

## **CHAPTER 20 - THE BREACH REPASSED**

Slowly and mournfully the sentinel at the rifted wall raised his eyes towards the eastern clouds as they brightened before the advancing dawn. Desolate as was the appearance of the dull, misty daybreak, it was yet the most welcome of all the objects surrounding the starving soldier on which he could fix his languid gaze. To look back on the city behind him was to look back on the dreary charnel-house of famine and death; to look down on the waste ground without the walls was to look down on the dead body of the comrade of his watch, who, maddened by the pangs of hunger which he had suffered during the night, had cast himself from the rampart to meet a welcome death on the earth beneath. Famished and despairing, the sentinel crouched on the fortifications which he had now neither strength to pace nor care to defend, yearning for the food that he had no hope to obtain, as he watched the grey daybreak from his solitary post.

While he was thus occupied, the gloomy silence of the scene was suddenly broken by the sound of falling brick-work at the inner base of the wall, followed by faint entreaties for mercy and deliverance, which rose on his ear, strangely mingled with disjointed expression of defiance and exultation from a second voice. He slowly turned his head, and, looking down, saw on the ground beneath a young girl struggling in the grasp of an old man, who was hurrying her onward in the direction of the Pincian Gate.

For one moment the girl's eye met the sentinel's vacant glance, and she renewed, with a last effort of strength, and a greater vehemence of supplication, her cries for help; but the soldier neither moved nor answered. Exhausted as he was, no sight could affect him now but the sight of food. Like the rest of the citizens, he was sunk in a heavy stupor of starvation--selfish, reckless, brutalised. No disasters could depress, no atrocities rouse him. Famine had torn asunder every social tie, had withered every human sympathy among his besieged fellow-citizens, and he was famishing like them.

At the moment when the dawn had first appeared, could he have looked down by some mysterious agency to the interior foundations of the wall, from the rampart on which he kept his weary watch, such a sight must then have presented itself as would have aroused even his sluggish observation to rigid attention and involuntary surprise.

Winding upward and downward among jagged masses of ruined brick-work, now lost amid the shadows of dreary chasms, now prominent over the elevations of rising arches, the dark irregular passages broken by Ulpian in

the rotten wall would then have presented themselves to his eyes; not stretching forth in dismal solitude, not peopled only by the reptiles native to the place, but traced in all their mazes by human forms. Then he would have perceived the fierce, resolute Pagan, moving through darkness and obstacles with a sure, solemn progress, drawing after him, like a dog devoted to his will, the young girl whose hapless fate had doomed her to fall into his power. Her half-fainting figure might have been seen, sometimes prostrate on the higher places of the breach, while her fearful guide descended before her into a chasm beyond, and then turned to drag her after him to a darker and a lower depth yet; sometimes bent in supplication, when her lips moved once more with a last despairing entreaty, and her limbs trembled with a final effort to escape from her captor's relentless grasp. While still, through all that opposed him, the same fierce tenacity of purpose would have been invariably visible in every action of Ulpus, constantly confirming him in his mad resolution to make his victim the follower of his progress through the wall, ever guiding him with a strange instinct through every hindrance, and preserving him from every danger in his path, until it brought him forth triumphant, with his prisoner still in his power, again free to tread the desolate streets and mingle with the famine-stricken citizens of Rome.

And now when, after peril and anguish, she once more stood within the city of her home, what hope remained to Antonina of obtaining her last refuge under her father's roof, and deriving her solitary consolation from the effort to regain her father's love? With the termination of his passage through the breach in the wall had ended every recollection associated with it in the Pagan's shattered memory. A new blank now pervaded his lost faculties, desolate as that which had overwhelmed them in the night when he first stood in the farm-house garden by the young chieftain's grave. He moved onward, unobservant, unthinking, without aim or hope, driven by a mysterious restlessness, forgetting the very presence of Antonina as she followed him, but still mechanically grasping her hand, and dragging her after him he knew not whither.

And she, on her part, made no effort more for deliverance. She had seen the sentinel unmoved by her entreaties, she had seen the walls of her father's house receding from her longing eyes, as Ulpus pitilessly hurried her father and farther from its distant door; and she lost the last faint hope of restoration, the last lingering desire of life, as the sense of her helplessness now weighed heaviest on her mind. Her heart was full of her young warrior, who had been slain, and of her father, from whom she had parted in the hour of his wrath, as she now feebly followed the Pagan's steps, and resigned herself to a speedy exhaustion and death in her utter despair.

