

CHAPTER 3 - ROME

The perusal of the title to this chapter will, we fear, excite emotions of apprehension, rather than of curiosity, in the breasts of experienced readers. They will doubtless imagine that it is portentous of long rhapsodies on those wonders of antiquity, the description of which has long become absolutely nauseous to them by incessant iteration. They will foresee wailings over the Palace of the Caesars, and meditations among the arches of the Colosseum, loading a long series of weary paragraphs to the very chapter's end; and, considerably anxious to spare their attention a task from which it recoils, they will unanimously hurry past the dreaded desert of conventional reflection, to alight on the first oasis that may present itself, whether it be formed by a new division of the story, or suddenly indicated by the appearance of a dialogue. Animated, therefore, by apprehensions such as these, we hasten to assure them that in no instance will the localities of our story trench upon the limits of the well-worn Forum, or mount the arches of the exhausted Colosseum. It is with the beings, and not the buildings of old Rome, that their attention is to be occupied. We desire to present them with a picture of the inmost emotions of the times--of the living, breathing actions and passions of the people of the doomed Empire. Antiquarian topography and classical architecture we leave to abler pens, and resign to other readers.

It is, however, necessary that the sphere in which the personages of our story are about to act should be in some measure indicated, in order to facilitate the comprehension of their respective movements. That portion of the extinct city which we design to revive has left few traces of its existence in the modern town. Its sites are traditionary--its buildings are dust. The church rises where the temple once stood, and the wine-shop now lures the passing idler where the bath invited his ancestor of old.

The walls of Rome are in extent, at the present day, the same as they were at the period of which we now write. But here all analogy between the ancient and modern city ends. The houses that those walls were once scarcely wide enough to enclose have long since vanished, and their modern successors occupy but a third of the space once allotted to the capital of the Empire.

Beyond the walls immense suburbs stretched forth in the days of old. Gorgeous villas, luxurious groves, temples, theatres, baths--interspersed by colonies of dwellings belonging to the lower orders of the people--surrounded the mighty city. Of these innumerable abodes hardly a trace remains. The modern traveller, as he looks forth over the site of the famous suburbs,

beholds, here and there, a ruined aqueduct, or a crumbling tomb, tottering on the surface of a pestilential marsh.

The present entrance to Rome by the Porta del Popolo occupies the same site as the ancient Flaminian Gate. Three great streets now lead from it towards the southern extremity of the city, and form with their tributaries the principal portion of modern Rome. On one side they are bounded by the Pincian Hill, on the other by the Tiber. Of these streets, those nearest the river occupy the position of the famous Campus Martius; those on the other side, the ancient approaches to the gardens of Sallust and Lucullus, on the Pincian Mount.

On the opposite bank of the Tiber (gained by the Ponte St. Angelo, formerly the Pons Elius), two streets pierced through an irregular and populous neighbourhood, conduct to the modern Church of St. Peter. At the period of our story this part of the city was of much greater consequence, both in size and appearance, than it is at present, and led directly to the ancient Basilica of St. Peter, which stood on the same site as that now occupied by the modern edifice.

The events about to be narrated occur entirely in the parts of the city just described. From the Pincian Hill, across the Campus Martius, over the Pons Elius, and on to the Basilica of St. Peter, the reader may be often invited to accompany us, but he will be spared all necessity of penetrating familiar ruins, or mourning over the sepulchres of departed patriots.

Ere, however, we revert to former actors or proceed to new characters, it will be requisite to people the streets that we here attempt to rebuild. By this process it is hoped that the reader will gain that familiarity with the manners and customs of the Romans of the fifth century on which the influence of this story mainly depends, and which we despair of being able to instil by a philosophical disquisition on the features of the age. A few pages of illustration will serve our purpose better, perhaps, than volumes of historical description. There is no more unerring index to the character of a people than the streets of their cities.

It is near evening. In the widest part of the Campus Martius crowds of people are assembled before the gates of a palace. They are congregated to receive several baskets of provisions, distributed with ostentatious charity by the owner of the mansion. The incessant clamour and agitation of the impatient multitude form a strange contrast to the stately serenity of the natural and artificial objects by which they are enclosed on all sides.

