

The Skewbald Panther

By Edward Lucas White

I

His face was the face of a man glad all through. He was standing, his knees against the coping of the inner wall. He looked down into the deserted arena, across it, at the great sweeping curve of tier above tier of blank, tenantless, stone benches and up at the sagging, saucered, spider-web of radiating or cross-knotted guy-ropes. Far away on the opposite side of the amphitheater several workmen were busy with those same guy-ropes, had flung some temporary tackle over one of them and were hoisting up a boy to make repairs or adjustments; otherwise the Colosseum was empty save for himself. He had the air of a man enjoying its emptiness. The sun had risen but a few moments before and its slant rays struck on the gayly painted awning-poles and on their gilded ropes. The interior of the building was coolish with the dawn-chill of masonry grown cold under autumn stars, and he kept his new, white, crimson-edged toga wrapped about him, both his arms under it to the wrists. Yet he snuffed joyously at the early air and breathed long breaths of its coolness, turning from side to side his uncovered curly head, rolling his gaze relishly about. As he stood there another head, a big close-cropped, bullet-haped head, raised itself slowly above the top rail of the entrance stairway behind him, a florid, round moon-shaped fleshy face came above the rail and its small, brown good-natured eyes peered at him. Then there came into view a neck, which would have been long if it had not been incredibly thick, nearly as thick as the big head. The owner of the head moved cautiously, like an over-grown boy playing blindman's bluff. He was a man huge in every dimension, wrapped in a very thin, very white toga with a very broad crimson border. As he trod softly round the end of the railing he showed foot-gear of pale green buckskin, much like Wellington boots, but shorter, with a gold crescent on a little gold chain dangling from the top of each. He was followed by an enormous fawn-colored dog; heavily built, square-jawed, short-haired, which moved as silently as he. Padding noiselessly up behind the absorbed gazer he slapped him boisterously on the shoulder. The smaller man turned round.

"Lucius!" he exclaimed, "what good luck brought you?"

"Precisely to find out," said Lucius, "what whim led you in here. I saw you entering, stopped my litter, got out and followed you. What on earth made you come in here, Quintus? There's no show to-day."

"Show or no show," said Quintus, "this is the Romanest thing in Rome and I am just famished for Rome. I've been hungry for Rome for five years."

"When did you get back?" Lucius asked.

"Day before yesterday," answered Quintus. "Just in time for a good bath and a good dinner. I paid all my official visits yesterday. To-day I'm my own man until lunch-time at the palace and I mean to stroll about and just bathe in the sensation of being in Rome again."

"Well," said Lucius, "while you are bathing, as you call it, you might just as well bathe sitting as standing. Let's sit down."

He settled himself ponderously into one of the ample, heavy-timbered, leather-bottomed, front row armchairs. Quintus took the next. The dog curled up at Lucius' feet.

"Were you at the Emperor's reception yesterday?" Lucius asked.

"I was, my boy," said Quintus, "and very kind he was too. 'You're the right sort, Proculus,' said he, 'you do things. You've earned a rest. Hope you'll enjoy it and go back and do more things. No time to talk now. I've sixteen yoke of horses to look over and I want to get this tedious ceremonial done. Come to lunch with me to-morrow and tell me your adventures.' Rather gracious for Commodus, don't You think?"

"Most unusually gracious," said Lucius. "Wish I could extract something like that from him for me. Wish I had been there to hear it. I didn't see you."

"I was early," said Proculus, "too early for you. I'll bet you were one of the last half dozen."

"I was the very last," said Lucius with a twist of his face. "And I caught it, Commodus burst out at me."

"Last again, as usual. You are a nuisance, Balbinus; you're one of those unimportant important men that aren't worth noticing and must be noticed. You haven't anything to do but eat and sleep and you do too much of both. I've quantities of things to do far better worth doing than eating or sleeping or ruling and you keep me here in this everlasting tedium longer than there is any necessity for, when I must be here too long anyhow. See you're early to-morrow, or I'll think of something to make you remember. You're too fat!" said he. I never had such a scolding. That's why I'm up so early to-day. I was on my way to the palace, trying to be first. But I have plenty of time yet to be early enough. There is no hurry."

"You are fat," said Proculus, running his eyes his friend.

"Not a bit of it," the other denied vigorously. "I'm big. Last time I was at Cossa I climbed into the pan of the bale-shed stilyard at the wool-house. I weighed two hundred and sixty. But I haven't a pound of fat on me. I'm all muscle, stronger than ever. Feel me anywhere. And I keep in the best condition. Swimming Tiber three times is nothing for me. I never make it less than five and generally six, and when I'm in Rome I haven't missed a day, except holy days, for years. I look suety, but I'm all hard flesh over big bones and sinews, stronger than ever."

"I believe you are," Proculus admitted after investigation.

"My wits may be fat, as Commodus says," went on Balbinus. "I can't get over your thinking of coming in here to-day. I might be away from Rome for ten years, and frantic to get back, but I should never think of coming in here when there was nothing going on."

"You think so now," said Proculus, "but if you had had two years of frontier fighting, let alone five as I have had, you'd have thought over a hundred times everything you could see at Rome, you'd want to see them all at once, and you'd get around and see them all as quick as possible."

"You've been on the Rhine, it seems to me," Balbinus ventured.

"Rhine!" Proculus exclaimed. "Not a bit of it. I've been in Dacia."

"But there have been no wars in Dacia," Balbinus demurred.

"No wars!" Proculus ejaculated. "Perhaps not. Do you remember how Opsitius Tanno used to get drunk?"

“Used to,” said Balbinus. “He does yet only not near so often. He’ll take a notion, you can’t tell when, and from beginning with the rest of us like everybody else he’ll make each bowl more wine to less water until he’s pouring it down pure and unmixed and the strongest in his cellar. He’ll keep on till his blood is just raw wine. And then when his fit’s over no more till next time.”

“Just so,” said Proculus. “And you remember what he said to Faltonius Bambilio?”

“Can’t say I do,” Balbinus ruminated. “What was it?”

