

CHAPTER 23 - THE LAST EFFORTS OF THE BESIEGED

We return to the street before the palace. The calamities of the siege had fallen fiercely on those who lay there during the night. From the turbulent and ferocious mob of a few hours since, not even the sound of a voice was now heard. Some, surprised in a paroxysm of hunger by exhaustion and insensibility, lay with their hands half forced into their mouths, as if in their ravenous madness they had endeavoured to prey upon their own flesh. Others now and then wearily opened their languid eyes upon the street, no longer regardful, in the present extremity of their sufferings, of the building whose destruction they had assembled to behold, but watching for a fancied realisation of the visions of richly spread tables and speedy relief called up before them, as if in mockery, by the delirium of starvation and disease.

The sun had as yet but slightly risen above the horizon, when the attention of the few among the populace who still preserved some perception of outward events was suddenly attracted by the appearance of an irregular procession--composed partly of citizens and partly of officers of the Senate, and headed by two men--which slowly approached from the end of the street leading into the interior of the city. This assembly of persons stopped opposite Vetricano's palace; and then such members of the mob who watched them as were not yet entirely abandoned by hope, heard the inspiring news that the procession they beheld was a procession of peace, and that the two men who headed it were the Spaniard, Basilus, a governor of a province, and Johannes, the chief of the Imperial notaries--appointed ambassadors to conclude a treaty with the Goths.

As this intelligence reached them, men who had before appeared incapable of the slightest movement now rose painfully, yet resolutely, to their feet, and crowded round the two ambassadors as round two angels descended to deliver them from bondage and death. Meanwhile, some officers of the Senate, finding the front gates of the palace closed against them, proceeded to the garden entrance at the back of the building, to obtain admission to its owner. The absence of Vetricano and his friends from the deliberations of the government had been attributed to their disgust at the obstinate and unavailing resistance offered to the Goths. Now, therefore, when submission had been resolved upon, it had been thought both expedient and easy to recall them peremptorily to their duties. In addition to this motive for seeking the interior of the palace, the servants of the Senate had another errand to perform there. The widely rumoured determination of Vetricano and his associates to destroy themselves by fire, in the frenzy of a last debauch--disbelieved or disregarded while the more imminent perils of the city were under consideration--became a source of some apprehension

and anxiety to the acting members of the Roman council, now that their minds were freed from part of the responsibility which had weighed on them, by their resolution to treat for peace.

Accordingly, the persons now sent into the palace were charged with the duty of frustrating its destruction, if such an act had been really contemplated, as well as the duty of recalling its inmates to their appointed places in the Senate-house. How far they were enabled, at the time of their entrance into the banqueting-hall, to accomplish their double mission, the reader is well able to calculate. They found Vetricius still in the place which he had occupied since Antonina had quitted him. Startled by their approach from the stupor which had hitherto weighed on his faculties, the desperation of his purpose returned; he made an effort to tear from its place the lamp which still feebly burned, and to fire the pile in defiance of all opposition. But his strength, already taxed to the utmost, failed him. Uttering impotent threats of resistance and revenge, he fell, swooning and helpless, into the arms of the officers of the Senate who held him back. One of them was immediately dismissed, while his companions remained in the palace, to communicate with the leaders of the assembly outside. His report concluded, the two ambassadors moved slowly onward, separating themselves from the procession which had accompanied them, and followed only by a few chosen attendants--a mournful and a degraded embassy, sent forth by the people who had once imposed their dominion, their customs, and even their language, on the Eastern and Western worlds, to bargain with the barbarians whom their fathers had enslaved for the purchase of a disgraceful peace.

On the departure of the ambassadors, all the spectators still capable of the effort repaired to the Forum to await their return, and were joined there by members of the populace from other parts of the city. It was known that the first intimation of the result of the embassy would be given from this place; and in the eagerness of their anxiety to hear it, in the painful intensity of their final hopes of deliverance, even death itself seemed for a while to be arrested in its fatal progress through the ranks of the besieged.

In silence and apprehension they counted the tardy moments of delay, and watched with sickening gaze the shadows lessening and lessening, as the sun gradually rose in the heavens to the meridian point.

At length, after an absence that appeared of endless duration, the two ambassadors re-entered Rome. Neither of them spoke as they hurriedly passed through the ranks of the people; but their looks of terror and despair were all-eloquent to every beholder--their mission had failed.

For some time no member of the government appeared to have resolution enough to come forward and harangue the people on the subject of the unsuccessful embassy. After a long interval, however, the Prefect Pompeianus himself, urged partly by the selfish entreaties of his friends, and partly by the childish love of display which still adhered to him through all his present anxieties and apprehensions, stepped into one of the lower balconies of the Senate-house to address the citizens beneath him.