The space they occupy is oblong in shape and of great extent in size. Part of it is formed by a turf walk shaded with trees, part by the paved approaches to the palace and the public baths which stand in its immediate neighbourhood. These two edifices are remarkable by their magnificent outward adornments of statues, and the elegance and number of the flights of steps by which they are respectively entered. With the inferior buildings, the market-places and the gardens attached to them, they are sufficiently extensive to form the boundary of one side of the immediate view. The appearance of monotony which might at other times be remarked in the vastness and regularity of their white fronts, is at this moment agreeably broken by several gaily-coloured awnings stretched over their doors and balconies. The sun is now shining on them with overpowering brightness; the metallic ornaments on their windows glitter like gems of fire; even the trees which form their groves partake of the universal flow of light, and fail, like the objects around them, to offer to the weary eye either refreshment or repose.

Towards the north, the Mausoleum of Augustus, towering proudly up into the brilliant sky, at once attracts the attention. From its position, parts of this noble building are already in shade. Not a human being is visible on any part of its mighty galleries--it stands solitary and sublime, an impressive embodiment of the emotions which it was raised to represent.

On the side opposite the palace and the baths is the turf walk already mentioned. Trees, thickly planted and interlaced by vines, cast a luxurious shade over this spot. In their interstices, viewed from a distance, appear glimpses of gay dresses, groups of figures in repose, stands loaded with fruit and flowers, and innumerable white marble statues of fauns and wood-nymphs. From this delicious retreat the rippling of fountains is to be heard, occasionally interrupted by the rustling of leaves, or the plaintive cadences of the Roman flute.

Southward two pagan temples stand in lonely grandeur among a host of monuments and trophies. The symmetry of their first construction still remains unimpaired, their white marble pillars shine in the sunlight brightly as of old, yet they now present to the eye an aspect of strange desolation, of unnatural mysterious gloom. Although the laws forbid the worship for which they were built, the hand of reform has as yet not ventured to doom them to ruin or adapt them to Christian purposes. None venture to tread their once-crowded colonnades. No priest appears to give the oracles from their doors; no sacrifices reek upon their naked altars. Under their roofs, visited only by the light that steals through their narrow entrances, stand unnoticed, unworshipped, unmoved, the mighty idols of old Rome. Human

emotion, which made them Omnipotence once, has left them but stone now. The 'Star in the East' has already dimmed the fearful halo which the devotion of bloodshed once wreathed round their forms. Forsaken and alone, they stand but as the gloomy monuments of the greatest delusion ever organised by the ingenuity of man.

We have now, so to express it, exhibited the frame surrounding the moving picture, which we shall next attempt to present to the reader by mixing with the multitude before the palace gates.

This assembly resolved itself into three divisions: that collected before the palace steps, that loitering about the public baths, and that reposing in the shade of the groves. The first was of the most consequence in numbers, and of the greatest variety in appearance. Composed of rogues of the worst order from every quarter of the world, it might be said to present, in its general aspect of numerical importance, the very sublime of degradation. Confident in their rude union of common avidity, these worthy citizens vented their insolence on all objects, and in every direction, with a careless impartiality which would have shamed the most victorious efforts of modern mobs. The hubbub of voices was perfectly fearful. The coarse execrations of drunken Gauls, the licentious witticisms of effeminate Greeks, the noisy satisfaction of native Romans, the clamorous indignation of irritable Jews--all sounded together in one incessant chorus of discordant noises. Nor were the senses of sight and smell more agreeably assailed than the faculty of hearing, by this anomalous congregation. Immodest youth and irreverent age; woman savage, man cowardly; the swarthy Ethiopian beslabbered with stinking oil; the stolid Briton begrimed with dirt--these, and a hundred other varying combinations, to be imagined rather than expressed, met the attention in every direction. To describe the odours exhaled by the heat from this seething mixture of many pollutions, would be to force the reader to close the book; we prefer to return to the distribution which was the cause of this degrading tumult, and which consisted of small baskets of roasted meat packed with common fruits and vegetables, and handed, or rather flung down, to the mob by the servants of the nobleman who gave the feast. The people revelled in the abundance thus presented to them. They threw themselves upon it like wild beasts; they devoured it like hogs, or bore it off like plunderers; while, secure in the eminence on which they were placed, the purveyors of this public banquet expressed their contempt for its noisy recipients, by holding their noses, stopping their ears, turning their backs, and other pantomimic demonstrations of lofty and excessive disgust. These actions did not escape the attention of those members of the assembly who, having eaten their fill, were at leisure to make use of their tongues, and who showered an incessant storm of abuse on the heads of their benefactor's

retainers.

