping her grey shroud-like tunic closely round her feet.

He bent over her and kissed her golden hair, each blue-veined lid closed in unconsciousness, the perfect lips pallid now and still.

"In the name of Him Who died before mine eyes, take her in Thy keeping, O God!" he murmured fervently.

Then without another glance on her, he fled precipitately from the room.

CHAPTER XXXI

"Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."--EPHESIANS VI. 13.

Without looking to right or left he strode across the atrium.

"A cloak quickly," he commanded as Dion and Nalus, obedient and expectant of orders, rushed forward at his approach.

From the triclinium on the right came the sound of loud laughter and the strains of a bibulous song, voices raised in gaiety and pleasure: Taurus Antinor recognised that of Caius Nepos, fluent and mellow, and that of my lord Hortensius Martius resonant and clear.

To what their revelries meant he did not give a thought. Dea had told him why these men had come to her house. The intrigues hatched two days ago over a supper-table were finding their culmination now. The Cæsar was a fugitive and the people rebellious: the golden opportunity lay ready to the hand of these treacherous self-seekers: and Dea Flavia was to be their tool, their puppet, until such time as they betrayed her in her turn into other hands that paid them higher wage.

Taurus Antinor wrapped the dark cloak which Dion had brought him closely around his person. He gave the slaves a mute, peremptory sign of silence

and then quickly walked past the janitors, through the vestibule and out into the open street.

The midday light had yielded to early afternoon. It still was grey and lurid, with a leaden mist hanging over the distance and moisture rising up from the rain-sodden ground. The worst of the storm had passed from over the city, but the thunder still rolled dully at intervals above the Campania and great gusts of wind drove the heavy rain into Taurus Antinor's face.

It seemed to him, as he walked rapidly down the narrow street in front of the Augusta's palace, that the noise from the Forum below had gained in volume and in strength. When the raging tempest of rebellion was at its height earlier in the day, he had lain in a drugged sleep, unconscious of the shouts, the threats, the groans which had resounded from palace to palace on the very summit of the Palatine. When he awoke these terrifying sounds were already more subdued. The people had been driven by the storm-fanned conflagration which they themselves had kindled, to seek shelter under the arcades of the tabernae in the Forum below. But now, after a couple of hours of enforced inactivity, they were ready once more for mischief: in compact groups of a dozen or so they were slowly emerging from beneath the shelters, and it only needed the amalgamation of these isolated groups for the fire of open insurrection to be ablaze again.

Time, therefore, was obviously precious. At any moment now, if the rain ceased altogether, the populace--in no way cooled by the drenching--would once more storm the hill and would discover the fugitive Cæsar in his retreat. Already from afar there came to the lonely pedestrian's ear the roar of a mighty wave composed of many sounds, which, gathering force and fury, was ready to dash itself anew upon the imperial hill.

But up here on the summit there still reigned comparative quietude. True that as he walked rapidly along Taurus Antinor spied from time to time groups of excited, chattering men congregated at street corners or under the shelter of a jutting portico; whilst now and then from behind the huge piles of builders' materials, which littered this portion of the Palatine, darkly swathed figures would emerge at sound of the praefect's footsteps on the flagstones, and as quickly vanish again. But to these Taurus Antinor paid no heed; they were but the remote echoes of the angry storm below.

Soon the majestic pile of Augustus' palace loomed before him on the left, with its unending vistas of marble and porphyry colonnades. On the right was the temple of Jupiter Victor on the very summit of the hill.

An undefinable instinct led the man's footsteps to that lonely height. He skirted the temple and anon stood looking down on the panorama of Rome stretched out at his feet: the Palatine sloping downwards in a gentle gradient--covered with the dwellings of the rich patricians which formed here a network of intricate and narrow streets; below these the great Circus redolent of the memories of the past four-and-twenty hours; beyond it the Aventine and the winding ribbon of the Tiber now lost in a leaden-coloured haze.

The streets from the valley upwards all round the hill were swarming

with men, who from this distance looked like pygmies, fussy and irresponsible, spectral too in the rain-laden mist as they appeared to be running hither and thither in compact groups, but with seeming aimlessness, whilst shouting, always shouting, that perpetual call for vengeance and for death.

The watcher looked down in silence, for that crowd of Pygmies was the people of Rome, who at a word from him would proclaim him Cæsar and master of the world. The immensity of the sky was above him, the far horizon partly hidden in gloom, but down there were the people whose voice was raised to deify their chosen hero in the intervals of demanding the death of a tyrant.

And the people were the lords of Rome just now. Entrenched in the narrow streets a crowd--one hundred thousand or more strong--held the imperial hill in a solid blockade. Down below, in and around the Circus, steel and bronze glittered in the distant vapours. One thousand men of the praetorian guard, cut off from the Cæsar, had been unable to forge a way through the serried ranks of the populace.

Dark masses--that lay immovable and stark in the open space around the Circus--spoke mutely of combats that had been fierce and bloody: but the people had remained victorious; the people held their ground. One hundred thousand fists and staves, a few agricultural and building implements had asserted their mastery over one thousand swords and shields.

The people were the masters of Rome, and they had chosen their Cæsar in the hero whom they had already deified.

Taurus Antinor's gaze swept over the vista that lay stretched out before him: it pictured the entire political situation of the world-city. With treachery lurking on the hill and a determined mob in the valley, the murder of the Cæsar was but a question of hours.

And after that?

After that the Empire of Rome and the dominion of the world for this man who stood here on the watch. He had but to say the word and that Empire would be his. He had but to go back now, to find his way with softly treading footsteps to the couch where Dea Flavia's exquisite body lay stretched out in semi-unconsciousness. He had but to take her once more in his arms, to murmur the words of love that--unspoken--seared his lips even now; he had but to close his ears to the still small voice that was God's, and Rome, the mistress of the world, and Dea Flavia, the peerless woman, would be his at the word.

Rome and Dea Flavia! the two priceless guerdons of the earth! They called to him now on the wings of the distant storm, from over the hills and from across the grey, dull mist that obscured the sky.

The man stretched out his arms with a gesture of passionate longing. How easy it were to take all! How impossible it seemed to give up everything that made life glorious and sweet.

A voice low and insinuating trembled in the air.

"Take all!" it said, "it is thine for the taking. Thine by the will of thousands, thine by the call of one pair of perfect lips ... Rome, the unconquered queen ... Dea Flavia holding in her white hands a cup brimming over with happiness ... all are thine at the word."

The silent watcher cried out in his loneliness and his agony; he held his hands to his ears, for the voice grew more insidious and more real:

"The Empire of the world and Dea Flavia ... and in the balance what?... an oath rendered to a tyrannical madman, the scourge and terror of mankind ... an oath which reason itself doth repudiate with scorn ... even thy God would not exact obedience from thee at such a price...."

His head fell upon his breast and his knees bent to the earth. It was all so difficult ... it seemed well-nigh impossible now....

No words escaped his lips; he knelt here silent and alone before the face of Rome that but waited to be conquered--before the face of God veiled to his gaze, and around him the distant roll of thunder and the confused shouts of the people from below.

Christian! this is thine hour! In silence and in tears thou must make thy last stand against temptation greater mayhap than suffering manhood hath ever had to withstand alone.

Everything in the man cried out to him to yield; his love for Dea and his love for Rome, and that pride of manhood in him that calls for power over other men. Born and bred in luxury-loving paganism, in the worship of might and the deification of the imperium, the Christian had to choose between the world and the Master. The battle was fierce and cruel. Gone now was the consciousness of strength, the dignity of the patrician! Here was but a lonely wretched human creature fighting the tempter for his own soul.

He cowered on the ground, the while driving rain beat against the tawny masses of his hair, and lashed the proud stiff neck that found it so difficult to bend. The tearing wind searched the loosened folds of his mantle and the purple silk of his tunic, the emblem of patrician rank. His face was buried in his hands, heavy sobs shook his broad shoulders. The face of Dea Flavia, exquisitely fair, smiled at him through his closed lids, the warm, mellow masses of her hair entwined themselves around his tear-stained fingers, her cooing voice called to him with the ineffable sweetness of love.

Christian, it is thine hour! and the battle must be fought out in anguish and in loneliness, with no one nigh thee to comfort and to succour, with no one to see the rending of thy soul or the slow breaking of thy love-filled heart.

"When thou art lonely and wretched," Dea Flavia had cried in the agony of her wounded love, "call on thy god then and thou wilt find him silent unto thy prayer and deaf unto thy woe."

And the cry was wrung out from the depths of the tortured heart: "Oh, God, my God, if Thou be willing take this cup from me!" whilst the man prayed to his God to take his soul into His keeping ere it became perjured and accursed.

But God was silent, because the soul, though racked and tempted, was too great for the tasting of an easy victory. God was silent, but He saw the tears that fell heavy and hot upon the ground. He was silent, but He heard the cries of anguish, the bitter moans of pain.

Christian, this is thine hour! for when thy soul and heart have suffered enough, when they have been weighed in the crucible of divine love and not been found wanting, then will the peace of God which passeth all understanding descend in exquisite comfort upon thee.

Gradually the tears ceased to fall, the sobs to shake the massive frame of the kneeling man. His hands dropped from his face and his gaze went up to the storm-tossed firmament, there where land and sky merged in the grey mists of approaching evening.

And on the horizon, as he gazed, beyond the valley, beyond the Aventine and the murmuring Tiber, already wrapped in gloom, a ray of golden light had rent the lowering clouds.

It shone serene and bright, illumined from behind limitless depths by the slanting rays of a slowly sinking sun. Taurus Antinor rose to his feet; he looked and looked upon that light until it tore a wider and ever wider gap in the angry clouds, and its golden radiance spread right across the horizon far away.

The very mist now seemed aglow; the waters of the Tiber, tossed by the gale, throw back brilliant sparks of reflected lights.

