

OUT OF THE MOUTH OF THE LION

CHAPTER I

THE MIDNIGHT MEETING



HE sun was slowly sinking behind the Alban hills, and the shadows were growing longer and longer in the lovely valley of Aricia, while upon the forests of ever-green oaks and cork-trees that clothed the lower slopes of the mountains, night had already descended. But in spite of the lengthening shadows and deepening gloom there was an unusual stir and bustle. Instead of retiring

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to their homes, all the inhabitants of the valley seemed to be going out in holiday attire with baskets and bundles, in which one could catch glimpses of goats'-milk cheese, dried dates and figs, as well as cakes and barley bread.

Gay equipages, preceded by slaves, were also to be seen mingling with the more humble holiday-makers, and they all took the same road across the Campagna towards the gate of the Imperial City. Men and women, with children in their arms or at their side; patrician ladies, who would not soil their feet by stepping across the streets where the poorer citizens walked, were all talking of the same subject this evening, all bent on the same errand—to reach the Flavian Amphitheater tonight, that they might secure seats to witness the games; for although that mighty edifice, now known as the Colosseum, would accommodate eighty thousand spectators, hundreds would struggle in vain to reach its marble seats, and would go away at last disappointed.

“Mother, will the lion be very fierce?” asked a gentle-looking, fair-haired girl, vainly trying to suppress a shudder as she spoke.

“Julia is afraid of the lion, I know,” said her brother. “He cannot come to us, silly girl,” he added; “it’s only those wicked Christians that the lion can touch.”

“Come, come, children!” called the father at this moment. “We must make haste, or the city

GAY: *brightly-colored*

EQUIPAGES: *horse-drawn carriages*

CAMPAGNA: *a residential area surrounding Rome*

gates will be closed, and then we shall see nothing of the games tomorrow.”

A litter, in which sat two ladies, was traveling in the same direction, and at about the same pace, as the vinedresser’s family, and the children’s talk about the next day’s grand doings seemed to interest and amuse them very much.

“I wonder whether we were as eager to see the shows as these children are when we first went,” said Flavia, the elder of the two sisters.

“Yes, indeed,” answered her sister, gaily; “and I am anxious to see the closing scene of this spectacle. Chariot riding and gladiators fighting are sights common enough; but the king of beasts fighting with half a dozen Christians is a sight Rome has not witnessed for several years.”

“No, I have never seen them in the arena,” said her sister. “The law of Trajan, that these people should be punished only when they broke the laws of Rome, has prevented the prefects from yielding to the wish of the people when they demanded that they should be thrown to the lions for worshipping strange gods,” replied Flavia.

“Well, it does not seem quite fair that these people should be so severely punished for not worshipping the gods of Rome. Serapis, for whom our late emperor erected such a splendid temple, is not a Roman god, and yet he is honoured here as in Egypt. Indeed, it is quite fashionable to worship both Serapis and Isis in Rome.”

PATRICIAN: *the upper class in ancient Rome*

PREFECTS: *high Roman officials*

SERAPIS AND ISIS: *Egyptian gods*

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“Nay, nay, Sisidona! It is not for the worship of this God alone, but the manner of their worship, that makes everyone hate them so much. We love our Eleusinian mysteries, it is true, but the orgies of these vile Christians are far, far worse than anything ever heard of before. Children are decoyed into these meetings, and never heard of or seen afterwards.”

Sisidona shuddered. “To think of sweet little innocents, like thy Flaminia, being ill-used,” she said. “I would have every one of them thrown to the lions or into the Tiber,” she added, quickly.

The young matron smiled at her sister’s earnestness. “There is little fear that thou wilt turn Christian.”

“The gods forbid any Roman matron or maiden joining this accursed sect. What thinkest thou, Flaminus?” she added, lifting the curtain of her litter and addressing a young man in the chariot at the side. “Flavia deems it needful to give me a word of warning concerning these wretched Christians.”

“Hush, hush, my sister,” said the young man, with a smile. “Jest not about this, for strangers who know thee not may suspect that thou needest the caution, and this would bring trouble upon all of us;” and he glanced at the gentleman beside him as he spoke.

Sisidona pouted like a spoiled child. “My friends need not trouble themselves about me,” she said;

ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES: *religious secrets associated with the worship of the Greek gods, Demeter and Persephone*
ORGIES: *wild rituals*

but she, too, glanced at the other occupant of the chariot as she spoke.

“The noble Sisidona will never cause her friends anxiety on that account, I am sure,” he said, in answer to her look.

“I never make any promises,” said the young lady, archly.

“Then my Flavia must take charge of her willful little sister,” said Flaminus, with a loving look at his wife as he spoke.

“She will not prove a troublesome charge. But shall we not be late?” said the lady, hastily, noticing for the first time the deepening shadows along the road.

“Yes, we must not linger talking here, or we shall have to stay outside the city gates until the morning;” and the next minute slaves and horses were urged to a brisker pace, and they hurried across the Campagna, for they were anxious to secure lodgings in the already crowded city, and this would not be easy, they knew, on the eve of such a splendid exhibition in the arena.

Meanwhile the streets of the city were thronged with eager sightseers, all on their way to or from the Colosseum; for those whom business would prevent, as well as many who did not intend venturing to be present the following day, were determined to see something of the spectacle, and went to see the lion confined in its cage at the side of the building; while those

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who hoped to occupy one of those marble seats now shining dim and white in the fading daylight were eagerly pressing toward the different entrances, where a dense crowd had already assembled.

These were variously engaged in betting on the gladiators, and talking over the additional spectacle of the lion and the Christians, some wishing the emperor had ordered them to be armed, that the unequal contest might be prolonged, and others that they might be brought out one at the time. But no one ventured to breathe a word of pity for those who were condemned to this awful punishment, even if they felt any compassion.

