

Baroness Orczy

Unto Cæsar

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Chapter 1

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“Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion....”—Psalm 48. 2.

And it came to pass in Rome after the kalends of September, and when Caius Julius Cæsar Caligula ruled over Imperial Rome.

Arminius Quirinius, the censor, was dead. He had died by his own hand, and thus was a life of extortion and of fraud brought to an ignominious end through the force of public opinion, and by the decree of that same Cæsar who himself had largely benefited by the mal-practices of his minion.

Arminius Quirinius had committed every crime, sunk to every kind of degradation which an inordinate love of luxury and the insatiable desires of jaded senses had suggested as a means to satisfaction, until the treachery of his own accomplices had thrown the glaring light of publicity on a career of turpitude such as even these decadent times had seldom witnessed ere this.

Enough that the end had come at last. A denunciation from the rostrum, a discontented accomplice thirsting for revenge, an angry crowd eager to listen, and within an hour the mighty, much-feared censor was forced to flee from Rome to escape the fury of a populace which would have torn him to pieces, and was ready even to massacre his family and his womenfolk, his clients and his slaves.

He escaped to his villa at Ostia. But the Emperor Caligula, having duly enjoyed the profits derived from his favourite's extortions, hurled anathema and the full weight

of his displeasure on the man who had been not only fool enough to be found out, but who had compromised the popularity of the Cæsar in the eyes of the people and of the army. Twenty-four hours later the imperial decree went forth that the disgraced censor must end his days in any manner which he thought best—seeing that a patrician and member of the Senate could not be handed over to common justice—and also that the goods of Arminius Quirinius should be publicly sold for the benefit of the State and the profit of those whom the extortioner had wronged.

The latter phrase, though somewhat vague, pleased the people and soothed public irritation, and the ephemeral popularity of a half-crazy tyrant was momentarily restored. Be it said however, that less than a month later the Cæsar decided that he himself had been the person most wronged by Arminius, and that the bulk of the profits derived from the sale of the late censor's goods must therefore find its way into the imperial coffers.

The furniture of Arminius' house within the city and that of his villa at Ostia had fetched vast sums at a public auction which had lasted three days. Everything had been sold, from the bed with the gilt legs on which the body of the censor had been laid after his death, to the last vase of murra that adorned his walls and the cups of crystal from which his guests had drunk. His pet monkeys were sold and his tame magpies, the pots of flowers out of the hothouses and the bunches of melons and winter grapes ripening under glass.

After that it was the turn of the slaves. There were, so I understand, over seven thousand of these: scribes and

carpenters, litter-bearers and sculptors, cooks and musicians; there were a quantity of young children, and some half-witted dolts and misshapen dwarfs, kept for the amusement of guests during the intervals of supper.

The bulk of them had been sent to the markets of Delos and Phaselis, but the imperator had had the most valuable items amongst the human goods set aside for himself, and not a few choice pieces had found their way into the households of the aediles in charge of the sales: the State too had appropriated some hundreds of useful scribes, sculptors and mechanics, but there were still a thousand or so who—in compliance with the original imperial edict—would have to be sold by public auction in Rome for the benefit of the late censor's defrauded victims.

And thus, on this ninth day of September, a human load panting under the heat of this late summer's sun, huddled one against the other, pushed and jostled by the crowd, was exposed to the public gaze in the Forum over against the rostrum Augustini, so that all who had a mind, and a purse withal, might suit their fancy and buy.

A bundle of humanity—not over-wretched, for the condition of the slaves in the household of Arminius Quirinius had not been an unhappy one—they all seemed astonished, some even highly pleased, at thus finding themselves the centre of attraction in the Forum, they who had spent their lives in getting humbly out of other people's way.

Fair and dark, ivory skin and ebony, male and female, or almost sexless in the excess of deformity, there were some to suit all tastes. Each wore a tablet hung round the neck by

a green cord: on this were writ the chief merits of the wearer, and also a list of his or her defects, so that intending purchasers might know what to expect.