From the low-lying marshes among the reeds two birds rose in rapid flight and disappeared in that golden haze.

"My God, not mine but Thy will be done!" murmured the lonely man; and anguish folded its sable wings and the tortured heart was at peace.

CHAPTER XXXII

"For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth."--HEBREWS XII. 6.

The gorgeous palace of Augustus appeared quite deserted when the praefect of Rome finally made his way to the vestibule. He crossed the magnificent inner peristylum, the tall, uncut pillars of which, sharply defined against the sky, enhanced its majestic grandeur and its air of mysterious solemnity.

As a rule these vast halls were peopled with scribes, and though shorn of its original imperial splendours the palace of the great Emperor presented at times a certain air of animation and of official bustle. But now these scribes, no doubt awed by the sound of terror and of strife which must have reached even this hallowed spot, had fled into the more remote portions of the palace, or mayhap had even joined the throngs in the Forum, on the principle that 'tis better to form an unit

in an angry crowd, rather than to be its butt.

The peristylum itself, despite its mute and lonely magnificence, bore traces of the turmoil that reigned throughout the city; there were obvious signs that men had lived and worked here but a very little while ago, that they had been afraid and then had run away.

The marble floors were stained with mud. The sedate chairs that usually lined the walls were pushed aside and left to stand crooked and awry, the very mockery of their former dignity. Here and there a roll of parchment, an ink-stained pen, a cast-off cloak littered the hall and looked curiously provocative and out of place--an insult to the majesty of the dead and mighty Cæsar, who had caused the stately columns to be reared, and the massive walls to raise their pure lines upwards to the sky.

But on all this Taurus Antinor did not pause to think. On his right he heard sounds which proclaimed the presence of men, and thither did he immediately turn his footsteps.

Peering through the long vista of numberless columns, the further ones of which were merged together in the dim light, he saw that the score or so of the praetorian guard who had escorted the Cæsar in his flight were assembled at the end of the gigantic hall, some lolling against the marble pillars, others lying or squatting on the hard floor, as much at their ease as circumstances would allow.

They had not discarded their accoutrements and each man had his sword by his side. Not realising that the fury of the mob had been momentarily damped by the storm, they remained prepared to defend the Cæsar's life at any moment with their own.

More than one of them had apparently been wounded in one or other of the hand-to-hand combats which they had sustained against the mob earlier in the day, for more than one head was wrapped in a rough piece of bandage and more than one tunic was stained with blood. All the men looked fagged and dirty and for the most part worn out with sleeplessness and want of food.

As the praefect's firm tread resounded from end to end of the colonnaded hall and woke the slumbering echoes of the deserted palace, weary, lack-lustre eyes were turned in his direction, and now when his tall figure appeared between two pillars the men recognised him, for his head was uncovered.

One or two of them gave a cry of terror since all of them had thought that the praefect was dead, and this tall, dark presence, wrapped in a long cloak and with tawny hair still dripping from the rain, looked very like an apparition from another world.

"The Cæsar?" queried the praefect curtly.

Some of the men struggled to their feet. The voice they knew well; it was as of old, loud and peremptory and not like to be coming from a grave. All did their best to assume a respectful bearing, and one who was in command made ready to show the praefect into the Cæsar's presence.

"I want no escort," said Taurus Antinor in that same commanding voice which no one in Rome had ever tried to resist. "Tell me only where I can find the Cæsar."

"In the lararium, O praefect," replied the soldier without hesitation. "He ordered us to remain here."

Without looking to right or left Taurus Antinor walked past the soldiers into the gorgeous tablinium beyond, where great Augustus had been wont to administer justice. This vast hall was deserted, but from an inner room on the left there came to the praefect's ear a curious sound like the snarl of an angry feline creature, a sound which he knew could only come from one human throat. Without hesitation he turned to whence that sound had come. On the right of the huge semi-circular apse, which contained the now vacant throne of Augustus, a narrow door led to the small temple-like room which had once contained the great Emperor's household gods.

A heavy curtain of embroidered silk masked this entrance. Taurus Antinor pushed it back and walked in.

The temple derived its light solely from a small opening in the vaulted ceiling; that light which came down in a narrow shaft was grey and dull and failed to penetrate the dark and mysterious corners of the room.

Taurus Antinor's eyes were narrowed beneath his frowning brows as he tried to pierce the gloom that lay beyond that shaft of light. He could hear heavy breathing proceeding from there and the muttering of curses, and anon he was able to spy a bundle of stained silken clothes that lay in a heap and which seemed to shrink and to shrivel, to tremble and to cower on the altar steps: a bundle of rags and a gleam of flaccid flesh which stood for the majesty of Cæsar.

All at once there was a raucous cry and a growl as of an animal enraged, and the next second something hot and heavy threw itself with violent force against the praefect, even whilst the sharp blade of a dagger caught a gleam of reflected light.

But Taurus Antinor--well knowing the man whom he had come to help--was fully prepared for the treacherous attack. With a rapid movement he had made a shield of his mantle by winding it closely round his arm, and holding it before his face. The dagger glanced against the woollen material, rendered heavy and sodden with the rain, and Caligula, unnerved by the futile effort, staggered back against the altar steps while the dagger fell with a sharp sound upon the marble floor.

"Traitor!" came in hoarse gasps from the Cæsar's throat. "Hast come to murder me!"

"Ho! there! My guard! My guard!"

He was trying to shout, but terror was evidently choking him. He struggled to his feet, and still trembling from head to foot, made pitiable attempts to work his way round to a place of safety behind the altar, whilst keeping his bloodshot eyes fixed upon the praefect.

"Hast come to murder me?" he gasped.

"I came to place my body at thy service, O Cæsar," replied Taurus Antinor quietly. "I have been sick for nigh on twenty-four hours, else I had come to thee before. They told me that thou wast cut off from those whose duty it is to guard thy person. An thou wilt grant me leave I'll conduct thee to them."

"Aye! thou'rt ready enough to conduct me to my death, thou treacherous son of slaves," snarled the Cæsar from behind the safe bastion of the stone altar. "I have learnt thy treachery, I, even I, who trusted thee. Thou didst lie to me and plan my death even whilst I heaped uncounted favours upon thee."

"On my soul, O Cæsar, thou dost me infinite wrong," rejoined the praefect calmly. "But, an it please thee, I am not here to justify myself before thee, though God knows I would wish thee to believe me true; rather am I here to serve thee, an thou wilt deign to accept my help in thy need."

"To accept thy help. Nay! By Jupiter, I would as soon trust myself to the snakes that creep under the grasses of the Campania, as I would place my life in the keeping of a traitor."

"Had I thought to betray thee, O Cæsar," said Taurus Antinor simply, "I had not come unarmed and alone. Even the dagger wherewith thou didst threaten my life lies at my foot now, ready to my hand for the mere picking up of it."

As he spoke he gave the dagger a slight kick with his foot, so that it slid clinking and rattling along the smooth floor, until its progress was stopped by the corner of the altar steps against which the Cæsar cowered in abject fear. "My guard is in the next room," said Caligula with an evil sneer, "an I call but once and they will kill thee at my word."

"That is as thou commandest and as God wills," said Taurus Antinor, "but remember ere thou strikest, O Cæsar, that with my death thou wilt lose the one man who can save thee now."

He spoke quite calmly nor did the tone of deference ever depart from his speech. He stood in the dim light which came in a straight shaft down through the opening above, his splendid person in full view of the Cæsar who still crouched in the shadow. The power of his individuality imposed itself upon the miserable coward who threatened him. Caligula--tyrant and half crazy though he was--had sufficient shrewdness in his tortuous brain to recognise the truth of what the praefect had told him. Had this man come with evil intent he would not have come alone and unarmed: had he wished to gain his own ends, he would have had but to say a word and the mob had been ready to wreak its desired vengeance upon the Cæsar.

"The people of Rome," resumed Taurus Antinor after a while, seeing that Caligula was silent and more inclined to listen to him, "are angered against thee. Thou knowest, O Cæsar! what the anger of the people portends. For the moment a violent storm has driven the malcontents away from the vicinity of thy palace. They are congregated under the arcades of the Forum and nurse there their thoughts of rancour and of revenge."

"Until such time as my wrath overtakes them," broke in Caligula with one of his most evil oaths. "I am not dead yet, and whilst I live I'll not forget. Rome shall rue this day in blood and in tears. Vengeance and rancour, sayest thou?" and he drew in his breath with a moist, hissing sound like the snakes of the Campania of which he spoke just now. "Vengeance and rancour will overtake the rebels! My vengeance and my rancour, beside which all others shall pale! Rome can wait, I say: the Cæsar is not yet dead."

The words fell choked and thick from his quivering lips, nor did Taurus Antinor attempt to interrupt him; but as the Cæsar finished speaking, exhausted and breathing heavily, there was a moment's silence in the room, and through that silence could be heard quite distinctly the call of the people from the distance below.

"Death to the Cæsar! Death!"

Caligula uttered a loud cry of rage and of fear and struggled to his feet. He staggered forward out of the darkness and into the light, his trembling arms outstretched, his sparse hair plastered against his moist forehead, his eyes, protruding and bloodshot, fixed upon the praefect.

"They'll murder me," he cried, as he almost fell on his knees and only saved himself by clinging desperately with both hands to Taurus Antinor's outstretched arm. "They'll murder me! Save me, O praefect; save me! and I'll heap wealth upon thee--money, honours, power, all that thou dost desire! Save me! Do not let them murder me! I will not die.... I will not! I will not!... Cowards! cowards! I am a defenceless man!... I will not die ... I cannot die.... Cowards!"

Taurus Antinor had to brace himself up against the sickening sense of almost physical nausea that came over him at sight of this pitiful creature, more abject than any cur.

Among the many moments of terrible doubt and still more terrible temptation through which he had fought to-day, this was perhaps the most intolerable because the worldly man in him cried out against the futility of his own sacrifice.

