

CHAPTER 14 - THE FAMINE

The end of November is approaching. Nearly a month has elapsed since the occurrence of the events mentioned in the last chapter, yet still the Gothic lines stretch round the city walls. Rome, that we left haughty and luxurious even while ruin threatened her at her gates, has now suffered a terrible and warning change. As we approach her again, woe, horror, and desolation have already gone forth to shadow her lofty palaces and to darken her brilliant streets.

Over Pomp that spurned it, over Pleasure that defied it, over Plenty that scared it in its secret rounds, the spectre Hunger has now risen triumphant at last. Day by day has the city's insufficient allowance of food been more and more sparingly doled out; higher and higher has risen the value of the coarsest and simplest provision; the hoarded supplies that pity and charity have already bestowed to cheer the sinking people have reached their utmost limits. For the rich, there is still corn in the city--treasure of food to be bartered for treasure of gold. For the poor, man's natural nourishment exists no more; the season of famine's loathsome feasts, the first days of the sacrifice of choice to necessity have darkly and irretrievably begun.

It is morning. A sad and noiseless throng is advancing over the cold flagstones of the great square before the Basilica of St. John Lateran. The members of the assembly speak in whispers. The weak are tearful--the strong are gloomy--they all move with slow and languid gait, and hold in their arms their dogs or other domestic animals. On the outskirts of the crowd march the enfeebled guards of the city, grasping in their rough hands rare favourite birds of gaudy plumage and melodious note, and followed by children and young girls vainly and piteously entreating that their favourites may be restored.

This strange procession pauses, at length, before a mighty caldron slung over a great fire in the middle of the square, round which stand the city butchers with bare knives, and the trustiest men of the Roman legions with threatening weapons. A proclamation is then repeated, commanding the populace who have no money left to purchase food, to bring up their domestic animals to be boiled together over the public furnace, for the sake of contributing to the public support.

The next minute, in pursuance of this edict, the dumb favourites of the crowd passed from the owner's caressing hand into the butcher's ready grasp. The faint cries of the animals, starved like their masters, mingled for a few moments with the sobs and lamentations of the women and children,

to whom the greater part of them belonged. For, in this the first stage of their calamities, that severity of hunger which extinguishes pity and estranges grief was unknown to the populace; and though fast losing spirit, they had not yet sunk to the depths of ferocious despair which even now were invisibly opening between them. A thousand pangs were felt, a thousand humble tragedies were acted, in the brief moments of separation between guardian and charge. The child snatched its last kiss of the bird that had sung over its bed; the dog looked its last entreaty for protection from the mistress who had once never met it without a caress. Then came the short interval of agony and death, then the steam rose fiercely from the greedy caldron, and then the people for a time dispersed; the sorrowful to linger near the confines of the fire, and the hungry to calm their impatience by a visit to the neighbouring church.

The marble aisles of the noble basilica held a gloomy congregation. Three small candles were alone lighted on the high altar. No sweet voices sang melodious anthems or exulting hymns. The monks, in hoarse tones and monotonous harmonics, chanted the penitential psalms. Here and there knelt a figure clothed in mourning robes, and absorbed in secret prayer; but over the majority of the assembly either blank despondency or sullen inattention universally prevailed.

As the last dull notes of the last psalm died away among the lofty recesses of the church, a procession of pious Christians appeared at the door and advanced slowly to the altar. It was composed both of men and women barefooted, clothed in black garments, and with ashes scattered over their dishevelled hair. Tears flowed from their eyes, and they beat their breasts as they bowed their foreheads on the marble pavement of the altar steps.

This humble public expression of penitence under the calamity that had now fallen on the city was, however, confined only to its few really religious inhabitants, and commanded neither sympathy nor attention from the heartless and obstinate population of Rome. Some still cherished the delusive hope of assistance from the court at Ravenna; others believed that the Goths would ere long impatiently abandon their protracted blockade, to stretch their ravages over the rich and unprotected fields of Southern Italy. But the same blind confidence in the lost terrors of the Roman name, the same fierce and reckless determination to defy the Goths to the very last, sustained the sinking courage and suppressed the despondent emotions of the great mass of the suffering people, from the beggar who prowled for garbage, to the patrician who sighed over his new and unwelcome nourishment of simple bread.

While the penitents who formed the procession above described were yet engaged in the performance of their unnoticed and unshared duties of penance and prayer, a priest ascended the great pulpit of the basilica, to attempt the ungrateful task of preaching patience and piety to the hungry multitude at his feet.