They turned from the Pincian Gate and gained the Campus Martius; and here the aspect of the besieged city and the condition of its doomed inhabitants were fully and fearfully disclosed to view. On the surface of the noble area, once thronged with bustling crowds passing to and fro in every direction as their various destinations or caprices might lead them, not twenty moving figures were now discernible. These few, who still retained their strength or the resolution to pace the greatest thoroughfare of Rome, stalked backwards and forwards incessantly, their hollow eyes fixed on vacancy, their wan hands pressed over their mouths; each separate, distrustful, and silent; fierce as imprisoned madmen; restless as spectres disturbed in a place of tombs.

Such were the citizens who still moved over the Campus Martius; and, besetting their path wherever they turned, lay the gloomy numbers of the dying and the dead--the victims already stricken by the pestilence which had now arisen in the infected city, and joined the famine in its work of desolation and death. Around the public fountains, where the water still bubbled up as freshly as in the summer-time of prosperity and peace, the poorer population of beleaguered Rome had chiefly congregated to expire. Some still retained strength enough to drink greedily at the margin of the stone basins, across which others lay dead--their heads and shoulders immersed in the water--drowned from lack of strength to draw back after their first draught. Children mounted over the dead bodies of their parents to raise themselves to the fountain's brim; parents stared vacantly at the corpses of their children alternately floating and sinking in the water, into which they had fallen unsuccoured and unmourned.

In other parts of the place, at the open gates of the theatres and hippodromes, in the unguarded porticoes of the palaces and the baths lay the discoloured bodies of those who had died ere they could reach the fountains--of women and children especially--surrounded in frightful contrast by the abandoned furniture of luxury and the discarded inventions of vice--by gilded couches--by inlaid tables--by jewelled cornices--by obscene picture and statues--by brilliantly framed, gaudily tinted manuscripts of licentious songs, still hanging at their accustomed places on the lofty marble walls. Farther on, in the by-streets and the retired courts, where the corpse of the tradesman was stretched on his empty counter; where the soldier of the city guard dropped down overpowered ere he reached the limit of his rounds; where the wealthy merchant lay pestilence-stricken upon the last hoards of repulsive food which his gold had procured; the assassin and the robber might be seen--now greedily devouring the offal that lay around them, now falling dead upon the bodies which they had rifled but the

moment before.

Over the whole prospect, far and near, wherever it might extend, whatever the horrors by which it might be occupied, was spread a blank, supernatural stillness. Not a sound arose; the living were as silent as the dead; crime, suffering, despair, were all voiceless alike; the trumpet was unheard in the guard-house; the bell never rang from the church; even the thick, misty rain, that now descended from the black and unmoving clouds, and obscured in cold shadows the outlines of distant buildings and the pinnacle tops of mighty palaces, fell noiseless to the ground. The sky had no wind; the earth no echoes--the pervading desolation appalled the eye; the vast stillness weighed dull on the ear--it was a scene as of the last-left city of an exhausted world, decaying noiselessly into primeval chaos.

Through this atmosphere of darkness and death, along these paths of pestilence and famine; unregarding and unregarded, the Pagan and his prisoner passed slowly onward towards the quarter of the city opposite the Pincian Mount. No ray of thought, even yet, brightened the dull faculties of Ulpius; still he walked forward vacantly, and still he was followed wearily by the fast-failing girl.

Sunk in her mingled stupor of bodily weakness and mental despair, she never spoke, never raised her head, never looked forth on the one side or the other. She had now ceased even to feel the strong, cold grasp of the Pagan's hand. Shadowy visions of spheres beyond the world, arrayed in enchanting beauty, and people with happy spirits in their old earthly forms, where a long deathless existence moved smoothly and dreamily onward, without mark of time or taint of woe, were opening before her mind. She lost all memory of afflictions and wrongs, all apprehension of danger from the madman at whose mercy she remained. And thus she still moved feebly onward as the will of Ulpius guided her, with no observation of her present peril, and no anxiety for her impending fate.

They passed the grand circular structure of the Pantheon, entered the long narrow streets leading to the banks of the river, and finally gained the margin of the Tiber--hard by the little island that still rises in the midst of its waters. Here, for the first time, the Pagan paused mechanically in his course, and vacantly directed his dull, dreamy eyes on the prospect before him, where the walls, stretching abruptly outward from their ordinary direction, enclosed the Janiculum Hill, as it rose with its irregular mass of buildings on the opposite bank of the river.