“Why after Tanno was well over one of his drinking-spells some of the boys were joking him and Bambilio had to join in, ‘You ought to be like me, Tanno,’ says he, ‘I’m never drunk.’ ‘No,’ says Tanno, ‘never drunk and never sober either.’ ”

“What’s that got to do with Dacia?” Balbinus demanded.

“Everything,” Proculus replied. “Dacia and the Rhine frontier are just like Tanno and Bambilio. When you’ve got a war on the Rhine you’ve got war sure enough. It takes every town, fortress, camp, catapult, spear and arrow you have and every man and boy you can muster to hold the frontier and stave off an invasion. You have to deal with this or that keen ambitious chief, full of dreams of conquest, glory, of wealth and power and ease, backed by a compact coherent nation of devoted warriors, hard fighters all, with good swords, good spears, good shields, good hearts envenomed with envy and hate, and then when they are beaten, you have peace, safe, dependable peace, until the next time. Dacia is different. No definite nations there, no chiefs worth reckoning with, no point of special danger, no period of rest. Just indefinite swarms of insignificant tribes of dirty, runty savages on rough-haired ponies, and only half-armed with bad lances, worse bows, wretched arrows, miserable shields and long raw-hide nooses. They have no dreams, no plans, no intentions. They are always on the verge of starvation, never half-clad nor half-housed. It is just raid, raid, raid, summer and winter wherever they think they see a chance for food or clothing, weapons, cattle, horses or slaves. They keep us going. It is exhausting work. If you had been through what I have been through you’d be wild for a sight of the Colosseum, even with nothing going on. Not but that I’m impatient to see a show too.”

“You’ll be here to-morrow, of course,” said Balbinus.

“If I don’t drop dead first,” said Proculus fervently. “And I don’t know what gate to go to. Commodus has changed the arrangements and regulations so I don’t know where I am entitled to sit. I was hoping he would ask me to a place on the dais with him. But after all the officers on leave I saw at the reception yesterday morning I don’t believe there’s a chance of that, so many outrank me.”

“There may be a chance anyhow,” Balbinus told him. “Commodus is a whimmy creature. But most likely he won’t. If he don’t, come with me. One of Commodus’ changes has been granting each Senator the right to bring in a guest to a front seat. I sit just over there, where you see that panel of gouged rollers.”

“I’ll be delighted to come with you,” said Proculus. “I can’t be too far forward for my taste. I want to see everything.”

“You shall,” said Balbinus, “and now let’s go.”

“Certainly,” said Proculus, but he did not move. “Where did you get that dog? I think be is the biggest, strongest-looking, fiercest-looking and quietest dog I ever saw.”

Balbinus settled himself again in his chair.

“That dog,” he said, “used to belong to Fonteia.”

“Did she give him to you?” Proculus enquired.

“Not a bit she didn’t,” Balbinus disclaimed. “She never gave me anything but the cold shoulder. One of her uncles sent her that dog all the way from Tolosa. They had him chained up for a door-dog. He used to growl at everybody. He growled at me every day, going in and coming out. One day he was loose and sprang at me. You know when you are surprised you think mighty quick. It came over me all in a flash that Fonteia was so determined to get rid of me that she had ordered the dog let loose just so he could get at me; for a hint you know.”

“Pretty positive hint,” interjected Proculus.

“Well she had nothing to do with it, I found out afterwards,” Balbinus went on. “But that was the way the idea rushed over me as the dog sprang. Anyhow, it made me so furious that, instead of smashing him on the nose, I just caught him by the throat with both hands and stood right there without moving either foot and choked him till he was limp as a towel. I had a half mind to give him a wrench and break his neck, but I was afraid Fonteia would be angry. So I just flung him into his kennel and went on into the atrium. They were all out in the garden under the big lotus tree. Vedia Philotera was there and Entedia and dear old Nemestronia and some more and of course there were three men to every one of them. I couldn’t get near Fonteia. They were all listening to an interminable recitation by one of those pestiferous poets Fonteia always has hanging round. It was all about Tiberius the Divine and his campaigns in Pannonia. Some of it was lively, exploits of Velleius Paterculus, hard fighting up gorges and on mountain spurs, but most of it bored me. Presently I felt something under my chair. Do you know, it was that dog; licking my feet too. The moment he had come to himself he had crawled after me. Presently Entedia smelt him, though how she can smell anything but the perfumery she uses is more than I could ever make out. She objected. Nemestronia backed her up, though why anybody that keeps a pet leopard should object to a clean dog is beyond my guessing. When the recitation came to a pause they spoke to Fonteia. She called a slave to take him away. He wouldn’t stir, showed his teeth. She sent for the door-keeper. The dog snapped at him. Then she sent after her slave lashers. They came and all five of them were too few to move that dog. Then Fonteia got up and tried herself. He snarled at her. Then I said if she would tell me where she wanted him to go I would take him there. And I took him to his kennel and chained him up. He stayed there till I went home and then he broke his chain at one tug, and followed me home: precious scared my bearers were too. He has never left me since. If I want to go anywhere without him I have to chain him up myself. He won’t let anybody else chain him. To hold him takes two chains, fastened to rings at opposite ends of his kennel wall. A single chain too strong for him to break is so heavy it drags down his collar even when he is lying still and chafes his neck sore.”

“You don’t mean to say he goes into the palace with you?” Proculus demanded.

“Oh,” said Balbinus, “he’ll stay by my litter if I tell him to. He knows that whenever I leave my litter I am sure to come back to it. He’s obedient enough. I like that dog. I never liked a dog before. But he’d let me twist his ears off, if I felt like it. He’s my dog.”

“Thought you said Fonteia didn’t give him to you,” Proculus remarked.

“Neither did she,” said Balbinus. “Next day she asked was I a dog-stealer. I said no, I hadn’t stolen her dog, she could get him if she sent after him. She said that wouldn’t do, I must bring back the dog and leave him or pay for him. I asked how much she wanted. She said twenty thousand sesterces. I said that was too much for any dog. She said to

bring him back then. Finally I paid her the money. What does she do, but buy a turquoise brooch with it.”

“Queer how those red-headed women do run after blue,” said Proculus.