To give up every hope of happiness, every aspiration for the welfare of an entire nation for the sake of this miserable coward, whose thoughts of self-preservation only alternated with those of maniacal tyranny, seemed indeed insensate mockery. Duty could not possibly lie in this. This base creature's worthless life surely could not be weighed in the balance against the countless others which--despite any promises that might be wrung from him now--he would inevitably sacrifice to his own lust for blood and for revenge.

The worldly man, the thinking philosopher, the pagan in fact, faced these propositions and placed them before the Christian. But the time had gone by for mental conflict. The Christian had fought until his numbed soul had almost lost the power of suffering; all he knew now was that he must not reason, he must neither think nor philosophise. The Master whom he had seen with limbs stretched upon a Cross in unspeakable agony and humiliation, might also have overturned a Cæsar and ruled the world from the heights of a throne. He chose to rule it from a place of

infamy, and when His dying lips proclaimed to that same world the supreme finality of its salvation: "It is accomplished!" it was not to the sound of triumphal music, with banners flying and the spoils of conquest around, it was to the accompaniment of taunts and of derision and with body stripped naked before a jeering world.

"I have offered thee my service, O Cæsar," said Taurus Antinor with a mighty effort at deference and calm. "An thou wilt follow mine advice I can shield thee from the wrath of the people until such time as that which has occurred to-day, lies buried in the bosom of the past."

"What must I do?... What must I do?" muttered Caligula between his chattering teeth. He was clinging to the praefect with both hands, for his knees were shaking under him and he would have fallen had he attempted to stand up alone. "Save me, praefect.... Save me.... Do not let them kill me.... I cannot die.... I will not ... and those cowards would murder me...."

"Wilt trust thyself to me, O Cæsar?"

"Yes, yes, what must I do?"

"Come forth with me into the streets. Wrapped in dark cloaks the people will not recognise us. They would never expect the Cæsar to leave his palace while his life is in danger, and well disguised thou couldst come with me through devious ways to a house I know of on the Aventine where thou wouldst be safe."

But at this suggestion that he should leave the security of this lonely palace for the open dangers of the streets, Caligula's terrors increased tenfold. His teeth chattered more loudly in his head, and his hands on the praefect's arm became convulsive in their grasp.

"I dare not go, praefect," he stammered, and it had been pitiable were it not abject to see the look of insane terror which he cast around him. "I dare not go.... They would kill me if they saw me ... and I don't want to die...."

"No one would recognise thee," said Taurus Antinor with ill-restrained patience, "dressed as scribes we can mingle with the fringe of the crowd. The shades of evening will be on us in an hour and our dark mantles will excite no attention. Have no fear, Cæsar! no one would suspect thee of running in the teeth of danger."

The tone of bitter irony was lost on the dulled perceptions of this miserable coward.

"I would not dare," he murmured intermittently, "I would not dare."

"Then do I take my leave of thee, O Cæsar," retorted Taurus Antinor coldly. "For here alone, with but twenty men to guard thee, I can do naught to save thy person from outrage."

"If I were quite sure that I could trust thee...."

"That is for thee to decide. I have offered thee my services ... an thou'lt not accept them I crave thy leave to go."

"No, no, do not leave me, praefect," cried Caligula with despair, clinging now with all his might to this arm, which every instinct in him told him was staunch in his defence. "Do not leave me ... I'll do as thou dost advise.... I'll don a slave's garb ... and slip out into the street in thy wake ... and ... after that...?"

"Thou'lt find temporary shelter in an humble house on the Aventine. There thou canst rest for a few days even while thy legions, distant from here but three days' march, I believe, do approach the city."

"Yes, yes! my legions," cried the Cæsar in a hoarse whisper. "I had nigh forgotten them. They are not far ... if I could but reach them...."

A sudden fire of malicious hatred once more lit up the dull misery of his face.

"At the head of my legions I can soon show this miserable rabble who is the master of Rome."

"At the head of thy legions, O Cæsar," retorted Taurus Antinor firmly, "and preceded by a proclamation of universal pardon for all the events of the past few days, thou wilt make thine entry into Rome amidst the rejoicings of thy people."

"Pardon!" hissed Caligula through set teeth. "Never!"

"Yet is a proclamation of universal pardon necessary for thy safety," said Taurus Antinor with solemn earnestness. "As soon as I have placed thee under the protection of that sheltering roof on the Aventine, I would return to Rome with thy proclamation, and with the news that in three days' time thou wouldst enter the city at the head of thy people. The people, frightened at first, would imagine that divine interference had led thee triumphantly out of danger, thy clemency would allay their fears and fire their enthusiasm; they would soon make ready to welcome thee with rejoicings. But without thy promise of pardon fear would gain the mastery over those who led this rebellion, and fear quickly would beget despair. In their terror of thy coming vengeance they might oppose thy coming, and such is the temper of the people just now that all the strength of thy legions--half-spent in this last expedition--might be powerless against it; thy chosen soldiers even might turn against thee."

The Cæsar was silent, and even in this dim light it was easy to read on his ghastly face the inner workings of his tortuous mind--rage, malice, a raging thirst for revenge fought against his own cowardice and the steady influence which the praefect's calm and firm attitude was exercising over him, much against his will.

"Time is precious, O Cæsar," continued Taurus Antinor earnestly; "the people will not wait. The shadows of evening will soon be drawing in and the storm has not yet wholly passed away. The hour is propitious now, an thou wilt accept my service, we can slip away and mingle with the few stragglng groups of malcontents before the crowd has again rushed the hill. An thou wilt not tarry and canst brace thyself up to indifferent demeanour in the streets, I swear to thee that thou wilt be under safe shelter in an hour."

"If I but dared to trust myself so entirely in thy keeping...."

Taurus Antinor shrugged his broad shoulders with marked contempt for his forbearance was threatening to give way.

"Is there anyone else," he asked, "whom thou wouldst rather trust? Name him then, O Cæsar, and, alive or dead, I'll bring him to thy presence within the hour."

But to this the Cæsar made no reply. He knew better than anyone could tell him that the man whom he had called a traitor, whom he had twice tried basely to kill, was the one man in the entire patriciate of Rome who would be true to him. Even madmen have such instincts at times. Caligula knew that he was doomed, the cries from below could leave no doubt in his mind that, isolated as he was, cut off not only from his legions but even from his guard, nothing could save him from the fury of vengeance which threatened him from his entire people.

A wave of fatality swept over his maniacal sense of terror. He knew and felt that if this man was a traitor then indeed could nothing save him; and he knew and felt at the same time that while he was under this man's protection no great harm could come to him.

Gradually this sense of fatality got the mastery over his cowardice, and as Taurus Antinor watched the twitchings of that distorted face, he could note that insensibly a resolution to follow his advice had found its way in this madman's brain.

"I'll come with thee," said Caligula at last, and now his voice sounded more firm, even whilst his hands released their grip on the praefect's arm and his short body straightened itself out upon his trembling limbs. "I'll come with thee, but may thy flesh wither on thy bones, thy hands be palsied and thine eyes become sightless if thou hast a thought of betraying thy Cæsar."

To this senseless speech Taurus Antinor vouchsafed no reply.

"Then I pray thee," he said quietly, "wait here a while till I find the necessary garments for thy disguise and mine, and also pen, ink and parchment."

"Pen and ink? For what?"

"Thy proclamation of pardon, Cæsar, signed by thy hand...."

"When I am in safety I will see to it," said Caligula with sudden blandness, "thou saidst it thyself there is no time to lose."

"There is time to fulfil a promise and time to take what is the most important measure for thy safety," rejoined Taurus Antinor.

"Thou dost not trust thy Cæsar," said Caligula with a vicious snarl.

"No," was the praefect's curt reply.

It was characteristic of this tyrannical despot that at the praefect's

rough answer he laughed with obvious satisfaction. At the back of his shrewd sense of self-preservation there had come the thought that the man who had spoken that unequivocal "No!" had learnt to its fullest the lesson of truth. He said nothing for a while, and when his laughter died away in a kind of hysterical gasp, he made a gesture expressive of indifference and also of submission to the other's wish.

Taurus Antinor turned away from the loathsome presence without another word and with a firm step. And Caligula, standing motionless in the middle of the room waited quietly for his return.

CHAPTER XXXIIII

"Come, take up the cross, and follow me."--ST. MARK X. 21.

Taurus Antinor had some difficulty in finding the clothes that he wanted, which would serve as a disguise for the Cæsar and himself, and he had to explore the huge deserted palace from end to end before he came on the block of the slaves' quarters; here in one of the cubicles he ultimately discovered a few bundles of garments, which had apparently been hastily collected and then forgotten by one of the runaway scribes.

These he found on inspection would suit his purpose admirably. Writing tools and desk he had already collected; there were plenty of these littering the building in every corner.

Armed with all these necessaries, he made his way back to the lararium without again crossing the peristylum where the soldiers were assembled.

Sitting on the altar steps, with the desk between his knees and the light from the narrow shaft above falling full upon the parchment, he wrote out carefully and laboriously the proclamation of pardon which was destined on the morrow to assure the people of Rome that all their delinquencies against the majesty and the person of their Cæsar would by him be forgotten.

It was necessary so to word it that not a single loophole should remain through which Caligula could ultimately slip and break his word. More than one beginning was made and whole lines erased and rewritten before the praefect of Rome was satisfied with his work.

The Cæsar in the meanwhile was tramping up and down the tiny room like his own favourite black panther when it was in a rage. Throwing his thick, short body about in a kind of rolling gait, he only paused at times for a moment or two in order to hurl a vicious snarl at the praefect.

His fingers were twitching convulsively the whole time, with longing no doubt to grasp the leather-thonged whip which they were so fond of wielding. At intervals he would gnaw his nails down to the quick while snorts of bridled fury escaped through his pallid lips.