There were the Phrygians with fair curly hair and delicate hands skilled in the limner's art; the Numidians with skins of ebony and keen black eyes that shone like dusky rubies; they were agile at the chase, could capture a lion or trap the wild beasts that are so useful in gladiatorial games. There were Greeks here, pale of face and gentle of manner who could strike the chords of a lyre and sing to its accompaniment, and there were swarthy Spaniards who fashioned breast-plates of steel and fine chain mail to resist the assassin's dagger: there were Gauls with long lithe limbs and brown hair tied in a knot high above the forehead, and Allemanni from the Rhine with two-coloured hair heavy and crisp like a lion's mane. There was a musician from Memphis whose touch upon the sistrum would call a dying spirit back to the land of the living, and a cook from Judæa who could stew a peacock's tongue so that it melted like nectar in the mouth: there was a white-skinned Iceni from Britain, versed in the art of healing, and a negress from Numidia who had killed a raging lion by one hit on the jaw from her powerful fist.

Then there were those freshly brought to Rome from overseas, whose merits or demerits had not yet been appraised—they wore no tablet round the neck, but their feet were whitened all over with chalk; and there were those whose heads were surmounted by an ugly felt hat in token that the State treasury tendered no guarantee for them. Their period of servitude had been so short that nothing was

known about them, about their health, their skill, or their condition.

* * * * *

Above them towered the gigantic rostrum with tier upon tier of massive blocks of marble, and in the centre, up aloft, the bronze figure of the wolf—the foster-mother of the great city—with metal jaws distended and polished teeth that gleamed like emeralds in the sun.

And all around the stately temples of the Forum, with their rich carvings and colonnades and walls in tones of delicate creamy white, scarce less brilliant than the clouds which a gentle morning breeze was chasing westwards to the sea. And under the arcades of the temples cool shadows, dense and blue, trenchant against the white marble like an irregular mosaic of lapis lazuli, with figures gliding along between the tall columns, priests in white robes, furtive of gait, slaves of the pontificate, shoeless and silent and as if detached from the noise and bustle of the Forum, like ghosts that haunt the precincts of graves.

Throughout all this the gorgeous colouring that a summer's mid-morning throws over imperial Rome. Above, that canopy of translucent blue, iridescent and scintillating with a thousand colours, flicks of emerald and crimson, of rose and of mauve that merge and dance together, divide and reunite before the retina, until the gaze loses consciousness of all colour save one all-pervading sense of gold.

In the distance the Capitol, temple-crowned, rearing its deified summit upwards to the dome of heaven above, holding on its triple shoulders a throng of metal gods, with

Jupiter Victor right in the centre, a thunderbolt in his hand which throws back ten thousand reflections of dazzling light —another sun engendered by the sun. And to the west the Aventine wrapped in its mantle of dull brown, its smooth incline barren and scorched, and with tiny mud-huts dotted about like sleepy eyes that close beneath the glare.

And far away beyond the Aventine, beyond the temples and palaces, the blue ribbon of the Tiber flowing lazily to the sea: there where a rose-coloured haze hung in mid-air, hiding with filmy, transparent veil the vast Campania beyond, its fever-haunted marshes and its reed-covered fastnesses.

The whole, a magnificent medley of cream and gold and azure, and deep impenetrable shadows trenchant as a thunder cloud upon an horizon of gold, and the moving crowd below, ivory and bronze and black, with here and there the brilliant note of a snow-white robe or of crimson head-band gleaming through dark locks.

* * * * *

Up and around the rostrum, noise that was almost deafening had prevailed from an early hour. On one of the gradients some ten or a dozen scribes were squatting on mats of twisted straw, making notes of the sales and entries of the proceeds on rolls of parchment which they had for the purpose, whilst a swarthy slave, belonging to the treasury, acted as auctioneer under direct orders from the praefect of Rome. He was perched high up aloft, immediately beneath the shadow of the yawning bronze wolf; he stood bare-headed under the glare of the sun, but a linen tunic covered

his shoulders, and his black hair was held close to his head by a vivid crimson band.

He shouted almost incessantly in fluent Latin, but with the lisp peculiar to the African races.