The crowd consisted of the poorer classes, wool-carders and dyers, tanners, and the miners or excavators who dug the stone, of which Rome was built, from the interior of the adjacent hills. These far outnumbered the other portion; and when it became known in which of the numerous cells that intersected the lower portion of the great amphitheater the prisoners were confined, several of these rough-looking men left the doorway, near which they were standing, and made their way to the deserted side of the vast building. After cautiously looking round to see that no one was within earshot, they went to one of the thickly-studded, grated doors, and one said in a loud whisper, "Courage, my brethren and sister, the Lord will be near ye."

IMPERIAL PURPLE: *certain shades of purple could only be worn by the Roman Emperor*

“Yes, nearer than the crowd or the lion, for He is with us now, brightening this dark cell with the glory of His presence,” said a firm cheerful voice from within.

“The Lord be praised!” said the visitors, and then gathered closer to the door that they might hear every word spoken, while one went to tell other friends that they had succeeded in finding the prison.

As the shades of night grew more dark the crowds in the streets leading to the Colosseum increased both in noise and number; and whatever other topic they might disagree upon, all joined in praise of their new emperor, Marcus Aurelius, who, at the festivities on his assumption of the imperial purple, promised to gratify his people’s wish, and put down these Christians. So eager, so intent was everybody in the discussion of this and kindred topics, that no one noticed a little group of quiet-speaking, unostentatious people, who pushed their way through the crowd when compelled to do it, but otherwise sought the shelter of walls and porticoes as they pressed on toward the center of attraction, the Colosseum.

It was reached at last, but they did not turn toward the spot where the fierce roaring of the lion gave notice of where he was to be seen, but passed on toward another cell, from whence other sounds than this were now heard. The little group of Christians, outside as well as inside the cell, had

UNOSTENTATIOUS: *not showy*

PORTICOES: *covered entrance areas or porches where the roof is supported by pillars*

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lifted their voices in concert, and were singing a hymn. Softly and sweetly came the muffled sound from within the iron grating; but the fresh-comers heard it before they reached the spot, and joined in the strain that told of life beyond the grave. Victor, their bishop, was with the little party outside. When the singing had ceased he went close to the door, and, though the grating was high above his head, he made himself heard while he spoke words of faith and hope to brace the courage of those about to suffer. If the glory and honour of martyrdom was pictured in such glowing language that those standing without almost envied their comrades within those stone walls, was it greatly to be wondered at? It was no common trial they were called upon to endure. The hisses and scornful words of thousands of spectators were in themselves enough to make the stoutest heart quail, and these, as well as the lion, would have to be confronted in a few hours.

When Victor had done speaking another hymn was sung, and then the bishop again drew near the door, and, with upraised head and outstretched arms, he prayed for those so soon to suffer an agonizing death; prayed that the Lord Himself would stand by them, as He did by His servant Daniel, either to shut the lion's mouth, or to grant them a speedy deliverance from the agonies of death, and an abundant entrance into the kingdom of light. But not only for those, or the Church of God in

Rome, did he pray but for that clamouring, quarrelsome multitude, whose shouting and struggling could be heard now, and who, scarcely less savage than the lion himself, had thirsted for their blood, and demanded it of the emperor. For those he prayed, that they might be turned from the worship of demons to the living God; that some of those who should assemble to witness the death of these Christians might be so impressed that they, too, should become seekers after God.

The deep blue of the midnight sky, with its myriad stars, saw the little company of Christians increase in number as well as in fervour. All fear of what the consequences might be had vanished, and many, as they joined in singing the soul-cheering words of their hymns, wished they could change places with their companions in the cell, or that someone would accuse them of holding the same faith, that they, too, might march to the arena the next day. The fear of death was taken away, and those whom a few in the distant crowd silently pitied as the most miserable people in Rome, were exulting in the anticipation of the glory so soon to be revealed. Those to be cheered and comforted had changed places before the little company broke up, for it was those within the cell who were speaking words of hope and joy and encouragement, while many outside were bowed down with grief and sorrow, and dared not trust their voices to respond for fear of betraying their emotion.

MYRIAD: *countless*

EXULTING: *rejoicing*

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At length, however, the last words had to be spoken—messages sent to absent friends from those within the cells, last wishes expressed, and then the last farewell. They could not see each other face to face—that joy could not be theirs until they met before the throne of God—but words of tenderest love and affection were uttered, and then, as the first rosy flush of dawn began to paint the eastern sky, the little company turned sorrowfully away, and silently took the road leading to their homes. A few of the boldest of them would fain have mingled with the crowd now pressing round the entrances, that they might by their presence, cheer and encourage their companions when they should be brought forth; but this their bishop deemed unwise in the present instance, and so, for the sake of others, these restrained their eagerness, and went back to their daily employment of wool-combing, or cutting out blocks of stone, and thus forming those wonderful cells and passages since known as the Catacombs. These cells the poor of Rome had been glad to use as sepulchers, for they could not afford to burn their dead, as the wealthy and patrician families did. Another use had now been found for some of the large chambers, for here the Christian Church could meet without fear of interruption or discovery, for none save the *fossors*, or those working in the catacombs, understood the tortuous windings of these subterranean passages, and it was among

FAIN: *gladly*

SEPULCHERS: *tombs*

TORTUOUS: *twisting*

these poor and despised workmen that the Gospel made its way most rapidly, so that the secret was comparatively safe from the rest of the world.

To this underground church many of the Christians now took their way, and while trumpets were blowing, and flags were being unfurled, and chariots driving at their topmost speed, and all fashionable Rome turning out to witness the grand scene of the day, they were praying for their companions, that their faith and courage might not fail, and for the emperor and his people, that they, too, might learn to seek God.