'See those fellows!' cried one; 'they are the waiters at our feast, and they mock us to our faces! Down with the filthy kitchen thieves!'

'Excellently well said, Davus!--but who is to approach them? They stink at this distance!'

'The rotten-bodied knaves have the noses of dogs and the carcasses of goats.'

Then came a chorus of voices--'Down with them! Down with them!' In the midst of which an indignant freedman advanced to rebuke the mob, receiving, as the reward of his temerity, a shower of missiles and a volley of curses; after which he was thus addressed by a huge, greasy butcher, hoisted on his companions' shoulders:--

'By the soul of the emperor, could I get near you, you rogue, I would quarter you with my fingers alone!--A grinning scoundrel that jeers at others! A filthy flatterer that dirties the very ground he walks on! By the blood of the martyrs, should I fling the sweepings of the slaughter-house at him, he knows not where to get himself dried!'

'Thou rag of a man,' roared a neighbour of the indignant butcher's, 'dost thou frown upon the guests of thy master, the very scrapings of whose skin are worth more than thy whole carcase! It is easier to make a drinking-vessel of the skull of a flea than to make an honest man of such a villainous night-walker as thou art!'

'Health and prosperity to our noble entertainer!' shouted one section of the grateful crowd as the last speaker paused for breath.

'Death to all knaves of parasites!' chimed in another.

'Honour to the citizens of Rome!' roared a third party with modest enthusiasm.

'Give that freedman our bones to pick!' screamed an urchin from the outskirts of the crowd.

This ingenious piece of advice was immediately followed; and the populace gave vent to a shout of triumph as the unfortunate freedman, scared by a new volley of missiles, retreated with ignominious expedition to the shelter of his patron's halls.

In the slight and purified specimen of the 'table talk' of a Roman mob which we have here ventured to exhibit, the reader will perceive that extraordinary mixture of servility and insolence which characterised not only the conversation but the actions of the lower orders of society at the period of which we write. Oppressed and degraded, on the one hand, to a point of misery scarcely conceivable to the public of the present day, the poorer classes in Rome were, on the other, invested with such a degree of moral license, and permitted such an extent of political privilege, as flattered their vanity into blinding their sense of indignation. Slaves in their season of servitude, masters in their hours of recreation, they presented, as a class, one of the most amazing social anomalies ever existing in any nation; and formed, in their dangerous and artificial position, one of the most important of the internal causes of the downfall of Rome.

The steps of the public baths were almost as crowded as the space before the neighbouring building. Incessant streams of people, either entering or departing, poured over the broad flagstones of its marble colonnades. This concourse, although composed in some parts of the same class of people as that assembled before the palace, presented a certain appearance of respectability. Here and there--chequering the dusky monotony of masses of dirty tunics--might be discerned the refreshing vision of a clean robe, or the grateful indication of a handsome person. Little groups, removed as far as possible from the neighbourhood of the noisy plebeians, were scattered about, either engaged in animated conversation, or listlessly succumbing to the lassitude induced by a recent bath. An instant's attention to the subject of discourse among the more active of these individuals will aid us in pursuing our social revelations.

The loudest voice among the speakers at this particular moment proceeded from a tall, thin, sinister-looking man, who was haranguing a little group of listeners with great vehemence and fluency.

'I tell you, Socius,' said he, turning suddenly upon one of his companions, 'that, unless new slave-laws are made, my calling is at an end. My patron's estate requires incessant supplies of these wretches. I do my best to satisfy the demand, and the only result of my labour is, that the miscreants either endanger my life, or fly with impunity to join the gangs of robbers infesting our woods.'