A sun-tanned giant whose massive frame and fair hair, that gleamed ruddy in the sun, proclaimed some foreign ancestry was the praefectus in command of this tangled bundle of humanity.

He had arrived quite early in the day and his litter stood not far from the rostrum; its curtains of crimson silk, like vivid stains of blood upon the walls of cream and gold, fluttered restlessly in the breeze. Around the litter a crowd of his own slaves and attendants remained congregated, but he himself stood isolated on the lowest gradient of the central rostrum, leaning his powerful frame against the marble, with arms folded across his mighty chest; his deep-set eyes were overshadowed by heavy brows and his square forehead cut across by the furrow of a perpetual frown which gave the whole face a strange expression of untamed will and of savage pride, in no way softened by the firm lines of the tightly closed lips or the contour of the massive jaws.

His lictors, at some little distance from him, kept his person well guarded, but it was he who, with word or nod, directed the progress of the sale, giving occasional directions to the lictors who—wielding heavy flails—had much ado to keep the herd of human cattle within the bounds of its pens. His voice was harsh and peremptory and he pronounced the Latin words with but the faintest semblance of foreign intonation.

Now and then at a word from a likely purchaser he would with a sign order a lictor to pick out one of his wares, to drag him forward out of a compact group and set him up on the catasta. A small crowd would then collect round the slave thus exposed, the tablet on his neck would be carefully perused and the chattel made to turn round and round, to walk backwards and forwards, to show his teeth and his muscle, whilst the African up on the rostrum would with loud voice and profuse gesture point out every line of beauty on a lithe body and expatiate on the full play of every powerful muscle.

The slave thus singled out for show seemed neither resentful nor distressed, ready enough most times to exhibit his merits, anxious only for the chance of a good master and the momentary avoidance of the lictor's flail. At the praefect's bidding he cracked his knuckles or showed his teeth, strained the muscles of his arm to make them stand up like cords, turned a somersault, jumped, danced or stood on his head if ordered so to do.

The women were more timid and very frightened of blows, especially the older ones; the younger shoulders escaped a chastisement which would have marred their beauty, and the pretty maids from Corinth or Carthage, conscious of their own charms, displayed them with good-natured *naïveté*, deeming obedience the surest way to comfort.

Nor did the praefect perform his duty with any show of inhumanity or conscious cruelty. Himself a wealthy member of the patriciate, second only to the Cæsar, with a seat in the Senate and a household full of slaves, he had neither

horror nor contempt for the state of slavery—a necessary one in the administration of the mightiest Empire in the world.

Many there were who averred that the praefect of Rome was himself the descendant of a freedman—a prisoner of war brought over by Cæsar from the North—who had amassed wealth and purchased his own freedom. Indeed his name proclaimed his foreign origin, for he was called Taurus Antinor Anglicanus, and surnamed Niger because of his dark eyes and sun-tanned skin. Certain it is that when the sale of Arminius' goods was ordered by imperial edict for the benefit of the State, no one complained that the praefect decided to preside over the sale himself.

He had discharged such duties before and none had occasion to complain of the manner in which he did it. In these days of unbridled excesses and merciless outbursts of rage, he remained throughout—on these occasions—temperate and even impassive.

He only ordered his lictor to use the flail when necessary, when the bundle of human goods was so huddled up that it ceased to look attractive, and likely purchasers seemed to fall away. Then, at his command, the heavy thongs would descend indiscriminately on the bronze shoulder of an Ethiopian or the fair skin of a barbarian from the North; but he gave the order without any show of cruelty or passion, just as he heard the responsive cry of pain without any outward sign of pity.

Chapter 2

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“To be laid in the balance, they are altogether lighter than vanity.”—Psalm 62. 9.

As the day wore on, trade became more brisk and the work of the lictors more arduous, for the crowd was dense and the bargain-hunters eager to push to the front.

Now a bronze-skinned artisan with slender limbs and narrow tapering hands was attracting attention. He was standing on the platform, passive and indifferent, apparently unconscious alike of the scorching sun which bit into his bare flesh, as of the murmurs of the dealers round him and the eloquence of the African up on the rostrum, who was shouting himself hoarse in praise of his wares.

