

CHAPTER XXV

THE REWARD OF SATURIUS

Meanwhile, in one of the palaces of the Cæsars not far from the Capitol, was being enacted another and more stormy scene. It was the palace of Domitian, whither, the bewildering pomp of the Triumph finished at last, the prince had withdrawn himself in no happy mood. That day many things had happened to vex him. First and foremost, as had been brought home to his mind from minute to minute throughout the long hours, its glory belonged not to himself, not even to his father, Vespasian, but to his brother, the conqueror of the Jews. Titus he had always hated, Titus, who was as beloved of mankind for his virtues, such as virtues were in that age, as he, Domitian, was execrated for his vices. Now Titus had returned after a brilliant and successful campaign to be crowned as Cæsar, to be accepted as the sharer of his father's government, and to receive the ovations of the populace, while his brother Domitian must ride almost unnoted behind his chariot. The plaudits of the roaring mob, the congratulations of the Senate, the homage of the knights and subject princes, the offerings of foreign kings, all laid at the feet of Titus, filled him with a jealousy that went nigh to madness. Soothsayers had told him, it was true, that his hour would come, that he would live and reign after Vespasian and Titus had gone down, both of them, to Hades. But even if they spoke the truth this hour seemed a long way off.

Also there were other things. At the great sacrifice before the temple

of Jupiter, his place had been set too far back where the people could not see him; at the feast which followed the master of the ceremonies had neglected, or had forgotten, to pour a libation in his honour.

Further, the beautiful captive, Pearl-Maiden, had appeared in the procession unadorned by the costly girdle which he had sent her; while, last of all, the different wines that he had drunk had disagreed with him, so that because of them, or of the heat of the sun, he suffered from the headache and sickness to which he was liable. Pleading this indisposition as an excuse, Domitian left the banquet very early, and attended by his slaves and musicians retired to his own palace.

Here his spirits revived somewhat, since he knew that before long his chamberlain, Saturius, would appear with the lovely Jewish maiden upon whom he had set his fancy. This at least was certain, for he had arranged that the auction should be held that evening and instructed him to buy her at all costs, even for a thousand sestertia. Indeed, who would dare to bid for a slave that the Prince Domitian desired?

Learning that Saturius had not yet arrived, he went to his private chambers, and to pass away the time commanded his most beautiful slaves to dance before him, where he inflamed himself by drinking more wine of a vintage that he loved. As the fumes of the strong liquor mounted to his brain the pains in his head ceased, at any rate for a while. Very soon he became half-drunk, and as was his nature when in drink, savage. One of the dancing slaves stumbled and growing nervous stepped out of

time, whereon he ordered the poor half-naked girl to be scourged before him by the hands of her own companions. Happily for her, however, before the punishment began a slave arrived with the intelligence that Saturius waited without.

"What, alone?" said the prince, springing to his feet.

"Nay, lord," said the slave, "there is a woman with him."

At this news instantly his ill-temper was forgotten.

"Let that girl go," he said, "and bid her be more careful another time.

Away, all the lot of you, I wish to be private. Now, slave, bid the worthy Saturius enter with his charge."

Presently the curtains were drawn apart and through them came Saturius rubbing his hands and smiling somewhat nervously, followed by a woman wrapped in a long cloak and veiled. He began to offer the customary salutations, but Domitian cut him short.

"Rise, man," he said. "That sort of thing is very well in public, but I don't want it here. So you have got her," he added, eyeing the draped form in the background.

"Yes," replied Saturius doubtfully.

"Good, your services shall be remembered. You were ever a discreet and faithful agent. Did the bidding run high?"

"Oh! my lord, enormous, ee--normous. I never heard such bidding," and he stretched out his hands.

"Impertinence! Who dared to compete with me?" remarked Domitian. "Well, what did you have to give?"

"Fifty sestertia, my lord."

"Fifty sestertia?" answered Domitian with an air of relief. "Well, of course it is enough, but I have known beautiful maidens fetch more. By the way, dear one," he went on, addressing the veiled woman, "you must, I fear, be tired after all that weary, foolish show."

The "dear one" making no audible reply, Domitian went on:

"Modesty is pleasing in a maid, but now I pray you, forget it for awhile. Unveil yourself, most beautiful, that I may behold that loveliness for which my heart has ached these many days. Nay, that task shall be my own," and he advanced somewhat unsteadily towards his prize.

Saturius thought that he saw his chance. Domitian was so intoxicated that it would be useless to attempt to explain matters that night.

Clearly he should retire as soon as possible.