The chief magistrate of Rome was no longer the pompous and portly personage whose intrusion on Vetricio's privacy during the commencement of the siege has been described previously. The little superfluous flesh still remaining on his face hung about it like an ill-fitting garment; his tones had become lachrymose; the oratorical gestures, with which he was wont to embellish profusely his former speeches, were all abandoned; nothing remained of the original man but the bombast of his language and the impudent complacency of his self-applause, which now appeared in contemptible contrast to his crestfallen demeanour and his disheartening narrative of degradation and defeat.

'Men of Rome, let each of you exercise in his own person the heroic virtues of a Regulus or a Cato!' the prefect began. 'A treaty with the barbarians is out of our power. It is the scourge of the empire, Alaric himself, who commands the invading forces! Vain were the dignified remonstrances of the grave Basilius, futile was the persuasive rhetoric of the astute Johannes, addressed to the slaughtering and vainglorious Goth! On their admission to his presence, the ambassadors, anxious to awe him into a capitulation, enlarged, with sagacious and commendable patriotism, on the expertness of the Romans in the use of arms, their readiness for war, and their vast numbers within the city walls. I blush to repeat the barbarian's reply. Laughing immoderately, he answered, "The thicker the grass, the easier it is to cut!"

'Still undismayed, the ambassadors, changing their tactics, talked indulgently of their willingness to purchase a peace. At this proposal, his insolence burst beyond all bounds of barbarous arrogance. "I will not relinquish the siege," he cried, "until I have delivered to me all the gold and silver in the city, all the household goods in it, and all the slaves from the northern countries." "What then, O King, will you leave us?" asked our amazed ambassadors. "YOUR LIVES!" answered the implacable Goth. Hearing this, even the resolute Basilius and the wise Johannes despaired. They asked time to communicate with the Senate, and left the camp of the enemy without further delay. Such was the end of the embassy; such the

arrogant ferocity of the barbarian foe!

Here the Prefect paused, from sheer weakness and want of breath. His oration, however, was not concluded. He had disheartened the people by his narrative of what had occurred to the ambassadors; he now proceeded to console them by his relation of what had occurred to himself, when, after an interval, he thus resumed:--

'But even yet, O citizens of Rome, it is not time to despair! There is another chance of deliverance still left to us, and that chance has been discovered by me. It was my lot, during the absence of the ambassadors, to meet with certain men of Tuscany, who had entered Rome a few days before the beginning of the siege, and who spoke of a project for relieving the city which they would communicate to the Prefect alone. Ever anxious for the public welfare, daring all treachery from strangers for advantage of my office, I accorded to these men a secret interview. They told me of a startling and miraculous event. The town of Neveia, lying, as you well know, in the direct road of the barbarians when they marched upon Rome, was protected from their pillaging bands by a tempest of thunder and lightning terrible to behold. This tempest arose not, as you may suppose, from an accidental convulsion of the elements, but was launched over the heads of the invaders by the express interference of the tutelary deities of the town, invoked by the inhabitants, who returned in their danger to the practice of their ancient manner of worship. So said the men of Tuscany; and such pious resources as those employed by the people of Neveia did they recommend to the people of Rome! For my part, I acknowledge to you that I have faith in their project. The antiquity of our former worship is still venerable in my eyes. The prayers of the priests of our new religion have wrought no miraculous interference in our behalf: let us therefore imitate the example of the inhabitants of Neveia, and by the force of our invocations hurl the thunders of Jupiter on the barbarian camp! Let us trust for deliverance to the potent interposition of the gods whom our fathers worshipped--those gods who now, perhaps, avenge themselves for our desertion of their temples by our present calamities. I go without delay to propose to the Bishop Innocentius and to the Senate, the public performance of solemn ceremonies of sacrifice at the Capitol! I leave you in the joyful assurance that the gods, appeased by our returning fidelity to our altars, will not refuse the supernatural protection which they accorded to the people of a provincial town to the citizens of Rome!'

No sounds either of applause or disapprobation followed the Prefect's notable proposal for delivering the city from the besiegers by the public apostasy of the besieged. As he disappeared from their eyes, the audience

turned away speechless. An universal despair now overpowered in them even the last energies of discord and crime; they resigned themselves to their doom with the gloomy indifference of beings in whom all mortal sensations, all human passions, good or evil, were extinguished. The Prefect departed on his ill-omened expedition to propose the practice of Paganism to the bishop of a Christian church; but no profitable effort for relief was even suggested, either by the government or the people.

And so this day drew in its turn towards a close--more mournful and more disastrous, more fraught with peril, misery, and gloom, than the days that had preceded it.