“A leather worker from Hispania,” he thundered with persuasive rhetoric, “his age but two dozen years, his skill unequalled on either bank of the Tiber ... A tunic worked by him is softer than the fleeciest wool, and the sheath of a dagger becomes in his hands as hard as steel.... Good health and strength, two thousand sesterces were a poor price to pay for the use of these skilled hands.... Two thousand sesterces.... His lordship’s grace, the censor Arminius Quirinius paid four thousand for him....”

He paused a moment whilst a couple of Jews from Galilee, in long dark robes and black caps covering their shaggy hair, turned critically round this paragon from Hispania, lifted his hands and gazed on each finger-tip as if trying to find traces on these of that much-vaunted skill.

“Two thousand sesterces, kind sirs, and you will have at your disposal the talent of a master in the noble art of leather working; pouches and coverings for your chairs, caskets and sword-hilts, nothing comes amiss to him.... Come! shall we say two thousand sesterces?”

The Jews were hesitating. With a rapid glance of their keen, deep-set eyes they consulted one with the other, whilst their long bony fingers wandered hesitatingly to the wallets at their belts.

“Two thousand sesterces!” urged the auctioneer, as he looked with marked severity on the waverers.

He himself received a percentage on the proceeds of the sale, a few sesterces mayhap that would go to swell the little hoard which ultimately would purchase freedom. The scribes stilet in hand waited in patient silence. The praefect, indifferent to the whole transaction, was staring straight in front of him, like one whose thoughts are strangers to his will.

“One thousand we’ll give,” said one of the Jews timidly.

“Nay! an you’ll not give more, kind sirs,” quoth the auctioneer airily, “this paragon among leather workers will bring fortune to your rival dealers....”

“One thousand,” repeated one of the intending purchasers, “and no more.”

The African tried persuasion, contempt, even lofty scorn; he threatened to withdraw the paragon from the sale altogether, for he knew of a dealer in leather goods over in Corinth who would give two fingers of his own hand for the exclusive use of those belonging to this Hispanian treasure.

But the Jews were obstinate. With the timid obstinacy peculiar to their race, they stuck to their point and refused to be enticed into purposeless extravagance.

In the end the wonderful worker in leather was sold to the Jew traders from Galilee for the sum of one thousand sesterces; his dark face had expressed nothing but stolid indifference whilst the colloquy between the purchasers and the auctioneer had been going on.

The next piece of goods however was in more pressing demand; a solid German, with massive thorax half-hidden beneath a shaggy goatskin held in at the waist by a belt; his hairy arms bare to the shoulder, his gigantic fists clenched as if ready to fell an ox.

A useful man with plough or harrow, he was said to be skilled in smith's work too. After a preliminary and minute examination of the man's muscles, of his teeth, of the calves of his legs, bidding became very brisk between an agriculturist from Sicilia and a freedman from the Campania, until the praefect himself intervened, desiring the slave for his own use on a farm which he had near Ostia.

Some waiting-maids from Judæa fetched goodly money; an innkeeper of Etruria bought them, for they were well-looking and knew how to handle and carry wine jars without shaking up the costly liquor; and the negroes were sought after by the lanistae for training to gladiatorial combats.

Scribes were also in great demand for copying purposes. The disseminators of the news of the day were willing to pay high prices for quick shorthand writers who had learned their business in the house of Arminius the censor.

In the meanwhile the throng in the Forum had become more and more dense. Already one or two gorgeously draped litters had been seen winding their way in from the Sacra Via or the precincts of the temples, their silken draperies making positive notes of brilliant colour against the iridescent whiteness of Phrygian marble walls.

The lictors now had at times to use their flails against the crowd. Room had to be made for the masters of Rome, the wealthy and the idle, who threw sesterces about for the gratification of their smallest whim, as a common man would shake the dust from his shoes.