"Most noble prince and patron," he began, "my duty is done, with your leave I will withdraw."

"By no means, by no means," hiccupped Domitian, "I know that you are an excellent judge of beauty, most discriminating Saturius, and I should like to talk over the points of this lady with you. You know, dear Saturius, that I am not selfish, and to tell the truth, which you won't mind between friends--who could be jealous of a wizened, last year's walnut of a man like you? Not I, Saturius, not I, whom everybody acknowledges to be the most beautiful person in Rome, much better looking than Titus is, although he does call himself Cæsar. Now for it. Where's the fastening? Saturius, find the fastening. Why do you tie up the poor girl like an Egyptian corpse and prevent her lord and master from looking at her?"

As he spoke the slave did something to the back of her head and the veil fell to the ground, revealing a girl of very pleasing shape and countenance, but who, as might be expected, looked most weary and frightened. Domitian stared at her with his bleared and wicked eyes, while a puzzled expression grew upon his face.

"Very odd!" he said, "but she seems to have changed! I thought her eyes were blue, and that she had curling black hair. Now they are dark and she has straight hair. Where's the necklace, too? Where's the necklace? Pearl-Maiden, what have you done with your necklace? Yes, and why didn't

you wear the girdle I sent you to-day?"

"Sir," answered the Jewess, "I never had a necklace----"

"My lord Domitian," began Saturius with a nervous laugh, "there is a mistake--I must explain. This girl is not Pearl-Maiden. Pearl-Maiden fetched so great a price that it was impossible that I should buy her, even for you----"

He stopped, for suddenly Domitian's face had become terrible. All the drunkenness had left it, to be replaced by a mask of savage cruelty through which glared the pale and glittering eyes. The man appeared as he was, half satyr and half fiend.

"A mistake----" he said. "Oh! a mistake? And I have been counting on her all these weeks, and now some other man has taken her from me--the prince Domitian. And you--you dare to come to me with this tale, and to bring this slut with you instead of my Pearl-Maiden----" and at the thought he fairly sobbed in his drunken, disappointed rage. Then he stepped back and began to clap his hands and call aloud.

Instantly slaves and guards rushed into the chamber, thinking that their lord was threatened with some evil.

"Men," he said, "take that woman and kill her. No, it might make a stir, as she was one of Titus's captives. Don't kill her, thrust her into the

street."

The girl was seized by the arms and dragged away.

"Oh! my lord," began Saturius.

"Silence, man, I am coming to you. Seize him, and strip him. Oh! I know you are a freedman and a citizen of Rome. Well, soon you shall be a citizen of Hades, I promise you. Now, bring the heavy rods and beat him till he dies."

The dreadful order was obeyed, and for a while nothing was heard save the sound of heavy blows and the smothered moans of the miserable Saturius.

"Wretches," yelled the Imperial brute, "you are playing, you do not hit hard enough. I will teach you how to hit," and snatching a rod from one of the slaves he rushed at his prostrate chamberlain, the others drawing back to allow their master to show his skill in flogging.

Saturius saw Domitian come, and knew that unless he could change his purpose in another minute the life would be battered out of him. He struggled to his knees.

"Prince," he cried, "hearken ere you strike. You can kill me if you will who are justly angered, and to die at your hands is an honour that I do

not merit. Yet, dread lord, remember that if you slay me then you will never find that Pearl-Maiden whom you desire."

Domitian paused, for even in his fury he was cunning. "Doubtless," he thought, "the knave knows where the girl is. Perhaps even he has hidden her away for himself."

"Ah!" he said aloud, quoting the vulgar proverb, "'the rod is the mother of reason.' Well, can you find her?"

"Surely, if I have time. The man who can afford to pay two thousand sestertia for a single slave cannot easily be hidden."

"Two thousand sestertia!" exclaimed Domitian astonished. "Tell me that story. Slaves, give Saturius his robe and fall back--no, not too far, he may be treacherous."

The chamberlain threw the garment over his bleeding shoulders and fastened it with a trembling hand. Then he told his tale, adding:

"Oh! my lord, what could I do? You have not enough money at hand to pay so huge a sum."

"Do, fool? Why you should have bought her on credit and left me to settle the price afterwards. Oh! never mind Titus, I could have outwitted him. But the mischief is done; now for the remedy, so far as

it can be remedied," he added, grinding his teeth.

"That I must seek to-morrow, lord."

"To-morrow? And what will you do to-morrow?"

"To-morrow I will find where the girl's gone, or try to, and then--why he who has bought her might die and--the rest will be easy."