'Truly I am sorry for you; but what alteration would you have made in the slave-laws?'

'I would empower bailiffs to slay upon the spot all slaves whom they thought disorderly, as an example to the rest!'

'What would such a permission avail you? These creatures are necessary, and such a law would exterminate them in a few months. Can you not break their spirit with labour, bind their strength with chains, and vanquish their obstinacy with dungeons?'

'All this I have done, but they die under the discipline, or escape from their prisons. I have now three hundred slaves on my patron's estates. Against those born on our lands I have little to urge. Many of them, it is true, begin the day with weeping and end it with death; but for the most part, thanks to their diurnal allowance of stripes, they are tolerably submissive. It is with the wretches that I have been obliged to purchase from prisoners of war and the people of revolted towns that I am so dissatisfied. Punishments have no effect on them, they are incessantly indolent, sulky, desperate. It was but the other day that ten of them poisoned themselves while at work in the fields, and fifty more, after setting fire to a farm-house while my back was turned, escaped to join a gang of their companions, who are now robbers in the woods. These fellows, however, are the last of the troop who will perpetrate such offences. With the concurrence of my patron, I have adopted a plan that will henceforth tame them efficiently!'

'Are you at liberty to communicate it?'

'By the keys of St. Peter, I wish I could see it practised on every estate in the land! It is this:--Near a sulphur lake at some distance from my farm-house is a tract of marshy ground, overspread here and there by the ruins of an ancient slaughter-house. I propose to dig in this place several subterranean caverns, each of which shall be capable of holding twenty men. Here my mutinous slaves shall sleep after their day's labour. The entrances shall be closed until morning with a large stone, on which I will have engraven this inscription: 'These are the dormitories invented by Gordian, bailiff of Saturninus, a nobleman, for the reception of refractory slaves.'

'Your plan is ingenious; but I suspect your slaves (so insensible to hardships are the brutal herd) will sleep as unconcernedly in their new dormitories as in their old.'

'Sleep! It will be a most original species of repose that they will taste there! The stench of the sulphur lake will breathe Sabian odours for them over a couch of mud! Their anointing oil will be the slime of attendant reptiles! Their liquid perfumes will be the stagnant oozings from their chamber roof!

Their music will be the croaking of frogs and the humming of gnats; and as for their adornments, why, they will be decked forth with head-garlands of twining worms, and movable brooches of cockchafers and toads! Tell me now, most sagacious Socius, do you still think that amidst such luxuries as these my slaves will sleep?'

'No; they will die.'

'You are again wrong. They will curse and rave perhaps, but that is of no consequence. They will work the longer above ground to shorten the term of their repose beneath. They will wake at an instant's notice, and come forth at a moment's signal. I have no fear of their dying!'

'Do you leave Rome soon?'

'I go this evening, taking with me such a supply of trustworthy assistants as will enable me to execute my plan without delay. Farewell, Socius!'

'Most ingenious of bailiffs, I bid you farewell!'

As the worthy Gordian stalked off, big with the dignity of his new projects, the gestures and tones of a man who formed one of a little group collected in a remote part of the portico he was about to quit attracted his attention. Curiosity formed as conspicuous an ingredient in this man's character as cruelty. He stole behind the base of a neighbouring pillar; and, as the frequent repetition of the word 'Goths' struck his ear (the report of that nation's impending invasion having by this time reached Rome), he carefully disposed himself to listen with the most implicit attention to the speaker's voice.

'Goths!' cried the man, in the stern, concentrated accents of despair. 'Is there one among us to whom this report of their advance upon Rome does not speak of hope rather than of dread? Have we a chance of rising from the degradation forced on us by our superiors until this den of heartless triflers and shameless cowards is swept from the very earth that it pollutes!'

'Your sentiments on the evils of our condition are undoubtedly most just,' observed a fat, pompous man, to whom the preceding remarks had been addressed, 'but I cannot desire the reform you so ardently hope for. Think of the degradation of being conquered by barbarians!'

'I am the exile of my country's privileges. What interest have I in upholding her honour--if honour she really has!' replied the first speaker.

