

## CHAPTER 9 - THE TWO INTERVIEWS

The time, is the evening of the first day of the Gothic blockade; the place, is Vetrano's palace at Rome. In one of the private apartments of his mansion is seated its all-accomplished owner, released at length from the long sitting convened by the Senate on the occasion of the unexpected siege of the city. Although the same complete discipline, the same elegant regularity, and the same luxurious pomp, which distinguished the senator's abode in times of security, still prevail over it in the time of imminent danger which now threatens rich and poor alike in Rome, Vetrano himself appears far from partaking the tranquility of his patrician household. His manner displays an unusual sternness, and his face an unwonted displeasure, as he sits, occupied by his silent reflections and thoroughly unregardful of whatever occurs around him. Two ladies who are his companions in the apartment, exert all their blandishments to win him back to hilarity, but in vain. The services of his expectant musicians are not put into requisition, the delicacies on his table remain untouched, and even 'the inestimable kitten of the breed most worshipped by the ancient Egyptians' gambols unnoticed and unapplauded at his feet. All its wonted philosophical equanimity has evidently departed, for the time at least, from the senator's mind.

Silence--hitherto a stranger to the palace apartments--had reigned uninterruptedly over them for some time, when the freedman Carrio dissipated Vetrano's meditations, and put the ladies who were with him to flight, by announcing in an important voice, that the Prefect Pompeianus desired a private interview with the Senator Vetrano.

The next instant the chief magistrate of Rome entered the apartment. He was a short, fat, undignified man. Indolence and vacillation were legibly impressed on his appearance and expression. You saw, in a moment, that his mind, like a shuttlecock, might be urged in any direction by the efforts of others, but was utterly incapable of volition by itself. But once in his life had the Prefect Pompeianus been known to arrive unaided at a positive determination, and that was in deciding a fierce argument between a bishop and a general, regarding the relative merits of two rival rope-dancers of equal renown.

'I have come, my beloved friend,' said the Prefect in agitated tones, 'to ask your opinion, at this period of awful responsibility for us all, on the plan of operations proposed by the Senate at the sitting of to-day! But first,' he hastily continued, perceiving with the unerring instinct of an old gastronome, that the inviting refreshments on Vetrano's table had remained untouched, 'permit me to fortify my exhausted energies by a visit to your

ever-luxurious board. Alas, my friend, when I consider the present fearful scarcity of our provision stores in the city, and the length of time that this accursed blockade may be expected to last, I am inclined to think that the gods alone know (I mean St. Peter) how much longer we may be enabled to give occupation to our digestions and employment to our cooks.

'I have observed,' pursued the Prefect, after an interval, speaking with his mouth full of stewed peacock; 'I have observed, oh esteemed colleague! the melancholy of your manner and your absolute silence during your attendance to-day at our deliberations. Have we, in your opinion, decided erroneously? It is not impossible! Our confusion at this unexpected appearance of the barbarians may have blinded our usual penetration! If by any chance you dissent from our plans, I beseech you communicate your objections to me without reserve!'

'I dissent from nothing, because I have heard nothing,' replied Vetricio sullenly. 'I was so occupied by a private matter of importance during my attendance at the sitting of the Senate, that I was deaf to their deliberations. I know that we are besieged by the Goths--why are they not driven from before the walls?'

'Deaf to our deliberations! Drive the Goths from the walls!' repeated the Prefect faintly. 'Can you think of any private matter at such a moment as this? Do you know our danger? Do you know that our friends are so astonished at this frightful calamity, that they move about like men half awakened from a dream? Have you not seen the streets filled with terrified and indignant crowds? Have you not mounted the ramparts and beheld the innumerable multitudes of pitiless Goths surrounding us on all sides, intercepting our supplies of provisions from the country, and menacing us with a speedy famine, unless our hoped-for auxiliaries arrive from Ravenna?'

'I have neither mounted the ramparts, nor viewed with any attention the crowds in the streets,' replied Vetricio, carelessly.