But Taurus Antinor went on with his work, absolutely heedless of the Cæsar's rage. When the wording of the proclamation satisfied him, he held out the pen for Caligula to sign. He knelt on the floor with one knee, holding up against his forehead, as custom demanded on a solemn occasion, the desk on which rested the imperial decree. He rendered this act of homage simply and loyally, as the outward sign of that sacrifice which the Divine Master had demanded of him.

Faithful to his instincts of petty tyranny, the Cæsar kept the praefect of Rome kneeling before him for close on half an hour; all this while volleys of vituperations poured from his mouth against all traitors in general, and more especially against the praefect whom he accused of selling his services only in order to gain his own ends.

It was only when Taurus Antinor had reminded him for the third time that he was placing his life in grave jeopardy with all this delay that he ultimately snatched up the pen and put his name to the decree.

After that both the men donned the dark garments of the fugitive scribe. With the proclamation of pardon rolled up tightly and hidden within the folds of his tunic, Taurus Antinor led the way out of the lararium.

The afternoon light was slowly sinking into the embrace of evening. The vast deserted palace, with its rows of monumental columns and statues of stone gods looked spectral and mysterious in the fast gathering gloom.

When exploring the building in search of disguises Taurus Antinor had taken note of the minor exits which gave on the more isolated portions of the imperial gardens; to one of these did he now conduct the Cæsar and suddenly the outer air struck on the faces of the two men and they found themselves in the open, in the waning light of day.

Unbroken now by the solid marble walls which had shut out most of the noise from the streets, the shouts that came from the slopes of the hill struck more clearly upon the ear. The sound travelling through the mist-laden air seemed to come more especially from the northwestern front of the palace of Augustus, which here faces that of the late Emperor Tiberius, with the new gigantic wing built recently thereunto by Caligula.

Here a vast multitude appeared to have congregated. The cries of "Death!" seemed ominously loud and near, and through them there was a dull murmur as of an angry mob foiled in its lust.

The Cæsar uttered a cry of terror and his knees gave under him. He cowered on the ground, clutching at the praefect's robe and hiding his face in the folds of his mantle.

"They will kill me!" he stammered thickly. "I dare not go, praefect!... take me back ... I dare not go!"

Taurus Antinor, none too patient a man at any time, had to clench his fists and drive his finger-nails into the palms of his hands, else he could have struck this abject, miserable coward. He wrenched his cloak out of the Cæsar's grasp and with a firm grip pulled him roughly up from the ground.

"An thou canst not control thy cowardly fears," he said harshly, "I'll leave thee to perish at their hands."

And holding the wretched man tightly by the wrist, he quickly sought shelter behind a pile of building material which lay some distance away. He hoped that this cringing dastard would not hear that other clamour of the people which invariably followed the call for vengeance: "Hail Taurus Antinor! Hail!"

Did these words perchance reach Caligula's ears he would no doubt even at this eleventh hour have refused to trust himself to the praefect; he would rush back into the palace, like a tracked beast that seeks its burrow, and all the sorrow and the renunciation of the past twenty-four hours would turn to the bitter fruit of uselessness.

Fortunately Caligula's senses were dulled by his own terrors. He heard the shouts and the ceaseless din of rebellious strife but the only word that he could distinguish was the ominous one of "Death," and whenever this word struck upon his confused mind a violent fit of trembling would seize him and he would stumble and stagger along like a drunken man.

Taurus Antinor, however, held him tightly by the wrist and thus he half led, half dragged him in his wake. The towering masses of building materials, huge blocks of stone and of marble, scaffoldings and ladders piled up on the open ground which encircled the rear of Caligula's palace, afforded him the protection which he had counted on and foreseen.

Keeping well within the shadows, he thus gradually worked his way on from pile to pile until he reached the brow of the hill. The crowd which was swarming up the slopes was just beginning to appear in isolated detachments in the roads and streets that led upwards from the Forum. Apparently the mob had not forgotten its former purpose to entrap the fugitive Cæsar and to force him to come out and to face his people.

The dull evening light creeping up from below, the thin drizzle which had succeeded the heavy rain and which mingled with the rising vapours from the sodden ground, the aimlessness of the onrushing crowd as it spread itself in confused masses all round the foremost palaces on the hill, all favoured Taurus Antinor's plans. Emerging from behind a monumental block of granite, looking in their dark clothes for all the world like the scribes who had been seen running about here all the day, the two men attracted little or no attention.

Their faces in the gloom could not easily be distinguished, nor did anyone in that excited throng imagine for a moment that the Cæsar would leave the safe shelter of his palace and, dressed in slave's garb, affront the multitude who clamoured for his death.

The audacity of this flight carried success along with it. Dragging the quaking Cæsar after him, Taurus Antinor soon plunged into the very thick of the crowd.

The tumult here and the confusion were intense. Men running and shouting, women shrieking and children crying, all in a tangled mass of noisy humanity. Some of the men brandished sticks, shovels or rakes, any instrument they had happened to possess; they shouted loudly for the

Cæsar, demanding his death, urging the more pusillanimous to rush the palace and drag the hiding princeps out into the open. Others carried tall poles on which they had improvised rude banners made of bits of purple-coloured rags: they were proclaiming the new Cæsar of their choice in voices rendered hoarse with lustiness.

The women clung to their men-folk, their shrill accents mingling with the rougher ones. Some of them clutched small children to their breasts, others dragged older ones at their skirts, and it was terrible to hear the cries of frightened children through the shouts of vengeance and of death.

Now as the gloom gathered in a few lighted torches appeared here and there, held high above the sea of surrounding heads; they flickered feebly in the damp air, throwing fitful lurid lights on the faces close by: dark faces, flushed and excited, with sullen eyes and dishevelled hair, above which the black smoke from the sizzling resin formed weird and shifting haloes.

The crowd carried the fugitives along with it, pressed shoulder to shoulder in a living, breathing, panting vice. Damp rising from thousands of rain-sodden garments mingled with the mist and with the rain and formed a grey, wet, clinging veil over this restless mass, kneading it all together into a dark, swaying entity from which rose the cries of the children and the hoarse shouts of the men.

Drifting with the throng, Taurus Antinor, still holding his trembling companion by the wrist, soon found himself being carried down the long flight of steps which leads from the heights crowned by Caligula's palace to the Forum below. Without attempting to work against the crowd, he presently crossed the Nova Via, and turning sharply on his left he found himself behind the basilica whose every arcade and precinct was densely packed with men and women and whose marble walls echoed and re-echoed with a multitude of sounds.

The crowd!--always the crowd! Always these shouting men, these screaming women, these puny crying children! It seemed as if their numbers were being fed by invisible masses that came from out the darkness which was closing in around. On ahead the height of the Aventine hid the horizon line from view, and on its slopes tiny lights began to appear that seemed to mock the weary fugitives by their distance and their elusiveness.

Taurus Antinor had all along intended to reach the Aventine by a devious way. Now the crowd had brought him and his companion to the river bank, there where the Tiber winds its sudden curve at the foot of the three hills. That curve of the river would have to be followed its whole way along the bank, and the slope of the Aventine looked so immeasurably far.

But progress had become more easy at last. Taurus Antinor pushed his way along now as quickly as he dared. More than one angry glance followed the tall, powerful figure as it forged a path for its burden, regardless of obstruction; more than one oath was uttered in the wake of those broad shoulders that towered above the rest of the crowd.

With a man who was shivering as with ague dragging upon his arm, with

his body racked with fever and his temples throbbing with pain, the man set out with renewed energy upon this final stage of his journey.

In the constant pushing through the crowd the bandages on his shoulder had shifted, and he could again feel the claws of the panther tearing at his flesh, and the hot breath of the beast scorching his face. The sodden garments clung cold and dank to his skin, he felt chilled down to the marrow, and yet he felt as if the fire of his body would burn his skin on to his bones.

Perhaps the physical misery which he endured numbed the more unendurable agony of the soul; certain it is that a kind of torpor gradually invaded his brain, leaving within it only the sensation of a terrible longing to drop down on the wet ground and to yield to the unconquerable desire to stretch out his aching limbs and to lay down his head in the last long sleep which would bring eternal rest.

But now the ground had begun to rise, the Aventine stretched out its slopes into the arms of darkness and its summit was lost in the gloom above. The weary ascent had begun.

Then it was that through the torpor of the man's brain a vision had suddenly found its way, searching those memory cells of the mind that contained the sacred picture of long ago. A mountain rugged and steep, a surging crowd, a Man, weary and with body tormented by ceaseless pain, toiling upwards with a heavy burden.

His naked feet made no noise upon the earth, the burden which He bore was a heavy Cross.

Above on the summit death awaited Him, ignominy and shame, but He walked up in silence and in patience, so that men in long after years, who had burdens of sorrow or of misery, should know how to bear them till they too reached the summit of their Golgotha, there to find ... not death, not humiliation or pain, but eternal life and the serenity of exquisite peace.

The Cæsar hung like a dead weight on Antinor's left arm, and the right one, lacerated by the panther's claws, burned and ached well-nigh intolerably. But the glorious memory of long ago now preceded him, the Divine Martyr walking on ahead with sacred shoulders bent to the sacrifice, and he seemed to hear again the swishing of the tunic, stained with blood and the mud of the road; he seemed to hear the shouts of the jeering crowd, the rough words of the soldiery, the sobs of faithful disciples and women.

And he too plodded on with his burden. The crowd, now far away, seemed to mock him for the uselessness of his sacrifice; Dea Flavia's sobs of sorely wounded love called to him to turn back.

But memory now would be held back no longer. The picture which it conjured up became more distinct and more real, and its gold-lined wings, as they fluttered around his head, made a murmur gentle and intangible as the flitting of the clouds across the skies of Italia.