The next morning dawned, but no preparations for the ceremonies of the ancient worship appeared at the Capitol. The Senate and the bishop hesitated to incur the responsibility of authorising a public restoration of Paganism; the citizens, hopeless of succour, heavenly or earthly, remained unheedful as the dead of all that passed around them.

There was one man in Rome who might have succeeded in rousing their languid energies to apostasy; but where and how employed was he?

Now, when the opportunity for which he had laboured resolutely, though in vain, through a long existence of suffering, degradation, and crime, had gratuitously presented itself more tempting and more favourable than even he in his wildest visions of success had ever dared to hope--where was Ulpian? Hidden from men's eyes, like a foul reptile, in his lurking-place in the deserted temple--now raving round his idols in the fury of madness, now prostrate before them in idiot adoration--weaker for the interests of his worship, at the crisis of its fate, than the weakest child crawling famished through the streets--the victim of his own evil machinations at the very moment when they might have led him to triumph--the object of that worst earthly retribution, by which the wicked are at once thwarted, doomed, and punished, here as hereafter, through the agency of their own sins.

Three more days passed. The Senate, their numbers fast diminishing in the pestilence, occupied the time in vain deliberations or in moody silence. Each morning the weary guards looked forth from the ramparts, with the fruitless hope of discerning the long-promised legions from Ravenna on their way to Rome; and each morning devastation and death gained ground afresh among the hapless besieged.

At length, on the fourth day, the Senate abandoned all hope of further resistance and determined on submission, whatever might be the result. It

was resolved that another embassy, composed of the whole acting Senate, and followed by a considerable train, should proceed to Alaric; that one more effort should be made to induce him to abate his ruinous demands on the conquered; and that if this failed, the gates should be thrown open, and the city and the people abandoned to his mercy in despair.

As soon as the procession of this last Roman embassy was formed in the Forum, its numbers were almost immediately swelled, in spite of opposition, by those among the mass of the people who were still able to move their languid and diseased bodies, and who, in the extremity of their misery, had determined at all hazards to take advantage of the opening of the gates, and fly from the city of pestilence in which they were immured, careless whether they perished on the swords of the Goths or languished unaided on the open plains. All power of enforcing order had long since been lost; the few soldiers gathered about the senators made one abortive effort to drive the people back, and then resigned any further resistance to their will.

Feebly and silently the spirit-broken assembly now moved along the great highways, so often trodden, to the roar of martial music and the shouts of applauding multitudes, by the triumphal processions of victorious Rome; and from every street, as it passed on, the wasted forms of the people stole out like spectres to join it.

Among these, as the embassy approached the Pincian Gate, were two, hurrying forth to herd with their fellow-sufferers, on whose fortunes in the fallen city our more particular attention has been fixed. To explain their presence on the scene (if such an explanation be required) it is necessary to digress for a moment from the progress of events during the last days of the siege to the morning when Antonina departed from Vetricano's palace to return with her succour of food and wine to her father's house.

The reader is already acquainted, from her own short and simple narrative, with the history of the closing hours of her mournful night vigil by the side of her sinking parent, and with the motives which prompted her to seek the palace of the senator, and entreat assistance in despair from one whom she only remembered as the profligate destroyer of her tranquility under her father's roof. It is now, therefore, most fitting to follow her on her way back through the palace gardens. No living creature but herself trod the grassy paths, along which she hastened with faltering steps--those paths which she dimly remembered to have first explored when in former days she ventured forth to follow the distant sounds of Vetricano's lute.

In spite of her vague, heavy sensations of solitude and grief, this recollection

remained painfully present to her mind, unaccountably mingled with the dark and dreary apprehension which filled her heart as she hurried onward, until she once more entered her father's dwelling; and then, as she again approached his couch, every other feeling became absorbed in a faint, overpowering fear, lest, after all her perseverance and success in her errand of filial devotion, she might have returned too late.

The old man still lived--his weary eyes opened gladly on her, when she aroused him to partake of the treasured gifts from the senator's banqueting table. The wretched food which the suicide-guests had disdained, and the simple flask of wine which they would have carelessly quaffed at one draught, were viewed both by parent and child as the saving and invigorating sustenance of many days. After having consumed as much as they dared of their precarious supply, the remainder was carefully husbanded. It was the last sign and promise of life to which they looked--the humble yet precious store in which alone they beheld the earnest of their security, for a few days longer, from the pangs of famine and the separation of death.

And now, with their small provision of food and wine set like a beacon of safety before their sight, a deep, dream-like serenity--the sleep of the oppressed and wearied faculties--arose over their minds. Under its mysterious and tranquilising influence, all impressions of the gloom and misery in the city, of the fatal evidences around them of the duration of the siege, faded away before their perceptions as dim retiring objects, which the eye loses in vacancy.