'But if you have seen nothing yourself, you must have heard what others saw,' persisted the Prefect; 'you must know at least that the legions we have in the city are not sufficient to guard more than half the circuit of the walls. Has no one informed you that if it should please the leader of the barbarians to change his blockade into an assault, it is more than probable that we should be unable to repulse him successfully? Are you still deaf to our deliberations, when your palace may to-morrow be burnt over your head, when we may be staved to death, when we may be doomed to eternal dishonour by being driven to conclude a peace? Deaf to our deliberations,

when such an unimaginable calamity as this invasion has fallen like a thunderbolt under our very walls! You amaze me! You overwhelm me! You horrify me!

And in the excess of his astonishment the bewildered Prefect actually abandoned his stewed peacock, and advanced, wine-cup in hand, to obtain a nearer view of the features of his imperturbable host.

'If we are not strong enough to drive the Goths out of Italy,' rejoined Vetranio coolly, 'you and the Senate know that we are rich enough to bribe them to depart to the remotest confines of the empire. If we have not swords enough to fight, we have gold and silver enough to pay.'

'You are jesting! Remember our honour and the auxiliaries we still hope for from Ravenna,' said the Prefect reprovingly.

'Honour has lost the signification now, that it had in the time of the Caesars,' retorted the Senator. 'Our fighting days are over. We have had heroes enough for our reputation. As for the auxiliaries you still hope for, you will have none! While the Emperor is safe in Ravenna, he will care nothing for the worst extremities that can be suffered by the people of Rome.'

'But you forget your duties,' urged the astonished Pompeianus, turning from rebuke to expostulation. 'You forget that it is a time when all private interests must be abandoned! You forget that I have come here to ask your advice, that I am bewildered by a thousand projects, forced on me from all sides, for ruling the city successfully during the blockade; that I look to you, as a friend and a man of reputation, to aid me in deciding on a choice out of the varied counsels submitted to me in the Senate to-day.'

'Write down the advice of each senator on a separate strip of vellum; shake all the strips together in an urn; and then, let the first you take out by chance, be your guide to govern by in the present condition of the city!' said Vetranio with a sneer.

'Oh friend, friend! it is cruel to jest with me thus!' cried the Prefect, in tones of lament; 'Would you really persuade me that you are ignorant that what sentinels we have, are doubled already on the walls? Would you attempt to declare seriously to me, that you never heard the project of Saturninus for reducing imperceptibly the diurnal allowance of provisions? Or the recommendation of Emilianus, that the people should be kept from thinking on the dangers and extremities which now threaten them, by being provided

incessantly with public amusements at the theatres and hippodromes? Do you really mean that you are indifferent to the horrors of our present situation? By the souls of the Apostles, Vetricano, I begin to think that you do not believe in the Goths!

'I have already told you that private affairs occupy me at present, to the exclusion of public,' said Vetricano impatiently. 'Debate as you choose--approve what projects you will--I withdraw myself from interference in your deliberations!'

'This,' murmured the repulsed Prefect in soliloquy, as he mechanically resumed his place at the refreshment table, 'this is the very end and climax of all calamities! Now, when advice and assistance are more precious than jewels in my estimation, I receive neither! I gain from none, the wise and saving counsels which, as chief magistrate of this Imperial City, it is my right to demand from all; and the man on whom I most depended is the man who fails me most! Yet hear me, oh Vetricano, once again,' he continued, addressing the Senator, 'if our perils beyond the walls affect you not, there is a weighty matter that has been settled within them, which must move you. After you had quitted the Senate, Serena, the widow of Stilicho, was accused, as her husband was accused before her, of secret and treasonable correspondence with the Goths; and has been condemned, as her husband was condemned, to suffer the penalty of death. I myself discerned no evidence to convict her; but the populace cried out, in universal frenzy, that she was guilty, that she should die; and that the barbarians, when they heard of the punishment inflicted on their secret adherent, would retire in dismay from Rome. This also was a moot point of argument, on which I vainly endeavoured to decide; but the Senate and the people were wiser than I; and Serena was condemned to be strangled to-morrow by the public executioner. She was a woman of good report before this time, and is the adopted mother of the Emperor. It is now doubted by many whether Stilicho, her husband, was ever guilty of the correspondence with the Goths, of which he was accused; and I, on my part, doubt much that Serena has deserved the punishment of death at our hands. I beseech you, Vetricano, let me be enlightened by your opinion on this one point at least!'