The murmur was soft and low, and it reached the aching senses of the weary pilgrim like the cooling breath of multitudes of angels in the

parched wilderness of his sorrow:

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it."

"For Thy sake, oh Jesus of Galilee!" said the man as he toiled up his endless Calvary and left behind him with every step, far away in the valley below, all that had made the world fair to him and all the promises of happiness.

On ahead the Divine Leader had fallen on his knees: the burden of His Cross seemed greater than He could bear. Rough hands helped to drag him up from the ground and set Him once more on His tedious way. His cheeks were wan and pale, blood trickled from the thorn-crowned brow, but there was no wavering in the lines of the face though they were distorted with pain, no giving in, no drawing back, not though one word from those livid lips could have called even now unto God, and ten thousand legions of angels would have come down at that word to avenge the outrage and to proclaim His godhead.

And in the wake of his Master the Christian plodded on, dragging his burden on his arm, the cross which he had to bear. Gradually behind him the noise became more and more subdued, then it died down altogether--all but a confused and far-away murmur which mingled with the sighing of the Tiber.

And the Christian was alone once more--alone with memory.

Taurus Antinor's breath came in short, stertorous gasps, his throat was parched and his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. The slope of the hill is precipitous here, and the house--nigh to the summit--seemed to recede farther and farther with devilish malignity.

And the sense of silence and of solitude became more absolute, a fitting attendant on memory. On and on the two men walked, the Christian and his burden; their sandalled feet felt like lead as they sank ankle-deep in the mud of the unpaved road.

"Come, take up thy cross and follow me!" and the Christian plodded on in the wake of the Divine Presence that beckoned to him upwards from above.

From time to time Caligula's hoarse and querulous voice would break the death-like silence.

"Are we not there yet?"

"Not yet. Very soon," the praefect would reply.

"I am a fool to have trusted myself to thee, for of a truth thou leadest me to my death."

"Patience, Cæsar, yet a little while longer."

"May the gods fell thee to the earth. I would I had a poisoned dagger by me to kill thee ere thou dost work thy treacherous will with me. Thou son of slaves, may death overtake thee now ..."

"God in heaven grant that it may, O Cæsar," said the praefect fervently.

Now at last the houses became more sparse. Only here and there up the side of the hill a tiny light glittered feebly. Taurus Antinor's senses were only just sufficiently alert to keep in the right direction. The house which he wished to reach was not more now than six hundred steps away.

The darkness had become almost thick in its intensity, even the houses were undistinguishable in the gloom. The two men stumbled as they walked, loose stones detached themselves under their feet and their heeless sandals slid in the mud. Once the Cæsar lost his foothold altogether; but for his convulsive hold on the praefect's arm he would have measured his length in the mud.

Taurus Antinor felt after the wrench as if this must be the end, as if body and brain and soul could not endure a moment longer and live.

A mist akin to the one that enveloped the hill seemed to fall over his brain. He no longer walked now, he just tumbled along, blindly stumbling at almost every step with that dead, dead weight upon his arm which an invisible force compelled him to carry up the precipitous height to the place of safety which was so far away.

"What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" asked that heavenly murmur on the wings of memory. "For the Son of Man shall come in the glory of the Father with His angels; and then He shall reward every man according to his work."

With his burden lying like an insentient log on his arm, Taurus Antinor fell up at last against the door of the house; his foot had stumbled against its corner-stone.

A moment or two later the door was opened from within and the feeble light of a tiny lamp was held above him whilst a kindly voice murmured:

"Who goes there?"

"The Cæsar is in danger, and a fugitive. He asks shelter and protection from thee," murmured Taurus Antinor feebly, "and I would lay down my burden in thy house for I am weary and I would find rest."

"Enter friend," said the man simply.

The Cæsar, trembling and nerveless, fell forward into the room.

The praefect of Rome lay unconscious upon its threshold but the Christian had laid down his cross at the foot of the throne of God.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"Finally my brethren be strong."--EPHESIANS VI. 10.

The younger men were still inclined to rebel. They felt that they were in great numbers and that they were strong: they believed--with that optimism of excited youth--that their will must prevail in the end. In their opinion the Cæsar had done nothing to atone for his crime against the praefect of Rome, or for his dastardly cringing before the power of his people.

But the older men, those who had mayhap more than once witnessed street rioting and the bloody reprisals that invariably followed open rebellion--they counselled prudence, an acceptance of what had come about, since the imperial decree had been fixed to the rostrum of the great Augustus, promising pardon for all delinquencies.

And--what would you?--but was not the praefect of Rome dead? The consul-major had stated it positively to all those who asked the question of him, and he had it on the positive authority of Folces, the praefect's most trusted slave. It was the consul-major who, preceded by his lictors, had caused the imperial decree to be read out aloud to the people of Rome from the topmost steps of the Temple of Mars, and it was he who had then ordered the decree to be affixed to the wall of the rostrum. The consul-major had received the precious parchment at the hands of the special messenger sent by the Cæsar himself: that messenger was none other than Folces, and he had stated positively that the praefect of Rome was dead.

It was useless to demand that a man be proclaimed to the principate if that man be dead. True that some of the malcontents--those young men who were hot-headed and whose raging tempers were not easily curbed--refused to accept the news and loudly demanded the body of the hero so that divine honours might be accorded to it, to the lifelong shame of the Cæsar who had so basely murdered him.

But the praetor urbanus had declared that the body of the praefect could not be found, and the rumour had gained ground that it had been defiled and thrown to the dogs. A sullen discontent reigned amongst the people for this, and it could not be allayed by all the promises of pardon and of rejoicings which the imperial proclamation decreed.

There had been some calls too for Dea Flavia. The Cæsar had nominated his successor to the imperium in the Circus the other day. If the Augusta would but make her choice, the people would perhaps be ready to accept her lord now as Consort Imperii, with the ultimate hope that a just and brave man would succeed to the principate in due course.

But no sound had as yet come from the house of Dea Flavia, and the people hung about the Forum in desultory groups, discussing the situation. That the gods had intervened in the Cæsar's favour no one could reasonably doubt. Even whilst the anger of the populace was at its height and dense masses had surrounded his palace to which he had been known to flee, he had been spirited away out of the city. His proclamation had come from Etruria, showing that he was already far from his city and on his way to join his legions.

How did he succeed in making a way for himself through the dense masses that had thronged the streets for nigh on forty-eight hours, since first the tumult broke out in the Circus when the praefect of Rome was

stabbed?

Had Jupiter sent down his thunders yesterday, his lowering clouds and heavy showers of rain, only in order to aid the Cæsar in his progress? What hand had guided him down the declivities of the Palatine? What arm shielded him from the anger of the people?

Dea Flavia had heard the news even as soon as the first hour of the day had been called. Yesterday, bruised in mind and heart and body, she had lain for close on an hour in a dreamless, semi-conscious state. It was only when she awoke from that that the knowledge of her misery returned to her in full.

She had found love, happiness, pride, all that makes life exquisite and fair, only to lose all these treasures even before she had had time to grasp them.

Love had been called to life by the look, the touch of one man, happiness had come when she saw the love-light in his eyes, born in response to hers: pride came with all the rich gifts which she could lavish upon him. Now everything was gone, he had taken everything from her, even as he gave it; and he took everything in order to offer it as a sacrifice to his God.

Now her heart was numbed and her brain tried in vain to conjure up the images of yesterday: the happy moments when she had lain against the noblest heart in Rome. But the only vision that her dulled senses could perceive was that of dying Menecreta speaking that awful curse, or of herself--Dea Flavia--gazing with eyes of anger and of pride into vacancy wherein her imagination had traced a glowing cross, and uttering words of defiance that seemed so futile, so sacrilegious now.

The storm then had obscured the sky, drove the rain in heavy patter overhead, the air was dismal and dark: now a brilliant sunshine flooded the imperial city with its radiance, the wet marble glistened in the dawn and a roseate hue tipped the seven hills of Rome with glory. But in Dea Flavia's heart there was sorrow darker than the blackest night, sleep forsook her eyelids, and all night long she tossed about restlessly on her couch listening to the sounds that came from the city in rebellion, counting them out as they died away one by one.

She had gone to her room quite early in the day; her guests she knew were being well looked after, and she could not bear to remain in the studio whose every corner reminded her of that powerful personality which had lately filled it, and whose very walls still echoed with the sound of that rough voice, rendered at times so exquisitely tender.

Blanca attended on her and put her to bed for she could not bear to have Licinia near her. The old woman's gossip jarred upon her nerves and she was physically afraid to hear indifferent lips utter the name of the praefect of Rome.

Only the call, "Hail Taurus Antinor Cæsar! Hail!" which still came half the night through from afar dulled her agony of mind for a few seconds when it struck upon her ear. It set her wondering, thus allowing her momentarily to forget her misery. Then she would lie, wide-eyed, looking

upwards and pondering.

Who was this god whom Taurus Antinor worshipped?

Who was he and what had he done? All she knew was that he had died upon a cross, the most ignominious death mortal man could suffer, and the praefect of Rome, the proud Roman patrician, had been content to obey him as a slave.

Who was he and what had he done? On this she pondered half the night through, while fever coursed through her veins and her brows were moist and aching, her heart palpitating with pain.

The dawn found her wearied and sick. But she rose when Blanca came to her in the first hour. She summoned Licinia and all her women and ordered them to dress her in one of her richest robes. She looked very girlish and very pale when she stood decked out in the embroidered tunic which she had chosen; it was of a soft material, clinging to her graceful figure in long straight folds, there was some elaborate embroidery round the hem, below which her feet peeped out clothed in sandals of gilt leather.

When she was dressed she went out into the atrium and then sent word to the praetorian praefect and his friends that she was ready to receive them.

Some of the news from the busy world outside had already reached her ears. Licinia was not like to be chary in imparting to her mistress the scraps of gossip which she had collected.

