



A TERRIBLE EXPERIENCE.

By SIDNEY PICKERING.

Illustrated by Harry Dixon.

TO the west the blood red of the sunset flamed and glowed through the great gaping windows; to the east, above the crumbling walls, in a sky rose-colour with reflected glory, hung the silver crescent of the new moon.

The last tourist had closed his Baedeker and departed. I was free to forget that such things as tourists existed. Seated on a marble-covered ledge a few feet above the ground level, I looked down into the narrow labyrinthine passages, the uncovered dungeon-like spaces, where once the wild beasts and their attendants waited for the summons which would call them up into the daylight of the vast arena. So looking, I reflected that the soul of the Colosseum, its evil soul, pagan still in spite of prayer and chant and benediction, stained with the crimes of many centuries, has there its special dwelling-place.

Something brushed lightly against my shoulder and dropped on to the pavement at my feet. It was a small grey cat.

She was a pretty little creature, smoke grey, close-haired, and singularly lissom, with small well-bred ears and speaking topaz eyes. But what took my fancy was her irrepressible, eloquently expressed joy at making the acquaintance of one worthy to understand and appreciate her.

"Madam," I said presently, when we

had become the best of friends, "I must really be leaving soon. It is getting dark."

This was not true. If the sky had faded to dull crimson, faint pink, and pure lilac, the brightening moon diffused a pale mysterious radiance.

Capricious, like all cats, my little friend bounded away from me, stood for a moment rubbing herself against the paling, then dropped out of sight. I got up and walked to the edge.

Close below me a narrow broken staircase, the steps of which had almost wholly crumbled away, led down into one of those passages I have mentioned. Till now I had never realised that it was a stairway; it had looked so like the jagged end of a wall. The cat, half way down it, was looking up at me, invitation, persuasion, coaxing entreaty in every line of her slim body. "You want me to come down there?" I said, inquiringly.

As I spoke, I looked about me. In the Colosseum towards nightfall an official goes his round, and, where the arena has been excavated, skips agilely from wall to wall. This evening, however, I saw no sign of him; evidently he had come and gone. Slipping under the railing, I swung myself down to where I could find a narrow foothold. It was not a spot for lingering

on; you had either to scramble down or up again, and I scrambled down.

The passage that I had now reached was deeper and darker than it had looked, seen from a higher level, its black walls rising high above my head. My friend was trotting on in front of me, and I followed her. I did so quite without consideration, moved by a strong unreasoning impulse.

The ground began to slope slightly downwards. Close before me rose a low-browed archway. Beneath it lay a space of almost black shadow, beyond which I could distinguish a faint light. Here, then, the passage had kept its roof, to be uncovered again a little further on. It

preoccupied by a curious sound, murmurous, monotonous, persistent, not unlike a gigantic, contented purr. With every forward step I took it grew in volume, until it seemed to fill my brain and stupefy it.

I had reached the light at last. It did not come from the open moonlit sky. Where did it come from? Did it filter down through some grating in the vaulting overhead? I hardly troubled to ask myself the question; there was but one question, as far as I was concerned, for which I was bound to find an answer: What was the inexplicable noise that hummed in my brain?

The passage turned abruptly. I passed



"I TURNED AND FLED FROM THE GROWLING BEAST"

occurred to me that I might as well turn back. A caressing touch made me look down. The little grey cat was twining herself round my ankle. I stooped, but she slipped away from me. Baffled and impatient, I pursued her into the darkness.

It lasted much longer than I expected; indeed, I had a puzzling, unaccountable delusion that the further I went the further the light receded. I was treading on pavement now, level and even, and trending ever downwards. On either side I could feel the massive walls hemming me in. No breath of fresher air met me; instead, my nostrils were filled with a damp, grave-like smell. And yet the idea of turning back did not again cross my mind. I was

the corner and stood still. The light was very dim, yet I could see that a few yards further on a dead wall rose before me, that below the wall there was a wide ledge, upon which crouched a long, dark form. And I met the unwinking stare of two great, lustrous, yellow eyes.

Slowly the light grew brighter; perhaps a little cloud drifted away from the moon.

On the ledge below the wall

lay a huge smoke-grey panther watching me, and as it watched me it purred aloud. Terror froze my faculties. Yet I knew that some devilish power was urging me, driving me to go nearer to it. I clung to the wall, driving my nails into its clammy surface, struggling, fighting with every nerve and muscle of my body against that fatal impulse.

The great beast stirred slightly as if impatient. The purr had become a growl—low, sinister, menacing. I saw the broad head sink between the mighty shoulders, while the whole frame quivered. It was crouching in act to spring. The spell which held me snapped. I turned and fled.

A roar shook the earth. Once I slipped and stumbled—a hot breath was on my neck—the black walls were closing in to crush me. Now I was dashing myself against the broken edges of rough brickwork, I had found a foothold—and there my memory stops short in utter blank.

When I regained consciousness I was lying face downwards on the ground a few steps from the spot where I had sat to watch the moon rise. I was trembling from head to foot, damp with sweat, and feeling weak as a little child. All round me slept the vast shadows of the mighty amphitheatre, and far overhead the crescent moon shone serenely. Not knowing why I did so, I held my breath. Nothing stirred.

By very slow degrees memory and strength came back to me, until I dimly realised the strange thing which had befallen me. To me it had been given to go down into the heart of that crime-stained shell we call the Colosseum, and to come face to face with its very soul, incarnate by day in the form of a small grey cat, and by night in that of a panther—once perhaps the slayer of martyrs—still thirsting for human blood.

Thunder growled dully in the far distance, reverberating under deep archways and hidden passages. I rose up, still dizzy and shaken. I have wondered since how in my demoralised state I should ever have found courage to pass through the black darkness of the chief entrance, had not my ear caught the blessed sound of voices—the officials chatting just outside. Near by a solitary carriage still lingered, waiting for a chance fare. I sprang into it, and was driven off.

Need I tell you that once back in my apartment, under the influence of a good dinner and some first-rate Paradiso, I

tried to laugh over the whole business—although I was placed between the unpleasant alternatives of either believing that I had suffered from a prolonged hallucination, or that I had been seized with some kind of fit. I vowed that I would re-visit the Colosseum at the same hour, forcibly abduct that cat and bring her home to my domestic hearth, and went to bed with an



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amour propre somewhat soothed by this resolution.

I went to the Colosseum. I have seen it again in broad moonshine, in broad sunshine; I have seen it when its old walls stood outlined in a flare of red Bengal light. And I have met cats there—black, tabby, and thoroughly prosaic—but the little grey cat, never!