He began his sermon by retracing the principal occurrences in Rome since the beginning of the Gothic blockade. He touched cautiously upon the first event that stained the annals of the besieged city--the execution of the widow of the Roman general Stilicho, on the unauthorised suspicion that she had held treasonable communication with Alaric and the invading army; he noticed lengthily the promises of assistance transmitted from Ravenna, after the perpetration of that ill-omened act. He spoke admiringly of the skill displayed by the government in making the necessary and immediate reductions in the daily supplies of food; he lamented the terrible scarcity which followed, too inevitably, those seasonable reductions. He pronounced an eloquent eulogium on the noble charity of Laeta, the widow of the Emperor Gratian, who, with her mother, devoted the store of provisions obtained by their imperial revenues to succouring, at that important juncture, the starving and desponding poor: he admitted the new scarcity, consequent on the dissipation of Laeta's stores; deplored the present necessity of sacrificing the domestic animals of the citizens; condemned the enormous prices now demanded for the last remnants of wholesome food that were garnered up; announced it as the firm persuasion of every one that a few days more would bring help from Ravenna; and ended his address by informing his auditory that, as they had suffered so much already, they could patiently suffer a little more, and that if, after this, they were so ill-fated as to sink under their calamities, they would feel it a noble consolation to die in the cause of Catholic and Apostolic Rome, and would assuredly be canonised as saints and martyrs by the next generation of the pious in the first interval of fertile and restoring peace.

Flowing as was the eloquence of this oration, it yet possessed not the power of inducing one among those whom it addressed to forget the sensation of his present suffering, and to fix his attention on the vision of future advantage, spread before all listeners by the fluent priest. With the same murmurs of querulous complaint, and the same expressions of impotent hatred and defiance of the Goths which had fallen from them as they entered the church, the populace now departed from it, to receive from the city officers the stinted allowance of repugnant food, prepared for their hunger from the caldron in the public square.

And see, already from other haunts in the neighbouring quarter of Rome

their fellow-citizens press onward at the given signal, to meet them round the caldron's sides! The languid sentinel, released from duty, turns his gaze from the sickening prospect of the Gothic camp, and hastens to share the public meal; the baker starts from sleeping on his empty counter, the beggar rises from his kennel in the butcher's vacant out-house, the slave deserts his place by the smouldering kitchen-fire--all hurry to swell the numbers of the guests that are bidden to the wretched feast. Rapidly and confusedly, the congregation in the basilica pours through its lofty gates; the priests and penitents retire from the altar's foot, and in the great church, so crowded but a few moments before, there now only remains the figure of a solitary man.

Since the commencement of the service, neither addressed nor observed, this lonely being has faltered round the circle of the congregation, gazing long and wistfully over the faces that met his view. Now that the sermon is ended, and the last lingerer has quitted the church, he turns from the spot whence he has anxiously watched the different members of the departing throng, and feebly crouches down on his knees at the base of a pillar that is near him. His eyes are hollow, and his cheeks are wan; his thin grey hairs are few and fading on his aged head. He makes no effort to follow the crowd and partake their sustenance; no one is left behind to urge, no one returns to lead him to the public meal. Though weak and old, he is perfectly forsaken in his loneliness, perfectly unsolaced in his grief; his friends have lost all trace of him; his enemies have ceased to fear or to hate him now. As he crouches by the pillar alone, he covers his forehead with his pale, palsied hands, his dim eyes fill with bitter tears, and such expressions as these are ever and anon faintly audible in the intervals of his heavy sighs: 'Day after day! Day after day! And my lost one is not found! my loved and wronged one is not restored! Antonina! Antonina!'

Some days after the public distribution of food in the square of St. John Lateran, Vetrano's favourite freedman might have been observed pursuing his way homeward, sadly and slowly, to his master's palace.

It was not without cause that the pace of the intelligent Carrio was funereal and his expression disconsolate. Even during the short period that had elapsed since the scene in the basilica already described, the condition of the city had altered fearfully for the worse. The famine advanced with giant strides; every succeeding hour endued it with new vigour, every effort to repel it served but to increase its spreading and overwhelming influence. One after another the pleasures and pursuits of the city declined beneath the dismal oppression of the universal ill, until the public spirit in Rome became moved alike in all classes by one gloomy inspiration--a despairing

defiance of the famine and the Goths.

The freedman entered his master's palace neither saluted nor welcomed by the once obsequious slaves in the outer lodge. Neither harps nor singing-boys, neither woman's ringing laughter nor man's bacchanalian glee, now woke the echoes in the lonely halls. The pulse of pleasure seemed to have throbbled its last in the joyless being of Vetrano's altered household.

Hastening his steps as he entered the mansion, Carrio passed into the chamber where the senator awaited him.

On two couches, separated by a small table, reclined the lord of the palace and his pupil and companion at Ravenna, the once sprightly Camilla. Vetrano's open brow had contracted a clouded and severe expression, and he neither regarded nor addressed his visitor, who, on her part, remained as silent and as melancholy as himself. Every trace of the former characteristics of the gay, elegant voluptuary and the lively, prattling girl seemed to have completely vanished. On the table between them stood a large bottle containing Falernian wine, and a vase filled with a little watery soup, in the middle of which floated a small dough cake, sparingly sprinkled with common herbs. As for the usual accompaniments of Vetrano's luxurious privacy, they were nowhere to be seen. Poems, pictures, trinkets, lutes, all were absent. Even the 'inestimable kitten of the breed most worshipped by the ancient Egyptians' appeared no more. It had been stolen, cooked, and eaten by a runaway slave, who had already bartered its ruby collar for a lean parrot and the unroasted half of the carcass of a dog.