The Prefect waited anxiously for an answer, but Vetricano neither looked at him nor replied. It was evident that the Senator had not listened to a word that he had said!

This reception of his final appeal for assistance, produced the effect on the petitioner, which it was perhaps designed to convey--the Prefect Pompeianus quitted the room in despair.

He had not long departed, when Carrio again entered the apartment, and addressed his master thus:

'It is grievous for me, revered patron, to disclose it to you, but your slaves have returned unsuccessful from the search!'

'Give the description of the girl to a fresh division of them, and let them continue their efforts throughout the night, not only in the streets, but in all the houses of public entertainment in the city. She must be in Rome, and she must be found!' said the senator gloomily.

Carrio bowed profoundly, and was about to depart, when he was arrested at the door by his master's voice.

'If an old man, calling himself Numerian, should desire to see me,' said Vetrano, 'admit him instantly.'

'She had quitted the room but a short time when I attempted to reclaim her,' pursued the senator, speaking to himself; 'and yet when I gained the open air, she was nowhere to be seen! She must have mingled unintentionally with the crowds whom the Goths drove into the city, and thus have eluded my observation! So young and so innocent! She must be found! She must be found!'

He paused, once more engrossed in deep and melancholy thought. After a long interval, he was roused from his abstraction by the sound of footsteps on the marble floor. He looked up. The door had been opened without his perceiving it, and an old man was advancing with slow and trembling steps towards his silken couch. It was the bereaved and broken-hearted Numerian.

'Where is she? Is she found?' asked the father, gazing anxiously round the room, as if he had expected to see his daughter there.

'My slaves still search for her,' said Vetrano, mournfully.

'Ah, woe--woe--woe! How I wronged her! How I wronged her!' cried the old man, turning to depart.

'Listen to me ere you go,' said Vetrano, gently detaining him. 'I have done you a great wrong, but I will yet atone for it by finding for you your child! While there were women who would have triumphed in my admiration, I

should not have attempted to deprive you of your daughter! Remember when you recover her--and you shall recover her--that from the time when I first decoyed her into listening to my lute, to the night when your traitorous servant led me to her bed-chamber, she has been innocent in this ill-considered matter. I alone have been guilty! She was scarcely awakened when you discovered her in my arms, and my entry into her chamber, was as little expected by her, as it was by you. I was bewildered by the fumes of wine and the astonishment of your sudden appearance, or I should have rescued her from your anger, ere it was too late! The events which have passed this morning, confused though they were, have yet convinced me that I had mistaken you both. I now know that your child was too pure to be an object fitted for my pursuit; and I believe that in secluding her as you did, however ill-advised you might appear, you were honest in your design! Never in my pursuit of pleasure did I commit so fatal an error, as when I entered the doors of your house!

In pronouncing these words, Vetricano but gave expression to the sentiments by which they were really inspired. As we have before observed, profligate as he was by thoughtlessness of character and license of social position, he was neither heartless nor criminal by nature. Fathers had stormed, but his generosity had hitherto invariably pacified them. Daughters had wept, but had found consolation on all previous occasions in the splendour of his palace and the amiability of his disposition. In attempting, therefore, the abduction of Antonina, though he had prepared for unusual obstacles, he had expected no worse results of his new conquest, than those that had followed, as yet, his gallantries that were past. But, when--in the solitude of his own home, and in the complete possession of his faculties--he recalled all the circumstances of his attempt, from the time when he had stolen on the girl's slumbers, to the moment when she had fled from the house; when he remembered the stern concentrated anger of Numerian, and the agony and despair of Antonina; when he thought on the spirit-broken repentance of the deceived father, and the fatal departure of the injured daughter, he felt as a man who had not merely committed an indiscretion, but had been guilty of a crime; he became convinced that he had incurred the fearful responsibility of destroying the happiness of a parent who was really virtuous, and a child who was truly innocent. To a man, the business of whose whole life was to procure for himself a heritage of unalloyed pleasure, whose sole occupation was to pamper that refined sensuality which the habits of a life had made the very material of his heart, by diffusing luxury and awakening smiles wherever he turned his steps, the mere mental disquietude attending the ill-success of his intrusion into Numerian's dwelling, was as painful in its influence, as the bitterest remorse that could have afflicted a more highly-principled mind. He now, therefore, instituted

the search after Antonina, and expressed his contrition to her father, from a genuine persuasion that nothing but the completest atonement for the error he had committed, could restore to him that luxurious tranquility, the loss of which had, as he had himself expressed it, rendered him deaf to the deliberations of the Senate, and regardless of the invasion of the Goths.

