

"No? Thinkest thou that I believe thee, when thou hast lain ever as a viper on my path, to bite my heel, and overthrow me?"

"Where, I again ask?"

"Everywhere, I repeat. At school; in the Lady Agnes's house; in the Forum; in the cemetery; in my father's own court; at Chromatius's villa. Yes, everywhere."

"And nowhere else but where thou hast named? When thy chariot was dashed furiously along the Appian way, didst thou not hear the tramp of horses' hoofs trying to overtake thee?"

"Wretch!" exclaimed the Prefect's son in a fury: "and was it thy accursed steed which, purposely urged forward, frightened mine, and nearly caused my death?"

"No, Corvinus, hear me calmly. It is the last time we shall speak together. I was travelling quietly with a companion towards Rome, after having paid the last rites to our master Cassianus" (Corvinus winced, for he knew not this before), "when I heard the clatter of a runaway chariot; and then, indeed, I put spurs to my horse; and it is well for thee that I did."

"How so?"

"Because I reached thee just in time—when thy strength was nearly exhausted, and thy blood almost frozen by repeated plunges in the cold canal; and when thy arm, already benumbed, had let go its last stay, and thou wast falling backwards for the last time into the water. I saw thee—I knew thee, as I took hold of thee, insensible. I had in my grasp the murderer of one most dear to me. Divine justice seemed to have overtaken him; there was only my will between him and his doom. It was my day of vengeance, and I fully gratified it."

"Ha! and how, pray?"

"By drawing thee out and laying thee on the bank, and chafing thee till thy heart resumed its functions; and then consigning thee to thy servants, rescued from death."

"Thou hast!" screamed Corvinus; "my servants told me that *they* drew me out."

"And did they give thee my knife, together with thy leopard-skin purse, which I found on the ground after I had dragged thee forth?"

"No; they said the purse was lost in the canal. It *was* a leopard-skin purse, the gift of an African sorceress. What sayest thou of the knife?"

"That it is here, see it, still rusty with the water: thy purse I gave to thy slaves; my own knife I retained for myself; look at it again. Dost thou believe me now? Have I been always a viper on thy path?"

Too ungenerous to acknowledge that he had been conquered in the struggle between them, Corvinus only felt himself withered, degraded, before his late school-fellow, crumbled like a clot of dust in his hands. His very heart seemed to him to blush. He felt sick, and staggered, hung down his head, and sneaked away. He cursed the games, the emperor, the yelling rabble, the roaring beasts, his horses and chariot, his slaves, his father, himself—everything and everybody except one—he could not, for his life, curse Pancratius.

He had reached the door when the youth called him back. He turned and looked at him with a glance of respect, almost approaching to love. Pancratius put his hand on his arm and said, "Corvinus, I have freely forgiven thee. There is One above, who cannot forgive without repentance. Seek pardon from Him. If not, I foretell to thee this day, that by whatsoever death I die, thou too shalt one day perish."

Corvinus slunk away and appeared no more that day. He lost the sight on which his coarse imagination had gloated for days, which he had longed for during months. When the holiday was over he was found by his father completely intoxicated: it was the only way he knew of drowning remorse.

As he was leaving the prisoners the *lanista*, or master of the gladiators, entered the room and summoned them to the combat. They hastily embraced one another, and took leave on earth. They entered the arena, or pit of the amphitheatre, opposite the imperial

seat, and had to pass between two files of *venatores*, or huntsmen, who had the care of the wild beasts, each armed with a heavy whip, wherewith he inflicted a blow on every one as he went by him. They were then brought forward, singly or in groups, as the people desired, or the directors of the spectacle chose. Sometimes the intended prey was placed on an elevated platform to be more conspicuous; at another time he was tied up to posts to be more helpless. A favorite sport was to bundle up a female victim in a net and expose her to be rolled, tossed, or gored by wild cattle. One encounter with a single wild beast often finished the martyr's course; while occasionally three or four were successively let loose without their inflicting a mortal wound. The confessor was then either remanded to prison for further torments or taken back to the *spoliatorium*, where the gladiators' apprentices amused themselves with despatching him.

But we must content ourselves with following the last steps of our youthful hero, Pancratius. As he was passing through the corridor that led to the amphitheatre he saw Sebastian standing on one side, with a lady closely enwrapped in her mantle, and veiled. He at once recognised her, stopped before her, knelt, and taking her hand, affectionately kissed it. "Bless me, dear mother," he said, "in this your promised hour."

"See, my child, the heavens," she replied, "and look up thither, where Christ with His saints expecteth thee. Fight the good fight, for thy soul's sake, and show thyself faithful and steadfast in thy Saviour's love. Remember him too, whose precious relic thou bearest round thy neck."

"Its price shall be doubled in thine eyes, my sweet mother, ere many hours are over."

"On, on, and let us have none of this fooling," exclaimed the *lanista*, adding a stroke of his cane.

Lucina retreated, while Sebastian pressed the hand of her son and whispered in his ear, "Courage, dearest boy: may God bless you! I shall be close behind the emperor: give me a last look there, and—your blessing."

"Ha! ha! ha!" broke out a fiendish tone close behind him. Was it a demon's laugh? He looked behind, and caught only a glimpse of a fluttering cloak rounding a pillar. Who could it be? He guessed not. It was Fulvius, who in these words had got the last link in a chain of evidence that he had long been weaving—that Sebastian was certainly a Christian.

Pancratius soon stood in the midst of the arena, the last of the faithful band. He had been reserved, in hopes that the sight of others' sufferings might shake his constancy; but the effect had been the reverse. He took his stand where he was placed, and his yet delicate frame contrasted with the swarthy and brawny limbs of the executioners who surrounded him. They now left him alone; and we cannot better describe him than Eusebius, an eye-witness, does a youth a few years older:

"You might have seen a tender youth, who had not yet entered his twentieth year, standing without fetters, with his hands stretched forth in the form of a cross, and praying to God most attentively, with a fixed and untrembling heart: not retiring from the place where he first stood, nor swerving the least, while bears and leopards, breathing fury and death in their very snort, were just rushing on to tear his limbs in pieces. And yet, I know not how, their jaws seemed seized and closed by some divine and mysterious power, and they drew altogether back."

Such was the attitude, and such the privilege, of our heroic youth. The mob were frantic as they saw one wild beast after another careering madly round him, roaring and lashing its sides with its tail, while he seemed placed in a charmed circle, which they could not approach. A furious bull, let loose upon him, dashed madly forward with his neck bent down, then stopped suddenly as though he had struck his head against a wall, pawed the ground and scattered the dust around him, bellowing fiercely.

"Provoke him, thou coward!" roared out still louder the enraged emperor.