“Red-headed!” exclaimed Balbinus. “Nonsense, Fonteia’s hair isn’t red. It’s the finest imaginable gold-copper. There isn’t a handsomer head of hair in Italy.”

“Certainly,” Proculus hastened to admit. “But what about that brooch?”

“She bought it of Orontides,” Balbinus went on. “Said she had been wanting it for a year. Showed it to me the next day. I told her I would have given her a dozen of them if she had hinted that she wanted one. She said that was different. I said I couldn’t see the difference. She said I was stupid as usual. Anyhow, I have never seen her since without that brooch. She wears it no matter what color she is dressed in, red or yellow, green or violet, brown or gray.”

“Don’t you understand why?” asked Proculus.

“Not a bit,” confessed Balbinus.

“Then you are stupid as she says,” said Proculus.

“I suppose so,” Balbinus admitted. “I’m generally stupid. I don’t understand about Dacia. I know about the Rhine frontier, there’s Gaul to sack on this side and all those ravening kinglets with their unhesitating hordes on the other. You’ve something to defend and something to fight. But by your own showing no Dacian would ever try to cross the Danube. Why not leave that as the boundary and let the Dacians eat each other up? What is there in Dacia worth fighting for?”

“Dacia, mostly,” Proculus replied, the aggressive light of the enthusiast for a new country shining in his eyes. “Dacia is bound to be the very jewel of the Empire. It is no teeming land of easy plenty like Egypt, no trimmed and clipped garden of glorious abundance like Syria or Asia, never can be such a country as Italy or Spain or even Gaul; but it is enormous, and full of possibilities. It has immense plains, flat as the sea, the finest horse-breeding territory in the Empire. It has vast stretches of rolling country, nothing better in the world for grain. It has uncountable chains of mountains covered with the finest timber, full of mines of iron and lead, silver and gold. Oh, it’s all worth fighting for, every foot of it.”

“What’s the use of all that without colonists,” Balbinus demanded.

“Without colonists!” Proculus exclaimed. “It’s filling up fast, much of it has filled up. The bridge is jammed from sunrise to sunset, and as I came southward I passed colony after colony. The roads are thronged all along.”

“Got roads there, too?” Balbinus queried.

“As fine roads as any in the empire,” Proculus asserted. “With good pile bridges at every river and some stone bridges. More than a thousand miles of perfect roads, ditched and curbed, paved and full twelve feet wide. They fork beyond the bridge. One to the westward runs to Porolissum, the middle one strikes Sarmatagete and runs on to Apula, the third swings eastwardly through Maluensis to Zusidava. They are well used all spring, summer and autumn.”

“But how on earth,” said Balbinus, “can you get colonists to go there in the face of all that raiding?”

“You don’t understand,” said Proculus. “We keep pushing the frontier back all the time. Where I was fighting in an absolutely wild country the first year I was there, is perfectly peaceable now, not only not a massacre, nor inroad, but no disturbances of any kind, not

so much as a murder. The farms are thick set all over the country and the people live on them the year round, entirely fearless.”

“What do they raise?” asked Balbinus.

“It varies with the part of the country,” said Proculus. “Cattle and horses and sheep on the plains, wheat and barley and rye on the farm-lands.”

“No olives?” asked Balbinus. “No wine? No fruit?”

“They’ll never raise olives there,” Proculus conceded. “But they’ll raise vines yet. They are trying everywhere. And they make a sort of wine out of barley. It’s not bad when you are used to it. And for fruit they have cherries and apples finer than anything in Italy and in season you’ll find as great a variety of garden fruits and fresh vegetables in the town markets as in any town market in Italy.”

“Towns!” Balbinus exclaimed. “What sort of towns?”

“Hasty towns most of them,” Proculus answered. “Not much better than a winter camp. The colonies run about five thousand persons and they are not rich to begin with. Stone work is slow and dear, while timber is cheap. They build timber houses and fortify the towns with a deep, broad ditch, a high earthwork and heavy log stockade with log towers. But the later colonies are bigger, some of twenty thousand, and they are better equipped. It is wonderful how rich they get in two or three years. Nearer the bridge many of the towns already have well built stone or brick temples, basilicas, baths, amphitheaters, circuses and other public buildings and fine stone city walls.”

“How do they get rich?” Balbinus asked.

“You ought to see the roads,” replied Proculus enthusiastically. “Droves of cattle and horses, great flocks of sheep, thousands of wagon-loads of sides of pork, hams and such, endless muletrains, panniers full of crude iron and lead, yes, and silver and gold, too. The Danube carries fleets of grain and timber ships all summer; they go round by Byzantium.”

“The people are well off by your account,” said Balbinus.

“They are,” Proculus boasted. “It is a cold country, but they will soon be as well-housed as people in Gaul or Britain and they have even a superabundance of clothing and food. Furs are good and cheap, wool and flax plenty. Everybody is well-fed, all the slaves are fat, no one poor anywhere.”

“You make it out a fine country, if we can hold it,” said Balbinus.

“Hold it!” Proculus cried. “We’ll hold it forever. We’ll push on beyond the Carpathians up to the Dniester.”

“Where can the Empire ever get men for such a conquest?” Balbinus wondered.

“From Dacia, of course,” said Proculus. “Dacia makes men. It not only will soon furnish enough men to hold its own frontier without a single legion from outside, but will push on westward, swing round the Yazyges and swallow them whole, and press on Germany from the rear till we crush it between Dacia and Gaul and colonize it up to the Baltic.”

“These are all wild dreams,” Balbinus protested. “Come down to facts. How do you hold Dacia now? If what you say is true it is already nearly as well worth looting as Gaul and will soon be richer. How do you hold off all those desperate nomads of the north? You can’t set up a cordon of legionaries shoulder to shoulder, over a thousand miles of frontier. You can’t ditch, stockade and tower any such endless line of defense. You can’t even have posts close together. How do you hold off the raiders?”

"The legions do it handily," said Proculus. "Hold them off and push them back too."

"You can't make me believe that," Balbinus objected. "A legion can't catch nomads any more than a sow can catch larks or a mud turtle can catch butterflies. The raiders must slip in between your posts and tear up the country. As it gets richer and more peaceful they will have more temptation. The first war elsewhere that calls off some of your outpost garrisons, you'll have a series of inroads and the whole province will go up in smoke."