Gradually, as the day of the first unsuccessful embassy declined, their thoughts began to flow back gently to the world of bygone events which had crumbled into oblivion beneath the march of time. Her first recollections of her earliest childhood revived in Antonina's memory, and then mingled strangely with tearful remembrances of the last words and looks of the young warrior who had expired by her side, and with calm, solemn thoughts that the beloved spirit, emancipated from the sphere of shadows, might now be hovering near the quiet garden-grave where her bitterest tears of loneliness and affliction had been shed, or moving around her--an invisible and blessed presence--as she sat at her father's feet and mourned their earthly separation!

In the emotions thus awakened, there was nothing of bitterness or agony--they calmed and purified the heart through which they moved. She could now speak to the old man, for the first time, of her days of absence from him, of the brief joys and long sorrows of her hours of exile, without failing

in her melancholy tale. Sometimes her father listened to her in sorrowful and speechless attention; or spoke, when she paused, of consolation and hope, as she had heard him speak among his congregation while he was yet strong in his resolution to sacrifice all things for the reformation of the Church. Sometimes resigning himself to the influence of his thoughts, as they glided back to the times that were gone, he again revealed to her the changing events of his past life--not as before, with unsteady accents and wandering eyes; but now with a calmness of voice and a coherence of language which forbade her to doubt the strange and startling narrative that she heard.

Once more he spoke of the image of his lost brother (as he had parted from him in his boyhood) still present to his mind; of the country that he had quitted in after years; of the name that he had changed--from Cleander to Numerian--to foil his former associates, if they still pursued him; and of the ardent desire to behold again the companion of his first home, which now, when his daughter was restored to him, when no other earthly aspiration but this was unsatisfied, remained at the close of his life, the last longing wish of his heart.

Such was the communion in which father and daughter passed the hours of their short reprieve from the judgment of famine pronounced against the city of their sojourn; so did they live, as it were, in a quiet interval of existence, in a tranquil pause between the toil that is over and the toil that is to come in the hard labour of life.

But the term to these short days of repose after long suffering and grief was fast approaching. The little hoard of provision diminished as rapidly as the stores that had been anxiously collected before it; and, on the morning of the second embassy to Alaric, the flask of wine and the bowl of food were both emptied. The brief dream of security was over and gone; the terrible realities of the struggle for life had begun again!

Where or to whom could they now turn for help? The siege still continued; the food just exhausted was the last food that had been left on the senator's table; to seek the palace again would be to risk refusal, perhaps insult, as the result of a second entreaty for aid, where all power of conferring it might now but too surely be lost. Such were the thoughts of Antonina as she returned the empty bowl to its former place; but she gave them no expression in words.

She saw, with horror, that the same expression of despair, almost of frenzy, which had distorted her father's features on the day of her restoration to

him, now marked them again. Once more he tottered towards the window, murmuring in his bitter despondency against the delusive security and hope which had held him idle for the interests of his child during the few days that were past. But, as he now looked out on the beleaguered city, he saw the populace hastening along the gloomy street beneath, as rapidly as their wearied limbs would carry them, to join the embassy. He heard them encouraging each other to proceed, to seize the last chance of escaping through the open gates from the horrors of famine and plague; and caught the infection of the recklessness and despair which had seized his fellow-sufferers from one end of Rome to the other.

Turning instantly, he grasped his daughter's hand and drew her from the room, commanding her to come forth with him and join the citizens in their flight, ere it was too late. Startled by his words and actions, she vainly endeavoured, as she obeyed, to impress her father with the dread of the Goths which her own bitter experience taught her to feel, now that her only protector among them lay cold in the grave. With Numerian, as with the rest of the people, all apprehension, all doubt, all exercise of reason, was overpowered by the one eager idea of escaping from the fatal precincts of Rome.

So they mingled with the throng, herding affrightedly together in the rear of the embassy, and followed in their ranks as best they might.

The sun shone down brightly from the pure blue sky; the wind bore into the city the sharp threatening notes of the trumpets from the Gothic camp, as the Pincian Gate was opened to the ambassadors and their train. With one accord the crowd instantly endeavoured to force their way out after them in a mass; but they now moved in a narrow space, and were opposed by a large reinforcement of the city guard. After a short struggle they were overpowered, and the gates were closed. Some few of the strongest and the foremost of their numbers succeeded in following the ambassadors; the greater part, however, remained on the inner side of the gate, pressing closely up to it in their impatience and despair, like prisoners awaiting their deliverance, or preparing to force their escape.

Among these, feeblest amid the most feeble, were Numerian and Antonina, hemmed in by the surrounding crowd, and shut out either from flight from the city or a return to home.