At this sudden change from action to repose, the overtaken energies which

had hitherto gifted the limbs of Antonina with an unnatural power of endurance, abruptly relaxed. She sank down helpless and silent; her head drooped towards the hard ground, as towards a welcome pillow, but found no support, for the Pagan's iron grasp of her hand remained unyielding as ever. Infirm though he was, he appeared at this moment to be unconscious that his prisoner was now hanging at his side. Every association connected with her, every recollection of his position with her in her father's house, had vanished from his memory. A darker blindness seemed to have sunk over his bodily perceptions; his eyes rolled slowly to and fro over the prospect before him, but regarded nothing; his panting breaths came thick and fast; his shrunk chest heaved as if some deep, dread agony were pent within it--it was evident that a new crisis in his insanity was at hand.

At this moment one of the bands of marauders--the desperate criminals of famine and plague--who still prowled through the city, appeared in the street. Their trembling hands sought their weapons, and their haggard faces brightened, when they first discerned the Pagan and the girl; but as they approached nearer they saw enough in the figures of the two, at a glance, to destroy their hopes of seizing on them either plunder or food. For an instant they stood by their intended victims, as if debating whether to murder them only for murder's sake, when the appearance of two women, stealthily quitting a house farther on in the street, carrying a basket covered by some tattered garments, attracted their attention. They turned instantly to follow the bearers of the basket, and again Ulpius and Antonina were left alone on the river's bank.

The appearance of the assassins had been powerless, as every other sight or event in the city, in arousing the faculties of Ulpius. He had neither looked on them nor fled from them when they surrounded him; but now when they were gone he slowly turned his head in the direction by which they had departed. His gaze wandered over the wet flagstones of the street, over two corpses stretched on them at a little distance, over the figure of a female slave who lay forsaken near the wall of one of the houses, exerting her last energies to drink from the turbid rain-water which ran down the kennel by her side; and still his eyes remained unregardful of all that they encountered. The next object which by chance attracted his vacant attention was a deserted temple. This solitary building fixed him immediately in contemplation--it was destined to open a new and a warning scene in the dark tragedy of his closing life.

In his course through the city he had passed unheeded many temples far more prominent in situation, far more imposing in structure, than this. It was a building of no remarkable extent or extraordinary beauty. Its narrow

porticoes and dark doorway were more fitted to repel than to invite the eye; but it had one attraction, powerful above all glories of architecture and all grandeur of situation to arrest in him those wandering faculties whose sterner and loftier aims were now suspended for ever; it was dedicated to Serapis--to the idol which had been the deity of his first worship, and the inspiration of his last struggle for the restoration of his faith. The image of the god, with the three-headed monster encircled by a serpent, obedient beneath his hand, was carved over the portico.

What flood of emotions rushed into the vacant mind of Ulpus at the instant when he discerned the long-loved, well-known image of the Egyptian god, there was nothing for some moments outwardly visible in him to betray. His moral insensibility appeared but to be deepened as his gaze was now fixed with rigid intensity on the temple portico. Thus he continued to remain motionless, as if what he saw had petrified him where he stood, when the clouds, which had been closing in deeper and deeper blackness as the morning advanced, and which, still charged with electricity, were gathering to revive the storm of the past night, burst abruptly into a loud peal of thunder over his head.

At that warning sound, as if it had been the supernatural signal awaited to arouse him, as if in one brief moment it awakened every recollection of all that he had resolutely attempted during the night of thunder that was past, he started into instant animation. His countenance brightened, his form expanded, he dropped the hand of Antonina, raised his arm aloft towards the wrathful heaven in frantic triumph, then staggering forwards, fell on his knees at the base of the temple steps.

Whatever the remembrances of his passage through the wall at the Pincian Hill, and of the toil and peril succeeding it, which had revived when the thunder first sounded in his ear, they now vanished as rapidly as they had arisen, and left his wandering memory free to revert to the scenes which the image of Serapis was most fitted to recall. Recollections of his boyish enjoyments in the temple at Alexandria, of his youth's enthusiasm, of the triumphs of his early manhood--all disjointed and wayward, yet all bright, glorious, intoxicating--flashed before his shattered mind. Tears, the first that he had shed since his happy youth, flowed quickly down his withered cheeks. He pressed his hot forehead, he beat his parched hand in ecstasy on the cold, wet steps beneath him. He muttered breathless ejaculations, he breathed strange murmurs of endearment, he humbled himself in his rapturous delight beneath the walls of the temple like a dog that has discovered his lost master and fawns affectionately at his feet. Criminal as he was, his joy in his abasement, his glory in his miserable isolation from



humanity, was a doom of degradation pitiable to behold.