"Dacia will take care of herself in a few years," Proculus argued. "And until then our outposts let no raiders through between them. The savages have learned better. We've plenty of local friendly cavalry, same kind of fellows as the raiders, confident in the backing of the legions, and aching to pay off old scores on their tribal enemies. And we modify the legions to meet the local conditions. Besides their regular equipment every man has a bow and quiver. Out of a legion we get four thousand men fit for volley archery, two thousand of them make good archers and one half of those get to be experts while on horseback. Then a legion can fight afoot with their regular shields and formation or we can use any advisable proportion of the men as archers and shift from one arrangement to the other as we please. Changing their heavy shields for bucklers, we can use as many as a third of a legion as mounted archers. And we can make any combination of mounted and foot fighters we need. We can fight a legion as a whole, or break it into cohorts or maniples and scatter them about. We teach them, besides their own natural methods, the nomad tricks and outdo the raiders at their own game."

"But how do you think of such innovations?" Balbinus wondered. "I have often considered about that. Somebody must have thought of everything first, I know. But I simply can't imagine it. I can do anything when someone explains it to me. But I should never think of making any variations. How do you do it?"

"Don't know," said Proculus. "Seems simple enough to me. Don't you think it's time we were going?"

"We might go," said Balbinus, rising. "But I've time to spare yet."

Proculus rose and surveyed the building with a lingering, loving gaze. The sunlight now bathed the interior opposite him, although some of the lower tiers of seats were still in shadow, as was the arena, which was, however, lit up by the glaring reflections from the higher expanse of sunlit marble.

"What's that up yonder?" he inquired, pointing to the far end of the arena.

"Oh," said Balbinus, "they're turning one of the animals loose. That's another of Commodus' notions. He says the beasts get dull and stupid in cages and he has the pick of them let out in the arena, one at a time for air and exercise."

"But what kind of a beast is it?" Proculus queried.

"Panther," said Balbinus.

"Nonsense," Proculus objected. "That can't be a panther. A panther is spotted yellow and brown, or is solid black. That creature is black and white like an Epirote bull or a Carthaginian watch-dog. There never was a panther like that."

"Never was, maybe," said Balbinus. "Maybe never will be again, but there is now. Why you must have seen that brute before you left. She's been here for four or five years."

"Five years!" Proculus exclaimed. "Why no animal lasts five years in the Colosseum: few ever fight twice."

“That panther,” said Balbinus, “will last ten years. She has a charmed life. She’ll die of old age, like as not. She has fought at least two hundred times. And never varies when she is let out. Watch her.” And he sat down.

Proculus, reseating himself, watched as he was bid.

“Watch her,” Balbinus repeated. “She always makes for that same panel of rollers over there—the set that is so gouged and clawed—and tries to climb up. She never tries any other panel, and she always tries there at least three times.”

The panther loped easily across the sands, crouched, sprang vertically and caught the third of the wooden rollers set along the face of the wall to protect spectators from any possibility of any animal scaling the enclosure of the arena. Her claws sank into the wood, but the lurching turn of the two-foot roller threw her back upon sand.

“That was not much of a leap,” said Balbinus. “I’ve seen her touch the sixth roller. Those claw-marks are nearly all hers. You can see from here some on the sixth roller. See, the sun has just reached it. She has never touched the seventh roller. There she goes again.”

As he spoke the panther shot into the air. She got a hold on the fifth roller and clawed wildly with her hind legs at those below, but as they yielded to her weight and revolved on their bearings she slipped down again.

“She’s only playing,” said Balbinus. “When she is really in earnest she does better than that. My seat is right above that panel, almost exactly in the middle of it, and sometimes I think she’s going to get her claws over the coping. If I am looking over when she springs it seems she is coming right in my face.”

The panther sprang a third time and fell back at once.

“She won’t try again,” said Balbinus. “Sometime she tries six or seven times.”

She walked nosingly around the edge of the arena, flicking the end of her tail. She lay down, rolled over, sprang up lightly and continued her nosing progress.

Proculus eyed her as she went.

“Did you ever see a black dog that had been scalded?” he asked, “with white hairs grown out on the scars?”

“I have,” said Balbinus, “but the white hair would only be in little streaks. She is more than half white.”

“Her belly is black,” said Proculus, “and her tail is black.”

“If she had been scalded over as much of her skin as shows white hairs, she would have been killed,” Balbinus argued. “I believe those are natural colors on her. The edges of the white are too irregular for scald marks. Look at her face now while it is towards us. That black patch over her left eye and ear looks perfectly natural.”

“Perhaps it is natural,” said Proculus. “But I never heard of such a beast.”

“You must have heard of her,” said Balbinus. “That is the very panther that killed Fonteius Bucco.”

“Killed Fonteius Bucco!” Proculus exclaimed.

“Oh well,” said Balbinus. “He had no right to the name of course, but he had passed under it.”

“But which Fonteius Bucco,” queried Proculus, “and how did she come to kill him?”

“Do you mean to say you never heard of the murder and the trial and all that frightful scandal,” demanded Balbinus.

“Lucius,” said Proculus. “I have heard nothing for five years except the wind howling over the plains, the moaning of the forests at night, the roaring of great rivers at their fords, the yells of Scythian robbers, the blare of bugles, the whine of well-sweeps and such like noises of campaign or camp. I have seen nothing but camps, or stockaded forts, or miserable, raw, timber towns, or the wild mountains and the weary plains of Dacia. I have had no time to read, no time to talk. It’s been day-and-night riding and fighting, or desperately hasty ditching or breathlessly driven sword, spear, shield, helmet, shoe, harness, tent, or tool-making. Little news has reached me and no gossip. Please assume that I know nothing. Tell me everything you know and by all means tell me about Bucco and the panther.”

“You remember Decimus Fonteius Bucco?” Balbinus asked.

“Fonteia’s uncle?” Proculus asked in turn.

“No,” said Balbinus. “Not old Decimus, young Decimus.”

“Fonteia’s brother?” Proculus queried.

“As you and I knew him,” Balbinus agreed.