Young Hortensius Martius, the rich patrician owner of five thousand slaves, had stepped out of his litter, and a way being made for him in the crowd by his men, he had strolled up to the rostrum, and mounting its first gradient he leaned with studied grace against the block of white marble, giving to the common herd below the pleasing spectacle of a young exquisite, rich and well-favoured—his handsome person carefully perfumed and bedecked after the morning bath, his crisp fair hair daintily curled, his body clad in a tunic of soft white wool splendidly worked in purple stripes, the insignia of his high patrician state.

He passed a languid eye over the bundle of humanity spread out for sale at his feet and gave courteous greeting to the praefect.

“Thou art early abroad, Hortensius Martius,” quoth Taurus Antinor in response; “’tis not often thou dost grace the Forum with thy presence at this hour.”

“They told me it would be amusing,” replied young Hortensius lazily, “but methinks that they lied.”

He yawned, and with a tiny golden tool he began picking his teeth.

“What did they tell thee?” queried the other, “and who were they that told?”

“There was Caius Nepos and young Escanes, and several others at the bath. They were all talking about the sale.”

“Are they coming hither?”

“They will be here anon; but some declared that much rubbish would have to be sold ere the choice bargains be put up. Escanes wants a cook who can fry a capon in a special way they wot of in Gaul. Stuffed with ortolans and covered with the juice of three melons—Escanes says it is mightily pleasing to the palate.”

“There is no cook from Gaul on the list,” interposed the praefect curtly.

“And Caius Nepos wants some well-favoured girls to wait on his guests at supper to-morrow. He gives a banquet, as thou knowest. Wilt be there, Taurus Antinor?”

He had spoken these last words in a curious manner which suggested that some significance other than mere conviviality would be attached to the banquet given by Caius Nepos on the morrow. And now he drew nearer to the praefect and cast a quick glance around him as if to assure himself that the business of the sale was engrossing everyone’s attention.

“Caius Nepos,” he said, trying to speak with outward indifference, “asked me to tell thee that if thou wilt come to his banquet to-morrow thou wilt find it to thine advantage. Many of us are of one mind with regard to certain matters

and could talk these over undisturbed. Wilt join us, Taurus Antinor?" he added eagerly.

"Join you," retorted the other with a grim smile, "join you in what? in this senseless folly of talking in whispers in public places? The Forum this day is swarming with spies, Hortensius Martius. Hast a wish to make a spectacle for the plebs on the morrow by being thrown to a pack of tigers for their midday meal?"

And with a nod of his head he pointed up to the rostrum where the dusky auctioneer had momentarily left off shouting and had thrown himself flat down upon the matting, ostensibly in order to speak with one of the scribes on the tier below, but who was in reality casting furtive glances in the direction where Hortensius Martius stood talking with the praefectus.

"These slaves," said Taurus Antinor curtly, "all belong to the imperial treasury; their peculium is entirely made up of money gained through giving information—both false and true. Have a care, O Hortensius Martius!"

But the other shrugged his shoulders with well-studied indifference. It was not the mode at this epoch to seem anything but bored at all the circumstances of public and private life in Rome, at the simple occurrences of daily routine or at the dangers which threatened every man through the crazy whims of a demented despot.

It had even become the fashion to accept outwardly and without the slightest show of interest the wild extravagances and insane debaucheries of the ferocious tyrant who for the nonce wielded the sceptre of the Cæsars. The young patricians of the day looked on with apparent

detachment at his excesses and the savage displays of unbridled power of which he was so inordinately fond, and they affected a lofty disregard for the horrible acts of injustice and of cruelty which this half-crazy Emperor had rendered familiar to the citizens of Rome.

Nothing in the daily routine of life amused these votaries of fashion—nothing roused them from their attitude of somnolent placidity, except perhaps some peculiarly bloody combat in the arena—one of those unfettered orgies of lust of blood which they loved to witness and which have for ever disgraced the glorious pages of Roman history.

Then horror would rouse them for a brief moment from their apathy, for they were not cruel, only satiated with every sight, every excitement and luxury which their voluptuous city and the insane caprice of the imperator perpetually offered them; and they thirsted for horrors as a sane man thirsts for beauty, that it might cause a diversion in the even tenor of their lives, and mayhap raise a thrill in their dormant brains.