"Die he surely shall be who has dared to rob Domitian of his darling," answered the prince with an oath. "Well, hearken, Saturius, for this night you are spared, but be sure that if you fail for the second time you also shall die, and after a worse fashion than I promised you. Now go, and to-morrow we will take counsel. Oh! ye gods, why do you deal so hardly with Domitian? My soul is bruised and must be comforted with poesy. Rouse that Greek from his bed and send him to me. He shall read to me of the wrath of Achilles when they robbed him of his Briseis, for the hero's lot is mine."

So this new Achilles departed, now that his rage had left him, weeping maudlin tears of disappointed passion, to comfort his "bruised soul" with the immortal lines of Homer, for when he was not merely a brute Domitian fancied himself a poet. It was perhaps as well for his peace of mind that he could not see the face of Saturius, as the chamberlain comforted his bruised shoulders with some serviceable ointment, or hear the oath which that useful and industrious officer uttered as he sought

his rest, face downwards, since for many days thereafter he was unable to lie upon his back. It was a very ugly oath, sworn by every god who had an altar in Rome, with the divinities of the Jews and the Christians thrown in, that in a day to come he would avenge Domitian's rods with daggers. Had the prince been able to do so, there might have risen in his mind some prescience of a certain scene, in which he must play a part on a far-off but destined night. He might have beheld a vision of himself, bald, corpulent and thin-legged, but wearing the imperial robes of Cæsar, rolling in a frantic struggle for life upon the floor of his bed-chamber, at death grips with one Stephanus, while an old chamberlain named Saturius drove a dagger again and again into his back, crying at each stroke:

"Oho! That for thy rods, Cæsar! Oho! Dost remember the Pearl-Maiden? That for thy rods, Cæsar, and that--and that--and that----!"

But Domitian, weeping himself to sleep over the tale of the wrongs of the god-like Achilles, which did but foreshadow those of his divine self, as yet thought nothing of the rich reward that time should bring him.

On the morrow of the great day of the Triumph the merchant Demetrius of Alexandria, whom for many years we have known as Caleb, sat in the office of the store-house which he had hired for the bestowal of his

goods in one of the busiest thoroughfares of Rome. Handsome, indeed, noble-looking as he was, and must always be, his countenance presented a sorry sight. From hour to hour during the previous day he had fought a path through the dense crowds that lined the streets of Rome, to keep as near as might be to Miriam while she trudged her long route of splendid shame.

Then came the evening, when, with the other women slaves, she was put up to auction in the Forum. To prepare for this sale Caleb had turned almost all his merchandise into money, for he knew that Domitian was a purchaser, and guessed that the price of the beautiful Pearl-Maiden, of whom all the city was talking, would rule high. The climax we know. He bid to the last coin that he possessed or could raise, only to find that others with still greater resources were in the market. Even the agent of the prince had been left behind, and Miriam was at last knocked down to some mysterious stranger woman dressed like a peasant. The woman was veiled and disguised; she spoke with a feigned voice and in a strange tongue, but from the beginning Caleb knew her. Incredible as it might seem, that she should be here in Rome, he was certain that she was Nehushta, and no other.

That Nehushta should buy Miriam was well, but how came she by so vast a sum of money, here in a far-off land? In short, for whom was she buying? Indeed, for whom would she buy? He could think of one only--Marcus. But he had made inquiries and Marcus was not in Rome. Indeed he had every reason to believe that his rival was long dead, that his bones were

scattered among the tens of thousands which whitened the tumbled ruins of the Holy City in Judæa. How could it be otherwise? He had last seen him wounded, as he thought to death--and he should know, for the stroke fell from his own hand--lying senseless in the Old Tower in Jerusalem. Then he vanished away, and where Marcus had been Miriam was found. Whither did he vanish, and if it was true that she succeeded in hiding him in some secret hole, what chance was there that he could have lived on without food and unsuccoured? Also if he lived, why had he not appeared long before? Why was not so wealthy a Patrician and distinguished a soldier riding in the triumphant train of Titus?

With black despair raging in his breast, he, Caleb, had seen Miriam knocked down to the mysterious basket-laden stranger whom none could recognise. He had seen her depart together with the auctioneer and a servant, also basket-laden, to the office of the receiving house, whither he had attempted to follow upon some pretext, only to be stopped by the watchman. After this he hung about the door until he saw the auctioneer appear alone, when it occurred to him that the purchaser and the purchased must have departed by some other exit, perhaps in order to avoid further observation. He ran round the building to find himself confronted only by the empty, star-lit spaces of the Forum. Searching them with his eyes, for one instant it seemed to him that far away he caught sight of a little knot of figures climbing a black marble stair in the dark shadow of some temple. He sped across the open space, he ran up the great stair, to find at the head of it a young man in whom he recognised the auctioneer's clerk, gazing along a wide street as empty

as was the stair.