“A vile whelp,” said Proculus. “The worst specimen of a noble family ever I saw. I detested him. How such an unsavory pup could be Fonteia’s brother and Causidiena’s son I never could make out.”

“He really wasn’t,” said Balbinus. “But I’ll get to that later. Causidiena died before you left I believe.”

“I was at the funeral,” said Proculus, “and very sorry I was. She would have turned into a lovely old lady like Nemestronia.”

“Well,” said Balbinus. “Even before she died, what with old Fonteius Bucco’s blindness and the invalidism of Marcus, young Decimus was more and more unmanageable. Marcus Bucco never could control any of his children, not even Fonteia. Naturally being the best man of the family Caius Bucco had charge of all the estate, and when his father and Marcus died about the same time, a little after you left, it hardly increased his power over the property. Old Decimus stood out of the way and never claimed any of his privileges as elder brother. Young Decimus kept getting into trouble, and though Caius was kind to him, he quarreled with his uncles continually.

“Then Caius was found murdered, most atrocious butchery too. Everybody thought it was one of his slaves; he was a very reckless man about slaves, bought all sorts with no guarantee of good character and gave them a loose rein. But when the investigation was no more than started suspicion turned on young Decimus. Proofs accumulated and it was soon clear he had murdered his uncle. He was convicted. Then one of Marcus’ slaves confessed that Decimus was her son, she had substituted him for Causidiena’s baby, and never been suspected. The legitimate heir had died on her hands before he was a year old. Of course that mitigated Fonteia’s shame, but still she had grown up with him as his sister, and felt the disgrace of the trial terribly.

“After he was proved a slave the lawyers had a fine wrangle over the sentence. One lot said he must be sentenced as a slave. The other lot held out that as he had had the status of a free man when the crime was committed and was constructively related as a son to his victim he must be punished as for parricide by a citizen. Then Commodus cut in. He said he didn’t mean to interfere with the dispensing of justice but he suggested that, instead of wasting time deciding whether to crucify him as a slave or drown him, sewed up in a sack with snakes, dogs and monkeys, as a parricide, why not compromise on

throwing him to the beasts in the Colosseum? That would be more of a lesson to others, as being visible to a greater crowd, and it would be more spectacular. Thrown to the beasts he was. It was four years ago, four years ago to-morrow Fonteia was there. She had been sorely tried at first between her genuine dislike for him, her abomination of him as a murderer and her love for her uncle on the one side and her mother's training in family duties and loyalty on the other. Once he was proved a slave and no kin of hers she behaved as if he had never existed. But the spectacle here shook her nerves for all her self-control. I sat on this side then, just where the Vestals sit now, about three panels nearer the dais. She sat with the Vestals, where I sit now above that panel the panther tried to climb. Several batches of criminals had been disposed of when they cleared the arena, sanded it afresh and turned him into it alone. He had nothing on but a waist-cloth, and carried a short club, to let him feel as if he had a chance and to make it interesting. They let out six panthers from six different inlets. Two began snarling at each other at once and paid no attention to anything else. The one nearest the fellow went straight for him, and, do you know, that cowardly scoundrel showed just one flare of courage in his desperation. He ran at the beast, hit it on the nose and drove it away. He scared off the next, too. The fifth was afraid of the crowd and the shouts and all that and tried to get back through the grating down the inlet. While Bucco had been setting the crowd wild with delight by scaring off the two panthers in succession, that she-demon down there had never moved. When he paused and glared round she began to crawl toward him. The moment he saw her coming he yelled, threw away his club and ran. She never hurried, just crawled steadily. He scudded to that panel of rollers below the Vestals. There was Causidiena, the eldest Vestal, and Fonteia, who had known him as nephew and brother, and Gargilia, the youngest Vestal whose cousin he had courted. It was harrowing to see him run and hear him yell. And the panther never hurried, just kept on crawling. Fonteia sat as if nothing was going on, but the Vestals leaned forward; Causidiena was very bitter over her brother-in-law's murder. Then . . . have you ever seen one of the log-walking contests?"

"I haven't seen one amphitheater show where you have seen a hundred," said Proculus.

"I mean," said Balbinus, "when the arena is flooded and they throw in a dozen or two logs and then offer a prize for anyone who can stand up on one. And first they let a batch of street urchins try, and they wade out to them and scramble on to them and try to stand up and always get thrown off when the logs turn."

"I've seen that," said Proculus.

"And then, you know," Balbinus went on. "Slaves and rabble try and not one of them can stay on a log. Then an acrobat minces out on a slack-rope, and takes a long jump for a log and lands neatly on it and stays there. And he dances and skips and makes the log turn under him and pirouettes and turns flip-flops and walks on it on his hands and stays on."

"Yes," said Proculus, "I've seen that too."

"You know what a peculiar trick of balancing he has so the log never lurches and throws him off?"

"Yes," said Proculus.

"Did you ever see anybody climb arena-rollers with a similar trick of balancing?"

"No, I never did," said Proculus, "and I don't believe it could be done."

