

THE BOTTOM OF THE GULF

THREE hundred and sixty-two years before Christ a chasm opened in the Roman Forum, and the soothsayers declared that it would never close until the most precious treasure of Rome had been thrown into it. It is said that a youth named Mettus (or Mettius) Curtius appeared on horseback in full armour, and before a very fair audience, exclaiming that Rome had no dearer possession than arms and courage, leaped down into the gulf, which thereupon closed over him. This incident, like most of the legendary history of Rome, has been subjected to severe criticism. Those who too hastily disbelieve in it will reconsider their opinion on reading the account, not previously published, of what took place at the bottom of the gulf.

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Curtius and the horse fell in the order in which they had started, with the horse underneath. After a few minutes' rapid passage the horse stopped falling somewhat suddenly, broke most of itself, and died. Curtius, who, though a little shaken, was uninjured, sat up on his dead horse and looked round to see if he could discover the nearest way back. As he looked upward he saw the top edges of the cavern close together, and the daylight shut out. But a curious greenish light still lingered in the cavern in which he found himself, and from one of its recesses came a voice which startled Mettus considerably. It said interrogatively :

‘Did you hurt yourself?’

‘Not much,’ replied Curtius. ‘I didn’t know there was anybody down here. You quite startled me. Do come out and let me see you.’

‘No, thanks,’ said the voice. Did you really believe that you

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would die when you jumped down the gulf?’

‘Certainly I did.’

The voice laughed, a mean little snigger.

‘So you will, too. You’ll die of suffocation, slowly, when the air in this cavern is exhausted.’

‘Then we’d better get to work at once,’ said Curtius. ‘I have an excellent sword here and a couple of daggers. I put them on for the occasion. I didn’t fall so far as I expected, and if we both of us work hard we shall be able to cut our way out.’

‘Thanks,’ said the voice, ‘but I’m not going to do any work. I’m not of the same kind as yourself. I don’t need the air of the outer world. In fact, I don’t think much of the outer world, even its best specimens. That’s why I live down here. You’ve got to die. Sorry, but there’s no help for it. I’ve set my trap, and I caught you, and if you’re the best specimen they can

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provide on top, my low opinion of them is confirmed.'

'What do you mean by the "trap"?' asked Curtius.

'Well, it was I who caused the chasm to open, knowing the kind of tomfool thing your soothsayers would remark about it. I sat here wondering what I should get. Shouldn't have been surprised at a brace of vestal virgins. They would have exclaimed, "Purity and devotion," instead of "Courage and arms," amid loud applause, of course. Or it might have been an elderly matron, with a good old tag that Rome held nothing more precious than the tender love of her mothers. It might have been a soothsayer, it might have been anything. As it is, it's you, and I think very little of you. Arms? Of what use do you think all those tin-pot arrangements which you have hung about you are likely to be? Courage? Why, man alive! you've got no courage at all.'

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‘I have,’ said Curtius stolidly ; ‘I fully expected to die, and I was willing to die.’

‘Just for one moment,’ said the voice, ‘when you had got all that mob of howling fools around applauding you. Applause is an intoxicant, and you got drunk on it. Now you are sober again, and you don’t want to die at all. The man who can die alone, slowly and terribly, is courageous. But you’ve got no more courage in you than a piece of chewed string. You’re as white as chalk.’

‘That’s the effect of the green light,’ interposed Curtius.

‘Rubbish!’ replied the voice, ‘green light doesn’t make a man shake all over, does it?’

‘That’s just the shock from the fall,’ said Curtius. ‘But I can’t stop here arguing with you ; I’m off to explore the cavern. There must be a way out somewhere.’

‘There isn’t,’ said the voice ; ‘but you can explore.’

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‘I can’t die like a rat in a trap,’ said Curtius, whimpering.

And off he went on his exploration. He looked in at the recess from which the voice had proceeded and found nothing. The cave was enormous. For many hours he tramped on and on, and never through one tiny chink in the roof did he see the light of day. Exhausted and ravenous, at last he flung himself down on the floor of the cave, and almost immediately the voice, which had been silent all this time, began again. First of all came that faint, mean little snigger; then it said:

‘Hungry?’

‘Worn out with hunger,’ sobbed Curtius; ‘I’m thirsty, too. My mouth is so parched that I can hardly speak, and there doesn’t seem to be one drop of moisture in this damned cavern.’

‘There isn’t,’ said the voice, ‘nor one crumb of food either, with the exception of your horse, and I don’t

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think you will be able to find that again. You can try back if you like. Now I come to think of it, you won't die of suffocation, but of starvation. Cuts my entertainment rather shorter than I had hoped, but I must put up with that.'

'I can't die like this,' sobbed Curtius.

'Courage and arms,' replied the voice, 'are the things which Rome holds most precious. Go on, my boy ; you'll last some time yet.'

Then Curtius drew his sword, and went to look for the proprietor of the voice in order to slay him. But he didn't find him. He resumed his explorations.

In a few hours he was too weak to walk any further. He fell into a kind of doze, and when he woke again his arms had been taken from him.

'Where is my sword?' he exclaimed.

'I've got it,' replied the voice, this time from the roof of the

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cavern; 'what do you want it for?'

'Want to kill myself,' said Curtius.

'If I give you your sword, will you own that you were merely a drunken theatrical impostor?'

'Yes.'

'And that you are a coward, and are dying the death of a coward?'

'Yes.'

The sword clattered down from the roof on to the floor of the cavern at the feet of the hero.

He picked it up and set his teeth.