'Nay! Your expressions are too severe. You are too discontented to be just.'

'Am I! Hear me for a moment, and you will change your opinion. You see me now by my bearing and appearance superior to yonder plebeian herd. You doubtless think that I live at my ease in the world, that I can feel no anxiety for the future about my bodily necessities. What would you say were I to tell you that if I want another meal, a lodging for to-night, a fresh robe for tomorrow, I must rob or flatter some great man to gain them? Yet so it is. I am hopeless, friendless, destitute. In the whole of the Empire there is not an honest calling in which I can take refuge. I must become a pander or a parasite--a hired tyrant over slaves, or a chartered groveller beneath nobles--if I would not starve miserably in the streets, or rob openly in the woods! This is what I am. Now listen to what I was. I was born free. I inherited from my father a farm which he had successfully defended from the encroachments of the rich, at the expense of his comfort, his health, and his life. When I succeeded to his lands, I determined to protect them in my time as studiously as he had defended them in his. I worked unintermittingly: I enlarged my house, I improved my fields, I increased my flocks. One after another I despised the threats and defeated the wiles of my noble neighbours, who desired possession of my estate to swell their own territorial grandeur. In process of time I married and had a child. I believed that I was picked out from my race as a fortunate man--when one night I was attacked by robbers: slaves made desperate by the cruelty of their wealthy masters. They ravaged my cornfields, they deprived me of my flocks. When I demanded redress, I was told to sell my lands to those who could defend them--to those rich nobles whose tyranny had organised the band of wretches who had spoiled me of my possessions, and to whose fraud-gotten treasures the government were well pleased to grant that protection which they had denied to my honest hoards. In my pride I determined that I would still be independent. I planted new crops. With the little remnant of my money I hired fresh servants and bought more flocks. I had just recovered from my first disaster when I became the victim of a second. I was again attacked. This time we had arms, and we attempted to defend ourselves. My wife was slain before my eyes; my house was burnt to the ground; I myself only escaped, mutilated with wounds; my child soon afterwards pined and died. I had no wife, no offspring, no house, no money. My fields still stretched round me, but I had none to cultivate them. My walls still tottered at my feet, but I had none to rear them again, none to inhabit them if they were reared. My father's lands were now become a wilderness to me. I was too proud to sell them to my rich neighbour; I preferred to leave them before I saw them the prey of a tyrant, whose rank had triumphed over my industry, and who is now able to boast that he can

travel over ten leagues of senatorial property untainted by the propinquity of a husbandman's farm. Houseless, homeless, friendless, I have come to Rome alone in my affliction, helpless in my degradation! Do you wonder now that I am careless about the honour of my country? I would have served her with my life and my possessions when she was worthy of my service; but she has cast me off, and I care not who conquers her. I say to the Goths--with thousands who suffer the same tribulation that I now undergo--"Enter our gates! Level our palaces to the ground! Confound, if you will, in one common slaughter, we that are victims with those that are tyrants! Your invasion will bring new lords to the land. They cannot crush it more--they may oppress it less. Our posterity may gain their rights by the sacrifice of lives that our country has made worthless. Romans though we are, we are ready to suffer and submit!"

He stopped; for by this time he had lashed himself into fury. His eyes glared, his cheeks flushed, his voice rose. Could he then have seen the faintest vision of the destiny that future ages had in store for the posterity of the race that now suffered throughout civilised Europe, like him--could he have imagined how, in after years, the 'middle class', despised in his day, was to rise to privilege and power; to hold in its just hands the balance of the prosperity of nations; to crush oppression and regulate rule; to soar in its mighty flight above thrones and principalities, and rank and riches, apparently obedient, but really commanding;--could he but have foreboded this, what a light must have burst upon his gloom, what a hope must have soothed him in his despair!

To what further extremities his anger might have carried him, to what proceedings the indignant Gordian, who still listened from his concealment, might have had recourse, it is difficult to say; for the complaints of the ill-fated landholder and the cogitations of the authoritative bailiff were alike suddenly suspended by an uproar raging at this moment round a carriage which had just emerged from the palace we have elsewhere described.