“Neither would I have believed it,” said Balbinus, “until I saw it. That frantic murderer jumped for the lowermost roller, and somehow got his right arm and right leg over it, hugging belly-flat to it. He hung on when it turned. Then he clung to it with both legs and one arm and got his right arm over the second roller. Then he got both arms round the second roller and steadied himself. Then up went his right leg and he was sticking to the second as he had stuck to the first. The whole audience was dead still, everybody that could see him watching breathlessly and the rest silent because the others were. The panther never hurried, just crawled steadily, her eyes never leaving him. By the time she was below him he was on the fifth roller and she crouched flatter and flatter while he worked up to the sixth roller. When he put up a hand for the seventh she sprang. Her paws clawed into him, one on his ribs and the other on his left thigh, and she gripped a mouthful of his right flank just above the hip, her teeth must have met in his liver. He gave one frightful screech as they fell together. She landed on her feet and instantly gave him a cuff with her forepaw alongside the head. It tore the side of his face off and must have broken his neck. Then she set her teeth into his throat and lay down flat, holding on. The audience had given one barking shout as they fell and then hushed again. When she lay motionless they yelled over and over. And through it all Fonteia sat bolt upright, fanning herself quietly and keeping her countenance, though she was dead pale. And she has never missed a spectacle since; too proud to give anyone an opportunity to say she stays away because of her memories. She always comes with the Vestals, too. But they were so affected by the panther’s regularly repeated efforts to climb those rollers that Causidiena petitioned Commodus for a different place. He was just making his revision of the seating regulations, and he changed them to this side. Quite by accident my new seats happened to be where theirs had been. I don’t wonder they were upset, it makes my flesh crawl every time that brute tries to climb up, not that I am afraid she is coming over, but because she reminds me of Bucco and all that. Fonteia hates the sight of the beast, a hundred times more than I do, I know. I used to hope each show would finish the creature. But she has killed any number of criminals. She has fought goats, antelopes, elks, bulls, buffaloes and all sorts of horned animals. She has set to with dogs, panthers, tigers, lions and come off alive. She has escaped numbers of gladiators, bested some, killed one or two, and been let off by the favor of the audience over and over. When I gave up hoping that she would be killed, I tried to bribe the keepers to poison her. But they wouldn’t hear of it. I bid them up to two hundred thousand sesterces, but they said Commodus had taken a special fancy to the beast and they dare not take any bribe to poison her. I would have paid four hundred thousand to get the creature out of the way. I know how Fonteia feels, though she holds her head high at the shows and never mentions the panther at any time. She can’t help being reminded of all that hideous humiliation and she not only can’t help remembering the horror of Bucco’s death, but she must recall her baby days with him before he developed his ugly traits. It must tear her heart to see that panther. I am sure nothing would please her as much as getting finally rid of the beast.”

“By your own account,” said Proculus, “you are no nearer winning Fonteia than you were five years ago.

“No nearer and not any more hopeful,” said Balbinus. “But just as determined.”

“Doesn’t the turquoise brooch make you any more hopeful?” asked Proculus.

“I don’t see what that has to do with it,” said Balbinus.

“That’s just it,” said Proculus. “You don’t see.”

“One thing I do see,” said Balbinus. “She doesn’t seem to care for anyone else. She has any number of suitors, but never treats anyone any better than she treats me; or any worse, for that matter.”

“I believe you are more hopeful after all,” said Proculus.

“Not a bit,” said Balbinus. “Whenever I talk marriage to her she says Helvacius was a man who did something and she’ll stay a widow for life before she’ll marry a do-nothing. She says if I’d only do something she’d think about it.”

“Why don’t you do something?” Proculus inquired.

“Can’t get a chance to do any of the things I can think of,” said Balbinus. “And can’t think of any more.”

“What did you think of?” his friend asked.

“I went to Commodus,” said Balbinus, “and asked for a province. You know the way Commodus looks at you, like a stupid countryman who has not understood what you said?”

“Yes, I know,” said Proculus, and he laughed grimly.

“Well,” said Balbinus, “he stared at me in his red-faced goggle-eyed fashion and burst out:

“ ‘Make you a Prefect! You manage a province! You never managed anything in your life.’

“ ‘I manage my estate,’ I said.

“ ‘Don’t put on airs with me,’ he growled. ‘You talk as if you were your rich cousin. You aren’t *the* Caelius Balbinus. Your estate is no wonder. There are a hundred men in Rome richer than you.’

“ ‘I’m not putting on airs,’ I told him. ‘I know where I stand and what my estate is. Such as it is I manage it.’

“ ‘You do not,’ he snapped like a dog. ‘It manages itself. You’ve bailiffs and overseers and inspectors and bookkeepers and managers. Your father trained them, yes and your grandfather, in the ways his grandfather’s grandfather before him didn’t so much as start, but only had to keep in motion. The estate runs itself as well as if you had been born deaf, dumb and blind; runs itself no worse and no better. You manage nothing.’

“ ‘Men less capable than I have provinces,’ I said.

“Then he did puff and glare.

“ ‘You think,’ he bellowed, ‘because I don’t wear a long beard and keep a glum face like my father that I’m a fool. You think because I enjoy a good time and don’t consort with dreary old shaggy-faced, shaggy-cloaked philosophers, that I care nothing for the Empire. You think because I love horse-racing and archery and beast-fighting and gladiators and all sorts of really entertaining things, I am no judge of men. I know men. I love best a man who can do things with his hands, a good swordsman or fighter. I love best a man who can distinguish himself in the amphitheater. That’s the best kind of man. But I love any sort of capable man. You senators think I hate you all. I don’t hate senators, I hate loafers. You are about as active as a row of hay-ricks in the sun. Get out and do something, any one of you, and I’ll be the first one to give you credit for it. If it’s worth while I’ll love you for it. I know men. You take me for a fool, but you are wrong, all of you. I’m no fool and I care more for the Empire than any man in it. I know whom to appoint and whom to reject. You run a province! You couldn’t attend to a rabbit-hutch.

You great, bloated, lard-bag, you! you sit like a toad on a mud-bank gaping for flies to blunder into his mouth. You never did anything in your life. Get out and do something.'

" 'What am I to do?' I asked. 'I want a province and you refuse and then tell me to do something. What am I to do?'

" 'Men who do things,' he said, 'don't need to be told what to do, they see things for themselves. If you only once did something I might think of you.'

" 'But what,' I insisted.

" 'What?' he roared in rage. 'Anything! I'd like to see you spit once as if you really meant it; I could forgive you if you'd up and kick me under the chin, if you thought of it for yourself. Go home,' he said. 'Get out of my sight!' And I went. I don't care about the province, and I don't care whether I please him or not, but I do want to do something to please Fonteia. Only I suppose nothing I could do would please her."

"I believe," said Proculus, "that she is much better pleased with you than you suspect and I believe Commodus likes you too."

"They have a queer way of showing it," Balbinus gloomed.

"You could please them both at once," said Proculus.

"I wish you would tell me how," said Balbinus. "Hang him I say. Yet I shouldn't mind catching his eye. For her, I'd do anything, as you know."

"Do you really mean to say," demanded Proculus, "that you don't see for yourself what to do?"

"Not a bit I don't," said Balbinus.