The Cæsar was outside the city, he would in due time return to Rome at the head of his legions, and in the meanwhile he had by a comprehensive and gracious act of clemency pardoned all those who had offended against his majesty.

The noble patricians who yesterday had already deposed him, and had called on her to name his successor, had been foiled in their ambitious schemes by the very man whom she--Dea Flavia--would have set upon the throne.

And once more that one all-absorbing puzzle confronted her: who and what was this god who had exacted this all-embracing sacrifice?

She wandered somewhat aimlessly through the halls, for the great lords were not yet ready to appear before her, and as she crossed the atrium and went into the peristylum, looking with somewhat wistful longing toward the open portals of the vestibule and the vista of open air and sky from whence a breath of pure fresh air struck pleasingly on her nostrils, she saw that in spite of the early hour a large number of the poorer clients, suppliants at the door of the great Augusta, had already assembled there.

Foremost amongst them was an elderly man dressed in the plain garb of a slave, and wearing, embroidered on his tunic, the badge that proclaimed him in the service of the praefect of Rome.

The man appeared to be very insistent, and to be receiving in

consequence, somewhat rough treatment from the janitors. Dea Flavia turned to one of her own slaves and ordered the man to be brought to her presence in her studio where she would receive him.

The man told the janitors that his name was Folces, that he belonged to the praefect of Rome and desired speech with the Augusta. He walked in very humbly, with back bent nearly double, and when he was shown into the studio where the Augusta sat alone he fell on both knees before her.

"Thy name is Folces, I am told," she began graciously, "and thou art of the household of the praefect of Rome?"

"I attend upon his person, gracious lady," replied the man.

"And thou hast brought me a message from him?" she asked, even as with this hope her heart began to beat violently in her breast.

"Not from him, gracious lady," said Folces humbly, "for the praefect of Rome is dead."

"Who told thee that he was dead?" she asked.

"Taurus Antinor named Anglicanus," replied the man simply; "he sent me my freedom this night and a message to lay at the feet of Dea Flavia Augusta."

"Give me the message," she said.

Still on his knees, Folces fumbled in the folds of his mantle and from his breast he drew a roll of parchment which he offered to the Augusta.

"Rise, Folces, and go while I read," she said; "wait outside the door till I do summon thee."

She waited until the man had closed the heavy door behind him: she wanted to be alone with these last words which he had penned for her. Now she untied the string that held the roll together, then she unfolded the parchment and read:

"Idol of my soul, beloved of my heart. Aroused from dreams of thee, my wakening soul takes its last flight to thy feet. This is farewell, my dear, dear heart, even as my hand pens the word the dawn around me turns to the likeness of the night, and it is peopled with all the sorrows that wear out the heartstrings slowly, one by one. The Cæsar is safe. Even as I write he starts forth on his way to join his legions. Having left him in charge of those who do not know how to betray, I succeeded in the night in reaching the detachment of the praetorian guard encamped around the Circus: a small company of them returned with me to the lonely house on the Aventine, and from thence at break of day they started with the Cæsar toward Etruria, where the legions home from the expedition against the Allemanni were still known to abide. In three or four days, or mayhap five, the Cæsar will re-enter his city. His proclamation of pardon is so worded that his keeping of his word is closely bound up both with his honour and with his personal safety. The people therefore have naught to fear from his vengeance: those who have more actively conspired

against him, and who would have drawn thee in their selfish schemes, have time before them to put themselves and their belongings out of the immediate reach of the Cæsar. Tell them to live in retirement as far from Rome as they can until such time as the events of the past few days have been erased from the tablets of memory.

"The Cæsar is safe, and I, dear heart, do bid thee a last farewell. When I parted from thee yesterday we both knew then that the parting would be for ever; even though thine exquisite hands clung to me and twined themselves round the very fibres of my soul, and thy voice called me back with the ineffable sweetness of thy love, I knew that it would be for ever. The Cæsar will never forgive me that I witnessed his abject humiliation. Even at dawn, when he stood surrounded by his praetorian guard, as secure from danger as human agency could make him, a gleam of hatred shone in his eyes whenever he looked on me. He never would give thee to me, dear heart, and would vent his wrath also upon thy dear head. 'Tis better that he too should think me dead, for dead will I be to Rome and to the people among whom my name might yet give cause for strife and for discontent.

"The Cæsar is safe, and I can go my ways in peace. He hath no longer need of me but my Lord hath called and I His servant must take up my cross and follow Him. The priceless gifts which thy pure hands did hold out to me are registered in His book of Heaven, and He never forgets. As for me I were less or more than a man were I to ask thee to forget. I would have thee remember, yet would I think of thee as happy and radiant as the stars wherewith He hath gladdened the darkness of our nights. But think not of me as unhappy. My Lord has called, and I the servant am bound to follow. He laid a burden on me and this burden must I bear even though I may bear with it all the pain that is greater than the pain of the earth, greater than the ceaseless travail of the sea, even though I may bear with it that bitterest of all bitter fruits the labour that is nothing worth. That I know not! Who knoweth, oh God? Truly not I. There was grief in the world, dear heart, even before the stars were made or the sky stretched its blue dome above; and as hour follows hour, day succeeds day and the cycles of years come and go, even so do fresh griefs and greener sorrows spring around us; like each recurrent season they too come and go. Only one thing abideth, dear heart, and that is the will of God, who made happiness and woe, love and pain, sleep and death. And 'tis the will of God that I should lose thee and yet continue to live, even though life to me henceforth will be one long dream of death.

"Idol of my soul, beloved of my heart, farewell. I go to find comfort from that bitter word on the summit of Golgotha, at the foot of an abandoned, broken Cross. When my soul hath found peace then will it be ready for the service of God.

"Farewell, my beloved! May God have thee in His keeping, even as thy soul hath already been touched with His grace. Farewell! Mine eyes are dim, my hand trembles, hot tears blur the writing on this parchment. And as I look up through the open doorway to where the limitless horizon lies beyond Rome's seven hills, I see

stretched out before me the long vista of years throughout which my heart will be for ever weaving with threads of longing and of sorrow the tether which binds undying memory to thee."

Her hands, which held the roll of parchment, dropped down upon her lap. Her eyes too were dim and the hot tears fell from them one by one. A sadness that was in no way bitter and yet was immeasurable as death had filled her entire being as she read.

Slowly she laid the parchment in the bosom of her tunic, then, like one who walks in sleep, she rose and crossed the studio, her hand--white and slightly quivering--pushed back the heavy door that masked the inner room. Silently it swung upon its hinges, disclosing the sanctum where yesterday the stricken hero had lain helpless and sick.

The couch had not been touched since he had lain on it. It still bore the imprint of the massive figure as it lay inert in the embrace of drugged sleep. The pillow only had been smoothed out as if by a loving hand, and as Dea Flavia came nearer to it she saw that a small object had been laid there, as if reverently, right in the centre.

The tears in her eyes obscured her vision momentarily, but when they fell one by one down her cheeks, she saw a little more clearly, and having approached the couch she took up the small object that lay there upon the pillow.

It was the wooden cross which she had last seen held between the clasped hands of the man whom she loved.

She gazed on the small symbol, and gazed, even though the tears gathered thick and fast in her eyes and the image that she saw was scarce discernible as it rested in her hand.

How puzzled she had been two nights ago when she stole softly into this room and saw him kneeling here beside the couch, clasping this wooden symbol between his fingers--intertwined in a gesture of passionate prayer. She had been puzzled because his actions of the day before had seemed incomprehensible to her: his attitude to my lord Hortensius Martius, an enemy whose life he saved at risk of his own, his loyalty to the Cæsar whom everyone abhorred!

All this had puzzled her then, but how infinitely more profound was that puzzle now. A riddle more mysterious than any sage could propound lay hidden in the words of the letter which she had just read. The man who had penned that letter had poured out his heart in it, and it was not a heart that was void of pity or of love. It brimmed over with pity, it was bruised with the intensity of love: but, crushed and broken though it was, it did not murmur, it only endured.

Dea Flavia looked down upon the small object which to Taurus Antinor had been an emblem of that god whom he worshipped and who had been man and had died a shameful death.

Who was this god whom Taurus Antinor worshipped? for whose sake and at whose bidding he was content to give up all the superheights of ambition to which a Roman patrician could aspire? Who was this god? and what had he done that a man like Taurus Antinor--a man filled with all a man's

strength and all a man's heroism, a man worshipped of the people and glorified by an entire nation--should thus give up the lordship of Rome in order to do him service? that he should give it up, too, without a murmur, content to offer this final and absolute sacrifice.

"Think not of me as unhappy. My Lord has called me and I, His servant am bound to follow."

Thus had the man written in loneliness and in peace after the sacrifice had been accomplished, even after she--the Augusta--had, with love-filled heart and generous hands, offered him everything that man could desire on this earth. He had written it in loneliness and in peace, having given up the world to follow his God.

Who was this god? and what had he done that his power over Taurus Antinor's heart was greater than her own?

Yesterday she had cursed him loudly and called him cruel and unjust, four days ago she had defied him and now he had conquered. Taurus Antinor had obeyed him and she who loved him and whom he loved was left desolate.

For this she never doubted: he loved her, that she knew. She was no child now! The last four days had made a woman of her: in the past four days she had tasted of and witnessed every passion that rends a human heart, love, ambition, cruelty, hatred! She had seen them all! seen through passion men brought down to a level lower than the beasts, and through passion a man become equal to a god. No! she was no longer a child, she was a woman now, and there was much that if she did not understand she at least could not doubt. The man whom she loved, loved her with an intensity at least equal to that which even now made her heart throb at the memory of his kiss. He loved her, longed for her, would have laid down his life for her even at the moment when he tore himself away from her arms. He loved her and longed for her even whilst his trembling fingers penned this last impassioned farewell.