The rest is known to us. He followed, and twice perceived the little group of dark-robed figures hurrying round distant corners. Once he lost them altogether, but a passer-by on his road to some feast told him courteously enough which way they had gone. On he ran almost at hazard, to be rewarded in the end by the sight of them vanishing through a narrow doorway in the wall. He came to the door and saw that it was very massive. He tried it even, it was locked. Then he thought of knocking, only to remember that to state his business would probably be to meet his death. At such a place and hour those who purchased beautiful slaves might have a sword waiting for the heart of an unsuccessful rival who dared to follow them to their haunts.

Caleb walked round the house, to find that it was a palace which seemed to be deserted, although he thought that he saw light shining through one of the shuttered windows. Now he knew the place again. It was here that the procession had halted and one of the Roman soldiers who had committed the crime of being taken captive escaped the taunts of the crowd by hurling himself beneath the wheel of a great pageant car. Yes, there was no doubt of it, for his blood still stained the dusty stones and by it lay a piece of the broken distaff with which, in their mockery, they had girded the poor man. They were gentle folk, these Romans! Why, measured by this standard, some such doom would have fallen upon his rival, Marcus, for Marcus also was taken prisoner--by himself. The thought made Caleb smile, since well he knew that no braver soldier

lived. Then came other thoughts that pressed him closer. Somewhere in that great dead-looking house was Miriam, as far off from him as though she were still in Judæa. There was Miriam--and who was with her? The new-found lord who had spent two thousand sestertia on her purchase? The thought of it almost turned his brain.

Heretofore, the life of Caleb had been ruled by two passions--ambition and the love of Miriam. He had aspired to be ruler of the Jews, perhaps their king, and to this end had plotted and fought for the expulsion of the Romans from Judæa. He had taken part in a hundred desperate battles. Again and again he had risked his life; again and again he had escaped. For one so young he had reached high rank, till he was numbered among the first of their captains.

Then came the end, the last hideous struggle and the downfall. Once more his life was left in him. Where men perished by the hundred thousand he escaped, winning safety, not through the desire of it, but because of the love of Miriam which drove him on to follow her. Happily for himself he had hidden money, which, after the gift of his race, he was able to turn to good account, so that now he, who had been a leader in war and council, walked the world as a merchant in Eastern goods. All that glittering past had gone from him; he might become wealthy, but, Jew as he was, he could never be great nor fill his soul with the glory that it craved. There remained to him, then, nothing but this passion for one woman among the millions who dwelt beneath the sun, the girl who had been his playmate, whom he loved from the beginning, although she had

never loved him, and whom he would love until the end.

Why had she not loved him? Because of his rival, that accursed Roman, Marcus, the man whom time upon time he had tried to kill, but who had always slipped like water from his hands. Well, if she was lost to him she was lost to Marcus also, and from that thought he would take such comfort as he might. Indeed he had no other, for during those dreadful hours the fires of all Gehenna raged in his soul. He had lost--but who had found her?

Throughout the long night Caleb tramped round the cold, empty-looking palace, suffering perhaps as he had never suffered before, a thing to be pitied of gods and men. At length the dawn broke and the light crept down the splendid street, showing here and there groups of weary and half-drunken revellers staggering homewards from the feast, flushed men and dishevelled women. Others appeared also, humble and industrious citizens going to their daily toil. Among them were people whose business it was to clean the roads, abroad early this morning, for after the great procession they thought that they might find articles of value let fall by those who walked in it, or by the spectators. Two of these scavengers began sweeping near the place where Caleb stood, and lightened their toil by laughing at him, asking him if he had spent his night in the gutter and whether he knew his way home. He replied that he waited for the doors of the house to be opened.

"Which house?" they asked. "The 'Fortunate House?'" and they pointed to

the marble palace of Marcus, which, as Caleb now saw for the first time, had these words blazoned in gold letters on its portico.

He nodded.

"Well," said one of them, "you will wait for some time, for that house is no longer fortunate. Its owner is dead, killed in the wars, and no one knows who his heir may be."

"What was his name?" he asked.

"Marcus, the favourite of Nero, also called the Fortunate."

Then, with a bitter curse upon his lips Caleb turned and walked away.