Therefore even now, when apparently he was toying with his life, Hortensius Martius did not depart outwardly from the attitude of supercilious indifference which fashion demanded. They were all actors, these men, always before an audience, and even among themselves they never really left off acting the part which they had made so completely their own.

But that the indifference was only on the surface was evidenced in this instance by the young exquisite's scarce perceptible change of position. He drew away slightly from

the praefect and anon said in a loud tone of voice so that all around him might hear:

“Aye! as thou sayest, Taurus Antinor, I might find a dwarf or some kind of fool to suit me. Mine are getting old and dull. Ye gods, how they bore me at times!”

And it was in a whisper that he added:

“Caius Nepos specially desired thy presence at supper tomorrow, O Taurus Antinor! He feared that he might not get speech with thee anon, so hath asked me to make sure of thy presence. Thou’lt not fail us? There are over forty of us now, all prepared to give our lives for the good of the Empire.”

The praefect made no reply this time; his attention was evidently engrossed by some close bidding over a useful slave, but as Hortensius now finally turned away from him, his dark eyes under the shadow of that perpetual frown swept over the figure of the young exquisite, from the crown of the curled and perfumed head to the soles of the daintily shod feet, and a smile of contempt not altogether unkind played round the corners of his firm lips.

“For the good of the Empire?” he murmured under his breath as he shrugged his broad shoulders and once more turned his attention to his duties.

Hortensius in the meanwhile had spied some of his friends. Gorgeously embroidered tunics could now be seen all the time pushing their way through the more common crowd, and soon a compact group of rich patricians had congregated around the rostra.

They had come one by one—from the baths mostly—refreshed and perfumed, ready to gaze with fashionable

lack of interest on the spectacle of this public auction. They had exchanged greetings with the praefect and with Hortensius Martius. They all knew one another, were all members of the same caste, the ruling caste of Rome. Young Escanes was now there, he who wanted a cook, and Caius Nepos—the praetorian praefect who was in search of pretty waiting-maids.

“Hast had speech with Anglicanus?” asked the latter in a whisper to Hortensius.

“Aye! a few words,” replied the other, “but he warned me of spies.”

“Will he join us, thinkest thou?”

“I think that he will sup with thee, O Caius Nepos, but as to joining us in—”

“Hush!” admonished the praetorian praefect, “Taurus Antinor is right. There are spies all around here to-day. But if he comes to supper we’ll persuade him, never fear.”

And with a final significant nod the two men parted and once more mixed with the crowd.

More than one high-born lady now had ordered her bearers to set her litter down close to the rostrum whence she could watch the sale, and mayhap make a bid for a purchase on her own account; the rich Roman matrons with large private fortunes and households of their own, imperious and independent, were the object of grave deference and of obsequious courtesy—not altogether unmixed with irony, on the part of the young men around them.

They did not mix with the crowd but remained in their litters, reclining on silken cushions, their dark tunics and

richly coloured stoles standing out in sombre notes against the more gaily-decked-out gilded youth of Rome, whilst their serious and oft-times stern manner, their measured and sober speech, seemed almost set in studied opposition to the idle chattering, the flippant tone, the bored affectation of the outwardly more robust sex.

And among them all Taurus Antinor, praefect of Rome, with his ruddy hair and bronzed skin, his massive frame clad in gorgeously embroidered tunic, his whole appearance heavy and almost rough, in strange contrast alike to the young decadents of the day as to the rigid primness of the patrician matrons, just as his harsh, even voice seemed to dominate the lazy and mellow trebles of the votaries of fashion.

* * * * *

The auctioneer had in the meanwhile cast a quick comprehensive glance over his wares, throwing an admonition here, a command there.

“That yellow hair—let it hang, woman! do not touch it I say.... Slip that goatskin off thy loins, man ... By Jupiter 'tis the best of thee thou hidest.... Hold thy chin up girl, we'll have no doleful faces to-day.”