After an interval his mood changed. He rose to his feet, his trembling limbs strengthened with a youthful vigour as he ascended the temple steps and gained its doorway. He turned for a moment, and looked forth over the street, ere he entered the hallowed domain of his distempered imagination. To him the cloudy sky above was now shining with the radiance of the sun-bright East. The death-laden highways of Rome, as they stretched before him, were beautiful with lofty trees, and populous with happy figures; and along the dark flagstones beneath, where still lay the corpses which he had no eye to see, he beheld already the priests of Serapis with his revered guardian, his beloved Macrinus of former days, at their head, advancing to meet and welcome him in the hall of the Egyptian god. Visions such as these passed gloriously before the Pagan's eyes as he stood triumphant on the steps of the temple, and brightened to him with a noonday light its dusky recesses when, after his brief delay, he turned from the street and disappeared through the doorway of the sacred place.

The rain poured down more thickly than before; the thunder, once aroused, now sounded in deep and frequent peals as Antonina raised herself from the ground and looked around her, in momentary expectation that the dreaded form of Ulpian must meet her eyes. No living creature was visible in the street. The forsaken slave still reclined near the wall of the house where she had first appeared when the Pagan gained the approaches to the temple; but she now lay there dead. No fresh bands of robbers appeared in sight. An uninterrupted solitude prevailed in all directions as far as the eye could reach.

At the moment when Ulpian had relinquished his grasp of her hand, Antonina had sunk to the ground, helpless and resigned, but not exhausted beyond all power of sensation or all capacity for thought. While she lay on the cold pavement of the street, her mind still pursued its visions of a speedy death, and a tranquil life-in-death to succeed it in a future state. But, as minute after minute elapsed, and no harsh voice sounded in her ear, no pitiless hand dragged her from the ground, no ominous footsteps were audible around her, a change passed gradually over her thoughts; the instinct of self-preservation slowly revived within her, and, as she raised herself to look forth on the gloomy prospect, the chances of uninterrupted flight and present safety presented by the solitude of the street, aroused her like a voice of encouragement, like an unexpected promise of help.

Her perception of outer influences returned; she felt the rain that drenched her garments; she shuddered at the thunder sounding over her head; she

marked with horror the dead bodies lying before her on the stones. An overpowering desire animated her to fly from the place, to escape from the desolate scene around, even though she should sink exhausted by the effort in the next street. Slowly she arose--her limbs trembled with a premature infirmity; but she gained her feet. She tottered onward, turning her back on the river, passed bewildered between long rows of deserted houses, and arrived opposite a public garden surrounding a little summer-house, whose deserted portico offered both concealment and shelter. Here, therefore, she took refuge, crouching in the darkest corner of the building, and hiding her face in her hands, as if to shut out all view of the dreary though altered scenes which spread before her eyes.

Woeful thoughts and recollections now moved within her in bewildering confusion. All that she had suffered since Ulpus had dragged her from the farm-house in the suburbs--the night pilgrimage over the plain--the fearful passage through the wall--revived in her memory, mingled with vague ideas, now for the first time aroused, of the plague and famine that were desolating the city; and, with sudden apprehensions that Goisvintha might still be following her, knife in hand, through the lonely streets; while passively prominent over all these varying sources of anguish and dread, the scene of the young chieftain's death lay like a cold weight on her heavy heart. The damp turf of his grave seemed still to press against her breast; his last kiss yet trembled on her lips; she knew, though she dared not look down on them, that the spots of his blood yet stained her garments.

Whether she strove to rise and continue her flight; whether she crouched down again under the portico, resigned for one bitter moment to perish by the knife of Goisvintha--if Goisvintha were near; to fall once more into the hands of Ulpus--if Ulpus were tracking her to her retreat,--the crushing sense that she was utterly bereaved of her beloved protector--that the friend of her brief days of happiness was lost to her for ever--that Hermanric, who had preserved her from death, had been murdered in his youth and his strength by her side, never deserted her. Since the assassination in the farm-house, she was now for the first time alone; and now for the first time she felt the full severity of her affliction, and knew how dark was the blank which was spread before every aspiration of her future life.

Enduring, almost eternal, as the burden of her desolation seemed now to have become, it was yet to be removed, ere long, by feelings of a tenderer mournfulness and a more resigned woe. The innate and innocent fortitude of disposition, which had made her patient under the rigour of her youthful education, and hopeful under the trials that assailed her on her banishment from her father's house; which had never deserted her until the awful



scenes of the past night of assassination and death rose in triumphant horror before her eyes; and which, even then, had been suspended but not destroyed--was now destined to regain its healing influence over her heart. As she still cowered in her lonely refuge, the final hope, the yearning dependence on a restoration to her father's presence and her father's love, that had moved her over the young chieftain's grave, and had prompted her last effort for freedom when Ulpus had dragged her through the passage in the rifted wall, suddenly revived.

