

The Coliseum

Butchered to make a Roman holiday.

It was a great festival day in Rome. From everywhere great crowds of people poured into one common destination. Over the Capitoline Hill, through the Forum, past the Temple of Peace and the Arch of Titus and the imperial palace, on they went till they reached the Coliseum, where they entered its hundred doors and disappeared within.

Inside, the Coliseum's enormous arena spread out, surrounded by countless rows of seats that rose over one hundred feet high to the top of the outer wall and were covered with people of every class and age. So vast an assembly gathered in such a way, presenting long lines of stern faces ascending high in successive rows, formed a spectacle that has never elsewhere been equaled, and that was calculated beyond all others to awe the soul of the beholder. More than one hundred thousand people gathered here, animated by one common feeling and incited by a single passion—their thirst for blood. Nowhere can we find a sadder commentary on the boasted civilization of ancient Rome than this, her own greatest spectacle.

Warriors who had fought in foreign wars and were familiar with deeds of valor felt no indignation at the scenes of cowardly

oppression displayed before them; nobles of ancient families could find in these brutal shows no stain upon their country's honor. Philosophers, poets, priests, rulers, the highest as well as the lowest in the land crowded these seats; but the patrician shouted as loudly and eagerly as the plebeian. What hope remained for Rome when her people universally gave themselves to cruelty and brutal oppression?

The Emperor Decius, surrounded by the chief Romans, sat on a raised seat in a conspicuous part of the amphitheater. A group of officers belonging to the Prætorian guards criticized various points in the scene before them with the air of connoisseurs. Their loud laughter, gaiety, and splendid attire made them the object of much attention from their neighbors.

Several opening spectacles had been introduced, and now the fights began. Several hand-to-hand combats, most of which resulted fatally, excited differing degrees of interest according to the courage or skill of the combatants. These whetted the appetite of the spectators to a keener relish and filled them with eager desire for the more exciting events that were to follow.

One man in particular, an African from Mauritania of gigantic strength and stature, drew admiration and applause from the multitude. His skill seemed equal to his strength; he wielded his short sword with marvelous dexterity, and thus far had slain every opponent.

He now faced a gladiator from Batavia, a man fully equal in stature and strength to himself. The tawny African, with glossy black hair and glittering eyes, and the fair-skinned Batavian, with blond hair and keen gray eyes, presented a striking contrast. It was hard to tell which had the advantage, so nearly were they matched in every respect; but as the former had already fought for some time, it seemed that the odds were against him. Both men, however, began the contest with great spirit and eagerness.

The Batavian struck tremendous blows, which the other parried adroitly. The African was quick and furious, but he could do nothing against the cool and wary defense of his vigilant adversary.

At length, at a given signal, the combat was suspended, and the gladiators were led away, not through mercy or admiration, but simply through a shrewd understanding of the best mode of satisfying the Roman public. It was well understood that they would return.

Now a large number of men armed with short swords entered the arena and began to attack each other. It was not a conflict between two sides, but a general fight in which every man attacked his neighbor. These were the bloodiest fights, and therefore the most exciting. A conflict of this kind always destroyed the greatest number of men in the shortest time. The arena quickly became a scene of dire confusion. Five hundred armed men in the prime of life and strength all struggled confusedly together. Sometimes they all interlocked into one dense mass; at other times they violently separated into widely scattered individuals, with a heap of dead at the scene of combat. But these assailed one another again with undiminished fury; separate combats sprang up all around, and the victors in these rushed to take part in others, until at last the survivors once more congregated into one struggling crowd.

At length their struggles became weaker. Out of five hundred, but one hundred wounded and weary men remained. At a signal two men leaped into the arena and rushed from opposite sides upon this crowd—the African and the Batavian. Fresh from their repose, they fell upon the exhausted wretches, who had neither the spirit to combine nor the strength to resist. It became a butchery as the two giants slaughtered right and left without mercy until they alone stood upright upon the arena, the applause of the throng thundering in their ears.

These two again attacked each other, attracting the attention of the spectators while the bodies of the wounded and slain were removed. The combat was as fierce as before, and quite similar. The African was agile, the Batavian cautious. But finally the former made a desperate thrust; the Batavian parried it and returned a stroke like lightning. The African sprang back and dropped his sword. But he was too late, for his foe's sword had pierced his left arm. As he fell, a roar of joy arose from one hundred thousand throats. But this was not to be the end, for even while the conqueror stood over his victim the attendants sprang forward and drew him away. Yet the Romans knew, and the wounded man knew that it was not mercy. He was merely to be reserved for a later but certain fate.

"The Batavian is a skillful fighter, Marcellus," said one young officer to a companion among the group of Praetorians.

"He is, indeed, Lucullus," replied the other. "I do not think that I ever saw a better gladiator. Indeed, both of them were much better than common."

"They have a better man than either inside there."

"Ah! Who is he?"

"The gladiator Macer. I think he is the best I have ever seen."

"I have heard of him. Do you think he will be out today?"

"I understood so."

A loud roar interrupted this short conversation. It came from the vivarium where the wild beasts were confined. It was a fierce and a terrific roar, such as the most savage beasts give when they are at the extremity of hunger and rage.

Soon the keepers flung open the iron gratings and a tiger stalked into the arena. He had been brought from Africa but a few days previously and been kept three days without food. His furious rage, which hunger and confinement had heightened to a terrible degree, was awful to behold. Lashing his tail, he walked

round the arena, gazing with bloodshot eyes upward at the spectators. But another object soon diverted their attention. From the opposite side a man strode into the arena. He had no armor, but wore only a loincloth. Bearing in his hand the customary short sword, he advanced with a firm pace toward the center of the scene.

All eyes at once fixed upon this man. "Macer! Macer!" called the horde of spectators.

The tiger saw him and uttered a short savage growl. Macer stood still, his eyes calmly fixed upon the beast, who lashed his tail more madly than ever and bounded toward him. The tiger crouched, and with one terrific spring, leaped directly at him. But Macer was prepared. Like a flash he darted to the left, and just as the tiger fell to the earth, he dealt a short sharp blow straight to his heart. The huge beast shuddered from head to foot, and drawing all his limbs together, he gave one last howl almost like the scream of a human and fell dead upon the sand.

The multitude's applause rose like thunder.

"Wonderful!" cried Marcellus. "I never saw skill equal to that of Macer!"

"Without doubt he has been fighting all his life," rejoined his friend.

After the carcass of the tiger was drawn away, the grating creaked again as it swung open. A lion stalked slowly out and looked about as if in surprise. He was the largest of his species, a giant, and had long been preserved for some superior antagonist. He seemed capable of encountering two animals like the tiger that had preceded him. Beside him, Macer looked like a child.

The lion had fasted long, but showed no fury like the tiger. He walked across the arena and then trotted completely around it as though searching for escape. Finding every side closed,