Sometimes his admonition required more vigorous argument. The praefect was appealed to against the recalcitrant. Then the harsh unimpassioned voice with its curious intonation in the pronouncing of the Latin words, would give a brief order and the lictor's flail would whizz in the air and descend with a short sharp whistling sound on obstinately bowed shoulder or unwilling hand, and the auctioneer would continue his perorations.

“What will it please my lord’s grace to buy this day? A skilled horseman from Dacia?... I have one.... A pearl.... He can mount an untamed steed and drive a chariot in treble harness through the narrowest streets of Rome.... He can ... What—no?—not a horseman to-day?... then mayhap a hunchback acrobat from Pannonia, bronzed as the tanned hide of an ox, with arms so long that his finger-nails will scrape the ground as he runs; he can turn a back somersault, walk the tight-rope, or ... Here, Pipus the hunchback, show thine ugly face to my lord’s grace, maybe thou’lt help to dissipate the frown between my Lord’s eyes, maybe my lord’s grace will e’en smile at thine antics.... Turn then, show thy hump, ’tis worth five hundred sesterces, my lord ... turn again ... see my lord, is he not like an ape?”

My lord was smiling, so the auctioneer prattled on, and the deformed creature upon the catasta wound his ill-shapen body into every kind of contortion, grinning from ear to ear, displaying the malformation of his spine, and the hideousness of his long hairy arms, whilst he uttered weird cries that were supposed to imitate those of wild animals in the forest.

These antics caused my lord to smile outright. He was willing to expend two thousand sesterces in order to have such a creature about his house, to have him ready to call when his guests seemed dull between the courses of a sumptuous meal. The deal was soon concluded and the hunchback transferred from the platform to the keeping of my lord’s slaves, and thence to my lord’s household.

Chapter 3

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“Fairer than the children of men.”—Psalm 45. 2.

“Hun Rhavas, dost mind thy promise made to Menecreta?” whispered a timid voice in the African’s ear.

“Aye, aye!” he replied curtly, “I had not forgotten.”

There was a lull in the trade whilst the scribes were making entries on their tablets.

The auctioneer had descended from the rostrum. Panting after his exertions, perspiring profusely under the heat of the noonday sun, he was wiping the moisture from his dripping forehead and incidentally refreshing his parched throat with copious drafts from out a leather bottle.

His swarthy skin streaming with perspiration shone in the glare of the noonday sun like the bronze statue of mother-wolf up aloft.

An elderly woman in rough linen tunic, her hair hidden beneath a simple cloth, had succeeded in engaging his attention.

“It had been better to put the child up for sale an hour ago, whilst these rich folk were still at the bath,” she said with a tone of reproach in her gentle voice.

“It was not my fault,” rejoined the African curtly, “she comes one of the last on the list. The praefect made out the lists. Thou shouldst have spoken to him.”

“Oh I should never dare,” she replied, her voice trembling at the mere suggestion of such boldness, “but I did promise thee five aurei if I succeeded in purchasing the child.”

"I know that," quoth the African with a nod of satisfaction.

"My own child, Hun Rhavas," continued the pleading voice; "think on it, for thou too hast children of thine own."

"I purchased my son's freedom only last year," acquiesced the slave with a touch of pride. "Next year, an the gods will, it shall be my daughter's and after that mine own. In three years from now we shall all be free."

"Thou art a man; 'tis more easy for thee to make money. It took me six years to save up twenty-five aurei which should purchase my child: twenty for her price, five for thy reward, for thou alone canst help me, an thou wilt."

"Well, I've done all I could for thee, Menecreta," retorted Hun Rhavas somewhat impatiently. "I've taken the titulus from off her neck and set the hat over her head, and that was difficult enough for the praefect's eyes are very sharp. Ten aurei should be the highest bid for a maid without guarantees as to skill, health or condition. And as she is not over well-favoured—"

But this the mother would not admit. In weary and querulous tones she began expatiating on the merits of her daughter: her fair hair, her graceful neck—until the African, bored and impatient, turned on her roughly.

"Nay! an thy daughter hath so many perfections, thou'lt not purchase her for twenty aurei. Fifty and sixty will be bid for her, and what can I do then to help thee?"