'I lament to confess it, O estimable patron, but my mission has failed,' observed Carrio, producing from his cloak several bags of money and boxes of jewels, which he carefully deposited on the table. 'The Prefect has himself assisted in searching the public and private granaries, and has arrived at the conclusion that not a handful of corn is left in the city. I offered publicly in the market-place five thousand sestertii for a living cock and hen, but was told that the race had long since been exterminated, and that, as money would no longer buy food, money was no longer desired by the poorest beggar in Rome. There is no more even of the hay I yesterday purchased to be obtained for the most extravagant bribes. Those still possessing the smallest supplies of provision guard and hide them with the most jealous care. I have done nothing but obtain for the consumption of the few slaves who yet remain faithful in the house this small store of dogs' hides, reserved from the public distribution of some days since in the square of the Basilica of St. John.'

And the freedman, with an air of mingled triumph and disgust, produced as he spoke his provision of dirty skins.

'What supplies have we still left in our possession?' demanded Vetrano, after drinking a deep draught of the Falernian, and motioning his servant to place his treasured burden out of sight.

'I have hidden in a secure receptacle, for I know not how soon hunger may drive the slaves to disobedience,' rejoined Carrio, 'seven bags of hay, three baskets stocked with salted horse-flesh, a sweetmeat-box filled with oats, and another with dried parsley; the rare Indian singing birds are still preserved inviolate in their aviary; there is a great store of spices, and some bottles of the Nightingale Sauce yet remain.'

'What is the present aspect of the city?' interrupted Vetrano impatiently.

'Rome is as gloomy as a subterranean sepulchre,' replied Carrio, with a shudder. 'The people congregate in speechless and hungry mobs at the doors of their houses and the corners of the streets, the sentinels at the ramparts totter on their posts, women and children are sleeping exhausted on the very pavements of the churches, the theatres are emptied of actors and audience alike, the baths resound with cries for food and curses on the Goths, thefts are already committed in the open and unguarded shops, and the barbarians remain fixed in their encampments, unapproached by our promised legions from Ravenna, neither assaulting us in our weakness, nor preparing to raise the blockade! Our situation grows more and more perilous. I have great hopes in our store of provisions; but--'

'Cast your hopes to the court at Ravenna, and your beasts' provender to the howling mob!' cried Vetrano with sudden energy. 'It is now too late to yield; if the next few days bring us no assistance, the city will be a human shambles! And think you that I, who have already lost in this public suspension of social joys my pleasures, my employments, and my companions, will wait serenely for the lingering and ignoble death that must then threaten us all? No, it shall never be said that I died starving with the herd, like a slave that his master deserts! Though the plates in my banqueting hall must now be empty, my vases and wine-cups shall yet sparkle for my guests! There is still wine in the cellar, and spices and perfumes remain in the larder stores! I will invite my friends to a last feast; a saturnalia in a city of famine; a banquet of death, spread by the jovial labours of Silenus and his fauns! Though the Parcae have woven for me the destiny of a dog, it is the hand of Bacchus that shall sever the fatal thread!'

His cheeks were flushed, his eyes sparkled; all the mad energy of his determination appeared in his face as he spoke. He was no longer the light, amiable, smooth-tongued trifler, but a moody, reckless, desperate man, careless of every obligation and pursuit which had hitherto influenced the easy surface of his patrician life. The startled Camilla, who had as yet preserved a melancholy silence, ran towards him with affrighted looks and undissembled tears. Carrio stared in vacant astonishment on his master's disordered countenance; and, forgetting his bundle of dogskins, suffered them to drop unheeded on the floor. A momentary silence followed, which was suddenly interrupted by the abrupt entrance of a fourth person, pale, trembling and breathless, who was no other than Vetrano's former visitor, the Prefect Pompeianus.

'I bid you welcome to my approaching feast of brimming wine-cups and empty dishes!' cried Vetrano, pouring the sparkling Falernian into his empty glass. 'The last banquet given in Rome, ere the city is annihilated, will be mine! The Goths and the famine shall have no part in my death! Pleasure shall preside at my last moments, as it has presided at my whole life! I will die like Sardanapalus, with my loves and my treasures around me, and the last of my guests who remains proof against our festivity shall set fire to my palace, as the kingly Assyrian set fire to his!'

'This is no season for jesting,' exclaimed the Prefect, staring round him with bewildered eyes and colourless cheeks. 'Our miseries are but dawning as yet! In the next street lies the corpse of a woman, and--horrible omen!--a coil of serpents is wreathed about her neck! We have no burial-place to receive her, and the thousands who may die like her, ere assistance arrives. The city sepulchres outside the walls are in the hands of the Goths. The people stand round the body in a trance of horror, for they have now discovered a fatal truth we would fain have concealed from them--' Here the Prefect paused, looked round affrightedly on his listeners, and then added in low trembling tones--

'The citizens are lying dead from famine in the streets of Rome!'