He loved her and he loved Rome! But his god called to him and he, the proud Roman patrician, the accepted lord of the Augusta and of Rome, followed as would a slave.

Slowly she dropped down on her knees just where he too had knelt two nights ago, and like unto him she clasped her hands together, scarce conscious that the tiny wooden cross still lay between her fingers.

"Thou hast conquered, oh Galilean!" she murmured, whilst great sobs that would not be suppressed rose to her throat. "At thy call he left everything that makes life beautiful and happy: at thy call he left me to mourn, he left the people of Rome who acclaimed him, he left the throne of Augustus and the Empire of the world! Everything he left at thy call! What hast thou in thy nail-pierced hands to give him in return?"

For a while now she was able to give way to her immeasurable sorrow. Her head buried in the pillow whereon his head had rested, she sobbed out her loving, aching heart in a passionate fit of weeping.

Just like the Christian yesterday up on the heights, so was she--the

pagan--alone now with her grief. More lonely than he--she had no anchorage, and in her ear had never sounded those all-compelling words, sublime in their perfect gentleness:

"Come unto Me!"

But who shall tell what divine hand soothed her burning forehead? what divine words of comfort were whispered in her ear?

Gradually her tears ceased to flow, the heavy sobs were stilled, her aching and bruised body felt numb with the pain in her heart. But outwardly she was more calm. She rose from her knees, and hiding the small cross in the bosom of her gown, she drew forth the letter and read it through once more.

"If only I knew!" she murmured. "If only I could understand!"

After a while she bethought her of the slave Folces, the one human link left now between herself and the man whom she loved and who was gone from her.

With reverent hands she smoothed out the couch, the pillow which had supported his head, the coverlet which had lain over him. She was loth to go from this room whose every corner seemed still to hold something of his personality and whose every wall seemed to hold an echo of his voice.

She would have stayed here for hours longer, talking to that absent personality, powerful and mysterious more than ever now, listening to the rugged voice which she would never hear again. But there was something that she must do ere she gave herself over finally to her dreams; there was a duty to accomplish which she knew he would ask of her.

Therefore--after a last, long, all-embracing look on the place which would for ever be as a sanctuary in her sight--she went back to the studio at last, and herself going to the door she called Folces back to her.

"The praefect of Rome, good Folces?" she asked as soon as the man had entered, "wilt see him again?"

"Taurus Antinor named Anglicanus hath left Rome to-day on his way to Syria, O Augusta!" said the man, humbly insisting on the name of his master.

"Dost not go with him?"

"He hath commanded me to stay here and to look after his household until such time as he doth direct."

"His household?" she said. "I had not thought of that. What is to become of his house in Rome, his villa at Ostia and his slaves?"

"The praefect of Rome," said Folces, "made ere he died a testament wherein he did command the freedom of all his slaves, and ordered a certain sum of money to be set aside which will enable even the humblest

amongst us all to live decently like freedmen. The house in Rome and the villa at Ostia are to be sold, whilst the remainder of Taurus Antinor's private fortune is to be administered by his general agents. He said that he would see to it later on. I am still his slave; he did not confide in me."

"Yet he asked thee to look after his household."

"It will take a little time until the manumissio testamento can take effect. In the meanwhile we all are Taurus Antinor's slaves and must look after his houses until they have been sold."

"Wilt be happy as a freedman, Folces?"

"Yes, Augusta," replied the man simply, "for then I shall be at liberty to follow Taurus Antinor as his servant."

She sat quite silently after this, her tear-stained eyes fixed into vacancy. Folces was on his knees waiting to be dismissed. It was some little while before she remembered his presence, then in a gentle voice she bade him go.

"Shall I take a message back to my master?" he asked humbly. "I could find him, I think, if I had a message."

"I have no message," she said; "go, good Folces."

CHAPTER XXXV

"We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do."--ST. LUKE XVII. 10.

Half an hour later Dea Flavia Augusta was in the tablinium. She had received Caius Nepos, the praetorian praefect, Marcus Ancyus, the elder, my lords Hortensius Martius, Philippus Decius and the others, and they, who had heard so many conflicting rumours throughout the morning and were beginning to quake with fear, for none of the rumours were reassuring, were grouped trembling and expectant around her.

"My lords," she began as soon as she had received their obsequious greetings, "I know not if you have heard the news. The Cæsar hath succeeded in quitting Rome; he is on his way to rejoin his legions and nothing can stand in the way of his progress. In a few days from now he will make his State re-entry into the city, and the city will resound from end to end with rejoicings in his honour."

"We had all heard the news, Augusta," said Caius Nepos who was vainly trying to steady his voice and to appear calm and dignified, "and also that a proclamation of pardon hath preceded the entry of the Cæsar into Rome and hath been affixed to the rostrum of the great Augustus by the consul-major himself this morning."

"And what do you make of all this, my lords?" she asked.

"That some gods of evil have been at work," muttered young Escanes between set teeth, "and spirited the tyrannical madman out of the way for the further scourging of his people."

"The spirit, my lords," she interposed quietly, "that led my kinsman to safety last night was one which actuated the noblest patrician in Rome to do his duty loyally by the Cæsar."

"Then curse him for a traitor," muttered Caius Nepos, whose cheeks had become white with terror.

"He was no traitor to you, my lords," she retorted hotly, "for he was not one of you. He was true to the oath which he had rendered to the Cæsar; aye, even to the Cæsar whom we, my lords, all of us here present had been ready to betray."

Then as she saw nothing but sullen faces around her and not a word broke the silence that ensued, she continued more calmly:

"Yesterday you came to me, my lords, with proposals of treachery to which I, alas, did listen because in my heart I had already chosen one man who I felt was worthy to rule over this great Empire. I had made my choice and myself offered him the imperium, the throne of Augustus and the sceptre of the Cæsars.... But he refused it all, my lords, and went forth in the night to place himself body and heart at the Cæsar's service."

"And his name, O Augusta?" queried Ancyus, the elder.

"He hath name Taurus Antinor and was once praefect of Rome."

"He is dead!" broke in Hortensius Martius hotly.

"He lived long enough, my lord," she retorted, "to show us all our duty."

There was silence after that, for many a heart was beating spasmodically with fear or with hope. My lord Hortensius Martius sat on a low stool, with his elbow on his knee, his chin buried in his hand. His eyes, glowing with dull and sullen hatred, searched the face of Dea Flavia, trying to read what went on behind the pure, straight brow and those liquid blue eyes, deep as the fathomless sea.

"What is to be done?" said Ancyus, the elder, with a pitiable look of perplexity directed at the Augusta.

"To make our submission to the Cæsar," she said simply, "those of us at least who are not afraid of his wrath. For the others there is still time to seek a safe retreat far away from Rome."

"But this is monstrous!" cried Hortensius Martius, suddenly jumping to his feet and beginning to pace up and down the room in an outburst of impotent wrath. "This is miserable, cowardly, abject! What? Would ye allow that stranger, that son of slaves, to thwart your plans by his treachery? Are we naughty children that can thus be sent, well-whipped and whining to bed? Up, my lords, this is not the end! Cæsar is not yet

in Rome! The people are still dissatisfied. Hark to the noise in the Forum below! Does it sound as if the populace was accepting the news with rejoicing? Up now, my lords! It is not too late! Acclaim your new Cæsar; it is not too late, I say. When the legions return with that mountebank at their head let them find Dea Flavia Augusta and her lord the acknowledged masters of Rome."

He looked flushed, excited and proud, feeling that even at this eleventh hour he could carry these men along with him if Dea Flavia put the weight of her power on his side. Now he paused in his peroration, standing above his fellow-conspirators as if already he were their ruler, and looking from one face to the other with eager restless eyes that expressed all his enthusiasm and all his hopes.

But the two older men had evidently no stomach for the situation as it now was. It had been easy matter enough to murder the Cæsar treacherously and while his legions were three days' march away. But now everything was very different, the issues very doubtful; no doubt that a safe retreat away from the city would be by far the wiser course.

Caius Nepos, with vivid recollections of his last interview with the Cæsar, shook his head with slow determination. Ancyrus, the elder, was silent and only the three younger men had followed Hortensius Martius in his heated argument.

"What sayest thou, Augusta?" asked Philippus Decius at last, looking doubtfully upon the young girl.

"That ye must make your plans without me, my lords," she said coldly. "Since, as you say, the praefect of Rome is dead, I can make no choice worthy of him who is gone. I choose to return to mine allegiance, my loyalty to the Cæsar and to my House."

"If the Cæsar returns," urged Hortensius Martius, "he will vent some of his wrath on thee."

"Then will I suffer for my treachery, my lords," she rejoined proudly, "in accordance with my deserts."

"But Augusta ..."

"I pray you, my lord," she interposed haughtily, "do not prolong your arguments. My mind is made up. An you value your own safety in the future, 'twere wiser to make preparations for a lengthy stay away from Rome."

"Hadst thou listened to us yesterday ..." sighed Ancyrus, the elder.

"A heavy crime had lain against us all," she said. "Be thankful, my lords, that in the history of Rome when it comes to be written, your deed will not have sullied the page that marks to-day. And now, my lords, I bid you farewell! You are in no danger if you leave the city forthwith. The rejoicings at the entry of the Cæsar and the homecoming of his legions will last many days, during that time your names will be erased from the tablets of my kinsman's memory."

"The gods grant it!" murmured Caius Nepos. "But thou, Augusta, what of

thee?"

"I, my lords," she said with a gentle smile, the irony of which was lost on their self-centred intellects, "I pray you have no thoughts of me. I have been placed in the keeping of one who, I am told, is mightier than Cæsar. There must I be safe; so farewell, my lords; we meet again, I hope, in happier and more peaceful times."

She stood up and one by one--for was she not still the Augusta and the favourite kinswoman of the Cæsar?--they bent the knee before her and kissed the hem of her gown. After which act of homage they retired with backs bent and walking backwards out of the room.