"Not with such an opportunity staring you in the face?" Proculus demanded. "When the gods have loaded the dice for you and all you need is to make the throw?"

"If you see anything to do," said Balbinus, "you tell me and I'll do it quick."

Proculus looked around. Several gangs of workmen were busy, but none near them. He stood up, walked to the rail of the stairway and peered down it. Then he came back to his seat.

"Now listen to me," he said, "and don't interrupt me till I am done."

Balbinus listened, mouth and eyes open. When Proculus was done he objected.

"It won't work."

"Are you afraid?" asked his friend.

"Not a bit," said he. "It would be easy. But if they refused two hundred thousand sesterces before how can I bribe them now?"

"Don't you see how different this is?" asked Proculus. "They have no dead panther to account for, only a natural failure to notice some rollers out of order, and you won't be dealing with the same set of men, anyhow, not trying to bribe men who have once shied. These will only have to invent a story to explain a perfectly usual occurrence. Did you never know of rollers jamming?"

"Often," said Balbinus.

"There you are," said Proculus, "and now let's go. It's getting hot here and you'll be none too early at the palace by now."

"Your advice is good," said Balbinus. "I'll take it."

Therefore the moon that night looking down into the Colosseum saw a group of figures in the arena by the enclosing-wall. One was a very big man with two attendants. The others were regular keepers of the amphitheater. They talked a long time and there were many

explanations and much assurance that there could be no mistake. A bag of coins changed hands.

Next morning, so early for holders of senatorial seats that they found the chairs all about their own still vacant, Balbinus and Proculus settled themselves into their places.

"One drawback about festival days," said Balbinus, "I always have to chain up my dog, I miss him and he misses me. He hates to be chained up."

"I sympathize with him," said Proculus, half shutting his eyes against the dazzle of the sunlit and, and snuffing joyously at the perfumed air. "I'd hate to be chained up to-day. But don't you think he'd interfere with our purpose?"

"We had best not think of our purpose," said Balbinus, "until the time comes to carry it out. I have never been nervous in my life and I don't expect to be now, but I want to run no risks. Let's forget our little secret until the moment for action arrives. There's plenty else to think of."

"The greatest plenty," Proculus agreed. "And more for me than for you. What makes the sand sparkle so?"

"Notion of Commodus," snorted Balbinus. "His father saved so much money he's afraid he can't spend it fast enough. So he has gold-dust sprinkled over it. Fine bit of fool ostentation."

"Wish he'd save the cost and spend it on Dacia," said Proculus earnestly.

"Can't you forget Dacia for one day?" Balbinus asked banteringly. "Isn't this enough to make you think there never was a Dacia?"

"Indeed it is," Proculus replied.

"Well, forget it then," his friend advised. "And enjoy yourself."

"I can't help that," said Proculus. "It's almost as novel to me as if I had never seen it before."

"Then you ought to be able to answer a question I have heard debated," said Balbinus. "Does the Colosseum look bigger when full or when empty?"

Proculus ruminated, gazing about him. The arena had in it only a few sweepers, the Imperial platform was untenanted save by the sentinels, most of the movable armchairs in the foremost rows were not yet occupied; but the second wider belt of stone seats devoted to the wealthy nobility of lower than senatorial dignity was already well filled; the third yet wider division of stone benches was crowded with gentry; the fourth steepest circle was overflowing with the populace; while behind them, on the uppermost level, was a packed jam of standing rabble.

"I don't know," he answered. "Yesterday it seemed enormous, to-day there is something choky about the crowd. Yet the unvaried variety of all that flickering waving of fans and turning of faces and moving hands and arms, gives one a sensation of immensity too."

"What strikes you most?" asked Balbinus.

"The flowers," said Proculus.

"Don't you have flowers in Dacia?" Balbinus inquired.

"Dacia won't be forgotten," laughed Proculus. "Yes, we have flowers there, even some roses. But when we have games the spectators just sit on the grass slopes or stand along the edge of the arena like our ancestors of old. You don't see the wreaths as you do here, and there they are mostly made of strange wild flowers, not a bit home-like to see. These are uniformly roses, and such roses! there must be wagon loads of them. When the seats

are all full, allowing a dozen roses to a wreath, there will be twelve hundred thousand roses in this building.”

“More,” said Balbinus. “But hang the wreaths. I’m afraid mine will tilt over my eyes at the critical moment.”

“Shall I pull it off your head as you rise?” asked Proculus.

“I’d thought of that,” said Balbinus. “Better not. It might disconcert me. I’ll risk the slipping.”

“We agreed to keep off that subject,” said Proculus.

“We did,” Balbinus admitted. “But it will come back. Yet it’s not worrying me any. I’m as cool as possible.”

“You look it,” said Proculus, “and that’s more than most of the audience look. I think it will be a hot day.”

“It’s cool enough here,” said Balbinus, “but the upper tiers look hot already.”

“I should think they would be,” said Proculus. “Piled against each other as they are. I never sat before where I could see the top rows opposite me. You senators get a fine effect here, able to see up under the awning, clear to the arcade and the awning-poles. You can’t imagine what a difference it makes.”

“I can,” said Balbinus. “For I never could see that much before. The sag of the awning, at its inner edge on the farther side, always cut off my view of everything above the top tier of seats.”

“I thought it was all because of our location,” said Proculus. “What makes the difference?”

“It’s the awning,” said Balbinus. “It’s the lightest they ever put up and it sags correspondingly less.”

“What’s it made of?” asked Proculus.

“Silk,” said Balbinus. “Pure silk. Commodus started the fashion of full complete silk clothing for men and all the dandies are imitating him. Linen and wool for me though, yet. But Commodus, not content with dressing in women’s textures must needs commit the extravagance of an entire silk awning.”

“It’s beautiful,” said Proculus. “But I should say it is too thin to do much good.”

“It’s hard to get a satisfactory awning,” said Balbinus, “they have tried all sorts in my time. One thick enough to stop the sunrays altogether is so heavy it sags till the inner edge cuts off the view of the upper tiers over the farther side of the arena, and besides it makes the place look gloomy. So does any awning all one color. Brown and gray are coolest, but very dingy. Blue and green make the people look ghastly and the women ugly, white and yellow make a glare no one can endure and red makes the place look hot. This awning is about the best I ever saw. It’s light and not too thin, the pattern is gay and the red and yellow, blue and green make a pleasant variety of bright colors on the audience.”