Once more she arose, and looked forth on the desolate city and the stormy sky, but now with mild and unshrinking eyes. Her recollections of the past grew tender in their youthful grief; her thoughts for the future became patient, solemn, and serene. Images of her first and her last-kept protector, of her old familiar home, of her garden solitude on the Pincian Mount, spread beautiful before her imagination as resting-places to her weary heart. She descended the steps of the summer-house with no apprehension of her enemies, no doubt of her resolution; for she knew the beacon that was now to direct her onward course. The tears gathered full in her eyes as she passed into the garden; but her step never faltered, her features never lost their combined expression of tranquil sorrow and subdued hope. So she once more entered the perilous streets, and murmuring to herself, 'My father! my father!' as if in those simple words lay the hand that was to guide, and the providence that was to preserve her, she began to trace her solitary way in the direction of the Pincian Mount.

It was a spectacle--touching, beautiful, even sublime--to see this young girl, but a few hours freed, by perilous paths and by criminal hands, from scenes which had begun in treachery, only to end in death, now passing, resolute and alone, through the streets of a mighty city, overwhelmed by all that is poignant in human anguish and hideous in human crime. It was a noble evidence of the strong power over the world and the world's perils, with which the simplest affection may arm the frailest being--to behold her thus pursuing her way, superior to every horror of desolation and death that clogged her path, unconsciously discovering in the softly murmured name of 'father', which still fell at intervals from her lips, the pure purpose that sustained her--the steady heroism that ever held her in her doubtful course. The storms of heaven poured over her head--the crimes and sufferings of Rome darkened the paths of her pilgrimage; but she passed firmly onward through all, like a ministering spirit, journeying along earthly shores in the bright inviolability of its merciful mission and its holy thoughts--like a ray of light living in the strength of its own beauty, amid the tempest and obscurity of a stranger sphere.

Once more she entered the Campus Martius. Again she passed the public fountains, still unnaturally devoted to serve as beds for the dying and as sepulchres for the dead; again she trod the dreary highways, where the stronger among the famished populace yet paced hither and thither in ferocious silence and unsocial separation. No word was addressed, hardly a look was directed to her, as she pursued her solitary course. She was desolate among the desolate; forsaken among others abandoned like herself.

The robber, when he passed her by, saw that she was worthless for the interests of plunder as the poorest of the dying citizens around him. The patrician, loitering feebly onward to the shelter of his palace halls, avoided her as a new suppliant among the people for the charity which he had not to bestow, and quickened his pace as she approached him in the street. Unprotected, yet unmolested, hurrying from her loneliness and her bitter recollections to the refuge of her father's love, as she would have hurried when a child from her first apprehension of ill to the refuge of her father's arms, she gained at length the foot of the Pincian Hill--at length ascended the streets so often trodden in the tranquil days of old!

The portals and outer buildings of Vetrano's palace, as she passed them, presented a striking and ominous spectacle. Within the lofty steel railings, which protected the building, the famine-wasted slaves of the senator appeared reeling and tottering beneath full vases of wine which they were feebly endeavouring to carry into the interior apartments. Gaudy hangings drooped from the balconies, garlands of ivy were wreathed round the statues of the marble front. In the midst of the besieged city, and in impious mockery of the famine and pestilence which were wasting it, hut and palace, to its remotest confines, were proceeding in this devoted dwelling the preparations for a triumphant feast!

Unheeding of the startling prospect presented by Vetrano's abode, her eyes bent but in one absorbing direction, her steps hurrying faster and faster with each succeeding instant, Antonina approached the home from which she had been exiled in fear, and to which she was returning in woe. Yet a moment more of strong exertion, of overpowering anticipation, and she reached the garden gate!

She dashed back the heavy hair matted over her brows by the rain; she glanced rapidly around her; she beheld the window of her bed-chamber with the old simple curtain still hanging at its accustomed place; she saw the well-remembered trees, the carefully tended flower-beds, now drooping mournfully beneath the gloomy sky. Her heart swelled within her, her breath seemed suddenly arrested in her bosom, as she trod the garden path

and ascended the steps beyond. The door at the top was ajar. With a last effort she thrust it open, and stood once more--unaided and unwelcomed, yet hopeful of consolation, of pardon, of love--within her first and last sanctuary, the walls of her home!