My lord Hortensius Martius was the last to take his leave. He went down on both knees and would have encircled the Augusta with his arms, only she drew back quickly a step or two.

"Dea ... in the name of my love for thee ..." he began.

But she interrupted him gently, yet firmly.

"Speak not to me of love, my lord," she said. "'Tis but love's ghost that moves to and fro when you speak."

Then as he would have protested, she put up her hand with a gesture of finality.

"It is no use, my lord. What love there is in me, that you could never have aroused--not even in the past. I entreat you not to insist. Love cannot be compelled. It is or is not. Whence it comes we know not; mayhap the gods do know ... mayhap there is only one who knows ... and he seems to give much, but also to take all.... Therefore mayhap love comes from him, and when we are not prepared to give up all for love's sake, then doth he withhold the supreme gift and leave our hearts barren.... Mayhap! mayhap!" she sighed, "alas! I know not! and you, good my lord, do not look so puzzled and so scared. I bid you farewell now. I'll not forget you; to remember is so much easier than to love."

He had perforce to accept his dismissal. He felt rebellious against fate and would have liked to have forced her will. But as she stood there before him, clad all in white, so young and so chaste and yet a woman who knew what love was, an awed reverence for her crept into his heart and he felt that indeed he would never dare to speak again to her of love.

He too kissed the hem of her tunic now, just as the others had done, and just as they had done he walked out of her presence backwards with back bent and an overwhelming disappointment in his heart.

CHAPTER XXXVI

"The peace of God, which passeth all understanding."--PHILIPPIANS IV. 7.

Three months had gone by since then. Rome had acclaimed the Cæsar and rejoiced over his homecoming. There were holidays and spectacles, chariot races and gladiatorial combats, and the people of Rome forgot that it had ever shouted: "Hail Taurus Antinor Cæsar! Hail!"

Now the calls were for Caius Julius Cæsar Caligula, and those who had most loudly shouted for his death, cringed most obsequiously at his feet. The very name of the ex-præfect of Rome was already forgotten.

His testament, made, it appears, just before his death, had been copiously commented on at first. All his slaves had received their freedom together with a sufficient sum to enable one and all to live in comfort in the new state of freedom. The rest of the vast property owned by the late præfect was being somewhat mysteriously administered, and up to this hour no one had been able to gain any definite information with regard to its ultimate destination. There were those who averred that a great deal of ready money--including the proceeds of the sale of the late præfect's house in Rome and of his villa at Ostia--had found its way to a section of very poor freedmen who lived on the Aventine and who formed a somewhat isolated little colony not viewed altogether kindly by the official magistracy of the city.

But all that was mere gossip and did not withstand the test of time. After three months people had plenty of other matters to think of and to talk about.

There were the festivals and games which had accompanied the re-entry of the Cæsar into Rome. The city had been beflagged and adorned with banners and with garlands. For thirty days did the rejoicings last, and brilliant sunshine shone over the golden glories of autumn and kissed the foliage of oleanders until they blushed a brilliant crimson, and tinged the marble of palaces and temples every morning with rose.

The games in the great Circus went on without intermission for thirty days; there were military and naval pageants, combats between the lions from Numidia and the new hyenas and crocodiles; there were gladiatorial contests and chariot races. Much human blood was shed for the delectation of the masters of the world, much skill displayed, much prowess vanquished by prowess greater, much valour laid to dust.

But the Cæsar's pet black panther did not appear again in the Circus. The mighty fist of the dead præfect had mayhap laid the creature low; in any case it were not safe to re-awaken dormant memories.

And Caius Julius Cæsar Caligula, the father of his armies, the best and greatest of Cæsars, showed himself at all these pageants more crazed than ever; he hardly ever spoke now to the people. 'Twas averred that Cæsonia, his wife, had given him a potion to cure him of his infatuation for Dea Flavia, his kinswoman, whom he had exalted above all the other Augustas, and whose absence from Rome and from all festivities had rendered him half distracted with wrath.

He would have liked to vent that wrath on Dea, but he could not lay hands on her. She had left her palace even before his re-entry into Rome, taking none but two of her most trusted slaves with her; the others did not know whither she had gone. Some thought that she had gone

on a journey to a villa which she possessed in Sicilia, others thought that she was living a life of retirement in a lonely dwelling on the Sabine Hills, preparatory to devoting her virginity to the glory of Vesta.

Caius Julius Cæsar Caligula prepared to have her sought for throughout the length and breadth of his Empire, and would no doubt have succeeded in time in this search had not a few months later Chaerea, the praetorian tribune, done the work with his hands which the dagger of young Escanes had failed to do.

The winter had been slow in coming, but it had come at last. An icy wind blew from across the sea. Overhead the sky was the colour of lead and great banks of clouds chased one another wantonly above the hills that tower over Jerusalem.

There was hardly a path up the rugged incline, the rains and winds and snows of the past seven years had obliterated the marks which a surging crowd had once made in the wake of the sacred feet.

It was close on the ninth hour and the shadows of evening were already drawing in very fast. A tall figure dressed in sombre garments walked slowly up the hill which is called Calvary.

His head was uncovered and he had no wand wherewith to ease his footsteps; the blustering gusts of wind blew the tawny hair over his brow.

He held his head erect and his eyes did not watch the places where trod his feet. They were fixed on ahead, up toward the summit of the hill, there where a Cross stood broken and lonely with wooden arms outstretched and the birds of heaven circling all round it.

Every day for seven days now had the pilgrim wandered up the steep desolate hill. Every day for seven days he had reached the summit ere the ninth hour was called from the city walls. He lived at a small inn just inside the third wall, and every day at noon he set out upon his pilgrimage and only came home when the darkness of the night lay dense upon the valley.

To-day he was more weary than he had ever been before. His feet felt like leaden weights that seemed to be dragging him down and ever downwards, and the loneliness of the place had its image within his heart.

On the summit he fell on his knees and knelt at the foot of the Cross, leaning his aching forehead against the cold, dank wood.

"How long, oh my God, how long?" he murmured. "The misery is more than I can bear. I am ready to do Thy work, oh God, to speak Thy Word where Thou dost bid me go, but take her image, dear Lord, from before mine eyes, it stands for ever 'twixt Thy Cross and me. Break my heart, oh God, since her image fills it and its every beat is not in Thy name. Take the cup from me, dear Lord! It is too bitter and I cannot drink!"

The night drew in around him; the lights in the city below were

extinguished one by one. The croaking birds on the lonely Cross had found a home far away in the gloom.

The pilgrim knelt against the Cross, he could hardly see the objects nearest to him, the small prickly shrubs, the rough grass, the loose stones that looked so white and spectral in the waning light. He could hardly see, for his eyes ached with the dull misery of tears that would not fall; but suddenly a sound softer than that made by a night-bird in its flight struck upon his ear.

It was like the drawing of a garment upon the rugged ground. One or two small stones detached themselves from their bed of wet earth and rolled away from under the tread of feet that walked upwards toward the summit.

The pilgrim did not move, and yet he heard the sound. It came nearer to him, and nearer, and suddenly he was not alone; something living and warm knelt on the stony ground beside him, and gentle fingers that had the softness and the coolness of snow were laid upon his burning hands.

"I came as quickly as I could," said a tender voice close to his ear. "But it has taken me some time to find thee. Had it not been for Folces and his devotion I might mayhap never have found thee. We came to Jerusalem yesterday. To-day at noon I saw thee starting forth from out the city. I followed thee, but the way was rough.... I feared I should never reach the summit ... and yet 'twas here I wished to speak to thee."

All this while he had remained numb and silent. He knew even when first her hand touched his that God had ended his sorrow and taken his aching soul into His keeping at last. But for the moment he thought that sweet death had kissed his eyelids and that this was the first taste of paradise. Darkness was closing in around them both; he could scarcely distinguish her features, but it seemed to him as if glory shone out of her eyes, glory so radiant that it illumined the darkness and pierced the walls of the night.

"Is it thou?" he murmured. "Oh God! have pity on me! Her image, her sweet image, allow it to fade from my mind ere my brain becomes a traitor to Thee!"

"'Tis not a vision, dear heart," she whispered softly, "'tis not a dream. It is I, Dea Flavia, whom thou didst call the beloved of thy heart. I came because I loved thee and because here on this spot I would learn from thee the mysteries of thy God."

"Is it thou? And hast thou come to me from heaven?"

"No, dear heart, only from far-off Rome. And I have come to thee, to be with thee and to follow thee wherever thou wilt lead me."

"Yet will my wanderings lead me far," he said, "my Lord has called and I must go."

"Then will I go with thee," she said.

"To far-off lands, dear heart, to speak the Word of God to those who heard it not."

"I will go with thee," she reiterated simply.

"To far-off lands whence I came, a sea-girt land which once was mine own. My fathers lived there. I would go back and tell my people of all that I saw here on Calvary seven years ago."

"Then thither will I go with thee," she replied, "thy home will be my home, thy people my people and thy God shall be my God, for thine am I now and always. I am ignorant yet but this I do know, that thy God must be the great, the true and only God. None other God but He could have put in thy heart the strength of sacrifice which hath brought thee--who had Rome at thy feet--a lonely wanderer to the foot of this Cross."

She knelt beside him and he no longer cowered, limitless joy was in his heart and immeasurable gratitude.

"For the Son of Man shall come in the glory of the Father with His angels, and then He shall reward every man according to his works."

The wings of the wind brought the sacred words to his ears. He kissed the rough wooden Cross there where the Divine feet had rested, and Dea Flavia pressed her lips on it too, and the peace that passeth all understanding descended upon them both.

Overhead the clouds had parted, their silver lining showed clearly against the dull blue sky, and in the midst of that rent in the firmament, far away in the limitless beyond, a star shone out bright and clear.

Then they both rose, and hand in hand they walked slowly down the hill.

THE END