“Too much red,” said Proculus.

“That’s Commodus again,” said Balbinus. “He likes red.”

“Speaking of red,” said Proculus, “what have you on under your toga?”

“Tunic, of course?” said Balbinus.

“But what color?” Proculus queried.

“Crimson,” said Balbinus.

“But why?” Proculus persisted.

“I might get scratched,” said the strong man, “and I don’t want to show it if possible.”

At this moment several senators with their wives and guests came to fill the chairs to right and left of them. Greetings, introductions of Proculus to the newcomers and various chat occupied some little time. By and by Proculus came to a lull in his talk with his left-hand neighbor and found Balbinus momentarily disengaged and questioned him.

“Is Fonteia with the Vestals? I can’t make her out?”

Balbinus peered across the arena. The Vestals had just entered and were settling themselves in their chairs.

“That’s Fonteia in lavender. She’s between Causidiena on her right with gray hair, and Manlia; Gargilia is the one with the black hair on the left end.”

“Fonteia is too young and too slender for lavender,” said Proculus.

“That’s what I tell her,” said Balbinus. “I say lavender is for fat old women. But she will wear it.”

Just then the imperial cortege began to fill the dais and the audience burst into the quick staccato three-bar song of greeting to the Emperor, thundering it over and over until he was seated and held up his hand for silence.

At once the shows began. Proculus, watching with unsated eyes the succession of beast-fights, acrobatic feats, and killings of criminals by various beasts, was, even in his interested state, aware of the lack of enthusiasm in the audience. He was too far from the dais to make out the Emperor’s expression. Commodus was hardly more than a great hulking, overgrown lad, with all a boy’s impatience and petulance. Not much could be expected of him in the way of dignity. He sulked often and at the smallest pretext. Yet Proculus perceived, or thought he perceived, a more than usually obvious posture of bored irritation, of disappointment with the progress of a very tame, usual and uninteresting series of shows. He saw, or imagined he saw, an Emperor wearied with what he had seen over and over and eager for some diversion, something new, something unusual. Fonteia’s face he could not read where she sat. It was all one could do to identify a known figure in a known seat at that distance. Yet he reflected that she could not but see Balbinus, the biggest-bodied man in the senate, in the front row. As he looked on with a return of half-forgotten reminiscence, he realized that no one could see everything when so many things went on at once, that no one group in the arena, still less any one figure, caught the eyes of all the throng.

Yet when the splotched panther appeared from one of the beast-inlets, it seemed to Proculus that all eyes followed her, as, ignoring everything in the arena, living and dead, she galloped in a straight line across the sand. His eyes he certainly kept on her till the coping cut off his view. Then he saw Balbinus slip the toga from his shoulders. Both of them sat well back and strove to appear unaware of what their strained senses expected. That the panther had sprung and had not fallen back they were apprised by a universal yell from all parts of the amphitheater from which she was visible, by an alarmed shrinking back of the senators and their guests near them, by little screams from two ladies who had been looking over the coping and who shrank back abruptly. Proculus pressed himself against the back of his chair and over its left arm, to give Balbinus room. He heard in front of him a scratchy clawing, heard it even above the redoubling waves of excited yells that rang from all around the arena; heard it all the more when those yells subsided suddenly into a tense hush of expectation, when the seventh roller failed to turn.

A paw clutched the coping, a splay paw with four translucent horny claws that slipped on the polished stone and caught on the interlaced leaves of the carved vine on it, a puffy paw with dingy black hair between the claws. Then beside it and by no means close to it another paw, white-haired and paler-clawed, hooked its talons into the carvings.

A head came up, a head with a black ear and a white ear with irregular marblings of white and black, with two round-pupiled yellow-gray eyes, one looking out of a black patch and one out of a white. It had a moist, black muzzle, and as it rose the lips curled, the mouth opened and Proculus found himself trying to push back his chair as he recoiled from a jagged snarl. He was looking past incredibly white, unbelievably sharp teeth into an unforeseeable immensity of scarlet mouth and throat.

There was more all too audible scratching and the head elevated itself on a black and white neck. Proculus did not see Balbinus move, but he did see a big, beefy, pink hand round that neck, the thumb on the gullet.

The spectators, who had first yelled in mere blind excitement and then stilled in mere unconscious strained attention, saw the panther's head above the coping, saw the senators tumbling over each other to right and left, saw the two occupied chairs in front of her, saw the distracted arena-guards, some ineffectually rushing for the nearest exits, vainly trying to reach the podium before the animal cleared the coping, some vacillating on the sand below, eager to shoot the beast and fearing to lose spear or arrow for fear of wounding one of the senators.

Then they saw a big, crimson-tunic'd figure erect, its long arms stiff and straight out before it, the panther's throat vis'd inside its big hands, the beast's fore legs beating the air in front of her, her hind legs lashing wildly against the top roller and the bit of wall below the coping. They followed breathlessly the gyrations and throes of the lithe body until it hung limp and motionless, straight down from the unaltered grip of those big hands. Then they stood up and howled, and stamped, yelling wave after wave of cheers till they were hoarse.

Balbinus stood motionless, the panther dangling against the coping, his tense arms streaked with the streams that gushed from a dozen gashes.

When the cheering died of itself he straightened his arms again till the carcass hung clear of the wall, gave it a flit to the right and flung the flaccid, broken-necked carrion into the arena.

The wave of cheers that followed after he sat down made all that had gone before seem whisperings.

When the first lull came between the gusts of cheers, Commodus, standing up on the seat of his throne, his voice broken by excitement to a cracked falsetto, sent down the whole length of the arena, audible to everyone, a shrill yell of:

"Macte virtute esto Balbine."

The cheering rose again like a storm-wind. It was very pleasant to Balbinus. He sat bolt upright in his chair, his toga wrapped round him to the throat, his arms under it. He was staring across the Colosseum at a lavender-clad figure in the front row facing him.