'Tell me,' he continued, after a pause, 'whither has Ulpius betaken himself? It is necessary that he should be discovered. He may enlighten us upon the place of Antonina's retreat. He shall be secured and questioned.'

'He left me suddenly; I saw him as I stood at the window, mix with the multitude in the street, but I know not whither he is gone,' replied Numerian; and a tremor passed over his whole frame as he spoke of the remorseless Pagan.

Again there was a short silence. The grief of the broken-spirited father, possessed in its humility and despair, a voice of rebuke, before which the senator, careless and profligate as he was, instinctively quailed. For some time he endeavoured in vain to combat the silencing and reproving influence, exerted over him by the very presence of the sorrowing man whom he had so fatally wronged. At length, after an interval, he recovered self-possession enough to address to Numerian some further expressions of consolation and hope; but he spoke to ears that listened not. The father had relapsed into his mournful abstraction; and when the senator paused, he merely muttered to himself--'She is lost! Alas, she is lost for ever!'

'No, she is not lost for ever,' cried Vetrano, warmly. 'I have wealth and power enough to cause her to be sought for to the ends of the earth! Ulpius shall be secured and questioned--imprisoned, tortured, if it is necessary. Your daughter shall be recovered. Nothing is impossible to a senator of Rome!'

'I knew not that I loved her, until the morning when I wronged and banished her!' continued the old man, still speaking to himself. 'I have lost all traces of my parents and my brother--my wife is parted from me for ever--I have nothing left but Antonina; and now too she is gone! Even my ambition, that I once thought my all in all, is no comfort to my soul; for I loved it--alas! unconsciously loved it--through the being of my child! I destroyed her lute--I thought her shameless--I drove her from my doors! Oh, how I wronged her!--how I wronged her!'

'Remain here, and repose yourself in one of the sleeping apartments, until my slaves return in the morning. You will then hear without delay of the

result of their search to-night,' said Vetrano, in kindly and compassionate tones.

'It grows dark--dark!' groaned the father, tottering towards the door; 'but that is nothing; daylight itself now looks darkness to me! I must go: I have duties at the chapel to perform. Night is repose for you--for me, it is tribulation and prayer!'

He departed as he spoke. Slowly he paced along the streets that led to his chapel, glancing with penetrating eye at each inhabitant of the besieged city who passed him on his way. With some difficulty he arrived at his destination; for Rome was still thronged with armed men hurrying backwards and forwards, and with crowds of disorderly citizens pouring forth, wherever there was space enough for them to assemble. The report of the affliction that had befallen him had already gone abroad among his hearers, and they whispered anxiously to each other as he entered the plain, dimly-lighted chapel, and slowly mounted the pulpit to open the service, by reading the chapter in the Bible which had been appointed for perusal that night, and which happened to be the fifth of the Gospel of St. Mark. His voice trembled, his face was ghastly pale, and his hands shook perceptibly as he began; but he read on, in low, broken tones, and with evident pain and difficulty, until he came to the verse containing these words: 'My little daughter lieth at the point of death.' Here he stopped suddenly, endeavoured vainly for a few minutes to proceed, and then, covering his face with his hands, sank down in the pulpit and sobbed aloud. His sorrowing and startled audience immediately gathered round him, raised him in their arms, and prepared to conduct him to his own abode. When, however, they had gained the door of the chapel, he desired them gently, to leave him and return to the performance of the service among themselves. Ever implicitly obedient to his slightest wishes, the persons of his little assembly, moved to tears by the sight of their teacher's suffering, obeyed him, by retiring silently to their former places. As soon as he found that he was alone, he passed the door; and whispering to himself, 'I must join those who seek her! I must aid them myself in the search!'--he mingled once more with the disorderly citizens who thronged the darkened streets.