This vehicle looked one mass of silver. Embroidered silk curtains fluttered all around it, gold ornaments studded its polished sides, and it held no less a person than the nobleman who had feasted the people with baskets of meat. This fact had become known to the rabble before the palace gates. Such an opportunity of showing their exultation in their bondage, their real servility in their imaginary independence, was not to be lost; and accordingly they let loose such a torrent of clamorous gratitude on their entertainer's appearance, that a stranger in Rome would have thought the city in revolt. They leapt, they ran, they danced round the prancing horses, they flung their empty baskets into the air, and patted approvingly their 'fair

round bellies'. From every side, as the carriage moved on, they gained fresh recruits and acquired new importance. The timid fled before them, the noisy shouted with them, the bold plunged into their ranks; and the constant burden of their rejoicing chorus was--'Health to the noble Pomponius! Prosperity to the senators of Rome, who feast us with their food and give us the freedom of their theatres! Glory to Pomponius! Glory to the senators!'

Fate seemed on this day to take pleasure in pampering the insatiable curiosity of Gordian, the bailiff. The cries of the multitude had scarcely died away in the distance, as they followed the departing carriage, when the voices of two men, pitched to a low, confidential tone, reached his ear from the opposite side of the pillar. He peeped cautiously round, and saw that they were priests.

'What an eternal jester is that Pomponius!' said one voice. 'He is going to receive absolution, and he journeys in his chariot of state, as if he were preparing to celebrate his triumph, instead of to confess his sins!'

'Has he committed, then, a fresh imprudence?'

'Alas, yes! For a senator he is dreadfully wanting in caution! A few days since, in a fit of passion, he flung a drinking-cup at one of his female slaves. The girl died on the spot, and her brother, who is also in his service, threatened immediate vengeance. To prevent disagreeable consequences to his body, Pomponius has sent the fellow to his estates in Egypt; and now, from the same precaution for the welfare of his soul, he goes to demand absolution from our holy and beneficent Church.'

'I am afraid these incessant absolutions, granted to men who are too careless even to make a show of repentance for their crimes, will prejudice us with the people at large.'

'Of what consequence are the sentiments of the people while we have their rulers on our side! Absolution is the sorcery that binds these libertines of Rome to our will. We know what converted Constantine--politic flattery and ready absolution; the people will tell you it was the sign of the Cross.'

'It is true this Pomponius is rich, and may increase our revenues, but still I fear the indignation of the people.'

'Fear nothing: think how long their old institutions imposed on them, and then doubt, if you can, that we may shape them to our wishes as we will. Any deceptions will be successful with a mob, if the instrument employed to

forward them be a religion.'

The voices ceased. Gordian, who still cherished a vague intention of denouncing the fugitive landholder to the senatorial authorities, employed the liberty afforded to his attention by the silence of the priests in turning to look after his intended victim. To his surprise he saw that the man had left the auditors to whom he had before addressed himself, and was engaged in earnest conversation in another part of the portico, with an individual who seemed to have recently joined him, and whose appearance was so remarkable that the bailiff had moved a few steps forwards to gain a nearer view of him, when he was once more arrested by the voices of the priests.

Irresolute for an instant to which party to devote his unscrupulous attention, he returned mechanically to his old position. Ere long, however, his anxiety to hear the mysterious communications proceeding between the landholder and his friend overbalanced his delight in penetrating the theological secrets of the priests. He turned once more, but to his astonishment the objects of his curiosity had disappeared. He stepped to the outside of the portico and looked for them in every direction, but they were nowhere to be seen. Peevish and disappointed, he returned as a last resource to the pillar where he had left the priests, but the time consumed in his investigations after one party had been fatal to his reunion with the other. The churchmen were gone.

Sufficiently punished for his curiosity by his disappointment, the bailiff walked doggedly off towards the Pincian Hill. Had he turned in the contrary direction, towards the Basilica of St. Peter, he would have found himself once more in the neighbourhood of the landholder and his remarkable friend, and would have gained that acquaintance with the subjects of their conversation, which we intend that the reader shall acquire in the course of the next chapter.