"Hun Rhavas," said Menecreta in a sudden spirit of conciliation, "thou must not heed a mother's fancies. To me the child is beautiful beyond compare. Are not thine own in thy sight beautiful as a midsummer's day?" she added with

subtle hypocrisy, thinking of the ugly little Africans of whom Hun Rhavas was so proud.

Her motherly heart was prepared for every sacrifice, every humiliation, so long as she obtained what she wanted—possession of her child. Arminius Quirinius had given her her freedom some three years ago, but this seeming act of grace had been a cruel one since it had parted the mother from her child. The late censor had deemed Menecreta old, feeble, and therefore useless: she was but a worthless mouth to feed; but he kept the girl not because she was well-favoured or very useful in his house, but because he knew that Menecreta would work her fingers to the bone until she saved enough money to purchase her daughter's freedom.

Arminius Quirinius, ever grasping for money, ever ready for any act of cupidity or oppression, knew that from the mother he could extract a far higher sum than the girl could possibly fetch in the open market. He had fixed her price as fifty aurei, and Menecreta had saved just one half that amount when fate and the vengeance of the populace overtook the extortioner. All his slaves—save the most valuable—were thrown on the market, and the patient, hard-working mother saw the fulfilment of her hopes well within sight.

It was but a question of gaining Hun Rhavas' ear and of tempting his greed. The girl, publicly offered under unfavourable conditions, and unbacked by the auctioneer's laudatory harangues, could easily be knocked down for twenty aurei or even less.

But Menecreta's heart was torn with anxiety the while she watched the progress of the sale. Every one of these indifferent spectators might become an enemy through taking a passing fancy to her child. These young patricians, these stern matrons, they had neither remorse nor pity where the gratification of a whim was at stake.

And was not the timid, fair-haired girl more beautiful in the mother's eyes than any other woman put up on the platform for the purpose of rousing a momentary caprice.

She gazed with jealous eyes on the young idlers and the high-born ladies, the possible foes who yet might part her from the child. And there was the praefect too, all-powerful in the matter.

If he saw through the machinations of Hun Rhavas nothing would save the girl from being put up like all the others as the law directed, with the proper tablet attached to her neck, describing her many charms. Taurus Antinor was not cruel but he was pitiless. The slaves of his household knew that, as did the criminals brought to his tribunal. He never inflicted unnecessary punishment but when it was deserved he was relentless in its execution.

What hope could a poor mother have against the weight of his authority.

Fortunately the morning was rapidly wearing on. The hour for the midday rest was close at hand. Menecreta could watch, with a glad thrill in her heart, one likely purchaser after another being borne in gorgeously draped litter away from this scene of a mother's cruel anxiety. Already the ladies had withdrawn. Now there was only a group of men left around the rostrum; Hortensius Martius still lounging

aimlessly, young Escanes who had not yet found the paragon amongst cooks, and a few others who eyed the final proceedings with the fashionable expression of boredom.

“I wonder we have not seen Dea Flavia this day,” remarked Escanes to the praefect. “Dost think she’ll come, Taurus Antinor?”

“Nay, I know not,” he replied; “truly she cannot be in need of slaves. She has more than she can know what to do with.”

“Oh!” rejoined the other, “of a truth she has slaves enough. But ’tis this new craze of hers! She seems to be in need of innumerable models for the works of art she hath on hand.”

“Nay, ’tis no new craze,” interposed Hortensius Martius, whose fresh young face had flushed very suddenly as if in anger. “Dea Flavia, as thou knowest full well, Escanes, hath fashioned exquisite figures both in marble and in clay even whilst thou didst waste thy boyhood in drunken revelries. She—”

“A truce on thine ill-temper,” broke in Escanes with a good-humoured laugh. “I had no thought of disparagement for Dea Flavia’s genius. The gods forbid!” he added with mock fervour.

“Then dost deserve that I force thee down to thy knees,” retorted Hortensius, not yet mollified, “to make public acknowledgment of Dea Flavia’s beauty, her talents and her virtues, and public confession of thine own unworthiness in allowing her hallowed name to pass thy wine-sodden lips.”